

Beyond Reach

By Robert Denton III

At least the tea was good. A minor point in the Kaiu lands' favor, but at this point Asako Tsuki would accept any comfort she could find. The weeks of travel had been one trial after the next. The sprawling tea farms and marshy rice paddies of the Quiet Wind Plain had been an oasis among the dingy, unwelcoming Crab provinces. Her assignment, while lacking prestige, could raise Tsuki's position in the clan. But truth be told, she didn't want to be here. The tether to her heart was being pulled, far north to her cozy little nook in the Meiyoko District library, a small desk littered with melted wax, a window overlooking the Bay of the Golden Sun, and a scroll containing the ninth-century biography of the folk hero Shiba Katsue, whose precious text faded a little more each day, begging for transcription onto paper that wasn't deteriorating.

I should be there, not here, she thought, trying not to imagine how many such transcriptions would greet her when she finally returned. It could be days before she caught up.

The woman before her cleared her throat, and Tsuki brought herself back to her present surroundings: an austere room in a Kaiu tower in a small keep whose name she'd already forgotten.

"I regret that I cannot approve your request," Kaiu Hitsuko said. She was a stark-looking woman with brown eyes and faint sideburns, and a smile that never touched her eyes. "Even if we knew the Kuni daimyō's current location, travel through the southern provinces has been restricted lately. I cannot amend your traveling papers. Perhaps it is best that you just go home."

Tsuki exchanged a look with the young Shiba beside her. The *yōjimbō* didn't seem particularly surprised, but then he had predicted this outcome only hours before. She could practically hear him crowing about it already.

Tsuki set down her tea. "I would prefer to hear this from Kaiu Shihobu-sama."

From behind the Kaiu woman came a barking laugh. Its source was perhaps the hairiest man Tsuki had ever seen, with a carpet of fur peeking out of his kimono collar and a thick black caterpillar spread unbroken across his brow. "As if the Kaiu daimyō had time for you! Perhaps you haven't noticed, but there is a war—"

His mouth snapped shut at the abrupt rap of Hitsuko's fan against the floor. "Our sister is indisposed," she calmly said. "It is only out of respect for the folding of our families that I have interrupted my own work to meet you, Asako-san."

Tsuki had counted on as much. After having been rebuffed by the Kuni, she had hoped that the pending marriage between the Kaiu daimyō and an Asako scholar could be used to her advantage. It did confirm her suspicions. The Crab did not want her "bothering" their leaders.



They likely didn't want her here at all.

Which makes two of us, she thought.

But it didn't change her duty.

"My champion's orders leave little interpretation, Hitsuko-san. I must deliver my message to the Master of Earth. Since he is currently tethered to the honorable Kuni daimyō, I see no other way except to seek an audience."

"The solution is simple," Hitsuko remarked. "Tell me your message, and when they return, I will see it delivered to him."

Nice try, thought Tsuki. But there was no chance she would convey her champion's words to a *hatamoto* of a war-thirsty clan: that the Void Master's seat on the Council of Elemental Masters was now vacant, the Master of Air's health had taken a sudden dire turn, and with the elemental imbalance spreading, the Phoenix were in desperate need of leaders. There was too much blessed jade in Phoenix shrines to admit vulnerability. The Crab were not above taking what they wanted when they thought they could. It had been done before.

"I fear that is impossible," she said.

Hitsuko said nothing. For a time, there was only the sound of Yukiti, the hairy one, chewing. Tea leaves, most likely. Tsuki knew this to be a common habit of the Kaiu family. They thought it gave them bursts of energy, although Tsuki's experimentation with the practice over the last week had yielded no such results. It was more likely that the energizing properties of dried tea leaves required hot steeping in order to work, and she postulated that mere chewing—

They were staring at her. She chided herself for daydreaming, then straightened her back.

"In that case, I must ask a favor," she said. "Since you would have me tell my champion that the Crab cannot produce the Master of Earth, I would ask that you dictate your reasoning and allow me to put it to scroll, in your own words." She paused. "To prevent a misunderstanding."

It was not *quite* an accusation. She hadn't *quite* implied that by denying her, they had declared Isawa Tadaka their hostage.

Hitsuko's eyes narrowed. "How sincere?"

The hairy man slapped a thick palm onto the floor. The room thundered. "How like a northerner to make such arrogant demands! It is the important work of Kuni-ue and others that keeps untold horrors on the other side of the Wall, and yet northerners would waste the time of their guardians. They would best remember that the only reason they enjoy their opulent lives and petty quarrels is that they are paid for with Crab blood. One might believe the Phoenix cared



for the fate of the Empire if they had bothered to honor the Great Bear's requests!"

Tsuki rose. Both Kaiu leaned forward, Yukiti's bearded mouth spreading into a grin. The burly man was not the oaf he seemed; he was baiting her, hoping she would respond in kind, giving him the excuse to resolve the issue with a fight, as he clearly wanted.

Instead, she bowed.

"My apologies," Tsuki said. "I spoke in haste and without due consideration. I will leave you now and trouble you no more." She turned and made for the door, resisting the temptation to glance at the stunned expressions of the Kaiu, her yōjimbō following suit.

On their way to the stables, Tsuki sensed his disappointment. Shiba Koetsu had probably hoped for a chance to further the reputation of the Feathers within Branches school of swordplay. As the hostler fetched their horses, Koetsu finally spoke. "What will you tell Shiba-ue?"

"We are not going home," she said. "We go south."

She met his surprise with some satisfaction. He was younger than she by at least a decade, and yet he always seemed to assume he knew more than she. "Hitsuko said that travel is restricted in the southern provinces, which suggests Kuni Yori is south of us. She couldn't amend our traveling papers, which means he is in a province where the Kaiu and Hiruma cannot permit travel. Based on Crab traveling law, that suggests he is in Hida lands. Finally, Yukiti said Kuni Yori is performing important work, suggesting he is seeing to his duties. There are only five shrines tended by the Kuni in Hida lands. That narrows his location down to one of those five shrines." She smiled. "So now, we go find him." And if I am wrong, it wastes no less time than simply waiting here!

Koetsu rubbed his neck. "How do you know all that?"

"I read it, Shiba-san." She allowed herself a chuckle. He'd learn eventually. Librarians weren't to be trifled with.

"This will upset the Hida," he finally said.

Definitely. But that's your problem, Shiba-san. "The objections of the Crab do not concern me. My duty is to find Isawa Tadaka." And the sooner I do that, the sooner we can go home!

At last he nodded. "Perhaps such deductive skills will find their way into your novel."

She hoped so. *The Celebrated Cases of Magistrate Yuzo* was in its eighth draft, perpetually unfinished in scattered sheets of prose and notes beneath her desk. Just the suggestion spiked her homesickness. She wanted only to return to her draft, to finish her transcription projects and resume her writing.

She could have finished it already, of course. But it wasn't ready. It had to be just right.

The hostler's return bought her back to the present with a sigh. Another reason to finish here. As Koetsu worked out how they would avoid the road patrols, Tsuki watched the darkening sky in the direction she imagined was home.

The first three shrines yielded nothing. Tsuki paid her respects at each, met with the resident Kuni, and, when they confirmed their ignorance of their daimyō's location, continued on her way, keeping to trade roads, avoiding patrols. The shrine attendants asked surprisingly few questions, apparently accepting that they were mere travelers, taking for granted that they were allowed to be there. But then, Tsuki supposed, what reason did they have to assume she hadn't been questioned already at the roadside way stations? Like most priests and shrine keepers, they were guileless and simple, having given themselves completely to worship of the Fortunes.

She therefore found it ominous when she discovered the fourth shrine completely abandoned.

"No living quarters," Koetsu reported. "If there are shrine keepers, priests, or a resident *shugenja*, I am not sure where they would stay. I'd guess this place is abandoned." Even so, his hand never drifted far from his katana's hilt.

"They could be staying in the *honden*," Tsuki supposed. But to her knowledge, only the Kaito really ever did that; few non-*shugenja* knew how to reside in a shrine's sanctuary without offending the enshrined spirit.

She didn't like it. The cleaning fountain was well kept, the grounds clean, the shimenawa ropes recently replaced. Yet there was no one here. It held the silence of a tomb, no sacred song or bell to break the pall. It was also the fourth shrine they'd visited so far. That made it unlucky.

But she couldn't leave a seemingly abandoned shrine alone. She had to investigate. That was the role of the Phoenix. She took such duties seriously.

"I'm going in," she said. "Stay here."

He started to protest, but Koetsu knew as well as she that bushi were forbidden to cross the threshold of the inner sanctum. Were this a shrine to Bishamon or Hachiman, perhaps an exception could be made. But she couldn't tell from looking who the enshrined *kami* was, or which Fortune blessed these grounds. Perhaps a local spirit?

Normally shrine keepers would be sweeping and making offerings, but the shrine's main structure was lifeless. On bare feet, Tsuki made her way to the *honden*, which held the *shintai*, where the spirit resides. She bypassed blessed shimenawa ropes and rolled aside heavy screens. A locked iron door briefly stopped her, but she foiled the padlock with an improvised paper shim, a trick her delinquent sister once showed her. With that obstacle bypassed, she braced herself to stumble into a startled priest or angry *shugenja*, excuses at the ready.

There was no inner sanctum. Tsuki's heart stopped at the mouth of a spiral staircase. It led down. She descended carefully into the dark. Groping the walls, she briefly considered the offerings in her satchel, but she was hesitant to invoke the *kami* for light this far south. She'd read that invoking the *kami* near the Shadowlands could attract spirits far less benevolent, ones she'd rather not draw. She would not risk that.

The stairs abruptly ended. It was pitch black. Her next step kicked a metal lantern with a wince-inducing crash. When no angry voices arose, she blindly searched for the vessel, then lit it with her striker.



She wasn't sure what she was expecting to find. But it wasn't this. Shelves of charts and papers lined the walls. Odd trophies—skulls, horns, scales, and a dried-up barbed tongue—sat as paperweights or on display. The lantern light glinted off dozens of crystalline glass bottles, some so old they were turning purple. Contained within were liquids and shriveled parts Tsuki could not identify.

Grimly it dawned on her that the shrine was a lie, a facade for a personal laboratory. But to what end?

Stamps carved with Kuni Yori's personal emblem confirmed the lab as his. A cot with neatly folded clothes atop it stood beside a nightstand holding Kabuki makeup. Discovering this room felt like a violation, as though she were peeking into his life.

More details slowly came into focus, and with them came a sinking sensation. Some of the bottles contained a thick liquid, brown or red, nearly black. A coppery scent hung in the air. There was a human skeleton in a pile in one corner. Hesitantly, Tsuki crept forward and peered closely at the scattered bones. It had been a long time since she'd studied the illustrations in Asako Michi's *Notes on the Human Body*, but it seemed to her that the finger bones, and perhaps others, were missing.

And then the light glinted off the implement on the center desk: a bone handle fitted onto a length of dull steel, curved abruptly with an inward-facing blade. It was designed to inflict superficial cuts onto the forearm. A tool for drawing blood.

For *mahō-tsukai*.

Tsuki stared at the blade for many shallow breaths. Surely there was a good reason it was here. Yori must have seized it from a criminal *mahō-tsukai*. He was a Witch Hunter, after all. Yes. That explained everything...

Beyond were a number of small scrolls, bound in polished leather. Her stomach twisted at the visible hair follicles. Human skin.

She didn't open them. She didn't need to. She could imagine what they contained.

A brief search turned up Yori's journal. She could only glance at the scratchy notes before dropping it with disgust. It may as well have been a confession. Yori was drawing upon *kansen*, *kami* corrupted by the Shadowlands. That was *mahō*. Blood magic. Forbidden.

And the scrolls were written by his own hand.



The room swam beneath her racing heart. The Kuni daimyō was a mahō-tsukai. And his lair, this laboratory, was beneath a shrine to kansen, to corruption. How many others in his family were complicit in this? How many knew?

All at once, she realized what duty required. She took a steadying breath and whispered a silent prayer.

Bishamon, grant me strength.

Tearing a sleeve, she wrapped up the scrolls without touching them. These went into her satchel. The wrapped sorcerer's dagger went into her undergarment. The journal, the most damning evidence, she tucked into her obi. This would be more than enough to present to the Council of Elemental Masters. She had to tell them of the Kuni's corruption.

What about Tadaka? She cast the thought aside. If Kuni Yori was a mahō-tsukai, then the Master of Earth was surely dead. And if not, then he would prefer she inform the remaining council members over rescuing him. Exposing and ending the corruption was more urgent. Whatever Tadaka's fate, he'd have to meet it alone.

There was plenty of lantern oil among Yori's possessions. She dumped it on every surface she could find. She overturned shelves and soaked the papers. She cast down the bottles and beakers until the fumes stung her eyes. She paused only to pray for the soul of the human remains. As she left, she threw the lantern into the room and turned away from the flash.

The crisp air was a blessing to her lungs when she emerged. She made for the cleansing fountain. She felt as though she'd been rolling in filth. "Koetsu, we're leaving. Kuni Yori is a heretic. We must inform the council."

She was halfway to the fountain before she saw the line of samurai, armor glinting, weapons drawn. Four Crab on horseback, bows drawn. Three others on foot, iron clubs held ready. A bound and gagged Shiba Koetsu slung across a horse's back, his weapons gone. The Crab frowned at the pillar of smoke rising from the shrine.

"Asako Tsuki," their leader growled. "You are coming with us."

Perhaps the other shrines' attendants had not been so guileless after all.

The guards had called it a "waiting room." It was furnished as such, and they'd even provided her with tea. But Tsuki knew this was a holding cell, albeit one reserved for those of samurai status. She would not be thrown into a dungeon and chained to the wall like a peasant, but neither would she be granted freedom. Outside the sliding doors, she could see the silhouettes of two guards. The view from the window overlooked the wrong side of the Kaiu Wall, a bone-shattering drop into Earthquake Fish Bay.

They'd taken her satchel, her offerings, even her sandals. They'd taken the journal, too. But they hadn't taken her clothing, so they hadn't found the dagger. She could feel it flat against her belly, beneath her obi. When she got out of here, she at least still had that as evidence.



Chirps from the nightingale floor. The shadows parting. Tsuki sat up on her cushion. Finally, the Crab Clan Champion had answered her summons. Even though she was their prisoner, the Crab were honor bound to observe the demands of Shiba Tsukuné's representative.

Tsuki did not wait for the door to fully slide aside. "Great Bear, I must protest the treatment of—"

Her words died on her lips. It was not the Great Bear, but his son. Hida Yakamo strode into the room with the gait of the weary, his long mustache framing severe features. His head nearly touched the ceiling as he crossed his arms, the guards closing the door behind him. At his hip, a *tetsubō* swung ominously.

She'd heard stories about Yakamo. He'd crushed the head of a Mirumoto hatamoto's brother over a minor insult. They hadn't been able to stop him.

"Where is Koetsu?" she managed.

"He is meeting the Fortunes," Yakamo replied.

She blinked, uncomprehending. They'd...killed him? Just like that?

"So," Yakamo grumbled. "You're the mahō-tsukai who sabotaged Kuni-ue's lab?"

His words raked through her like icy daggers. "You're wrong! Kuni Yori is mahō-tsukai! Ask your guards! They have his journal! He used human remains to—"

He stared down at her as one might a cockroach. "Lies."

As cold dread washed over her, realization finally dawned on Tsuki. Evidence of Yori's corruption would forever blight the Kuni name and bring a stain upon the honor of the Crab. Yakamo could not allow that.

She pushed words through a rapidly drying mouth. "I—I demand an audience with—"

Yakamo slammed his *tetsubō* into the floor. "You will demand nothing!" He leaned forward. Tsuki felt his hot breath. "You torched a Kuni shrine and sabotaged the Kuni daimyō's work! Did you think burning his records would bury your crimes?"

"You're not listening," she protested. But her head swam. Was he truly fooled by Yori? Or was he covering up the Kuni daimyō's misdeeds? She wasn't sure.

"Fortunes know how far you've set him back, how many Crab will pay for the knowledge lost." He straightened again. "Fortunately his work can continue elsewhere."

Elsewhere? How many labs did he have? Her stomach sank into her knees. Of course, a daimyō would have more than one lab. Perhaps mahō artifacts were scattered throughout the Crab provinces.

Her eyes flicked to his *tetsubō*, its sharp jade studs. If he was going to kill her, why did he not just get it over with?

Yakamo followed her gaze, then looked back at her. "Not yet," he said. "First, I want to give you some advice, little bird." He knelt, a mountain hunched over her. "The Kuni will arrive soon to ask their questions. Who your cohorts are. Who you are working for. Where they are hiding.



That sort of thing. My advice is to tell them. Hold nothing back. It will be easier for you that way.”

His words chilled her bones. They were going to torture her. They wanted information and to punish her. They would do both.

She wasn't a mahō-tsukai, but what did that matter? She would either break and lie, admitting to corruption and disgracing her entire line, or she would tell a disregarded truth and be tortured to death. And those who died by torture never went to Yomi, the Realm of Blessed Ancestors. The pain, the anger, and the futility all made that impossible. Tōshigoku was their destination, the Realm of Slaughter. It was not just her life at stake. If she died this way, it could cost her very soul.

What choice did she have?

As he made for the door, all Tsuki could think about was her collection of notes, the eighth draft of *The Celebrated Cases of Magistrate Yuzo*. It could have been published by now, had she been willing to accept its imperfections. But now she would never finish that book. She would never finish anything.

She would never again sit at her little desk overlooking the sea. Never again smell the musk of aging paper. Never again trade made-up tales of folk heroes with her friends, invent fanciful romances between historic figures, sneak a moment to absorb her transcribed stories for herself. Yesterday, it had seemed she had all the time in the world. How foolish she had been. She should never have waited. She should have lived...

The dagger. She remembered it then, pressing against her flank. The bone could be an offering. The kami would come to her aid. So what if she was close to the Shadowlands? She could resist its call! Now was the moment, while the brute's back was turned, before the guards knew what was happening. All she had to do was draw the dagger, whisper her prayers, and—

No. She let the temptation fall. Never. These fates are better than falling to corruption. I am a Phoenix. I will trust the Fortunes, and bow to—

A cold wind blew against her cheek and extinguished the lantern. The only light now came from the setting sun outside.

Outside the open window.

The open window.

Reflexively her eyes darted to the round portal, then back to Yakamo. But he'd turned one last time just before the door, and his eyes had followed hers. Comprehension washed over his face, then a hint of urgency. He was calculating, trying to remember if they'd taken all her offerings.



“That way is death,” he said.

He was right. A fall into the watery bay from this height would be like smashing into stone. No sane person would try it. She wouldn't survive.

She didn't care.

She bolted. He crossed the room like a thunderbolt. She used her momentum to pull herself through the window frame.

He grabbed her hakama and yanked. The garment unfurled in his grasp. She slipped from it. And she fell like a fluttering arrow.

She closed her eyes. *Please.*

The water, like stone against her back.

Her lungs, emptied.

Then darkness.

Tsuki shivered in wet silk as she hugged her knees beneath the wooden bridge, sinking into moldering foliage. Each breath was like fire. She was certain her ribs were broken, or at least cracked. But the water kami had spared her the worst, without offerings. Her invisible allies—they had not abandoned her. She would need to thank them properly. If she lived.

Above, she heard the stomps of Crab guards, their shouting. They found the dagger she'd dropped in the fall. They knew she was close by. Alive or dead, it would only be a matter of time before they discovered her.

She gritted her teeth against a sneeze. Her head pounded, her eyes burned. She tried not to think about what she had read about the waters near the Shadowlands, to wonder if it were also true for the waters of the bay. She breathed hot air onto her goose-pimpled skin.

She had to get a message to the Phoenix. But how? She had nothing to offer the kami, and even a minor invocation might attract kansen.

They'd find her if she stayed here. But where else could she go? Not the castle. She'd never sneak through. Not the bay. They were searching it.

Not the Shadowlands. *Please. Not there.*

She rocked back and forth. *Not the Shadowlands. I can't. I can't.*

The voices grew louder. Above, the stomping increased with the shadows between the cracks. She tried to think of something, anything. But all she could picture was her little desk overlooking the sea.

I didn't even want to come here, she thought as her eyes grew wet. I didn't want to do this. I just want to go home.

