

# Pillow Book of a Bayushi

*(Traacherous Terrain)*

**1500 sakura blossom season, Mura Sano Eiyu ni Suru, Ikoma Lands** – I travel through the lands of the Lion clan with another who was born of my own family; one Otomo (formerly Bayushi) Soten. Otomo-sama and I were on our way to offer our respect and prayers at the Shrine of Duty in the village of Mura Sano Eiyu ni Suru, in the lands of the Ikoma. I found myself quite amused with Otomo Soten during our journey thusfar. He seemed caught between considering me with the affection of a younger sister, and with... a different sort of affection. I am pleased that I can so affect even one trained by the Bayushi courtiers. I overheard him muttering to himself to remember his Imperial wife.

There were many others offering their prayers today at this small and neatly tended shrine. A Dragon of the Mirumoto, and a Kakita arrived at roughly the same time as myself and Otomo-sama. We silently offered our incense while a pair of Phoenix stood nearby. One a shugenja, was an older samurai man, the other a young woman of roughly my own age. Their mon indicated they are of the family of the Asako, from the Order of the Inquisitors. The man was of the Phoenix shugenja school, as am I, while the woman bore the marks of an Asako courtier. It was obvious they were disagreeing quietly over something, but following the lead of Otomo-sama, I kept a polite distance and did not bother trying to overhear.

Aside from the Phoenix, there was also a Scorpion present, quietly praying, and a pair of Crane making much show of their devotions.

After a brief time, we finished our offering, and found ourselves in conversation with the elder Phoenix. Asako-sama introduced himself as Asako Kato, Acolyte of Air, of the Order of Inquisitors serving Lord Asako Heishi. He then introduced the young samurai-ko as his niece and apprentice Asako Ryoko.

Asako Kato had received a summons to the City of the Rich Frog, but also must deliver missives to his lord Asako Heishi. Asako Ryoko had volunteered to carry the missives for him, but he felt the journey was too hazardous for her to undertake alone.

Now I understand the quiet disagreement; though she hides it well enough, Asako Ryoko does not see the danger, and takes her uncle's insistence on an escort as a disparagement of her abilities.

Of course, Asako Kato is not made to ask for any such escort. Otomo Soten immediately volunteers for this duty, as befitting. He then turns, and asks the Mirumoto and Kakita nearby if they would wish to travel with us.

He does not ask me if I will accompany him; he seems to assume I will follow him. I agree to accompany Asako Ryoko myself, which draws a small eyebrow raise from Otomo-sama, but costs him no face. I have simply made it clear I am not his servant.

The Kakita agrees immediately, but the Mirumoto is not so quick. He quietly says he will go if Otomo-sama requires it. I can understand his reticence. The Dragon and Phoenix are not on friendliest of terms at present.

Asako Kato then asks us all to join him at the House of the Jade Tiger, as he must leave at first light, and wishes us also to be fresh come the dawn. So we departed the shrine together.

At the inn, most of the samurai present are Lions, of course, and of higher station such that they politely ignore us. The Crane from the shrine also are settled at this inn, as are a Unicorn, several ronin, and a Dragon shugenja. The Dragon is of the Tonbo family, I noted.

I also noticed that Asako Ryoko saw the Tonbo, and grimaced slightly when she did. Does she know this shugenja? Is there something between them? Perhaps it was just the general malaise between their two clans, though she made no grimace at the sight of the Mirumoto...

As the evening progresses, I discover that the two companions joining our travels are Mirumoto Takako, and Kakita Matsu. Asako Kato agrees to provide us with travel papers, as Asako Ryoko must

be escorted to Pale Oak Castle in the western part of the lands of the Asako.

Our conversation with the Asako samurai is limited. I myself felt too low of a station to converse much with Asako Kato, and Asako Ryoko seemed quite quiet. Perhaps I can see about speaking to her later on along our journey.

As the evening progressed, I noted that the Tonbo kept looking toward Asako Ryoko, making a poor attempt to disguise his interest. I am led to believe there is something between them. Perhaps I can learn something of this in future days.

**1500, the Ever-Vigilant Road, Lion Lands** – We set out briskly on foot the first morning. There was little sign of the Tonbo, I noted. It seemed he had already left before we did.

I found in the days we spent on the road that Asako Ryoko was much more conversant to myself than to the others in the party, even to Otomo Soten, although Soten was closer in appropriate station to her. To Mirumoto Takako she spoke not at all, unless it was needful.

As the time passed, I slowly found her warming to me, and eventually she spoke in a genuinely friendly manner, rather than with the superficial politeness she gave the others. I found out why soon enough. It seems she has grown to distrust men, as the Tonbo, named Ukiya, was an insistent and unsuccessful suitor for her hand in marriage. I found that my agreement that such insistent men can be troublesome, to have let her become closer in feeling to myself.

Eventually she also deigned to speak of her training, and recent investigations a bit, which was of interest to me. An ancestor of mine had sought to join the Order of Inquisitors, until marriage into the Bayushi family had changed the course of her journeys as a samurai-ko. I learned that Asako Ryoko and her sensei were following rumors of a cult of Maho-tsukai in the region, though she confided they had found no definitive proof of their existence as yet.

But of more note to me than Asako's friendship was the unignorable presence of another traveler. Two days after we left the House of the Jade Tiger,

we encountered a monk along the road. Wearing tattered green hakama, and covered in strange tattoos, he was clearly of the Dragon. He was also clearly quite mad.

As we passed him he said, "Well met, are you sharing my road?"

I wished at first to ignore him, but his eyes were on me like a weight. So finally I responded as coolly as I could, "We all travel the *emperor's* road."

Unfortunately, I feel that speaking to him may have been an encouragement. He began to follow us, and would not be denied. This Dragon, one Hitomi Fuguki I soon learned, was rude and bizarre. He spoke in obscure rhymes and riddles. Some of the things he says seemed to oddly to echo my thoughts. Though I find it beyond belief that he could have actually read my mind's turning, I superstitiously began to guard my thoughts most carefully, not allowing myself to turn my imagination to past events or any speculations that might be deemed unworthy. I tried very much to be polite to him, but found it most difficult when he was so rude.

**1500, Oiku, Akodo Lands** – When we arrived in Oiku, I found it a spartan and quite military settlement. We settled at one of numerous inns, although there is no real entertainment here. Not that further distraction is needful with Hitomi Fuguki around.

It began to rain shortly after we arrived. With the rain, came a Crane. A wet and wilted courtier wearing the mon of a Kakita came in, calling for sake.

The Kakita looked around, and noted as we had, that the room was filled with nothing but Lion. He then saw me. As was the penchant of most men who first laid eyes upon me, he came up and introduced himself. He was Kakita Umasu, an Artisan specializing in ikebana.

As usual for most men, he flirted with me, but I was not in the mood really, especially for one who seemed so effete and generally useless. It somehow just wasn't right. I've heard of effete Crane, but never before met one who so typified the stereotype. I gave a look of companionly frustration to Asako Ryoko, who returned it in kind. When both of us had made it

clear we did not wish to get involved, Umasu turned his attentions to the others in our party. He began to complain about everything..the weather, the service, the general unsociability of Lions and Dragons. Hitomi Fuguki's mad manners...everything.

I wasn't interested in hearing such complaints. Though I consider myself a patient woman, I despise those who disparage others so openly. It dishonors the speaker most, but the listeners as well. I even almost felt the urge to defend Hitomi Fuguki from the Kakita's rude words, but kept my tongue. To dignify such comments with a response is more than they deserve.

Not too long after the Kakita joined us, another traveler came in out of the rain. Tonbo Ukiya. His presence here, along our same road, set the drums of alarm pounding in the back of my mind, and I was immediately on the defensive.

He approached our table boldly, trying in an almost desperate way to start polite conversation. Finally, stuttering, he presents Asako Ryoko with a letter; another plea for her hand in marriage. She has made it quite clear that neither she, nor her family, would permit such a thing. Tonbo Ukiya tried to force the letter into her hands, but found his wishes thwarted by Kakita Matsu, who took the letter and firmly showed the Tonbo away from Asako Ryoko. He was backed discretely by Mirumoto-san.

Otomo Soten, and the effete Kakita Umasu of course absented themselves from this event by conversing pointedly with each other, and Hitomi Fuguki babbled meaninglessly nearby.

Asako Ryoko seemed much relieved when the Tonbo was finally dispatched. I could feel for her then, I drew the eyes of many men, but the training followed natural assets. I do so because I am obliged to take the best advantage of what would happen naturally. My fine features cannot be denied. Her own features were deserving of note, but she was not as accustomed to it as I, I judged. And the Tonbo continued to behave in a most unseemly fashion, which only makes a bad situation worse.

**1500, the Path of Changing Hands, Lion Lands** – The road here was crowded, and I was most watchful. Not only did our party of samurai continue

along, but we were accompanied by both Hitomi Fuguki, and to my dismay, Kakita Umasu. I supposed he felt safer in the presence of bushi and shugenja.

Many merchants and Lion messengers also filled the road as we neared the border with Dragon lands. Although I watched closely for Tonbo Ukiya at this time, I saw no sign of him.

Finally we reached the large bridge over the Drowned Merchant River. Although the bridge is wide and strong, I felt uneasy. It was the perfect place for an ambush. I believe the others felt it too; we proceeded past the Lion guards at the foot of the bridge swiftly, and sought to place the span behind us as soon as possible.

The Fortunes were not with us in that endeavor. As we reached the center of the arched span, a strange fog arose around us. It was near midday; this was no natural fog. The bushi and I took defensive positions around the three courtiers, while the monk seemed swallowed by the mist. I drew my scroll of Counterspell; as I felt this fog an ill omen, and began to speak it aloud. I called upon the kami of the earth, to whom I am most closely aligned. I wished this fog to be dispersed.

But my countering kami did not rid me of the fog; another chanting arose at almost the same moment, and being also an incantation of the air kami, it was cancelled out instead. What it was, I did not know, but what followed next was clear enough.

From the fog above us came a strange sight. A figure from the sky resolved itself into the form of Tonbo Ukiya, flying on dragonfly's wings. He swooped towards the bridge, and Asako Ryoko. As he plummeted downward, Kakita Matsu proved skillful in Ryoko's defense. With a single lightning-quick strike of his katana, he neatly severed the Tonbo's wings, and sent him tumbling across the bridge. My own following attempt to summon the kami was ineffective; but it mattered little. The Kakita and Mirumoto bushi ended the obsessed Tonbo's existence in mere moments, while he sought to regrow his dragonfly wings and continue the conflict.

As the fog then settled, another horrific sight loomed before us. Lumbering up the bridge was a bloated and bloodied form, dagger in hand. It

appeared to be one of the traveling merchants, but clearly in the grips of some foul maho.

The bushi stepped forward again, as this bloodied horror sought to reach Asako Ryoko. Was this somehow linked to Tonbo Ukiya? It seemed unlikely, but not impossible. I myself, lacking any further ability to summon the kami of earth for this day, drew my wakizashi in defense. My own strike, though, was rendered unnecessary, once again, by the skillful katanas of the bushi. I was much relieved.

But we were not yet done with evil that day. As I was ready to sheathe my wakizashi, Otomo Soten spoke out. He confronted Kakita Umasu, and boldly accused him of theft! Umasu of course denied it; claiming the document he holds was taken from Ryoko's kimono sleeve because he feared she would be taken or wounded in the fight; he sought to protect her missive. But we see through the sham. How did the Kakita even know Asako Ryoko carried a missive? We had not spoken of it on the journey.

Otomo Soten firmly demands the return of the document, and the bushi back him, their blades still covered with the blood of the maho-tsukai. The Kakita relents, but then surprises us all. In the moment after the missive is returned, I see a flash of black and red; a Scorpion mon. He draws a smoke bomb, and we are again engulfed in fog. The smoke-shrouded figure sheds Crane robes and dives off the bridge into the water below.

We are left only with questions. Only I saw the Scorpion mon, I believe. I said nothing of it. Why would a Shoshuro be here, and seeking to intercept a message to the Order of Inquisitors? Are the Shoshuro implicated in some act of maho?

But these questions must wait for another day. I have filed away this thought for future reference. Lion guards met us just outside of the town, checking our papers and inquiring as to the happenings on the road. They promised to keep an eye towards the river, and the Crane impersonator, but it is unlikely they will succeed.

As we reached the town of Toi Koku, I was relieved. It seemed perhaps the most difficult part of our journey was passed. Everyone had been very silent, even the Hitomi, during this last leg of the

journey towards the intersection of the lands of Lion, Dragon, and Phoenix.

We at last settled at an inn, but it was not yet to be a peaceful night. The Hitomi, previously outgoing in his strange non-sequiturs, has become pensive. He begins to drink, which he had not done before on this journey. He rudely takes food from our plates, and leers at passers-by. When Otomo Soten objected to this strange new behavior from the monk, the monk then exploded in a tirade against the samurai caste.

The Hitomi seemed almost as if he was possessed by some kansen. He began shouting and carrying on in an inexcusable fashion. The Kakita sought some guards to restrain the monk. Mirumoto Takako, Otomo Soten and Asako Ryoko seemed too shocked to take any action at all.

Myself, I could not sit by. I used all my wits to attempt to calm the monk; I countered his debates, and attempted to charm him into submission.

Eventually he seemed to gain some sense of himself again, and all memory of his outburst seemed to have gone with it. He quickly returned to his previous manner, claiming he did not know what happened. When the guards arrived, Hitomi Fuguki was calm, and he was able to behave in as rational and polite a manner as he ever was. He retires quietly for the night.

The next morning, Hitomi Fuguki left our party, setting out along his own path into Dragon Lands with thanks to us for sharing his journey. For some reason I cannot fathom, I wish this strange man well. He seemed possessed by his own problems, and not at peace like so many others of the Dragon seem to be.

**1500, Pale Oak Castle, Asako Lands** – We at last completed our journey. I was pleased to note that Asako Ryoko seemed more at ease on this last part of the sojourn. In more familiar lands, and assured by our skills, she even had polite conversation with the men in our group.

Twelve days after leaving Toi Koku, Asako Ryoko reached her destination. We were given a message of polite thanks for our escort, and we were once again on our way, not wishing to overstay our welcome.

Otomo Soten seeks to return to the Imperial city and the courts after this trek, and I am inclined to proceed there myself. I am sorely tempted to see if I can make him forget his wife along the way... But I doubt I will try too hard. There is no benefit in doing so, other than my own amusement.