

Pine and Cherry Blossom

By Marie Brennan

The tracks were easy to follow. Although the southern reaches of the Empire rarely saw snow, it could happen, and this winter was a hard one. Mitsu didn't need his wolf tattoo sharpening his senses to follow the footprints, but he kept it alive anyway. He'd spent four years searching, from one end of the Empire to the other, and he could not stand for losing his quarry this close to the end.

As he drew close, he heard a quiet humming. Through the snow-dusted pines, he saw the mounded shape of a heavy straw cloak and, above it, the head of a woman with her hair pinned in a loose knot. She was using a small hatchet to cut the bark from a pine tree, adding the strips to a bundle at her feet.

Mitsu paused, breathing deeply to steady his pulse. The hatchet wasn't a threat, and Kazue-san had said the spiritual danger was long past. *I might as well start off by being polite.*

He released the energy of his tattoo and stepped out from behind a tree. "What are you doing?"

He'd taken care to ask while she was tidying her pile of strips, so she wouldn't cut herself with the hatchet. But the woman didn't jump in surprise. She only brushed her hair from her face and bowed low. "The inner bark of the tree can be eaten, Togashi-sama. And I'm not aware of any law that prohibits the gathering of bark in this wood."

Given what he'd seen in the nearby village, he didn't have to ask why she was collecting food. And he was easily recognizable as an *ise zumi*—especially for a woman who had met one before. Her face was as described, an oval slightly too long for traditional beauty, with straight, heavy brows, and she was foraging in the wilderness to help others just as he had suspected.

As was what she said next. "Before you do whatever it is you came to do, Togashi-sama, will you permit me to deliver this bark to the village? Mothers there have been starving themselves to give their children more to eat, and it still isn't enough."

It seemed her insight hadn't dulled at all. "Of course, Senzai. After that, though, you'll have to come with me to the High House of Light."

Across the Spine of the World, in wintertime. But Mitsu had searched a thousand remote forests, flyspeck villages, and city slums these past four years, facing everything from bandits to disease to the questions of interfering officials, all to find this woman. One peasant among millions: the strange hermit his fellow monk Kazue had met in the remote depths of the northern mountains, whom his clan champion had ordered him to find and bring back, for the sake of the Empire.



He had her before him at last. He didn't dare wait for a better season.

Senzai retied her bundle with a rough piece of twine and lifted it to her back. "And if I don't want to go?"

Mitsu said, "I'm afraid I can't allow you that choice."

It didn't occur to Mitsu until later how absurd that exchange had been. Senzai was a peasant, and he was the heir to the Dragon Clan Champion; choice never entered into it. But he hadn't been thinking about rank at all—only the chance to fulfill his lord's order at last.

"Are you going to bind me?" Senzai asked as they began their journey north, trailing Mitsu's packhorse behind them.

"Are you going to run away?"

"I have no plan to do so."

It wasn't a promise not to. Merely an indication that she was willing to go along with him for now. "Not unless you give me reason," Mitsu said, and hoped she would heed the warning. He doubted she could get far before he caught her, but it would be a long, tedious journey north if he had to spend half of it rounding her up.

Senzai didn't shy away from him or cast her gaze around like she was looking for an opportunity to flee, though. She led Mitsu's packhorse quietly for several hours, walking steadily and without complaint, keeping her head down when a Scorpion patrol stopped and asked to see Mitsu's travel papers. When the short winter day faded into grey twilight, they halted at a temple on the bank of a frozen stream, where the monks gave them hospitality for the night.

She was silent through the meal, and he wondered if she was planning an escape in the night. It would be smarter than running away while he was awake. *I wish I had a tattoo that would let me go without sleep*, he thought ruefully. The best he could do was to place himself between her and the door and leave the wolf tattoo active while he slept. It made for a restless night, Mitsu rousing at every small sound, but that was a small price to pay.

Fear was one of the three sins. His mind looked everywhere for something to go wrong, now that he finally had Senzai in hand. Regret was also a sin, though, and Mitsu knew which one he preferred.



In the morning, Senzai was still there—and more talkative than before. “You’re Togashi Mitsu-sama,” she said after they’d walked for a little while. “For an ise zumi, you’re unusually famous. I’ve met a surprising number of people in my travels who have heard of you.”

“And you’ve wandered surprisingly far, for a peasant with no travel papers.” He’d chased rumors of her through the lands of every single Great Clan.

Senzai shrugged. “It isn’t as difficult as people think. There are fewer threats in the wilderness than in civilization, for those who know their way.”

From what Kazue had said, she was more than capable of surviving in the wild. “But most peasants wouldn’t risk it without good reason. Why have you been moving around so much? Are you searching for something?”

“I could ask you the same, Togashi-sama.”

“You’re dodging my question.”

She smiled and brushed a strand of hair from her face. “Yes and no. ‘Study what the pine and cherry blossom can teach’—isn’t that what it says in the Tao?”

“You’re seeking Enlightenment, then.”

“I’d say understanding, instead. Humanity may not be the only keeper of Enlightenment, but pine trees and cherry blossoms can’t tell me much about people. To understand those, I need to speak with people across the Empire—from the humblest servant to the heir of the Dragon Clan. I imagine you understand that very well.”

Was she referring just to his habit of making friends with peasants, or something more? Mitsu had wondered at first why Togashi Yokuni had chosen him as heir, when he was the most restless man in the order. By contrast, the Champion of the Dragon Clan was an isolated figure, sitting apart from the Empire in the High House of Light.

During Mitsu’s search for Senzai, though, he’d come to understand. Isolation brought clarity... but it could also bring ignorance and coldness of heart. When the time came for him to don the armor and mask of the champion, Mitsu would need the wisdom he’d gained in his travels, his awareness of the breadth of the Empire, and his compassion for those his decisions would affect.

Mitsu nodded thoughtfully—then scowled. She was more philosophical in her approach than most courtiers, but Senzai was as skilled at deflecting his thoughts as the most silver-tongued Doji or Bayushi. “What happened when Kazue-san used her tattoo on you? What enlightenment did it bring?”

“The Tao we speak of is the True Tao, yet it is not the Eternal Tao we speak,” Senzai quoted. Then she laughed quietly. “Forgive me, Togashi-sama. I’m not trying to be unhelpful. But I can’t reduce what happened to words, except to say: ‘The last and the first—are they not the same?’”

He knew that phrase well, from Kazue’s report on her encounter with Senzai. It was the koan her tattoo had guided her to speak. But as Senzai had reminded him, the words were inadequate, and always would be; the truth that lay behind them could not be spoken. Whatever moment of enlightenment Senzai had experienced when she heard them, it wasn’t



something she could communicate to Mitsu.

The clan champion wouldn't have sent me to collect her without a reason. Spiritual wisdom alone was not enough; there were many wise people at the High House of Light. Something about this woman was different.

"If I may ask," Senzai said, "how is Togashi Kazue-sama?"

Another deflection. They had a long way to travel, though, and patience might net him more than pushing. Balancing inaction with action: it was a core lesson of the order. "She's well. She often expresses her gratitude for the wisdom and guidance you shared with her."

Senzai shook her head. "I owe her far more than she owes me. I had lost my way, and without her, I might not have found it again."

And what is your way? he wondered. During her hermitage she'd nearly transformed into a *yōkai*, a spirit creature; she could just mean her humanity. But he didn't believe that was all.

Maybe all would become clear once he got her to the High House of Light. The *li* rolled past, day after day, the ground beneath his feet climbing into the Spine of the World; soon they would pass through to Lion Clan lands, and the teeth of winter. Senzai conversed with Mitsu readily enough, but she might as well have been a koan herself, an impenetrable puzzle, waiting for him to experience a flash of understanding.

Instead he woke one night to discover Senzai was gone.

He leapt to his feet, the energy of the wolf flaring through his senses and his hands clenching into fists. His first thought was, *she lured me into trusting her.* She'd bided her time until they were away from civilization and watching eyes, then made her escape.

Then reason took hold once more. Senzai had survived winters in the Great Wall of the North; she wasn't a fool. They'd sheltered for the night beneath a stony ledge, driven there by a snowstorm that had prevented them from reaching the way station up ahead. That storm had laid down a fresh mat of snow—one that showed her tracks with perfect clarity, even to someone without Mitsu's advantages. She'd made no attempt to hide them.

He sniffed the ground, breathing in her scent. Fairly fresh; she'd been gone less than half an hour. He could catch her easily.

The trail led toward the road, and up into the mountains rather than back down toward the plain. Before Mitsu had gone very far, he heard her voice, muffled by the snow, speaking in a low tone. Wariness sparked again. *Meeting with someone?*

Rather than approach directly, he circled around and found a boulder to scale, allowing him to look down on Senzai without being seen.

The snow lay in a shallow, gleaming bowl between the rocks, just out of sight of the road. Senzai knelt, heedless of the cold, at the side of a man whose white-cruled clothing said he'd been there since before sunset. The man's arms and legs sprawled at unnatural angles: broken, and badly.



Whatever was going on, it wasn't some clandestine conspiracy. Mitsu slid down the boulder's other side. Senzai's voice continued, soft and soothing, offering comfort to the dying man. But her head came up, and her gaze pinned Mitsu before he could even open his mouth, carrying a wordless command: *Not now*.

She was a peasant, and she'd run away, against his explicit order. But Mitsu knelt and waited.

It didn't take long. The winter air soon finished what those injuries had begun. When Senzai laid the man's head down at last, Mitsu said, "I recognize him. He was one of the servants following the patrol we saw this afternoon."

Senzai's voice remained low, as if not wanting to disturb the body's peace. "He had angered one of the samurai, very badly. A cruel man. I knew he would take revenge."

"You had a vision?"

She met his eyes. "Not like you're thinking. Not foresight or prophecy. But I understand people." Her gaze fell again to the dead man. "Unfortunately."

Heedless of any defilement from touching the corpse, Senzai arranged the man's broken limbs more decorously, then laid her straw cloak over him and stood. Mitsu brushed the snow off his own knees and said, "It was generous of you to give him comfort. But I have to insist that you not vanish like that again. I thought you'd run away."

"I'm sorry, Togashi-sama."

He thought she was apologizing for having crept out without warning him. But when he began to walk back to their shelter, Senzai didn't move. Her words hung in the cold, still air, and he realized she meant something else entirely.

His voice tightened. "I told you—I can't allow you that choice."

"And I can't go with you," she said quietly. "There are things about the Empire that I don't understand, and I need to. I won't learn them if I go with you to the High House of Light."

"You don't know that."

She gestured at him. "I see it in you. In every detail of how you behave. You want to keep me safe there, and to question me until you understand. But you'll understand nothing that way, and you'll stop me from doing what I must."

"Then help me understand now," Mitsu said through his teeth. "What *must* you do?"

"I don't know."



Lifetimes of monastic training were all that kept him from punching the nearest boulder in frustration. “Senzai—”

“I know the truth of myself, Togashi-sama. That is what I saw, when your sister in the order used her tattoo. But knowing myself is only part of it.” Senzai looked down at the dead man, her hair falling to conceal her expression. “I don’t understand the Celestial Order. No—I don’t understand the *Empire*. Why things are the way they are. I need to answer that question before I can do...”

She trailed off, and Mitsu waited, hands tense. But she only shook her head, breath pluming in a quiet sigh. “Whatever it is I’m meant to do.”

“We can help you,” Mitsu said. “At the High House of Light. And I have orders from my clan champion—”

This time it was his turn not to finish the sentence. *My orders.*

Senzai stepped closer. “You have realized something, Togashi-sama.”

Find her—for the sake of the Empire. That was what Togashi-ue had said, the day he named Mitsu his heir and sent him in search of Senzai. That—and nothing more.

After years of searching, he’d almost forgotten that his orders ended there. His assumptions had filled in the rest of it—the idea that Togashi-ue meant for Mitsu not only to find Senzai, but to bring her back to the High House of Light.

Senzai said, “The foresight of the Dragon Clan Champion is a powerful thing, but not a perfect one. Some day that foresight will flow through you, Togashi-sama—and you will have to make decisions about how best to use it.”

Decisions that began now, here at the feet of the Spine of the World.

The answer of a samurai should be to take Senzai with him anyway. It was possible Togashi-ue had indeed meant for Mitsu to bring her there, and if not, then it would be easy enough to let her go afterward. The wishes of a peasant woman didn’t outweigh the risk of disappointing his lord.

But Kazue had spoken highly of Senzai’s insight. And Mitsu was not only a samurai, but a Dragon; he was not only a Dragon, but an *ise zumi*. He understood the need to follow one’s path.

Mitsu bowed slightly. “Senzai-san. I was instructed to find you, and I believe there was a reason for that. Perhaps you can enlighten me as to that reason. Is there anything I can do to assist you?”

The faintest hint of a smile warmed her face. “You’ve traveled the Empire, Togashi-sama, far more than I have. Tell me: who is the most wretched person you know of, and who is the most fortunate?”

He gave it careful consideration, even as night deepened around them and the wind sent the fresh snow dancing through the air. *I don’t understand the Celestial Order*, she’d said. *I don’t understand the Empire. Why things are the way they are.*



The most fortunate should be the Emperor, or someone else whose karma had raised them to high status in this lifetime. But that wasn't the case.

"The most wretched," he said, "is a minor courtier in Hakayu Mura. Doji Omocha. She was born to a good family, but lacks all talent and knows it. Her best efforts have brought her nothing but disgrace, for her and her family. She can't even bring herself to ask permission to expunge her shame through seppuku, because she lives in dread of her next incarnation, and the punishments that await her failures. There is no moment of joy in her life, and there has not been for decades—only fear and despair, because she cannot live up to the expectations placed on her."

Senzai nodded. "And the most fortunate?"

"A heimin," Mitsu said. "I don't even know his name. He lives outside of Kōgan Mura, not far from here. Anyone would look at his life and see nothing but hardship and suffering...yet despite that, the man lives content. I asked him once why he was smiling, and he said that he was grateful every day for the miracles of sun and rain, the beauty of the kami, and the hope of the future. That would be admirable enough in any person, but to achieve such peace of mind in circumstances like his? That man is truly blessed."

All of Senzai's previous bows had been mere etiquette, a peasant acknowledging the samurai above her. This time it was sincere. "Thank you, Togashi-sama. Your words have enlightened me."

Not like Kazue's words had done. But he hoped it would be enough.

Mitsu shrugged out of his own straw cloak and offered it to her. "You'll need this. Winter isn't over yet."

She accepted it with gratitude. "May the Fortunes favor your path, Togashi-sama."

"And yours, Senzai-san."

Then Mitsu headed for the road north and the High House of Light—alone.

