



The Tale of Doi

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Chapter 1: Birth

On the twelfth day of the third month of the year 127PA, a beautiful, white-haired baby girl was birthed under the great Sabaki mountain that crowns the small, enchanting Tenshi Island, situated just off the coast of Yanxia. She was named Doi, meaning earth, and was raised by her mother Chidori and her father Arata, two humble goatherds. For some time, the family lived peacefully - life was never easy, food was always scarce, firewood was rare, but the three of them had a close, loving bond which kept them warm. Eventually, though, like the inevitability of the setting sun, all things must end, and Chidori fell gravely ill with the scarlet fever. Every night, Doi would stay up by her bedside, clutching her limp, sweaty hands and praying to every God she'd ever heard of to take mercy and save Chidori. Doi offered everything, the goats in their field, the gold in their purse, the heart which hammered in her chest, and would fall asleep to her own frantic murmurings.

It was winter when Chidori passed, and her death took a severe toll on Arata, who, although he tried his best to hide it, grew weak, weary, and frail. The winter was savage and bleak, emerging with a ravenous hunger that would go on to devour their entire livestock, save for one newborn goat which Doi found nestled in the frozen body of its mother, crying mournfully. In a cruel twist of fate, the goat had been born genetically stunted - 'sukureipi', it was called, noticeable in its trembling head, agitated scratching, and awkward, uncoordinated stumble. Doi knew it wouldn't live longer than a year - just another tragedy to add to the ever-increasing list.

One night, when Doi returned home after trading the last of their frozen goatskins, she heard Arata weeping from inside their small, battered home. The sobs which wracked his body agonized Doi, who knew that no matter what she did or said, could not end her father's torment. The following morning, when Doi awoke, Arata was gone, taking only his boots, his coat, and a portrait of Chidori with him. There was no note, no message, no last words of wisdom to impart. Doi knew what it meant.

At first, Doi flung into a fit of rage, tearing the home apart in a seething, violent rampage. She grabbed the gas lamps that Arata had stored away for safekeeping, set them alight, and smashed them against the broken wooden walls. The bright orange flames engulfed the ruins which she once called home, belching out black smoke and soot that stained the white snow. Never before had Doi felt the true ferocity and heat that fire wielded. As the fire faded so did Doi's rage, replaced only by a tender, empty aching. Beside her, the baby goat that she had found those few days prior cautiously approached, bleating frightfully. Doi embraced the kid tightly and sobbed until her throat felt raw. In a painful whisper she croaked, "I will name you Setsunai, and I shall not let you die."

Setsunai had less than a year to live.

Chapter 2: Voyage

The pair wandered the mountains for weeks, scavenging off rabbits and worms, desperately clinging onto the bare threads of life. At day, they waded through the thick snowy plains, at night they took refuge in the burrows of the ice caves. The mountain was cold, quiet and unforgiving, but eventually Doi and Setsunai made it to the foot, where the small coastal village of Hoshino stood. Doi had nothing material to trade or sell, and so she offered her labour at the docks. She began as a deckhand, scrubbing the wooden planks and scraping the frozen barnacles off the side of boats. The work afforded her enough to take board at the local ryokan inn, who allowed Setsunai to stay in their stables in exchange for her milk.

Over time, Doi worked up her way up in the ranks, determined to earn enough to go to the Yanxian mainland and find a veterinarian to cure Setsunai. After four long months of gruelling labour and little food, Doi had saved enough for the passage. The two embarked on a ship bound for the mainland, and Doi watched as Tenshi Island, the land which had been her birthplace, her home, which held so many memories, disappeared over the edge of the horizon, replaced by the streams of the rising sun.

Upon arriving in eastern Yanxia, Doi rushed to the local library, and poured through any book which could have some relevance; the anatomy of animals, common livestock diseases, cures and remedies, but every book said the same - sukureipi, known as yangbing in Yanxin, is incurable. So, Doi and Setsunai travelled through the provinces, visiting every alchemist, every veterinarian, even other goatherds. All of them gave the same answer - the goat will die within the year.

Three months later, Doi was no close to finding any answer, and Setsunai's health had become even worse. The awkward trot had slowed to a crawl, meaning she had to be carried, her fur began to fall out in matted clumps, and her gaze became hazy and unfocused. Doi sat, defeated, in the dark corner of a quiet tavern and clutched Setsunai close to her chest. "I'm so sorry." She whispered, tears brimming in her eyes, "I wish I was smarter, maybe then I could have figured out the cure myself... but I'm useless and I'm scared, and I miss home. I don't belong in this strange land."

Setsunai bleated softly in response, so weak and fragile that Doi felt struck with pain. Doi's tears spilt over her cheeks and onto Setsunai's trembling head. The two sat in silence.

Next to them, a cloaked figure turned their head and inquired, "Cure for what?"

Doi wiped her tired, bloodshot eyes and replied, "Yangbing. My goat's bound to die soon. And she's... she's the only thing I have left in this world. Truly, the only thing."

The figure paused, looking over the small, shivering frame of Setsunai, and then responded, "You know, back in the age of the ancient, it is said that my ancestors had access to a great library, an archive created by a primeval spirit. From that library they acquired powerful knowledge, such as cures to various diseases."

"Who were your ancestors?" Doi questioned curiously.

"The Vaelar. They were the native people of the land now inhabited by the Roselithian Empire, to the west. But they were massacred, now only a few of us remain, scattered across unfamiliar lands."

"That great library... does it still stand?" Doi's voice quivered in her throat, terrified of daring to hope once again.

"Well, yes and no. Supposedly, it existed within the spirit realm, and therefore was perennial. However, it could be accessed through a sacred ritual taking place in one of our shrines. At least, that's the story told to me by my mother."

Doi hung her head dismally, "I assume all such shrines were destroyed long ago by the Empire."

"Probably." The figure agreed. "Although, my grandmother maintained that some remained, hidden deep within the northern ice caves. I'm sure they're all buried now by centuries of snow but... somewhere... maybe... I mean who knows?"

Doi's eyes dropped to gaze at the tiny, helpless frame of Setsunai, before returning to the shrouded eyes of the stranger. "Did she ever mention where those ice caves were?"

"Yes, the city renamed as Pagon, but known to my people as Unippueq, meaning centre of the universe. The caves were in the mountains to the north, and their entrance marked by carved marrow trees."

Doi knew the marrow trees, for some grew on Mount Sabaki. They were incredibly rare and ancient trees, planted millennia ago, and grow only in harsh, cold environments. Chidori used to say that they were each a spirit guarding the mountain from invaders, Doi wondered if they guarded the ice caves too.

"How do I get to the Empire?" Doi asked, determined.

"Not sure, they closed their borders a few years back. My ancestors fled from there via boat, across the Northern Sea, but maybe it's easier getting in then getting out. I'm sure there's a few people who smuggle goods over, perhaps you could sneak aboard a cargo ship."

Doi contemplated this for about a minute, and then slowly nodded, "Alright. Thank you, stranger. You've given me hope which I've been sorely missing for some time now. What's your name?"

The stranger hesitated, and then pulled down their hood, revealing a surprisingly young woman with a shy but friendly smile. She had rich brown eyes that glowed like honey in the candlelight, and long, silky black hair that was pulled into two looping braids decorated with glassy beads. On her forehead, partially hidden by her wispy bangs, was an intricate, curving line tattoo which crowned between her eyebrows. "I'm Yuka." She said.

"I'm Doi."

They both placed their fist in their palms and saluted to each other.

"You wouldn't fancy coming with me, would you?" Doi joked, half serious.

"I'm afraid I can't. I have a family and a job and can't exactly just up and leave. Besides, the Empire would recognise my tattoos, and they aren't exactly known for their kindness to my people. But before you go you should speak with my grandmother. She might be able to help you."

Doi agreed, lifted up Setsunai, and followed Yuka out.

Her home was modest, made from rammed mudbrick and wood which stood amongst several other humble abodes around a shared courtyard inhabited by chickens, rabbits and cats. Above, lethargically perched on the curved rooftops sat a pale blue wyvern, no larger than a wolf, who watched them approach with piercing azure eyes. Doi halted in her tracks, pointing it out with a quivering finger. Yuka laughed, "Oh, that's Long Feng. Don't mind him, he's our courtyard guardian. He won't do you any harm." As if in response, Long Feng placed his head down on the tiles and went back to sleep.

Inside, the house was surprisingly warm, with sparse furniture organised around a raised platform that seemingly acted as a bed. On the bed sat two women: the woman on the left was middle-aged with soft black hair and rough hands that carefully braided the long, dark grey hair of the other. Despite having bright green eyes, they were both the spitting image of Yuka, and, Doi noticed, both shared the same facial tattoos, with the grandmother having a few more across her cheeks and neck. Beside her, a tired, older man shovelled clay into a furnace which filled the room with hot air. When he looked up, Doi noted that he was not Vaelarian but Yanxin, and his dark eyes and strong jaw mirrored that of Yuka's.

"Good eve." Yuka announced as she swung open the wooden door and walked up to the bed. "Naani." She said warmly to her grandmother, before touching noses. "Aama," she greeted her mother similarly, and then embraced the man, "Baba." They returned the gestures. "This is my friend, Doi and her goat Setsunai. She has travelled far in search for the cure to yangbing. I told her about the great archive in Unippueq and she is determined to go."

Setsunai had less than seven months to live.

Chapter 3: A Friend

"Come here." The grandmother beckoned Doi forth, and Doi stepped forward, bowing her head. "You aren't Yanxin, are you? Your white hair is unusual." She inquired.

Doi shook her head, "No, I'm Tenshin, ma'aam. It's a small fishing island out east. I'm fluent in Yanxin, though, my parents taught me."

"Ah, so you're like us - fish out of home waters," her eyes crinkled warmly, "Call me Naani. That's my daughter Kaya and her husband Huang, Yuka's parents."

Huang straightened up, brushing off the dirt and clay from his plain trousers, and gave a fist-palm salute. Kaya stood and followed suit, and then, taking Doi's hands in her own, said, "Doi. What a beautiful name... what does it mean?"

"Earth, after the mountain on which I was born."

"What a coincidence!" She exclaimed, "Kaya means mountain, after my birthplace in the Unippueq peaks. How funny."

Naani tilted their head, looking at Doi curiously, "Perhaps our people are not so different. Sad that we've both ended up here, in this land which is not our own."

Huang spoke up, "But that sorrow brought me the love of my life, Kaya." He gazed at her with a soft admiration that painfully reminded Doi of how her own parents used to look at each other, long ago. "Life hands us great evil and sorrow, but darkness cannot exist without light. Evil will eventually be corrected, if not in this life, then in the next. Such is the way of Tianzun." As he spoke, he gently caressed a carved wooden amulet of a panda he wore around his neck.

Naani pursed her lips, and looked away, sadly.

"We didn't come for a religious lecture, Baba." Yuka laughed. "Doi is set to travel a great distance and she doesn't have much time. I wondered, Naani, if you would help her with whatever you might know."

Naani returned her gaze to Doi, "Mmmm. Very well. Huang, you go out to the kitchen and start the fire, Kaya ready the meat, and Yuka fetch some hay for the goat. Let us speak over dinner."

The food was nothing like Doi had ever eaten before; crispy, savoury rabbit cooked slowly alongside smashed garlic and a sweet berry sauce served with soft, salted vegetables and fluffy brown rice. The rabbit was placed onto a rectangular metal sheet on the floor, surrounded by the complementary dishes, and the smell made Doi's mouth water - they hadn't experienced such rich, delicious food since childhood. Naani announced, "Ujuk!" And Yuka cut the rabbit into portions, serving Naani first, then her parents, then Doi, and ending with herself.

Over the course of the night, Naani talked about countless tales from her childhood. She spoke about the great city of Unippueq, how its ice walls rose up into clouds, fawned over the enchanting ice caves which held gemstones that sparkled like stars. While she chattered, her eyes had a watery shine of tender nostalgia, and at certain points she became too choked up to continue. She began talking about the grand spiritual archive, which was a story passed down to her by her own mother. She explained how it was accessible through reciting a traditional ritual which could only take place in one of their temples. Her voice quivered, and then in tears she dutifully described the arrival of the Equistadian colonisers, who she called 'Thuum', and the subsequent destruction of the walls, the city, and the temples.

"Ah, but Aama one still stands, right?" Kaya interrupted, placing a comforting hand on Naani's shoulder to steady her.

"Yes, my dear. Indeed. The oldest, and most sacred one of them all, built by the very first men." Naani dabbed her eyes with a square of cloth. "Never got to see it myself, it was a place we went on pilgrimage, as a way of marking one's transformation into adulthood. But... we had to flee before I could ever..." Naani swallowed hard. "Well, anyway... I didn't get to go. But my mother sung to me about it, and she told me it was buried deep within the caves, so deep that no Thuum could ever find it. It's the last surviving evidence that my people ever existed."

Yuka shook her head, "No Naani, that's not true. We exist, and your legacy is continued through our lives, through our blood."

"Thanks to your grandmother's bravery and perseverance," Huuang added.

"And a little luck," Naani smiled and then looked away in thought. "I still remember my mother singing it to me while braiding my hair before I slept. 'Kinauvit', the song was called."

"Oh, let us hear it Naani!" Yuka exclaimed.

Doi agreed enthusiastically.

Naani laughed, held up her hands to call for a hush, and then began to tap her feet to a slow, lullaby-like rhythm. Doi listened to the song closely.

"Under the gaze of the great mountain,

Through the hills so old,

I see a marrow, a marrow I see,

With veins of silver and gold.

Over the paths which lead unwinding,

Watched by the moon so high,

I sing a ditty, a ditty I sing,

Softer than silk could sigh.

So slowly, so slowly, these stones below me

Are slick from morning rain,

If only, if only, I came on a pony,

My feet would have been saved the pain."

"Under the gaze of the cold, white moon,

Through the caves so cold,

I see a temple, a temple I see,

And a faded fable unfolds.

Over the stones which shift unbinding,

Watched by the stars in the sky,

I seek a spirit, a spirit I seek,
Who holds the world in its eye.

I'm lowly, I'm lowly, my patience outgrows me,
And patience is what I was taught,
You know me, you know me, so please bestow me,
The knowledge of which I have sought. "

"Under the gaze of the great spirit,
Through the arch foretold,
I hear it speaking, it speaking I hear,
A story that's never been told.

Over the flames which grow so blinding,
Watched by the sparks as they fly,
We spin away, away we spin,
Spin away until the flames die.

You show me, you show me, what you hold so holy -
Knowledge void of power and fame,
Although we, although we, both know that you're lonely,
You never tell me your name."

Naani finished the song to a round of applause, and remarked with a wide smile, "It sounds much more beautiful in its original tongue." Then, she yawned loudly, "But all that singing has knackered out this old crone."

"It's been a long night Aama, maybe we should all get some rest." Kaya posited. Naani agreed, and Huuang began to move around a few thin paper screens to section the room into separate sleeping quarters. Kaya and Huuang took the biggest bed in the centre, Naani slept on a smaller bench in the corner, and Yuka and Doi lay down on separate matts weaved from grass, with Setsunai curled up in Doi's arms.

That night, Doi dreamt of strange spirits, cascading shadows, and delicious cooked rabbit spinning away into flames.

Setsunai had less than seven months to live.

Chapter 4: Departure

Doi awoke just before the crack of dawn to the feeling of Setsunai gently licking her cheek. She gathered her things, leaving a single coin on their bedstead while the family slept, gingerly creaked open the door, and left.

Outside, they were met with the sight of Naani sitting on a bench in the courtyard, who was stroking the pale cerulean scales of a sleepy Long Feng. Doi approached carefully.

"I'm setting off now. I can't lose any more time. But please tell your family thank you for your hospitality and guidance."

Naani turned her head, and Doi realised her cheeks were wet with tears.

"You're going to need this." Naani said in a hushed whisper as she passed Doi a faded leather case. "I carried this over from Unippueq when I fled... it contains a scroll which I translated for you. When you get to the temple, recite the incantations and you will summon the spirit. But please be careful... The spirit isn't entirely benevolent. My mother journeyed to the archive frequently, but one time she never returned. Be warned." And with that, the pair embraced, while Setsunai stared at Long Feng with wide, terrified eyes, said their goodbyes and departed. Doi walked away with Setsunai cradled in her arms - two small, fragile silhouettes backed against the light of the rising sun.

Over the next two months, Doi and Setsunai travelled by foot to reach the western border of Yanxia; the pair hiked over the winding waterways of Zhejiang, past the abundant rice fields of Jiangnan, through the blistering sands of Zinjiang, and into the rich coastal region of Shandong. After some investigation, Doi concluded that the area most likely to facilitate her voyage would be the small town of Kowloon, which sat nestled in the Shandong caves. Due to the town being hidden away from nearby cities, and the convenience of being situated close by to the Spectral Ocean, which separated Yanxia from the west, the town had become a safe haven for criminal activities - specifically pirating and smuggling.

First, Doi visited the docks, and asked around for any spare work, citing their previous experience as a deckhand, but the townsfolk were suspicious of foreigners; they took once glance at Doi's bright white hair and ignored her. So instead, Doi went to the tavern to play mahjong with the locals. She played precisely and shrewdly - winning enough to break even and then, as the locals began to complain, would fumble their next few games. Doi laughed alongside the locals as they all counted their winnings.

One man, an older, red-faced fisherman, elbowed Doi with a hearty chuckle, "You know, my niece married a Tenshin fella, handsome guy with snow white hair. Now my sister objected, said she ain't like the foreign sort but I said look Biyu, you can't stand in the way of love, else the Heavenly Emperor'll get upset, and we can't be having that. Not with all the recent unrest in this country."

Doi laughed, "My parents were the same. Didn't want me adventuring to foreign worlds... but then my mother fell ill, and my father lost his legs in a mining accident, so I had to leave to find work." Doi looked down, forlorn, "But alas, it isn't easy to come by here. I sent them the last of my money last week, but I know it won't be enough."

A middle-aged mercenary seated at the table narrowed his eyes and questioned, "If you're so desperate for money then why are you sitting here gambling?"

Doi shrugged, "I guess I got tired, and desperate. I know nobody here will offer me a job so what's the point in trying. There's no use."

The fisherman nodded his head sympathetically, "We've all been there, lass, but it's best to not give into it. Else you'll end up like poor Shu over there." He gestured to a grey-haired, rotund older man who was passed out at the bar, with an empty bottle in hand.

Doi sighed, "I guess you're right, it's just hard. But I pray to Cai Shen every night for his blessing."

The table grumbled, "Shi ma Cai Shen" in agreement.

The fisherman scratched his head, "Look, you're a good lass, maybe I could ask around at the docks and find you some work."

"The Black-Hand Fleet is always looking for spare hands," A woman from a nearby table suggested. Doi turned to look at her; she had dark eyes, tan skin and greying-black hair pulled into a tight bun, with a wicked scar stretching from nose to ear.

"Oh, buzz off Ching." The fisherman spat, "This here is a gods-fearing, good-natured young lass. He ain't looking for that sort of work."

"A shame." She replied, calmly, "For our coin does not discriminate." With that she stood and exited the tavern, giving a slight smile to Doi as she left.

"Who was that?" Doi inquired.

"Ching Shih. Dragon of the Spectral Ocean." The mercenary whispered.

"A good for nothing pirate." The fisherman added, "A braggart who clambers over treetops and thinks herself tall."

The mercenary rolled his eyes, "You really think so? If she cared enough to challenge you, old man, you'd cower in fear."

"She'll be hung one day, and then she'll have to face the wrath of the Jade Empress. Bet she'll be cowering then." He retorted.

"Where can I find the Black-Hand Fleet?" Doi asked, excitedly.

The fisherman shook his head and stood up angrily, "Gods have mercy on you, girl. I won't be privy to this." He hurriedly left, slamming the tavern door behind him.

Doi glanced down at Setsunai, who was still curled beneath her chair, shivering quietly, and vaguely wondered if the Gods cared at all.

The mercenary wiped the spit from his upper lip and dropped his empty bottle on the table. "Don't mind old man Ling. He's a little loose in the head, terrified of the Gods - as if they'll reach down from the heavens with their big hands and flatten him." He chuckled a little. "We used to be an exporting town, but with the Empire closing its borders most of us lost our jobs. The new generation doesn't have the luxury of earning fairly. It's just not realistic."

Doi held up her hands defensively, "Hey, I'm not one to judge. Like I said, I need money by whatever means necessary. It's not easy for anybody anymore."

The mercenary nodded, "Aye, that's for sure." He paused, and then said, "The Black-Hand Fleet hangs out in the caverns to the south. The work ain't never simple but for a foreigner it's probably the best you'll find."

"Thank you." Doi said, standing up.

"You can thank me by buying me another bottle of baijiu." He grinned, tapping the empty glass.

Doi bought the man another bottle, thanked him once again, and promptly walked off to find the Black-Hand Fleet.

Setsunai had less than five months to live.

Chapter 5: The Black-Hand Fleet

The caverns were hard to find - secluded behind a string of shadowy alleyways and closed entrances, but eventually, as Doi and Setsunai stumbled through the town, their way lit only by dim moonlight reflecting across the tranquil waters, they came across a cave spilling with warm, yellow light and lively, raucous music.

Doi slipped inside the cave, weaving her way behind the boisterous carousers that danced with vigour and cheer, their cheap Baijiu sloshing clumsily over the edges of their cracked cups. The strident choir was a shanty Doi had vaguely heard before from drunkards at taverns, and as the verses slurred into the chorus, Doi joined in.

"We dine with your women, as you dine alone.

We shine like jade; you scatter like stone.

We drink fine wine; you slurp your rum.

We're warriors, you're Imperial scum!"

The song ended to exuberant applause, led most enthusiastically by Ching Shih, who stood atop a table slick with spilt drink, holding her drink victoriously to the roof of the cavern. She grinned through a set of rotting, yellow teeth, and as she did, her piercing black eyes connected with Doi's. While the rest of the band rolled smoothly onto the next song, she hopped down from the table and strolled over to Doi, eyeing her up and down.

"Consider my offer huh?" She smirked.

Doi nodded.

"Smart woman. What's your name?"

"Doi, Ma'am. Me and my goat been sailing for three years. Started by scrubbing barnacles and ended as a helmsman." Doi lied.

"Why'd you leave?"

"Tenshin's a small island - the biggest boat carries less than a dozen men. I heard stories of the boats out here... boasting passengers of five hundred. Figured five hundred men must make good pay, or at least better than back home."

Ching smoothed back her hair thoughtfully. "And then you found that those sorts of ships don't hire foreigners, and you ended up here."

"Pretty much."

"A shame, really. I've personally always found immigrants to be some of the hardest workers. But their loss, our gain, eh?"

Doi looked around the cavern, and realised they had never seen such a concentrated, eclectic mix of people before - some with the rich, dark skin typical of travellers from Xinjiang, some with the pale skin and blue eyes associated with the Hanleng mountains, and some not native to Yanxin at all. They all shared a rosy merriness and communal spirit that felt very warm and welcoming.

"Although, that song wasn't exactly the most welcoming to foreigners." Doi joked.

Ching tilted back her head and cackled, making her scar stretch unnervingly, "Well there's foreigners and then there's imperials." Her harsh, barking laughter felt grating. "But enough about politics. Let's talk work. You're actually in luck, my boatswain got outlandishly drunk and made the decision to steal a bottle of my fine wine. Naturally, he was thrown overboard but the guy I got to replace him is a little slow in the head. So, I wanna get you on a ship, see what you can do, and maybe you can be my convenient replacement. How's that sound?"

"That sounds perfect, Ma'm. It might take me a bit to get used to your big, fancy ships but I'm a fast learner and I think real quick on my feet."

"Good. I'll set you up a meeting with my first mate Jianguo in the morning. You'll be training under him."

"Thank you so much, Ma'am."

"Do know, though, that I don't do second chances. One step out of line, one suspicious whisper, and I will peel off your skin and feed you, bit by bit, to the sharks. Ask anyone in this cavern, they've seen me do it."

Doi swallowed hard, feeling a little nauseous, nodded, and then asked, "Is it alright if I bring my goat with me? She doesn't require much attention, she's pretty old."

Ching glanced down at the small, fragile frame of Setsunai. "If you're feeding and cleaning it then sure. Make sure to tell me when it dies though, I do like me some mutton."

Doi smiled uncomfortably, "Of course."

"Well then, Doi, welcome to the Black-Hand Fleet."

It took Doi three weeks to come up with a solid plan, and another five weeks to execute it.

The ship she was stationed on mainly worked to intercept smaller ships which were illegally smuggling valuable produce over to the empire from Yanxia, such as silk, sugar and spice. They'd board the ships, killing the captain and anyone who resisted, pillaging the produce, and then stealing the ship. The stolen ship would be steered back to Kowloon by the Black-Hand first mate, where it would be sold. However, in the unlikely event that both the first and second mate would fall sick or get injured, the role of replacing the captain would fall to Doi, the boatswain.

Doi's plan was to add wolfsbane to the crew's stew, making them sick with what would appear to be food poisoning, and so leaving the task of steering the enemy ship back to Yanxia to her. Ching would be fine, as she usually dined alone, with a separate meal of fine meat and wine, so she would still be able to lead the interceptive battle. Instead of Doi actually steering the ship back, though, she would take the ship up to the north of the Roselithian Empire, disembark at the icy shores close to Pagon, travel through the ice caves, arrive triumphantly at the temple, summon the spirit of knowledge, and save Setsunai. Simple, right?

Setsunai had less than three months to live.

Chapter 6: The Plan

The poisoning of the stew had been pretty easy - one of Doi's tasks as boatswain was to check that the galley was being thoroughly maintained. As they'd only been at sea for a week, there was still some fresh meat kept on deck, mainly chicken, which would be cut and boiled in the stew. While inside the galley, Doi asked to check behind the cupboards, as she routinely did, and deftly dropped in a handful of wolfsbane buds. Not enough to kill someone, but surely enough to make them all very sick. The stew was usually served in the afternoon, alongside merry singing, dancing and cheap baijiu. Doi made sure to be seen drinking plentiful alcohol, and when the stew was offered to her, she waved it away, declaring in slurred speech, "Boiled rabbit makes sick. Bring me more baijiu!" That night, the ship was rocked to sleep with the sounds of guttural, painful groaning and thick vomit slapping against wet, wooden planks. Doi lay awake in her hammock, closely embracing Setsunai to her chest, while her stomach churned with deep, burning anxiety. "I guess they were right." Doi whispered to Setsunai's patchy, shuddering ear, "We weren't to be trusted."

The next morning, Doi was roughly awoken from her uneasy rest by Jianguo, the belligerent first mate who shouted, "Wake up newbie. Ching is summoning us." Doi's heart hammered in her chest as she scrambled to their feet, tucking in Setsunai and throwing on her uniform. Jianguo snarled at Setsunai, "I'll never understand why you keep that thing around. If you ask me, it's only going to spread its foul disease." He spat on the floor.

Doi ignored him, kneeling to tie her shoes with sweaty, trembling fingers, "What do you think Ching wants?"

"You're about to find out, as soon as you figure out how to tie your shoelaces."

Doi took a deep breath, tied his shoes, and stood up. "Well let's go."

Stepping into Ching's dimly lit chamber, Doi felt sick with anxiety; her ears rang with the sound of hard, pounding blood, and her legs felt weak beneath her - there was a palpable sense of dread.

The walls were adorned with dark, lacquered wood, intricately carved with sinister motifs of serpents and sea dragons, patterns which swirled and spiralled into ominous storm clouds that leered into the room. A large, imposing desk dominated the room, made of ebony and inlaid with twisted silver patterns that seemed to writhe and contort, partially covered by crimson velvet drapes. A skull-adorned hourglass perched at the side of the desk as a grim reminder of Ching's disregard for time and mercy.

Ching herself stood behind this desk, her hands impatiently smoothing back her hair. "Finally. What took you so long?"

Jianguo gestured vaguely to Doi.

"Oh Gods. You look terrible. Please don't tell me you ate the stew too because if one more person tells me they are ill I swear to Wu Shen I will throw them overboard."

Doi blinked, "Uhh... no captain, I luckily managed to avoid the stew. I probably just look bad because I didn't get much sleep."

"Praise be. If my intel serves me right, then we are on course for interception some time within the next twelve hours. Pretty much my entire crew is ill with that damned stew so Doi, you're going to have to step up."

"Of course, captain. I'll ready the crew for interception."

Ching raised her eyebrow in confusion, "What? No, Jianguo is fine. He'll be readying the crew. I need you to take the role of second mate, while Bao is ill. Check over the navigation instruments, weaponry, and so on. And Jianguo, I don't care how ill the rest of the crew feels, they can vomit while swinging a blade."

Doi looked over at Jianguo who, sure enough, looked tired but not ill. Her heart sank into a pit in her stomach.

Jianguo picked at his teeth, "Never been a fan of chicken stew. Guess it was my lucky day, eh?"

"That will be all", Ching waved them away.

Doi walked away from the cabin with her brain whirring to come up with a way to quickly dispense Jianguo before the interception would take place. She knew Jianguo would easily overpower her in combat; while scrappy and light on her feet, Doi had never been in a proper fight before, whereas Jianguo swaggered with the cool confidence of a frequent brawler.

"Are you slow?" Jianguo interrupted Doi's train of thought. "Didn't you hear Ching? Get to it, newbie."

Practically tripping over her own feet, Doi stumbled away to the lower decks, to fulfil his tasks, and to improvise some alterations to the plan.

Doi was still hopelessly plotting when the alarm was raised, and the call for interception was sounded. She had come to the uneasy decision that the plan would simply have to be delayed another few weeks, when she would try something similar again. While pondering this, she pictured Setsunai's tiny, heaving, patchy body, still curled in the creaking hammock, and knew she did not have enough time for any more delays. As Doi emerged from the lower deck, no conclusion had been found. Besides, the entire crew had a ship to capture - and there were no guarantees it would go smoothly.

The sea roiled with fury as the pirate ship closed in on its prey - led headfirst by Ching, who stood with her curved sword unsheathed and pointed to the skies. The sun had dipped below the horizon, casting an ominous twilight upon the crashing waters, and a nervous anxiety coiled in Doi's throat, who half-heartedly wondered if she wouldn't have to worry about the plan because she might instead die here, to a stray blade in a battle she had no care for. Jianguo readied the crew with harsh, barking instructions, and the air grew hot and electric with tension.

As the vessel approached steadily over the waves, it spotted the infamous sigil of the Black-Hand Fleet on the raised flag, and released a cry of alarm, attempting to change course. However, the wind, as Ching planned, was on their side, and the superior craftsmanship and engine of the pirate ship allowed it to easily catch up, coming close enough to see the hardened faces of the mercenaries hired to protect the ship. Doi grasped their wodao sword with a sweaty hand, which suddenly felt much too small to hold such a large, heavy weapon.

With a deafening war cry, the Black-Hand Fleet crew launched their grappling hooks, latching onto the enemy ship's railings. The two vessels converged, their hulls crashing together like angry titans colliding in battle. The metallic clash of weapons reverberated through the air, mingling with the cries of fallen combatants. Sword against spear, staff against halberd, the clash of steel echoed throughout the tumultuous scene. The scent of iron and gunpowder hung heavy in the air as cannons roared, booming like the godly wrath of thunder. Weapons clattered onto the wooden planks; bodies splashed overboard - life extinguished in the chaotic dance of war.

Amidst the chaos, Doi used their sword defensively, deflecting oncoming blows and shoving off any colliding bodies, mainly using those around her as protective fodder. The noise around her was suffocating and overwhelming, and Doi, to her own surprise, found herself to be screaming at the top of her lungs. Meanwhile, the boarding action raged on; the clash of weapons merged with the cries of the fallen and the clash of splintering wood.

Ching leaped onto the enemy deck, her sword glinting evilly in the moonlight. She whistled through the air, severing ropes and limbs with precision, and leading the way for the crew to surge forward with a unified ferocity. The Black-Hand Fleet moved as one, their strikes swift and calculated, seeking any opening to overpower their adversaries. The mercenaries, though valiant, could not match the coordinated assault of the pirates, and began to fall back. The enemy ship's resistance wavered, their ranks outmatched, outmanned and broken down. Realising their defeat, the remaining defenders surrendered, their pleas for mercy swallowed by the cacophony of battle.

A bleeding, battle-weary Ching Shih emerged victorious, her eyes glinting with triumph and child-like joy. The enemy ship, now under their command, lay subdued beneath the night sky. The crew, tired yet exhilarated, began to loot the enemy vessel, claiming their prize of precious cargo and valuable produce. Ching turned to Jianguo and Doi, who stood splattered with gore, sweat, and sea-spray, and threw a set of jangly keys, wet with fresh blood, "You two, go to the captain's cabin. Fetch me his gold."

The two made their way over to the stern of the ship, with Doi staggering clumsily over the dying bodies, and Jianguo snickered at Doi's petrified, anguished expression, "First battle, eh newbie? How did your first kill feel?"

Doi tried to recover her composure a little, "Yeah, good. It felt good."

Jianguo sneered, "Oh, I bet, that's why your blade's so dry. Hah! I saw you cowering on the battlefield, dipping and deflecting like the coward you are. You didn't kill anyone, and you better pray that Ching didn't notice, else she will feed you to the sharks." Doi tried to swallow the hard lump in her throat, which felt raw from screaming, and sheathed her sword in the leather scabbard.

Jianguo curled his lip scornfully, sheathed his sword, and unlocked the door to the cabin with steady, unwavering hands. Doi followed him inside and the door closed behind them. The cabin was richly furnished, decorated with heavy, draping sheets of extravagant ivory silk with gold trimming and contained a collection of various expensive goblets. As they walked around, Jianguo began to scavenge through the desk drawers, saying, "Did you see how Ching killed that captain? Slaughtered him like a pig, slit his throat before he even had the chance to speak. I'm pretty sure he was trying to mumble surrender as the blood bubbled from his neck. Hah! As if she'd let him walk free."

Doi replied numbly, "The dragon of the Spectral Ocean is a fearsome warrior."

Jianguo held up a large, extravagant golden necklace that shimmered in the shadowy light, "Aw look. A betrothal necklace. The captain must have been getting married. Bet that will fetch a hefty sum on the—"

In a flurry of movement, a figure that had been crouched in the dark corner of the room leapt out from their hiding place and grappled onto Jianguo, shakily pressing a breadknife close to his throat. It was a noblewoman, still dressed in her nightgown, her hair flinging wildly out into different directions, and wide, manic eyes that shifted towards Doi.

"Scream and I'll kill you." She whispered to Jianguo, who had let out a stifled, surprised yelp. "This man's important right? By his scabbard I can tell he's second, maybe first mate. Take me to this Captain Ching and I'll tell her that I can let him go if you let me go. A life for a life. My father is rich, very rich, and he'll pay a grand fee for my safe return. Alright?" She stammered nervously.

"Of course. Easily done." Jianguo replied calmly, "I'm the first mate of this ship and Captain Ching Shih cares greatly about me. If you take me to her, without harming me at all, she will grant you safe passage immediately. Right Doi?"

Doi was silent.

"Why isn't she talking? Are you lying to me?" The woman whispered fiercely, her grip on the knife becoming tighter.

"No! I don't know, I don't know. She's slow in the head I tell you. Was probably dropped as a baby. Doi, please tell the woman everything is going to be alright if she stays calm, and safely delivers me to Ching." Jianguo's voice became pleading, Doi could tell he was getting scared.

Doi thought of Setsunai.

"He's lying. He's a lowly deckhand. He stole that scabbard from the first mate last night when he was drunk. I already informed the captain of it and she told me he's to be thrown overboard after the battle. If you bring him to her, she'll laugh in your face and say you're doing her a favour. Then, you'll be cut down where you stand."

Jianguo's mouth dropped open, flabbergasted, and then he growled furiously, "I thought of you as a coward Doi, but not a traitor. Listen, woman, she's lying. She wants me killed so she can get promoted. Trust me, take me to Ching and everything will be—"

"You'll be killed. Either way you'll be killed. The way I see it, if you kill him now you get revenge. The captain of this ship, he was your husband to be right? A life for a life." Doi looked down at the terrified face of Jianguo which grew long and pale. "Kill him or don't. I don't care. He's just a deckhand. Ching's already got his replacement lined up."

The knife slipped deep into Jianguo's throat, with an awful, gut-wrenching squelch that felt intimate and queasy. He tried to gurgle something, but his final words shrivelled on his tongue. His body slumped to the floor and the woman began to sob uncontrollably, her blood-stained chest heaving with grief.

The door flung open to the sound of Ching shouting, "What in the Gods is taking you two so—"

Ching took one moment to take in the room - the wailing noblewoman still clutching her crimson breadknife, Jianguo's body lying in a pool of his own blood, Doi standing still, shell-shocked. Ching stormed over to the woman, kicking away

the knife with ease, grabbing her by her untamed, matted hair, and yelling, "You idiot. You know what you've just done? Gone and killed my first mate. Damn you." The woman's panicked eyes shot up to Doi, who turned away and thought only of Setsunai.

The woman's body fell to the ground with a thump.

Ching wiped her wet hands on her leather armour and grimaced at the scene. "Gods' sake. What a damn waste. An idiot too, we would have let her surrender." She sighed. "Well, Doi, I guess you've just been promoted. Go help the rest of the men clear up the deck and prepare the course of this ship for home. I'll take care of this."

Doi left the cabin, closed the door, and promptly vomited over the edge of the ship. A crewmate dragging a box of loot came past, pausing to pat her on the back and saying, pitifully, "I feel ya sister, I ain't never having no chicken stew again."

The ship was cleaned up within a few hours - the bodies hauled overboard, the blood washed away with buckets of seawater, the treasure taken across to the main boat. Only the stench of blood, iron and salt remained. Doi stood by their hammock, collecting the last of their things to transfer over to the other boat before departure. She felt numb, and a little nauseous, but not regretful. No, as she gently petted the whimpering Setsunai, she sung in a quiet but calm voice, "So slowly, so slowly, these stones below me are slick from morning rain. If only, if only, I came on a pony, my feet would have been saved the pain."

"That's a quaint song, is it Tenshin?" Ching remarked, from behind Doi.

Doi jumped in shock, and then recovered. "Uh, yes, captain. Nothing more than a nursery rhyme my father used to sing."

"That's sweet. I never met my father, but I was told he was an admiral of the Yanxin navy. If he still lived, his job would probably be to hunt me down and get me hanged. Funny how that works."

Doi smiled apprehensively, feeling deeply uneasy, and leant over to pick up Setsunai.

"Oh, don't worry about her. I'll bring her back on my ship."

Doi whipped around to face Ching, who was observing her carefully. She tried to soothe their nerves, and then replied in a calmer tone, "Oh, why is that captain?"

"I suppose I've just gotten so used to her good company. It won't be a problem, will it? I mean we'll be meeting straight at the port so I don't see why it would be." Ching grinned innocently.

"Oh well, it's just that she gets awfully anxious when we are separated, tends to defecate everywhere..."

Ching shrugs, "Well that's why we employ deckhands."

Doi didn't move. Ching didn't move.

Ching's gaze became a glower as she crossed her arms, "Or... is there a problem you aren't telling me about? Maybe you weren't planning on taking the ship back to the docks. Maybe, instead, you were planning on stealing my ship and taking it someplace else. Does that sound about right?"

They stared at each other blankly for a split second, and then Doi drew her sword, and launched herself at the dragon of the Spectral Ocean.

Ching swiftly unsheathed her sword and parried the attack with ease, laughing, "You thought I wouldn't get a little suspicious of both my first and second mate falling ill on the same day of a battle? Especially, when the third mate is a new recruit who's only been here for a few months?" Ching circled her, her sword carving a curve into the wooden ground. Doi pounced, and again, Ching deflected it effortlessly. "I've just spent the last few hours doing some investigating. See, Kazuya, my engineer, he's from Tenshi himself, came here about two years ago. Asked him about you, and he swore down he never heard of a Doi working at the docks as a helmsman." With that, Ching slashed her sword in an attack that Doi only narrowly avoided, breathlessly hopping to the side. "My only mistake was not investigating you sooner." Ching spat.

"No." Doi panted. "Your only mistake was being arrogant enough to face me alone."

Doi spun towards Ching, arching her sword in a swift and calculated curve towards her shoulder, but the seasoned captain was no stranger to battle, her reflexes honed by years of bloodshed, and she met the blow with her own. The swords locked, and the clash of steel reverberated around the lower deck, the sound a haunting symphony of duelling wills. Sparks flew while the metal screeched, as if in pain, illuminating the determined faces with dim, flickering light, and then ended as the metal agonizingly scraped off each other.

The exhilarating exchange continued, each combatant pushing themselves to the limits of their abilities. Doi's unyielding determination fuelled their movements, while Ching's relentless experience proved an immovable force. Blow after blow, the clash of their swords reverberated through the cramped space, a testament to their unyielding spirit. The battle intensified, the dance of blades escalating to a feverish crescendo. Though Ching maintained her dominance, Doi's resilience shone through in a moment of unexpected brilliance. As Ching launched a particularly fierce strike, Doi deftly sidestepped, redirecting the force of the blow with a well-timed parry. The calculated manoeuvre caught Ching off guard, momentarily disrupting her rhythm.

Seizing the opportunity, Doi swiftly closed the distance, her movements infused with an uncanny swiftness and fury that caught Ching off guard. With a series of rapid strikes, Doi aimed to exploit the split-second opening in Ching's defences. Her sword weaved through the air like a flickering shadow, each stroke calculated to unsettle the formidable captain. For a brief moment, Ching found herself on the defensive, her flawless composure momentarily faltering. Surprise registered in her eyes as Doi's agile manoeuvres challenged her assumptions. The unexpected display of cunning and intellect from her opponent injected a renewed sense of urgency into the fray. However, Ching's mastery soon prevailed; she regained her composure and re-established her dominance - adapting to Doi's unorthodox tactics with a measured calmness, countering her moves with calculated precision. But in that fleeting moment, as Doi's unexpected manoeuvre disrupted the captain's rhythm, a flicker of uncertainty had crossed Ching's face. That moment, while past, had given Doi a glimmer of hope.

Yet, the fleeting respite proved short-lived. Ching's hardened resolve reasserted itself, her movements becoming more calculated and merciless. With every strike, she closed the distance between victory and defeat, until Doi found themselves once again at the precipice of submission. Doi's agility allowed them to evade some of Ching's more devastating strikes, her nimble footwork enabling her to stay just out of the captain's deadly reach. But Ching's relentless onslaught wore down Doi's defences, gradually exposing gaps in her guard. As the fight wore on, Ching's experience and ruthless precision began to dominate the battlefield. With each exchange, Doi found herself inching closer to defeat. The weight of her inexperience became increasingly apparent, her movements growing desperate and unsteady.

Sensing victory within her grasp, Ching launched a series of lightning-fast attacks, one hitting its mark and carving a deep line across Doi's chest. Doi, caught off guard, found her sword knocked from her grip and sent skittering across the floor. She stumbled backward, disoriented, her breathing ragged.

In the pulsating silence that followed, Ching slowly advanced, her blade poised at Doi's throat. Her eyes bore into Doi's, radiating a chilling mix of triumph and hunger. "Did you really think you could defeat me?" Ching hissed; her voice laced with a dangerous calmness. "I am worth more than this ship's weight in gold, I am wanted by every government, every King, every Emperor... I am the dragon of the Spectral Ocean and you thought my story would end here? To you? Pathetic. Who are you to challenge me?"

A pool of blood seeped from where the blade made contact with Doi's chest, the searing pain causing her let out a stifled whimper, as she looked over to Setsunai's hammock to utter a silent apology in her final moments of life. But Setsunai wasn't there. Doi scanned the room with panicked eyes, "Where is she? Where's Setsunai?" Ching raised an eyebrow, glanced over at the empty hammock, and was promptly bitten on the ankle by a furious goat.

Ching yelled in pain, staggering backwards and loosening her grip on the sword in surprise. Doi, seizing the moment of opportunity, yanked the sword out of Ching's hand, and then, in the same smooth movement, powered a sharp kick to her chest which sent the captain tumbling to the floor.

"I guess you could call me a dragon slayer." Doi smirked, before driving the sword deep into Ching's heart.

Afterwards, Doi attempted to bandage her wound in cloth torn from Ching's tunic, wincing as fresh blood kept oozing through the cloth. She pocketed a few of Ching's gold rings before slowly and laboriously wrapping her body in the fabric of her hammock, dragging her outside, and slumping her over the edge of the ship, which went unnoticed by the busy crew already occupied with their countless duties. To them, she was just another wounded crewmate. She watched the body disappear into the watery depths, sinking like a heavy stone. The ship was prepared and ready to depart soon after.

Doi held Setsunai, her blood staining her patchy white wool, and waved goodbye to the Black-Hand Fleet as the impressive vessel sped away over the waves, vanishing over the horizon's edge. Once again, the two stood at the helm of a ship, leaving the world which had become familiar to them, wondering what await them tomorrow, in their new world. But this time, at least, they had the blinking stars to guide them.

Despite Doi's injury, which had begun to fester, the journey to the empire was relatively smooth; Doi and Setsunai had packed enough supplies to sail without making any stops, and they didn't make contact with any other boats on their way. Although at night, when the waves grew tall and angry, and the storms howled against the creaking wood, Doi would have feverish nightmares which shifted restlessly between the chorus of clashing swords and the stench of freshly spilt blood. And sometimes, when a gust of evening wind would billow through the white drapes, it appeared to a ghostly figure - one night it would be Jianguo, the next Captain Ching, and once it was the nameless noblewoman hanging by her matted hair. Each time, Doi would scream out in anguish and fear, her wound burning like a red-hot stoker, only to be soothed by Setsunai, who's frequent twitching had slowed to an alarming still.

Eventually, after sixty-two long days at sea, Doi spotted the jagged, icy peaks of land. Her febrile headache ached and pounded, and she felt entirely too ill to recall the description Naani had provided her. With tears swelling in her bloodshot eyes, Doi decided to pull the ship into the shore regardless and try to find a place to dock. After some brief, agitated surveying, Doi decided to drop the anchor in the shallow waters nearby some rockpools which had long since frozen over. Immediately after disembarking, Doi felt the chilling air against her shivering skin, and wrapped Setsunai warmly in silk cut from her cabin's drapes, before tucking her, a lamp and fire stick, and the leather case Naani gifted her, into a wicker basket she carried on her back. Then, she carefully edged her way over the slippery ice and onto the cold earth, which she hiked up to the hillside peak of.

From there, Doi beheld the grand skyline; emerald hills tipped with twinkling, frost rolled smoothly across the land, dipping into the southern valleys and soaring up into the northern mountain peaks - her ultimate destination. Away, towards the south-east, stretched the towering ice walls of Pagon, which shimmered like thousands of diamonds under the pale sunlight, and stared pitifully across the small settlements scattered across the snowy fields. Doi was hungry and tired and injured - she had used the last of her supplies on the journey here, but knew it would be far too risky, and take far too long, to detour via the city. Her headache swelled into a splitting migraine, white spots danced across her dying vision, and she collapsed to her knees.

She gazed helplessly at the distant mountains which stood tantalisingly so close, and collapsed to the fading, frightened bleats of Setsunai - the same mournful cries she made to her mother's frozen body all those months ago.

Setsunai had less than thirty days to live.

Chapter 7: A New World

Doi awoke to an unfamiliar face; a small, stupefied child with a mess of blonde curls framed around their round face who spoke in a language Doi didn't understand. The lights hurt her head, and she struggled to sit up right, wincing at the pain in her chest which burnt, although noticeably less. The child ran out of the room which, as Doi looked around, also looked alien - a small, humble abode filled with indecipherable books and writing and a strange, small gas lamp that sat atop a raised table. Weirdly, though, the house had a smell that felt nostalgic, echoing some old memory, but Doi couldn't place it exactly. The child re-entered the room, hand in hand with an adult woman who also had curly blonde hair which had been pulled into a thick braided updo unlike any hairstyle Doi had seen before. The woman spoke to Doi in the same, garbled language, and Doi frantically remembered Setsunai.

"Setsunai? Setsunai?" Doi called, her voice cracking with pain. "My goat?" The woman apologetically shook her hands to indicate she didn't understand. Doi gestured horns with her fingers and croaked a bleating noise. The child leapt up and sprinted out the room, coming back with Setsunai in their chubby little arms. Setsunai, while clearly in great pain of her own, lifted her head at the sight of Doi, and awkwardly half-leapt, half-fell on top of her, excitedly licking her face all over. The child giggled while Doi embraced Setsunai, who felt her panic ease, and grinned at the woman in thanks.

The woman smiled back, pointed to Setsunai and asked, "Setsunai?"

Doi nodded, pointed to herself and added, "Doi."

"Evelyn Hierde." The woman replied, gesturing to the child and saying, "Samuel Hierde."

Their names were foreign, and Doi realised she must be in the empire - her memories filtering back to her in a painful blur.

"Setsunai, scrapie?" Evelyn asked.

Doi furrowed her eyebrows in confusion, "Scrapie?" And as she sounded out the letters, she realised what Evelyn meant. "Sukureipi?" Doi nodded sadly, shifting her legs over the edge of the bed and getting to her feet.

Evelyn put her hand around Doi's arms, supporting her unsteady weight, and Samuel helped to lift Setsunai off the bed, speaking in a soft but unintelligible voice as she did so.

Doi gently caressed her wound, which had been cleaned and covered with fresh bandages. The feverish, burning pain had gone, as well as the repugnant, putrefacient stench of infection, replaced by a dull tenderness. Evelyn noticed Doi grazing the bandages with a shaking hand, and she gestured for her to go through the doorway and into the adjacent room. Inside was what looked to be a small stone stove, a few cupboards, a bucket of water, and a table decorated with an array of herbs, bloodied bandages and empty potion bottles. Neatly arranged on a cupboard to the side was Doi's basket, silk drapes that she used to keep Setsunai warm, Nanni's leather case, and Doi's clothes. Suddenly embarrassed, Doi glanced down to realise she were wearing a loose tunic, and scratchy woollen trousers that tied around her waist, an outfit that felt strange and awkward, definitely not tailored for a woman. The clothes smelt vaguely musty, clearly having not been worn in some time, but Doi was grateful for their warmth and cleanliness.

Once Doi had regained some of her strength, she hobbled over to the pile of her belongings unaided. The clothes, although washed, were stained and torn, and still vaguely smelt of disease, so Doi decided not to wear them. As she was looking over the garments, she realised she had no idea how much time had passed. She attempted to ask Evelyn to no avail, so she acted out sleeping and waking up, to which Samuel held up eight fingers. Doi pressed her hands together in thanks, and her stomach growled hungrily. Evelyn walked over to the stove, and carefully lay a thick cut of succulent beef in a metal bowl that sat over hot stones. Immediately, the room filled with the delicious scent of sizzling fat, and Doi's mouth watered. She spoke to Samuel, who grabbed a bucket in one hand, took Doi's hand with his other, and led her outside, and into the refreshing morning air.

Outside, Doi realised what smell had been so familiar to her, it was the smell of goats - of clean straw, sweet hay and musky bucks, and, after surveying the surroundings, Doi realised these people were goatherds. The humble cottage was situated in the hills close to where Doi had collapsed, surrounded by a small fence filled with about a dozen goats and a handful of chicken. Setsunai stumbled around the goats, breathlessly excited to meet them but slow, sluggish and skittish at any contact. Her eyes had become a misty white, the growing sukureipi had likely infested her eyes, resulting in near blindness, but she could still smell the goats, and, like Doi, seemed to recall the memories of home. Samuel bounced over to one of the goats, bringing Doi and the bucket with him, and began to milk the goat, trying to

demonstrate the process to Doi as he did so. Doi laughed, a genuine, joyful chuckle that warmed her chest, knelt onto the frosty ground, and milked the goat with ease, as her mother had once taught her. Samuel beamed with delight and the two shared a sweet, wordless moment of understanding.

An older, gawky goat hobbled bunglingly past, stiffly walking on its heels. Doi noticed, and carefully took it into her arms, closely scrutinizing its hooves. At first, Samuel seemed wary and a little concerned of Doi handling the goat, but as Doi calmly and meticulously picked out small stones which had got trapped between its toes, showing the boy as she did so, Samuel's worry turned into inquisitive interest. After treating the goat, and putting it back down on the ground, it trotted smoothly on. Samuel applauded with a cheery grin.

Doi carried the bucket of milk back into the kitchen and Samuel carried in a couple of eggs, presenting it to Evelyn, who retrieved them and added them to the heated bowl which, by this point, smelt rich and luscious. As Evelyn served up the food on plates, alongside cabbage, leeks, and a dark, grainy bread, Samuel took a seat at the table and indicated for a confused Doi, who was used to dining while sat on the floor, to follow, which she did. Then, Evelyn took the third seat, and linked hands with Samuel and Doi, who subsequently linked hands with each other, in a connecting circle. Evelyn spoke gentle words which seemed to be some sort of prayer, and concluded with, "Laudate Divinum". Samuel repeated this phrase, and then they began to eat, poking the food with a sharp knife and shovelling it into their mouths. Doi bashfully fumbled over the knife, being used to eating with a pair of long bamboo sticks, which made Samuel giggle. Evelyn chastised him, and fetched Doi a carved wooden spoon instead.

The food was simple, and noticeably lacked spice, but it still remained delectable; the tender meat slipped right off the bone, its buttery fat absorbed into the stocky bread which served as a hearty foundation for the eggs, leeks and boiled cabbage. Doi felt reminded of the last time she had eaten at a newfound friend's home, back in Yanxia, with Naani, Yuka, Kaya and Huuang. It felt so long ago, but as she sat now, sharing food and laughter with kind strangers once more, Doi recalled something Naani had said to her - "Perhaps our people are not so different." Doi smiled at the memory. After finishing the food, Samuel leapt up out of his seat and grabbed a large instrument from within a cupboard. It looked similar to a pipa, a four-string wooden instrument Doi had seen played in taverns and by the Black-Hand crewmates, but Samuel proudly exclaimed, "Illa flute!" Then, with hands still greasy from the food, he begun to strum the strings excitedly, playing humorous little patterns of notes which jumped from high to low. Evelyn clapped to the beat of the song, and the two began to sing a vibrant, upbeat tune that rose up with every verse and cascaded down at the chorus, which, after a few loops, Doi began to join in with.

As the song finished, Samuel enthusiastically signalled for Doi to take the lute, but Doi shook her head - she had never learnt to play. So instead, Samuel mimed singing and Doi, after excessive pleading from Samuel and amused cheering from Evelyn, begrudgingly complied.

"Under the gaze of the great mountain,

Through the hills so old,

I see a marrow, a marrow I see,

With veins of silver and gold.

Over the paths which lead unwinding,

Watched by the moon so high,

I sing a ditty, a ditty I sing,

Softer than silk could sigh.

So slowly, so slowly, these stones below me

Are slick from morning rain,

If only, if only, I came on a pony,

My feet would have been saved the pain."

Samuel and Evelyn burst into a round of applause, and Doi bowed with a sheepish grin.

Once the plates had all been cleaned, and Doi had collected her things, she stood with the family outside their home. Samuel tugged at Doi's trousers and questioningly moved his hands around them in a circle. Doi pointed at the mountain range and replied, "Unippueq peaks."

Samuel looked a little confused, "Pagon Montes?"

Doi nodded and Samuel grinned, pleased to have deduced her meaning. Then, Doi turned to Evelyn and handed her the golden rings she'd taken from Ching's body, which had been hidden at the bottom of the wicker basket. Evelyn's eyes widened in shock, and she adamantly shook her hands, refusing the gift. Doi ignored this, forcefully shoving the rings into the palm of her hand and closing her fingers over it.

"Thank you." Doi said conclusively.

Evelyn stammered in shock, and then hurried back into the cottage, returning a few seconds later with an armful of bread, some woollen gloves, and a heavy cloak made from sheepskin draped over her shoulder. She stowed the bread into Doi's basket, put the gloves over her hands, and slipped the cloak over Doi's arms and shoulders; immediately Doi felt the harshness of the wind against her skin cease, replaced by a cosy warm. They thanked each other, and the mother and her son watched as their strange visitor, and her goat, marched off into the distance, their head dipping below the curving hill. Evelyn whispered a prayer.

Setsunai had less than twenty two days to live.

Chapter 8: The Final Stretch

It took Doi exactly seven days to reach the mountains, which was longer than Doi expected - the cobbled path was frequented by dawnbreaker soldiers transporting prisoners in rickety horse-driven carts, meaning Doi had to sneak through the long, wild grass. While the Hierde family had been so kind, she wasn't sure that the dawnbreakers would be as hospitable. The mountains, on the other hand, were vacant of human touch; the blanket of snow spread thick and deep, disturbed only by a few snowshoe hares who bounced around unfazed. Doi hiked through the snow and up the slippery rocks, glad to be wearing the fur cloak which offered some protection from the harsh, bitter elements, reaching the mountain peak and gazing across the white landscape - searching aimlessly for any sign of a marrow tree, but there was none.

After another five days of desperate exploration passed, to no avail, and as Setsunai's familiar bleats quietened to unnerving silence, Doi grew despondent. Also, Doi was growing hungry; the bread from Evelyn had been devoured quickly as the journey had been strenuous and exhausting. Feeling dejected, but not wanting to give up hope, Doi decided to take a break from the search and instead hunt some animals to regain her energy and restart the investigation the following day. She crept up behind an unsuspecting hare feasting obliviously on a hindberry bush and lingered behind a rock, poised.

Patiently, Doi waited, the chill wrapping around her face as her breath escaped in a soft exhale which swirled a hazy mist before dissipating into air. And then she pounced, her hands closing in tightly around the squealing hare. But the hare was stronger than the rabbits Doi was used to, and it squirmed out of her grip, bounding down the mountainside. Frustrated, Doi sprinted after it, the weight of Setsunai on her back slowing down her pursuit as she clambered frantically down the icy rocks. A rapid chase ensued, Doi's long legs plunging deep into the snow, her back against the frigid wind which howled in her ears. Occasionally, the hare would pause to look back, twitching its pale pink nose as if taunting. Eventually, a panting Doi chased it into a small divot where it was cornered, backed up against frosty stone too stiff and slippery to climb. Doi smiled in triumph, unsheathing her sword which she gripped like a spear, ready to claim victory. The hare stared back at her with fathomless grey eyes that seemed to hold an eerie amount of emotion and intelligence, like it didn't just observe Doi but actually understood her to be something more, something deeper. Then, just as Doi dove towards it, the hare twitched its little nose and dove into a hole in the ground which had been shrouded by snow.

Faceplanting into the snow with a grunt, Doi let out an aggravated sigh of annoyance, her hands clasping around air. But then, while on the ground, Doi began to hear something - shuffling... digging? Clearly, the burrow hadn't been fully excavated, and the hare was moving towards wherever their home actually was. Doi listened closely, crawling along the ground along with the hare's muffled movements, the basket containing Setsunai weighing heavily on her back. This lasted around half an hour, the snow slowly seeping through the wool gloves, but Doi was determined - hellbent on catching this snowshoe hare. This furious pursuit led Doi over the snow and across a patch of frozen earth wherein the hare's movements became louder and more clear - it was coming up to surface. Grinning, Doi readied her hands and stopped progressing, her eyes fixed to the ground.

In a flurry of snow and blurred fur, the hare burst from the ground, hopping gracefully over Doi's hands and bounding up a tree with ease. As Doi scrambled to her feet to investigate the daring escape, she realised what stood before her - a large, majestic marrow tree with rivers of silver and gold etched across its ivory bark. Doi looked up to the hare who was stretching lethargically across a frozen branch; it glanced towards her and squeaked as if lazily amused. "Thanks." Doi muttered, brushing the snow from her legs as she turned towards a small cave entrance partially covered by ice-tipped bushes of hindberries. The hare watched her pull away the debris and cautiously enter the cave, before resuming its stretches.

Inside, the cave spiralled into shadow, and as Doi clambered into the inky darkness she realised that she was moving downwards, into the underground. Doi pulled her lamp and fire stick from her basket, uncapped the fire stick and blew gently on the contained components, which immediately set alight. Quickly, she lit the small oil lamp, which she carried in one hand, gingerly feeling her way with her other. The flame illuminated the cave with a low, flickering light, casting tall shadows across the cave walls which, upon closer inspection, had ancient drawings etched into the stone. There was writing too, in a language Doi couldn't understand but did recognise as Vaelarian, alongside illustrations of small people gathered around some kind of winged beast - a relative of the owlbear perhaps?

Further into the depths of the cave Doi traversed, and the deeper she descended, the warmer she felt, the icicles above dripping droplets of water onto her flushed cheeks. Hours passed, the lamp began to dim, and a nervous anxiety bubbled in Doi's stomach as she realised she would likely not be able to make the journey back in the dark. But then, faintly, as if a gift from the gods, Doi felt a gentle breeze against her skin - her destination was within reach.

Doi rushed towards the breeze, noticing how the air grew hotter still, and the walls were becoming slick and wet with melting ice. The breeze was becoming stronger too, although it seemed to ebb and flow almost organically, and as she reached a curve in the cave which seemed to open up into a large cavern of sorts, her lamp cast a dying light onto a colossal shape looming in the darkness.

It was a dragon. And it was breathing.

The feeble glow of her dwindling lamp fought valiantly against the encroaching darkness, casting a flickering light that sent amorphous orange shapes dancing across the dragon's glinting, violet scales that shimmered like oil. Each breath it took was an ominous shudder that reverberated sinisterly through the damp, stagnant air and sent ripples of dread coursing down Doi's spine. There was an oppressive weight in the cavern which pressed down on her, and the silence was thick, palpable and suffocating. Thankfully, it appeared to be sleeping, curled in a tight coil that creaked under its own sheer mass. The acrid scent of sulphur and rust permeated the air, a haunting reminder of the perilous proximity to this sleeping behemoth. Doi prayed to all the gods she had never believed in that she would not make a sound and as she edged around the perimeter of the cavern, she heard Setsunai rustle awake from within the basket. The dragon stirred.

Time stretched agonizingly long before the dragon resumed its heavy, heaving sighs. Doi's rapid heartbeat merged with the sound of her short, breathless pants that felt tight in her chest. As her hand trembled, the lamplight fell onto a set of large, serrated teeth that winked evilly in the swinging light, instilling a primal fear, an instinctive, bone-deep terror that threatened to paralyse her with each hesitant step she made towards the other side of the cavern. Each movement became a test of nerves, every heartbeat a silent plea to remain unnoticed by the slumbering monstrosity before her. Doi wasn't sure how long it took her to reach the other side... it felt like hours, gradually inching closer to the exit that eventually revealed itself hidden behind the dragon's long, spiked tail. She realised that she would have to climb over the tail to be able to leave. Holding her breath, she slipped the basket's leather straps over her shoulders, lifted up the basket, reached over the lowest part of the tail, and placed the basket and lamp carefully on the other side. Setsunai wriggled around inside the basket, her hooves slightly scraping against the woven bamboo, but thankfully she made no other sound. Doi winced but the dragon's breathing remained steady and undisturbed so, with another silent, desperate plea to the gods, she swung her leg over the tail, her trousers less than an inch away from making contact. Doi hesitated, anxiously bouncing on her left foot as she pumped herself up, and then swung her other leg over as well. Her foot barely avoided scraping against the scales, and she paused, waiting, and listening, but the dragon made no reaction. With tears now spilling down her sweaty cheeks, she picked the basket and lamp back up and continued down the stone path.

Doi was still shaking an hour later and, when the lamp finally died, she moved through the pitch black with trembling hands and quaking legs, the image of the bone-white serrated fangs burnt painfully into her mind. The watery walls slowly hardened to ice, and once again she felt her breath hang in the air, a cold mist. As she turned a corner, she saw light streaming through the end of the tunnel, feeling a cool wind against her face. Hurriedly, with hands that were scraped and bruised from the sharp rocks, she scampered towards the light, laughing in relief and delight. As Doi traversed the cave's rocky pathway, anticipation fluttered in her chest like a thousand delicate wings. With each step, the air shifted, and a crescendo of whispers filled her ears, as if nature itself held its breath, awaiting her arrival. At last, she emerged from the mouth of the cave, looking out into an otherworldly scene that she had travelled so far to reach.

Setsunai had less than ten days to live.

Chapter 9: Kinauvit

Gazing around, Doi realised she was not on the other side of the mountain, but rather stood inside of it, in its very heart. The icy walls stretched up and around a magnificent opening above - a natural portal which unveiled the vast expanse of the starry night sky. Through this natural aperture, silver moonbeams cascaded, basking the hallowed ground below in a soft, silky gleam that made it feel illusory and surreal.

A mystical grove breathed with a symphony of vivid colours and fragrances, as if it were a living tapestry woven from dreams. Wisps of lavender, azure, and emerald danced through the air, floating like ethereal lanterns, casting a soft, enchanting glow that bathed the flora in a shimmering luminescence. These mystical will-o'-the-wisps, known to Doi as onibi, fluttered delicately, their iridescent wings weaving ephemeral trails of fading light across the twilight canvas. In the centre, bathing in moonlight, sat a tranquil, shimmering pond inhabited by a family of ivory koi fish. And above, nestled comfortably within a bewitching scattering of trees, stood the ancient temple — a testament to the timeless wisdom of the foregone Vaelarian people. The entrance, an arched gateway, beckoned with an invitation to a realm steeped in mystique and forgotten fables.

As Doi wandered through the grove, she felt a stirring deep within her soul, an undeniable connection to a world outside of her own. The air tingled with a strange, celestial energy, as if the very fabric of this space had been woven with wordless enchantment. Time seemed to lose its hold, and the boundaries of reality grew hazy, as if the grove existed in a place between worlds, a sanctuary of dreams made manifest. Stooping under the bow of the sighing archway, Doi stepped over cobblestones which seemed to shift under her feet, drifting aimlessly like water, and entered the temple.

The temple's broken beams seemed to whisper tales of bygone eras, its weathered spires reached toward the heavens - bridging the gap between the earthly and the divine. On either side, the temple's dilapidated walls, adorned with once resplendent glass windows, acted now as a mystical lens, allowing fractured streams of moonlight to spill inside, painting the temple's interior in a shifting silver light. Doi removed her basket, setting it on the ground in the corner, reached inside, and pulled out Setsunai, who was, to her dismay, deathly still. Distraught, Doi pressed fingers into Setsunai's motionless chest which by now had lost all of its wool, leaving only scratched patches of red, irritated skin. There was a very, very faint heartbeat, which fluttered frantically, as if trapped. Doi wrapped Setsunai in the silk drapes and lay her on the ground, at the back of the temple, and then retrieved Naani's leather case from the basket.

Opening the case, Doi found a very old and faded scroll that felt so fragile it might break at a heavy touch. Delicately, she withdrew the scroll, unfurling the ancient paper to reveal its contents. At the top were lines of writing scribed in Vaelarian symbols and below it was Naani's scrawled translations in common Yanxin. Doi glanced at Setsunai's dying body and then back down at the page. She took a deep breath, and then began to recite the incantations.

The story ends here, unfinished.