

Excerpt from “The Pool of Shikama”

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Prologue

The elderly door servant was good at not hearing the insistent arguing emanating from beyond the thin shoji door at his back. Nothing more than strips of wood and translucent rice paper separated him from the tempest in the adjoining room, but he had been trained well. He listened only for the tell-tale approach of footsteps making the tiniest of sounds as they came near the door, when he would turn and slide it open just as the bearer of the footsteps approached. His father, long dead these many years, had trained him to pretend that all else, any sound he might hear behind him, was no more than the rustle of wind in the leaves.

He was therefore startled when a large vase smashed through the framework of the door, narrowly missing his head, and shattered against the hallway wall opposite him. He leapt to his feet just as another, smaller vase followed the first, this one careening through the shoji door right where his head would have been had he not moved in time. It too crashed against the wall before ending up in broken bits on the floor, and then the entire door collapsed in a shambles of tattered paper and broken wood.

He gaped in astonishment at the scene. The room beyond was the Kojuro's family shrine, a chamber designed to preserve the history of every previous ruler of Hajameshi. It was filled with the artifacts of many lifetimes, each symbolizing part of the story of a Kojuro's reign from the past. It was ordinarily a place for quiet contemplation, not for family squabbles. But such was apparently what was now taking place right before the dumbfounded servant's eyes.

Lord Kumaka, consort of the present Kojuro, stood in the center of the room, resplendent in his fine Yutakashi robes. His shaved head gleamed in the flickering light from the wall sconces, an effect ruined somewhat by the dark scowl evident through the bristles of his beard. The servant had heard it said that Kumaka rarely lost his temper but when he did, he was not a man to cross. And from the look on his face he was most certainly angry now.

Domisen, the Kojuro of Hajameshi, and the door servant's mistress, clutched her hands together, her usually neatly-coiffed hair hanging loosely in misshapen tangles. Her kimono was of the finest silk, worth (or so the servant had been told) more than the yearly taxes of two entire villages. It too was a disheveled mess, the obi falling loose around her waist.

Kumaka reached toward a small table near the center of the room. There was a single decorative vase atop it crafted of fine porcelain with azure inlays depicting trees from the Sacred Grove. There used to be three of the vases, the servant recalled, and with a sickening feeling he grasped that the jumble of porcelain shards at his feet were the remains of the other two.

As Lord Kumaka almost casually picked up the remaining one, appearing ready to hurl it as well, the door servant dashed partway down the hall to avoid the anticipated

projectile. Before it could be launched, he heard the anguished voice of his mistress, the Kojuro. “Enough, my lord! There is no need for this. I will agree!” The door servant had not noticed her distress before; indeed, he was not supposed to ever notice. But how could one not notice such things when one’s head is nearly taken off by a flying vase?

He heard the sound of the remaining urn being set down roughly atop its table. The vases had been in the Kojuro’s family for centuries, priceless artifacts from the kingdom’s founding. He was appalled; what could have possessed Lord Kumaka to treat them so?

As the servant edged his way back to his post, a position now covered by the shambles of the door, he realized that he was in full view of the Kojuro and her consort. As they began speaking again, he quickly came to his senses and dove for the floor, bowing his head to tacitly ignore the tableau in front of him. But he could not now ignore the voices that were only a few feet away.

Kumaka, despite the violence that had just occurred, now sounded calm and measured. “Very well. The announcement will be made tomorrow then. See that the boy is prepared.”

“Tomorrow?” came Domisen’s agitated response. “Why so soon? He is – he needs time to prepare himself, he – ”

“He has *nothing* to prepare.” Kumaka’s voice was commanding despite the fact that Domisen was supposedly his overlord. “You said yourself, he is still but a child. Children do not ‘prepare,’ they do as they are told.” With barely restrained impatience he added, “I have waited long enough. Musako should have been designated the heir the moment he was born. It was foolish to wait this long – and any fool can see that every

day we delay further strengthens the enemies of our house. We need a strong succession and we need it now.”

“But my mother – ” began Domisen.

“Damn your mother!” There was a brief moment of silence, and when he spoke again Kumaka had regained his composure. “Shudojo is Family Elder, not the Kojuro. *You* are, and all the more reason for you to stop this useless sniveling about our son’s precious ‘childhood’ and wake up to the reality of what is happening outside the walls of this castle.” He stalked through the tattered remains of the doorway, ignoring the servant cowering on the floor at his feet. “Have Musako ready tomorrow. As soon as the announcement is made his military training will begin.” Incongruously he then bowed to Domisen. All her subjects, of whatever station, accorded the Kojuro such honors. He walked away, his footsteps crunching through the remains of the broken vases.

There was nothing but silence for a moment, and the door servant chanced a look before dropping his eyes once again. Domisen was watching where Lord Kumaka had strutted off down the hall. Slowly she turned away from the remaining vase on its table and made her way out into the hallway. Also ignoring the servant, she stared down at the pieces of shattered porcelain, her voice a whisper: “But he’s just a little boy...”

The door servant raised his head, tentatively asking, “Do you wish me to call for the town glazer, Your Majesty? He – he might be able to put them back together again.”

Domisen, only now seeming to realize the servant was present, spoke sharply. “No, never mind.” She turned away but added stiffly over her shoulder, “And do not forget yourself. You have no business noticing the affairs of your superiors.”

Humbly the servant bowed his head to the floor again, cursing his stupidity in speaking so boldly.

As his mistress walked unsteadily away down the hall, he pondered what he had just witnessed. So Kumaka's son Musako was now to be the formal heir! That will certainly set the tongues wagging. What then of Kisami and Tashika, the Kojuro's older daughters? Kumaka certainly had never cared for them, that much was certain. And understandable, as they were the children of Domisen's previous marriage. Lord Kumaka was looking out for his own flesh and blood, then, making it official that the girls would not be in line for the throne.

He sat back on his heels, looking at the shards of crushed pottery that Kumaka had walked through. Well now, he pondered, there were going to be some who might not like this Musako heir business. He knew all the stories, about how the Hajameshi nobles were being forced out, replaced by Yutakashi men. He'd heard the story about that lord from the south, the one who had refused to leave; the fellow had been found dead within the week. 'Fallen from his horse,' so they said. Some of the nobles might not want another woman on the throne but he suspected others might prefer that than to have some Yutakashi lout controlling it. Either way it sounded like trouble might be coming.

As he scooped up the broken shards, he thought about whether he should take up his cousin's offer to retire and join his family on their farm in Ganshi. Being a servant of the Kojuro might not be the safest of positions in the months to come...

The small firelight hovered just inside the door, barely illuminating the large chamber beyond. The cursory light was the only magic the young woman had been permitted to use in her task, that of cleaning out the disused rooms in the Shodanjin's

tower in Teranashi. Other than that simple skill, all else was to be done with nothing but her own two hands.

She was by no means tall but it was mostly her thin, bony frame that accentuated the impression of height. Most of her shape was hidden beneath the folds of the green robe that all Zaitan acolytes wore. Her long black hair, constrained in a tight braid, continually slipped down in front of her shoulder as she stooped to examine dusty boxes on the floor or to pick up long-forgotten bundles of dried herbs that had once been intended for use in potions and spells. As she tugged on one such parcel it split open, spreading an acrid smell and a mess of decayed stalks of... something... all over the floor.

She straightened with a sigh. It was not the first time it had happened nor likely to be the last. To the best of her knowledge these rooms had not been used since before she was born, a dumping ground for the discarded bits and pieces of failed magical spells. Which shouldn't, it seemed to her, preclude her being able to use magic to help clean it up. But the Shodanjin had decreed that using magic for such mundane tasks was demeaning to the art. Spellcraft was far too important to waste on such trivial matters as housecleaning, she had been told. Apparently, an acolyte's time was not deemed of similar worthiness.

She would have to go find the wicker dustpan again to clean this pile up. As she turned for the door something along one of the walls caught her eye. Later she was never quite sure what it was that had first attracted her attention but as she walked up to the wall now, squinting in the dim light, the stones of this wall appeared slightly different to her.

Of course, she knew the entire tower was a magical construct, created from arcane wizardry far more ancient than that of the Zaitan magicians themselves. This did

not prevent them from inhabiting the towers, as they had done for centuries. Each of the towers was unique, its interior reshaping itself to reflect the personality of its occupant; and none was more grand or expansive than that of the Shodanjin, first among equals of all the female magicians who ruled the kingdom of Teranashi. Thus none of these walls were truly 'real' in the strictest sense of the word. But in general they all fit into a similar pattern.

This wall, now; to her this one seemed different. Although hard to discern by the firelight's glow, the color of the 'stonework' was not quite like the other walls of the chamber, and the blocks that formed its structure appeared slightly too regular. She reached forward to touch it and see if it felt different as well.

The moment her fingertips brushed the stone a soft humming sound filled the chamber. Alarmed, she snatched away her fingers, stepping back into the center of the room. The entire wall began to move, and her first fear was that it would collapse and crush her. Had she de-stabilized a part of the magic that held it together? She should not have been able to, as her own skills were quite limited, her training having been severely curtailed –

And then the wall was gone. Just like that, it vanished before her eyes. There was an entire additional room beyond, an extension of the one she was in that nearly doubled the chamber's size.

Staring in wonder, she saw no evidence of a door on the far side. The only way in or out of it was through the wall that she had somehow just removed. Its remaining walls were of the same stone as the existing chamber but otherwise the space was totally unlike the musty room by which she had entered.

There were tables and several chairs, and cabinets mounted along the walls. Each of the cabinets held hundreds of little drawers. There were many glass globes, brass urns mounted on tripod stands, and an array of bottles, still full of liquids, arranged in a rack on the far wall.

She recognized instantly the components of a Zaitan magician's private study, that place where the most experienced and practiced of their order delved into the deepest parts of their art. But she had absolutely no idea why this was here – the Shodanjin's study was at the very top of this tower, and always had been insofar as she knew.

What most captured her attention was a large orb sitting on an ornate cradle in the center of the room. It looked similar to the orbs that the Zaitan used in the Grand Chamber for channeling their debates. Those orbs, however, were each of a single hue, keyed to their owner's magic specialty. This one displayed a random mosaic of color across its surface, twisting and turning like a chromatic whirlpool gone mad.

This was not, she imagined, what the Shodanjin had expected her to find when she had been tasked with clearing out the lower chambers. Quickly she dashed from the room and headed for the top of the tower.



Amaya shuffled along as fast as her bad leg allowed. She gritted her teeth to hold back the pain, intent on seeing for herself this 'room' that the girl Yuri had discovered. Not for the first time she mentally cursed the fact that her own healing skills were

practically non-existent, preventing her from fixing her own gouty leg. But she'd be damned if she was going to let some smug Healer show off her –

She stopped suddenly just inside the doorway. Yuri, trailing right behind, bumped into her. Amaya snapped, "Stop following me so closely, girl." The older woman quickly cast a spell and several bright firelights winked into existence above her before they drifted further into the room. Her expression changed slowly from amazement to consternation to anger as she stepped into the exposed chamber. She moved slowly through the room, fingering a crystal globe here and a frayed parchment there. She smacked the largest of the wooden tables with the palm of her hand. "Damn this tower! It never told me about this!"



Yuri hung back in the storeroom portion of the chamber, unwilling to venture too close when Amaya was angry. She watched as the Shodanjin closed her eyes and knew Amaya was communing with the tower. The towers were sentient, after a fashion, or at least they appeared that way to the particular Zaitan who were their nominal owners. Yet the magicians did not control them, the source of their power being a complete mystery to even the most learned of the Zaitan.

The Shodanjin scowled. "Typical," she grated, opening her eyes. "It says I never asked about it. Well of *course* I never asked about it, since I didn't know it existed!" She stared around the chamber, her expression a mixture of longing and exasperation. "When my mother left, I searched every inch of this tower for her things. I found the study at the top of the tower but it didn't seem possible to me that it could hold

everything. She was too great a Zaitan to have performed all she did with the paltry contents of that room. And it was here, all along, under my very nose.”

“Under your feet, you mean,” ventured Yuri, who immediately regretted the utterance.

“Hold your tongue, girl!” rasped Amaya. “If I want your opinion on the matter I shall ask for it!” The Shodanjin’s attention was finally drawn to the colored orb at the center of the room. She stepped closer to it, head cocked sideways. “Now what are you?” She reached out with a hand and casually touched it. Instantly it flared into magnificent brilliance, the rainbow within the glass lighting up the chamber in a shower of color and light. The colors swirled like an ocean wave across the walls. Startled, Amaya snatched her hand away and stepped back.

The color inside the orb quickly dissipated, replaced by a dull grey, almost black, turbulent fog. As Amaya moved closer to it again Yuri was surprised to hear a voice coming from the orb. “*Akitsu? Are you there?*” It did not come audibly but directly into her mind, as if delivered by a Zaitan practicing the Thought magic. From the look on Amaya’s face she must have heard it too. The voice was oddly ethereal, sounding vaguely female but at the same time like something not female, or even human, at all.

Never one to mince words, Amaya called out to the orb, “Who are you? Where are you?”

There was silence for a moment before the voice, uncertain and tentative, replied. “*I – my name, I think you would call it... my name is Senshima. It – it has been so very long... No one else is left, I am the last. Where is Akitsu? Is he there?*”

Amaya’s attention focused intently on the orb. “Who is this Akitsu?”

“He went there, to your side. To save us,” came the wavering reply. *“Do you know where he is?”*

But Amaya did not answer. As Yuri watched, the Shodanjin looked away from the orb, her gaze focused on something only she could see. But the leering expression on her face sent a chill up Yuri’s spine.