

Shinjo Atagi went out on deck. The sun was still high and hot. Most people had retired to their cabins to sleep out the heat. There were of course some who were not, mainly the heimin sailors. But there was something else going on. He could hear singing.

***...out on the steppe, on the hillside steep,  
Grass is long, horse is strong,  
Unicorn children watch over the sheep...***

The creak of the ship and the stuffiness of the cabin melted away and, for a moment, he was back. A soft twilight settling over his family's encampment. The sweet, acrid smell of fermented milk. And the sounds of the shamisen flowing softly out of the yurt as his mother soothed his little sister to sleep.

***...heroes ride and pass them by...***

For a moment he was back. He was *home*.

***...the river below, purple banners fly high...***

Coarse laughter brought him back to the present with a start. Looking around, he could see where the singing had come from. Two sailors had spread a sail cloth above them for some shade and were enjoying the shade beneath it, cups in their hands. And standing over them, waving around the bottle, was the reason they'd been drinking in the first place: Moto Raiju.

Raiju was the very picture of why the other clans regarded the Moto family with a little apprehension.

He was stripped to the waist. His hakama was faded and had patches. His unkempt hair was matted about his bare shoulders and there was three days' worth of growth on his face.

While Atagi had taken the trouble to maintain a standard of dress as befitting a samurai, Raiju was almost indistinguishable from the peasants he was slumming with. Only the Moto's daisho on his belt marked the difference.

The sailors then noticed Atagi, quickly dropping their cups on the deck and bowing. Raiju at first laughed at them, his back still to Atagi. The Moto then slowly turned his head.

"Aw, crap."

Atagi motioned for the sailors to leave, when they'd gone he stepped forward beneath the canvas, grateful for the shade. For a time silent, drawing out the moment so Raiju could feel as uncomfortable as he should. Then he spoke.

"I recall, Moto-san, you promised not to make personal use of our stores without permission," Atagi said.

"This isn't that," said Raiju, swishing the bottle. "This is something that was cooked up below decks." He took another swig and shuddered. "Knocks out your back teeth, but does the job."

"What's in it?"

"I didn't ask."

Atagi shook his head. "Hand it over, then."

Raiju complied.

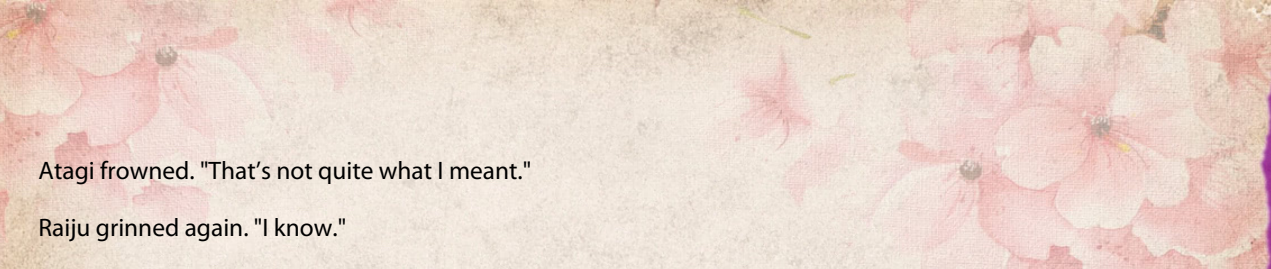
Atagi took a cautious sip from the bottle. "Yow, that...it's..." He winced, making a fist. "It's like putting my head in the fire and underwater." He handed the bottle back to Raiju. "You can keep it."

Raiju grinned and took another drink.

"Still, we can't let things slip," Atagi said. "I know it can be difficult but..."

"I understand, Shinjo-san," said Raiju, his voice adopting a more formal tone. "You won't catch me with the heimin again."





Atagi frowned. "That's not quite what I meant."

Raiju grinned again. "I know."

At the far end of the ship, a groom approached them leading a horse out on exercise. As they approached, the decline in the horse's condition became more apparent. Thinness, dullness in the coat, hesitation in the gait.

Raiju's smile fell away. "It is a sad sight to see," he sighed. "Tell me, Shinjo-san, did our ancestors go through such hardships in their wanderings?"

"I'm not sure," Atagi replied. "Perhaps. The stories say little of such details. But they had Lady Shinjo herself to guide them. And even after she had gone from this realm, there were many of those who had been in her company and known her secrets. But still," he added, "they were not at sea for weeks at a time like us. Their horses could roam."

Raiju nodded. "We have always been explorers."

With a sigh, Atagi turned to face the sea. It was a limitless expanse, akin to the vast grasslands of the steppes of the Unicorn homelands. Ahead of them were infinite possibilities, but still, they were far from home.

As the horse passed them, Raiju turned to stand next to Atagi but something made him turn back. A movement in the corner of his eye, a sound, a warning...

The horse reared up, pulling against the halter, its scream loud and shrill, shattering the silence. It reared up, shrieking again, its eyes rolling to reveal the white. The groom fell back to avoid the hooves. The horse, now free, staggered about the deck.

Instantly, Atagi and Raiju went into action. Atagi tried to grab the horse's bridle but the horse tossed its head and it flew out of reach. Raiju sprinted towards it, dropping his bottle, springing onto the horse's back and wrapping his arms around its neck.

Atagi made another grab for the bridle but missed again. The horse tried to throw off Raiju, but he held on with his knees, leaning close to the horse's face, stroking its neck and whispering in its ears.

"Easy there," he soothed.

Finally, Atagi got hold of the bridle, hanging on with all of his strength while Raiju continued to calm the horse.

"That's much better, isn't it?" Raiju said, rubbing the horse's side with his hand. He looked down at Atagi and grinned.

It was then they realized they had an audience. The noise had of course woken people from their afternoon naps. Explanations were given, and Atagi put the horse away.

When Atagi came back on deck, Raiju was pulling a bucket full of water onto the deck. He offered it first to Atagi. Atagi didn't pour it over his head as the Moto did, but he was content to wash his hands and face.

"I offer you my thanks," said Atagi, pulling a small bottle out of his sleeve.

"Oho," said Raiju, recognising the label. "But you said we weren't allowed to go in the stores."

"This is mine," said Atagi. He had been saving it, but...

"Then as it was both of us, we should share it," said Raiju.

With the sun bright overhead, the ship continued to make its way towards their new home.

