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MEET THE SAVIORS

The Meeting

Alex Smith

Makie sighed and brushed the dust off the blue silk of her robes. She coughed as the motion sent up a thick plume of scroll-dust. How like Toru to suddenly remember an important errand on the day they were to air the scrolls. She would have to speak with Azami-sensei about this. She had thought to report her fellow apprentice keeper many times before, such as the time when she caught Toru using a pilfered *gohei* to dust off the maps in the spire observatory.

"Look," he had said. "The *kiyomi-no-kami* is still trapped inside!" He meant that the purification spirit called into the *gohei* ages ago by some long-dead kannushi at the shrine he'd stolen the *gohei* from was still active, and now he'd brought it into the library!

Toru stood in front of a large map of the Minamo complex spread out on a drawing table and waved the frilly papered-end of the *gohei* in the air above the map.

"Watch."

Ghostly tendrils snaked down out of the *gohei*, writhing over the surface of the map. In horror, she looked and saw that where the tendrils touched the surface, the colors of the map glowed. She looked closer and saw that the water of the great waterfall in the center of the map was actually moving! She could see mist rising from the bottom of the falls!

"See?" said Toru, grinning broadly, "it's clean as can be, and I never touched it. No rags, no fuss. . . ."

Makie didn't hear a word he said. Her gaze was fixed on the waterfall at the center of the map. Her eyes widened. Something was moving through the water--there! She saw a flash of light off cerulean scales, claws, then a serpentine tail and . . . fangs! Makie shrieked and swift as could be, she snatched the *gohei* out of Toru's hand. Ignoring his protests, she lunged past him to the arched window that looked out at the real waterfall far below and tossed the *gohei* outside. She watched as it tumbled end over end and disappeared in the roiling mists at the waterfall's base.

"Why'd you do that?" exclaimed Toru.

"Fool!" she snapped. "It's bad enough stealing that thing, but to bring it in here, inside the library's defenses! What if that *kami* decided that we were in need of "purification"? What if it has friends?"



Toru scowled and said nothing, but ever since that day, it seemed as though Toru was out to make her life miserable by whatever means he could find. Today's delinquency was the last straw, she decided. It was time for her to act--once she was finished moving these scrolls.

Makie looked up at the stack of rolled parchment and vellum that she had carried from the inner stacks. There was one she recognized, a thick scroll bound with a red-leather cord wrapped around an ivory clasp. It was a painting, she remembered, a landscape done in sumi charcoal ink. It was clearly the work of a master, broad brush strokes that made the mountains seem to leap out of the paper, and just the faintest hint of ink for the clouds--so different it was hard to believe that they had been made by the same hand.

Well, she thought, there were advantages to working alone. No one would chastise her if she took a little rest and looked at the painting again. Her hand moved to the ivory clasp swiftly undoing the cord. The parchment felt rich in her hand. Stepping to the side of the hallway, she looped the leather cord around a sconce set high on the wall, and stepped back, letting the scroll's own weight unfurl it till it hung perfectly displayed before her.

A light breeze blew through the corridor, and from far off she heard the sound of rushing water. Someone must have opened the door to one of the decks overlooking the waterfall. Makie didn't worry she'd be caught. Few came up here to the halls where they kept these paintings, high in the stacks. Art was a pleasant pastime, but it could not help you defeat an enraged *kami*, or shield a room from the scrying mirrors of the soratami. As such it was considered a frivolity, and there was little interest in frivolity these days.

The painting was just as she remembered it. Impossibly tall mountains draped with slender waterfalls that ran like ribbons down to the foothills before disappearing into the mist at the bottom of the scene. On the centermost peak sat a lone teahouse at the top of a switchbacking path that ran down the mountainside.

It was customary in these landscapes to show a pilgrim or two making their way up one of the paths to pay their respects at some mountain shrine. This gave the composition life and a sense of scale. But this one had been different. There was no one on the paths, no birds flying above the clouds, only a few straggly pines clinging to the rocky shelves of the mountains. She imagined the painter, near the end of his career, sitting in some highland lodge, his eyesight failing but his withered hands as steady as they had been in his youth. Here, in this lonely place, so near his final rest, he had realized the ultimate supremacy of nature. The mountain stood alone. It would not suffer a single mortal to climb its paths, not a single . . . Makie blinked. Was that a smudge on the parchment?

She took a step closer. There, two-thirds of the way up the steep path to the small teahouse, she could clearly see a figure. He was tiny against the landscape but she could clearly see his walking stick and mendicant's bowl--a monk. Her eyes went up the path and sure enough she saw more shapes in the teahouse, four in all. How could this be? Had she somehow missed them when she discovered this painting two years ago? Impossible, she thought, but then again there was no mistaking it: this was the same painting. She leaned closer and a draft blew through the hall bringing with it the scent of mountain air and cold fall-spray. She closed her eyes, and the sound of rushing water filled her ears.

* * *

The old man leaned out of the teahouse window, peering down through the early-morning mists at the path weaving down the mountain below.

"He comes," he said, turning away from the window and shaking jewels of dew from his long beard of ivory and silver. "One appointment to keep every 1,000 years. You'd think he could be on time."

"Leave him be," said another man, as old as the first, who sat on a low stool at the lone table in the middle of the room. The top of the table was etched with a spider's web of lines, a series of paths all leading from the edge of the table to the center like an elaborate labyrinth. Set in places where the lines crossed were small figurines of various shapes: a snake, a moth, a seated samurai lord, and others. The seated man stared at them intently, occasionally dragging on the long slender pipe he held between his teeth. His eyes reflected the ruby glow of the embers in his pipe-bowl. The acrid smell of sulfur and brimstone filled the teahouse. "He's been busier than us all, of late."

From outside the door came the sound of leather boots on gravel, and a third man appeared in the open doorway of the teahouse. He leaned heavily on a twisted staff of hard cherry with a single leaf of emerald green and a large thorn growing from the top. A wooden begging bowl hung from a hempen cord at his waist. "Pipe, Silverbeard," he said, nodding to the two already inside. "He's coming. I saw him on the path."

"We saw him too, Thorn," replied Silverbeard, turning away from the window. "He thinks himself clever to make us wait like this. Why doesn't he just fly up?"

Pipe knocked a trail of embers onto the floor. "He respects the conventions of the form."

"Bah," Silverbeard spat. "He respects nothing. In fact, I'm starting to think that our little reunions are a waste of time."

Thorn laughed, a sound like the rustling of leaves in a strong wind. "So you say whenever we meet, yet something brings you back to us every 1,000 years."

"He's lonely," said Pipe, grinning.

Silverbeard answered his grin with a scowl. "I have hope."

"Hope?" Pipe raised a bushy eyebrow. His lip curled and a thin ribbon of smoke escaped his mouth and rose up to the ceiling. "Hope that he'll change? Hope that he'll shed eons of foul corruption and emerge from the darkness to fly by your side under the sight of the sun once more? You might as well wait for every mortal in Kamigawa to attain enlightenment!"

"I have hope of that, too," said Silverbeard, quietly turning back to look out the window.

Pipe blew another cloud of acrid smoke and grinned at Thorn who was slowly walking over to join him at the table. Pipe pointed at Silverbeard standing by the window. "As if he'd know a mortal from a cloud in the sky, eh?"

"I do know the mortals!" said Silverbeard, whirling around. A warm breeze blew through the room, lifting his whiskers. It smelled of a field of susuki grass in the afternoon sun. "Would you like to hear just how I have spent my time these past 1,000 years? I--"

Pipe waved his hand, smiling. "Easy, friend. I meant no offense. Save your telling for when we are all arrived. Scale is almost here, and the other . . ." Here Pipe paused and shot a meaningful glance across the table at one of the empty stools.

"Old memories meet in borrowed vestments," said a voice--barely a whisper--from the space above the empty stool. "The sleeves of my robe, they are still wet with tears of sorrow from our last parting, or is it the blood of those who we have led on from this world with gentle hands?"

"How nice of you to join us, Dew. You speak in riddles as always."

There was a rush of warm, salty air, and a man appeared, sitting in the stool. He was dressed in flowing cerulean robes that shimmered as though they remembered the once-caught light of a sunset at sea.

"I was here long before you arrived, dear Pipe," said the man called Dew, "and the world is a riddle. I merely speak its truth."

Pipe made to make some rejoinder, when he was interrupted by a furious howling of wind at the door. A fifth man stepped into the teahouse. He wore thick robes of oiled burlap, the hem soiled with dried mud from the road. His eyes were small, jet-black jewels set in shrunken sockets, and his skin was dry leather tanned black. The wrinkles in his skin bore persimmon-colored blotches, the scars from some illness suffered long ago. He smiled, revealing a black tongue that darted along toothless gums.

"My move."

Striding to the table, he reached out and picked up one of the pieces, an acorn netsuke carved to resemble an egg around which three snakes twisted and coiled. With a grimy fingernail, he traced along one of the lines on the board until he came to an unoccupied juncture. He set the piece back down, Pipe's eyes intently watching his every move. Satisfied, he plunked lightly down on a stool and began to cough loudly.

Pipe politely waited for his fit to subside, then spoke. "Greetings, Scale. Silver here was about to tell us of his intimate knowledge concerning the mortals' potential for enlightenment, weren't you?"

"Ah, I enjoy a good fable," croaked Scale, his rasping voice a thin whisper.

Silverbeard ignored him and sat down on the last empty stool. Then, folding his hands before him as though in prayer, he began to speak.

"You laugh when I speak of mortal enlightenment, but its more than a fable or a game played by *kami* in idleness" he said, gesturing to the board in front of him. "I have seen it happen with my own eyes. I have seen a mortal man enlightened, and witnessed the ascension upon his death."

Scale's rasping laugh filled the teahouse, then he gasped in mock horror. "So wait--in the end, the mortal dies?" he said, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "Shocking!"

Silverbeard frowned at the interruption and reached out to pick up a small ivory piece from the board. The shape suggested a seated human in armor, though the face was so worn its bearing and gender were impossible to guess. "A samurai, he was, and I served as his advisor. He was lord of a small keep near the ruins they now call Reito, though in those days it was a lively city, a center of commerce and learning. The lord kept a small retinue of loyal men well provisioned and he played the political games of the samurai well, but a corrupt merchant brought about his ruin.

"Learning of my lord's weakness for ventures, the merchant whispered in his ear, proposing many lucrative and outlandish schemes. With silvery tongue he promised that my lord's gold would take root and grow tenfold. I advised against each of these ventures, but my powers of persuasion were not enough to save the lord from his base greed, and I was determined not to break role and use my real powers."

This set off another round of grating laughter from Scale. Pipe shot him a glance and at last he quieted, though his chest still shook with silent mirth.

"In time, my lord was destitute. He took to spending his days in his private chambers in a fever, counting his remaining silvers. On one morning, I caught him sneaking out of the keep warehouse with a sack held under one arm. I knew that it held a great helm with the crest of the crane--a valuable family heirloom. He was off to pawn it to a moneylender to pay off one of his many debts, or more likely, to get more money for one of the merchant's schemes. Seeing that he had dropped as low as he could get, I resolved to make a test case of the man. Could someone utterly without honor be saved? Could he achieve enlightenment and ascend to join the *kami*?

"I stopped him outside the rear gate of the keep and told him there was another way. He would not listen to me at first, but I reminded him of how poor his fortunes had become since he stopped heeding my advice, and he agreed to join me to pray at the keep's single shrine for salvation, if only on the hope that the *kami*'s blessing might improve his chances with this latest planned investment.

"He knelt at the shrine and rang the bell to get the *kami*'s attention, placing the helm upon the altar as an offering. It was then that I first used my real powers, and in such a way that the lord would not realize that it was I who had done it, I transformed the helm into a tiny *kami* of light that rang like a silver chime as it flitted up into the rafters of the shrine and disappeared.

"The samurai lord was understandably shocked, and for a time, he cursed me and wailed at the loss of this treasure, but he saw that *kami* in his dreams that night, and the next day he came back to me and begged that I take him to the shrine again. Every morning, we repeated the ritual. He would bring another treasured object to the shrine, and I would transform it into a wondrous *kami* as he prayed, until he had nothing left to offer.

"The samurai lord then discarded his title and land and joined a monastery to better serve the *kami*. He lived a full life, and on his 88th birthday he passed away an enlightened man. I stood at his bedside and watched. As the last breath left his lips, there was the sound of a gong, and with a puff of rose-scented smoke his body dissipated and he became a *kami*. So, you see, mortal enlightenment *is* possible. And is that not a preferable alternative to the extermination suggested by our brethren these days?"

Scale cackled loudly. "So, to whit, you are recommending that we each spend 50 years saving one mortal soul? That hardly seems efficient. And this ascension you speak of sounds like pretty trappings, nothing more. You could have struck the mortal down as he kneeled at that shrine and been done with it. Not to mention, I hear that *kami* ended up getting caught in some *kannushi's gohei* and was used to clean maps. So much for ascension!"

"Who says the mortals need our intervention at all?" asked Thorn in a voice like the dripping of soft rain on moss.

"Ah, then you propose a truce!" said Scale, idly scratching at a sore on his neck. "Good luck convincing the Great One of that."

Thorn sighed. "How can there be war between two parts of the same whole? Like us, the mortals are part of the rhythm of nature. In their way, they are just important as we *kami*."

"Why don't you tell us what you've been up to these past 1,000 years, Thorn, and we'll decide the merit of your argument," suggested Pipe. Thorn nodded and began to speak.

"I have been many things since we last met, and in all my roles, I witnessed mortals working in accordance with nature. For a time I was an ox plowing fields tended by human monks. I saw how they added mulch to the fields, and rotated their crops so that the land might not be poisoned by too much of one thing. Their festivals were the festivals of sowing and harvest, and they observed the proper rites for the *kami* of rice and the *kami* of fresh water. Then, a while after, I became a bamboo grove, carefully tended by the *orochoi*. Every spring they would come pick my greenest shoots so that the taller stalks would not be crowded and sicken. Then they would pickle the shoots for eating through the summer and fall, and in the winter, they would spread their offal upon my roots, nurturing new shoots in the spring and thus maintaining the cycle.

"Just before coming here, I was a stream that flowed past rice fields tended by *kitsune*. They built sluices and gates on me, and burned incense to count the passing of hours so that they might know when to redirect my runoff from one family's field to another's that all might partake of nature's boon evenly, and never in excess. And they would sing songs to pass the time as they waited by the sluice gates. I can hear their voices even now, full of life, yet tinged with sadness--an acknowledgement of mortality, like the grain that grows tall in the summer yet knows of the harvest that will come. And yet they continued to live and die and give themselves back to the land. The Great One's war is folly, for he would upset the balance that both mortal and *kami* work hard to preserve. How can we *kami* seek to destroy this? How can the worshipped live without those to worship them?"

The room was silent. From outside the window came the drip, drip, drip of gathered mist dropping off leaves.

At last, Scale broke the silence, saying "Tell me, o verdant one, have you seen the high plains after the samurai pitch a battle against one another? It is devastation, not a thing moving on the ground or in the sky. Or what about the wild moths they enslave as beasts of burden? What balance maintained there, what cycle preserved? Even your dear *kitsune* cut great swaths in the *susuki* plains for their villages. Are these mortals part of nature's rhythm? Do they give back even a tenth of what they take?"

"Say what you will, infernal brother," replied Thorn quietly, in a voice like the beating of moth's wings, "I have seen the good in mortals, and I say there is another way."

"Bold words," hissed Scale, "but I've seen you with your head bowed, doing the Great One's bidding. How many times have you allowed your life-giving waters to rise in a flood, and your swift-growing thorns to take back farmlands? In your own way, you have claimed more mortal lives than any of us before the war began, and you--"

"Enough!" barked Pipe. The air around him seemed to spark with heat, and there was the faint scent of sulfur. "You talk of saving the mortals, aiding the mortals, slaughtering the mortals; Why not leave them to their own devices? If they cannot exist in harmony with the *kami* as it is, perhaps *they* will find a way to reconcile this rift? They are surely more resourceful than any of you give them credit for."

"Ah hah!" said Scale. "I sense a tale coming. Tell us, dear Pipe, on what do you base this claim to the resourcefulness of mortals?"

"I make no claims," said Pipe, "nor do I take a side in this debate, be it *kami* or mortal. I am merely a tool, a lens--like the hammer that takes the strength of the blacksmith's arm and focuses it to a point, or the sword that takes the skill of the swordsman and focuses it to a thin blade-line."

"Your very choice of metaphors reveals your predilection for the mortals, but please, continue," said Scale.

Pipe did not seem to have heard him. He paused a moment, surveying the game board until he found the piece he was looking for, a man riding a strange beast like a cross between an ox and a mountain goat. Laying a finger on the piece, but not moving it, he began to speak.

"I spent most of the time since I last met you in my true form, for it is up high where the fire of twilight burns along the clouds that I feel most at home. Yet I did descend once or twice, and on one of those occasions I saw fit to be a sword. Not any normal sword was I, but a work of art, made of metal folded thousands of times by the hand of a true master. My handle was wrapped in leather made of a dragon's hide, and my pommel was a single circlet of the purest ruby, hardened by incantations now long lost to mortal knowledge. In my time, many possessed me, but it was only one who, with me, found greatness.

"I had been dropped in a snowbank in the high mountains of the Sokenzan range after a bloody fight between two rival factions of bandits, when a scout from another tribe found me. He first thought to bring me back as a great prize for his warchief, when he passed a roving pack of oni in a ravine and had a better idea. Hurrying back to camp, he showed me to the warchief and told him of a great cache of similar arms to be found nearby. Driven to haste by their greed, the warchief and three of his closest men rushed out at once with the scout to guide them. He brought them to the ravine, and pointed down it, saying the cache was in there, and that he would watch the entrance so that no other roaming bands might interfere. His four tribesmen rushed down into the ravine where the wild oni awaited--fierce, feral beasts, with barbed tails and tusks of iron. The scout waited until the echoes of their screams died, and when he saw that the oni had moved on, he crept back into the ravine and reclaimed me, and he took also the pendant of the warchief, the symbol of his rank and power.

"Returning to his bandit tribe, the scout claimed that the warchief had perished in combat with oni, which was true, and that he had appointed the scout to take up the mantle of leadership after him, which was false. Some challenged him, but when the scout drew me, I flared with an unearthly flame, and the superstitious in the tribe saw it as the will of the *kami*. There were still dissenters, and one by one, they met their end at the end of my blade, gripped tightly in the scout's hand.

"Winters passed, and before long, the scout had risen higher than any chief before him, bringing several tribes together in an alliance. How great their victories over the samurai forts in the lowlands, and how rich their spoils! The scout fathered many children to many wives, and was blessed with good fortune; until one day when he was riding in the hills alone at morning, as was his custom, and he was set upon by a band of akki. He cut five of their shells clean in two, but when he struck the sixth the blood on his gauntlet made his grip slip, and I fell from his hand. He was brained by a rock moments later and so fell to his death."

"Bah!" howled Scale, "you tell us the tale of a greedy fool who dies a fool's death by a fool's hands! If these antics are what impressed you, then you set your standards far too low, o fiery one!"

"Yet did he not achieve great things?" countered Pipe. "A lowly scout becoming warlord! Can you name a single one of our kind that has advanced in so grand a fashion? His descendants, too, found great success. Why, his great-grandson Godo is quite highly thought of by the bandit tribes, I hear."

Scale made a noise somewhere between a cough and a chortle. "Dear, dear, Pipe. Was it not your interference in the first place that brought this lowly scout his fortune? I've never seen you meet a mortal, or a *kami* for that matter, that you did not seek to manipulate . . . but no, I do not wish to quarrel with *you*." He paused and shot a significant look at Silverbeard. "Yet, your tale did have a lot of mortals killing each other, and so I approve. In that sense, perhaps they do have potential after all."

Pipe frowned and took a long drag, blowing the smoke out in the air where it hung like a stormcloud over the table before it gradually dissipated in the breeze from the open doorway. "What of you, Dew?" he asked at great length. "Where do you stand on the topic of mortals?"

"You . . . do know what a mortal is, don't you?" asked Scale, flashing Dew a toothless grin.

"That, I do not," replied Dew, eliciting another cackle from Scale, "for I see vessels walking upon the earth, but also, I see phantasmal beings of light and wonder that bring whole worlds into being merely by closing their eyes."

"You speak madness, friend, as always," said Pipe.

"No, I speak of dreams."

Dew stood, his form flickering between transparent and invisible, yet he never completely disappeared. It was more like he was something seen out of the corner of your eye. Definitely there, but impossible to focus upon.

"For the last 1,000 years, I have been a recurring dream in the minds of mortals. I have wandered the shifting paths of their dream worlds, I have read the unwritten scrolls that never say quite the same thing twice, though they are untouched by any quill or razor.

"When the young soratami Meloku closed his eyes after completing the first of the great examinations a scholar of the soratami must pass, he created a dream palace in which he was master, and I danced among its clouds, a kirin with whiskers of mist."

"My, how original," muttered Scale.

"I was there as a worm in a fruit when the akki Ishi-Ishi flew over the heights of Sokenzan on his stalwart goat and found the persimmon tree of plenty. I was a soft summer breeze that carried the scent of a gilt-haired maiden to the kitsune Snow Fur in his dreams. He awoke and wrote his first poem that day."

"Wait," interrupted Scale, "are you trying to tell us that you think mortals are something other than animals--that they are kin to *kami* even--because they *dream*?"

"All I say," replied Dew, "is that you cannot judge an acorn by its size. You must look at its shadow, for there you will see the dream of the oak it is to become."

Scale shook his head and sighed. "Tell me then, Dew, what of the nezumi that dreams of being a dragon? Should we say that, because he dreams so, he is indeed a great being of scales and fury?"

Dew was silent.

"No," said Scale, answering himself, "for in the end he will still end up face down in the swamp, a poisoned dagger in his back. And, Dew, I read that poem by Snow-Fur, the one about the gilt-haired fox-maiden? It was a real stinker."

Scale began to laugh at his own joke. He laughed so hard that the laugh became a hacking cough. One hand went to his throat, and he coughed loudly again. There was the sound of something metallic hitting the floor. All there looked to see a small triangular black scale lying flat on the wooden planks beneath their feet. Quietly, they watched as smoke began to rise from the floor around the scale. In moments, the scale had burned its way through the floor and fallen out the bottom of the teahouse.

Scale stood.

"Over the last 1,000 years I have seen many mortals from the inside looking out, and soon after each of my visitations the mortal I chose would die. Some I would visit for months, some for a week, some for only a day, and each would receive signs of my presence. Sores in the throat and mouth, bleeding from joints and the skin, or crimson wounds that blossomed on the face overnight. Once I saw whole village die, as I passed from dog to child to mother to father, and then to the next family. My travels knew no prejudice or favor. I leapt as easily from wretch to nightsoil-man as I did from peasant to lord. They called me the Black Wind, and the Weeping Plague, so named, I suppose, from the trails of blood that fell from the eyes of those I blessed."

Scale paused and looked at each of the others seated there in that teahouse, slowly considering each in turn as he continued to speak. "I have seen mortals reach dizzying heights only to fall on their knees, lamely cursing the *kami* as though they had anything to blame but their own mortality. And here each of you claims he knows what it is to be mortal,

and how we might reconcile this great rift between our two worlds that are in fact one. But hear this: It is only at the end of something that you truly understand it, and I have seen so very many endings . . . And," he added after a moment, "I will see many more, for my work is not done."

Scale bowed deeply, then stepped out the door of the teahouse.

"Wait!" Silverbeard stood and ran to the door, grabbing Scale by his spindly liver-blotched arm. "Wait, old friend. You speak of bringing an end to the mortals, yet you know they are more than cattle for the culling. Have them worship you or serve you if you must, just . . . don't give up on them. Remember, Scale. Remember how it was before. We can have glory again, but it must be glory shared or we will all suffer."

"I do remember," said Scale, a faint smile playing on his bony lips. Then there was a great howling of wind and a rush of glistening black leathery skin followed by a banded, scaly tail as a giant creature--a dark *kirin*--took flight from where Scale had stood. A chilling bellow tolled and echoed through the hills, and he was gone.

The remaining four looked at each other in silence.

"I never did like that one," said Silverbeard, sighing. "But, I have hope."

So saying he walked out the door. A great brilliance streamed from where he stood, as though the sun had come down to the very door of the teahouse, and when it faded a *kirin* stood in Silverbeard's place. His mane was the color of the dawn, and his scales were soft clouds, limned with a celestial light. He snorted and stomped at the ground with a hoof and then he, too, was gone.

Back inside the teahouse, Pipe grinned. "Well, I suppose this ends our meeting. See you two in another--" He stopped, for it was only him and Thorn that remained in the teahouse. "Fleeting, that Dew, isn't he?" Pipe mumbled. "Like a brilliant idea that hovers over your head, but you can never quite think it. Ah well." He looked at the table. "We never did finish our game, either. Next time, I suppose, next time." Pipe sighed, and a moment later, he disappeared in a blistering hot wave of flame and smoke that turned two of the stools to ash and left half the table smoking.

Alone, Thorn stood and leaned wearily on his walking stick. Slowly, he began to walk out, his limbs creaking like timbers in an old wooden ship at sea. He left the teahouse and began to descend the winding path down the mountainside.

* * *

Makie opened her eyes and drew in a sharp breath. She was sitting on the floor, and there, across from her was the landscape, hanging just as she had last seen it. She must have fallen asleep! But what a fantastic, horrible dream! It had been so real -- the old men, in the teahouse . . . She leapt to her feet and ran over to the painting. Then breathed a sigh of relief. There were no pilgrims, no shadows in the teahouse in the painting.

No kirin.

It was only a dream.

She noticed for the first time that she was sweating, and her mouth was terribly dry. Her throat ached and her tongue felt huge in her mouth, almost as if . . .

Slowly, hand shaking, she reached with her fingers into her mouth and drew out a single black scale.