

Court of Fey

The Rules of Magic, book 2

Prologue: Deadly Rabbits

A shadow, slipped between shadows and noiselessly moved closer to the palace. A figure lay still on the floor, its feet almost reaching the edge of the shade cast by the tall trees, seemingly, as if reaching for the light, but in truth, it would never walk again.

Another figure walked out of a small copse of trees into an open lawn between the outside of the palace and the perimeter wall. As the figure paused to investigate a copse of large bushes a small steel spike whipped through the air and thudded into his neck. His eyes went wide, right hand reaching for his neck, and came away covered in red. His eyes went wider still, and he sunk to his knees, and then to the floor, wondering what exactly had happened. Sadly for him, he would die never knowing. Another body lying still, in the shadows.

A shape, blurred at the edges, a black shadow, low to the ground, scurried out from the darkness, grabbed the body, and quickly dragged it deeper into the bushes. If you looked directly at the figure, your head would get achy, you may even squint, as through looking at the sun.

Possibly, even, you'd wipe your face with your hands, and then look up, and look away, as if not too sure where you'd looked in the first place. If asked later, what kind of shape it was, your head would fill in all sorts of memories - a raven, a dog, a shadow, a wolf, a black bag, a tumbleweed. But specifically, not a large fox. A Pitch-black fox with seven tails. A Nogitsune. No, definitely not a fox indeed.

The not fox shape moved across the garden, in the setting afternoon light. It had needed the light to get into the land of Queen Danithel - her autumn magic, dark and rich, loved the night. He would never have been able to get into the kingdom, at night. But now, once in, when the night did settle, he would strike in the darkness, a blade in the night, a whisp of blackened mystery, leaving his targets to die quickly, and then, he would leave.

Kuroi Nogitsune Hai, the black ash fox, Assassin supreme, malevolent entity from deep in Japanese mythology, found the window that had been left open, and slid up the wall like a shadow growing long in the late afternoon sun, and he hopped in through the opening.

He had, in all his long years never seen wards as complex and powerful as this. They were almost interesting, but if you were a spirit of mist and shadow, a fox of the field, these wards would be nothing more than intriguing. He smelt the wards, the smells of autumn and the power of the immortal queen that cast them. Damp leaves and roots, luke-warm sunshine, and loamy soil. A hint of ancient shores, green moss and giant stones that had been in place so long they were like exposed bones of the earth. Frankly, he loved the smell. He was a creature of burrows,

dark and rich with the fragrance of soil that nourished life, with thick gnarled roots as boughs running along the ceiling. Her power smelt like a place he could stay, for a while.

Despite that it was easy for him to walk between the lines of wards in mist form, nimbly hop over faint glowing lines and between wards in the shapes of ancient glyphs, even older runes all joined by swirling lines like tree roots reaching out with intertwining tips beneath the soil. It tasted very intimate, on the tip of his tongue and teased at his nose and whiskers.

He licked the air, a black furred fox with seven bushy ended, sashaying tails in a mist form that allowed him to walk through wards that others couldn't even see.

He smelt magic and tasted enchantment. Also, he was almost a thousand years old, and had trained how to kill at the hands of *Furui Yama no Senshi*, The most ancient of Tengu.

A truly horrendous and dangerous old man who drank far too much sake and remained unwholesomely hard to kill.

Hai cleared the wards and landed noiselessly in a wooden passageway. It was simple and gorgeous. The wooden floor was polished to a pale gold, the walls and roof, a paler hue, in long, wide horizontal strips. These halls were simple and apart from the occasional tapestry, the wealth was in the age, and type of the wood. The magical charms that overlaid them, and the power that

coursed through them was, in some sense, beyond price. The enchantments they carried were, an extension of the Queen herself, and were a part of the larger surrounding Elven kingdom.

She would know any person that set foot in these halls. Unless of course, they were an ancient fox spirit. He was impressed at how sensitive it was, and how the wood seemed to pulse with life, an ancient and glorious life, imperious. The wooden floor felt warm beneath his paws, and field fox he was, he enjoyed the feeling.

His ears pricked up as he neared a bend. Footsteps were coming. Three sets. He shifted alongside the wall in-between a set of warm yellow sconces, seeking the patch of deepest shadow. Shadows worked for field foxes. Truth be told, the shadows were pale shades, and shone through with golden yellow light. They were truly not good enough for hiding in.

He remained in mist form, sunk to the floor and tensed himself to transform for action. Just in case. Most likely, they would never see him, but these were magical halls and well lit, with magical light and the people who were coming around the corner would most likely be elves. Which meant they would, to some extent, be magical. How magical, would make all the difference.

He crouched in mist form, and kept his eyes peeled to the passage end, probably fifteen feet away. Both his ears pointed forward. He held his breath, and tensed his muscles, loaded, ready to launch.

The three elves rounded the corner, with a slow easy gait, smiles all round, in the relaxed easy way that close friends did in each other's company. They were long limbed, and slender, auburn haired - well, except for the one at the back, slightly older with a rounding middle, his hair was strawberry blonde. They were wearing tee shirts, sneakers and jeans, the front two had Band Tee's - a Black Led Zeppelin and bright yellow Fleetwood Mac. The fatter one at the back was wearing a navy-blue tee the front covered in gravy stains.

It smelt like pork to Nogitsune the fox.

It was the old one that responded first. His smile dropped, for a second as he rounded the corner. His eyes flickered around the passage, down to where The Black Ash Fox - Nogitsune Hai, hid in mist form.

For a split second, his eyes paused, and then looked up again. The pause was the give-away, and all the trigger the black fox needed.

He leapt, materializing in the air as he did so. A large black fox materialized in the air rocketing forward towards the elves - changing as he did so into a short, elderly Japanese man. He was barefoot, in loose black clothing. An aged, perfectly manicured foot lashed out at speeds, almost too fast for the eye to see, and smashed the smile off the face of the elf wearing the Fleetwood Mac tee. In faster-than-the-blink-of-an-eye, a short and sharp whipping sound

cracked through the air, leaving a thin sliver blur in its wake. Led Zeppelin died, as the top half of his head slid off, left temple to right jawline.

On the floor in front of the dead elf, and the elf lying unconscious on the floor, staring at the stunned, fat, old elf, was a wizened, bald man with a katana sharper than the sharpest razor could ever dream to be, crouched low, dressed in loose black pants and a long black shirt. In that split second, as both elves fell to the floor, the lethal old Man's scraggly white beard split into a feral grin. Like a fox, in a henhouse.

The older elf raised his hands, and air began to swirl around his fingers. This was happening at the speed of thought, but it still wasn't fast enough to stop another cut with the short, black handled katana. Or two. The first cut sliced upwards, removing both hands, and returned down before the blood could even spurt from the severed stumps. Or even before the aging elf knew his hands had been severed.

Nogistune Hai, the black ash fox jumped over the dead, falling body of the old elf, and flickered into fox form in the air, like a bad special effect from an ageing celluloid movie. Then he disappeared into mist and vanished down the passageway in towards his target.

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Winter was had already arrived, but in the Autumn kingdom, winter could not hold sway. It was acknowledged yes, but in a land where reality and time bent to suit the rhythm of nature's ebb and flow, winter was acknowledged yes - but Autumn was queen, and her name was Danithel. Her Power was felt throughout her entire kingdom and in it, she lived eternally. Some price for immortality. The entire kingdom was her home, and because of that, her palace was a particularly un-ostentatious one. The fact that the entire kingdom, to some extent was a manifestation of her power, was a bigger flex than a shiny palace and a bunch of sparkly chandeliers.

All who entered, knew where the power lay - it was vested in Danithel the Autumn Queen, recently chosen as head of the Unseelie court. She was the first Autumn ruler of the Unseelie in over a thousand years. It heralded a time of great change, and potential. A time of great danger.

Danithel, nodded her petite head gently, and subtly in the way of elves. Theirs was a reserved and refined culture. To one of her people, a simple nod of her head could mean life or death, or a thousand other little things, depending on the situation. Today, it meant she was pleased, and the builder was to be rewarded for the mill that ran off the blue waters of the Byrthwraithe and helped feed her people.

As she turned from the solid stone structure, with its sturdy wooden bones and stone and mortar flesh, she felt that sense, for the first time.

It was a Sense of unease. It came suddenly, unwelcome and unexpected, like a tax collector. The Queen stilled herself and felt out through a network of power that spread across the land through every living thing - every tree and person, every bough, and every limb. She shut her eyes and communed for a moment with her kingdom. Her eyes opened, and she knew. There was an intruder in her domain. A killer on the loose. A snake, in her fine garden, so to speak...

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There were two dead bodies of uniformed guards on the floor behind him, and now that the alarm had been set off, he heard the sound of many feet slamming onto the floor in hurried running. He did not have much fear that he could get down into the dungeons, to carry out his mission. It was the getting out that concerned him. They would be on watch and waiting - aware. What's more, she would be there, her kingdom wasn't that big, and she wasn't that far away.

The best option was to get in and out before she arrived, but that choice was receding as an option by the second, as increasing amounts of elven warriors and mages made their way towards him. The noose was drawing ever tighter. He grimaced and stretched his neck out a little bit, then fiddled with the lock little bit more, and the door swung open in front of him, opening a dark passageway before him - yawning and ominous, a dark path, downwards to hell. He stepped over the threshold, and into the dungeons of the Elf Queen.

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Time had flown past on recklessly fast, short-tipped wings. Like a peregrine falcon, wings tucked tight, plummeting to earth too fast to be tracked. Time was crashing down towards him. Incidentally, he had never caught a Peregrine falcon.

Sadly, Hai remarked to himself, the passageways through the dungeons had become a vision of violence. It was his doing, true, but this was not his way. At least, not anymore, he was in some ways, a changed fox. There was a time when he would have gloried in the slaughter of hens, their blood running warm and iron down his throat, in his fur and down his face, his head and neck darkened sticky and hard with their congealing blood.

He would totter off into the woods afterwards, and clean himself over days, the lingering scent of blood a trophy of the slaughter, a reminder of the speed of his bite and the sharpness of his fangs. His ability to feed himself and his mates and his pups. He had grown somewhat since those times. Time asked of him some questions; What good is slaughter for its own sake? Where was the challenge, the artistry? Where was the skill, the deft touch, the sardonic repartee against a foe whose skill would haunt him and who's ability and persistence would be the rock on which he sharpened his blade? A foe of legend?

Where was the heavy and vicious mastiff, or the sheepdog with unending endurance? Why is it, all he ever found, were fat, soft hens?

He had taken the mission into the elven kingdom because they were known as having powerful magic, but to date all he had found were more clucking egg layers, content to sit on a pile of hay and be fed. Maybe (To be honest he did pause here) he needed to take on the queen herself, but he felt that seemed inappropriate. She was after all a queen, and he, an impudent fox. A powerful, impudent fox, an assassin of legend, of course. But she was an immortal queen and killing her didn't seem right. Unless, she had some guard, some warrior of mythical power, equipped with artefacts mighty and armour impenetrable and layered with spells unbeatable. After many battles, he would eventually overcome this foe, and THEN, he would mercifully and gently, end the life of this queen and her blood would spill artfully on the floor, and it would be a scene that artists would paint for eons to come.

He ducked as a pillar of flame lanced out of a guard's hand and straightened up, casually sliding his sword through the man's throat as though he were skewering an errant pea on his plate. He pulled his sword out and spun to his right, leaping, so that both feet landed on the wall and pushed off again with both to flip over and forward, his spin landing just short of the pistol wielding prison guard, who was emptying shells at the small black clad assassin.

All to no avail, as Nogitsune landed, and sliced the blonde elf's head neatly in two. Of course, it was easier when your sword was sharp enough to cut lustful thoughts from a man's head, separate a mother from her maternal instincts and sharper still, to separate a liar from their cowardice and a miser from their coin. Her name was *Jundo* - Purity -and he loved her dearly.

A foot fall landed behind him, and almost not looking, and almost too casually, Hai reached into the lapel of his black top, and flicked a hand behind him, a thin black spike hurtling through the air at the speed of a bullet. The guard, a cautious veteran was pulling his head back behind the doorway, but it was too slow and too late, as the steel spike sunk four inches into his eye.

Hai, the large black fox in the shape of a small, wizened man, walked on deeper into the elven dungeon, without even looking back. The sound of the guard falling to the floor, all the confirmation he needed that he had hit his target - like he really needed confirmation anyway.

The elven prison was defended by many countermeasures, beyond guards. He had already dispatched a dozen of the defenders. He had overcome the magic that befuddled your sense unless you received the captain's blessing. He had found the doors that were hidden by a glamour which he had to admit, had been hard to sniff out, but sniff it out, he had.

And now, deep beneath the palace, amidst dark stones, curses and glammers, through winding passageways, dead ends and (now) a sea of dead bodies and blood-spattered grey walls, he stood in the chamber he was looking for, in reach of his quarry.

Hai faced a large rectangular room, from a doorway situated, directly in the middle of its length. The opposite wall was lined with black barred prison cells. Cell after cell running down the entire length of the room, twenty cells in total. All but two of them occupied.

This was the room where elven prisoners were kept. Prisoners from the other elven kingdoms. Prisoners of the Summer, Spring and Winter courts, languishing in the dirt and grime and dark beneath the palace of the Autumn queen.

All of them were manacled, with rune covered chains affixing the manacles to a thick ring in the floor. Even from where he stood at the entrance to the room, he felt the power coursing through the bars of the cells.

The fact that he could even see that the cells were there, was testimony to his intrinsic magical nature. And whilst he had overcome many challenges, and as a fox, inherently, he could sneak into many places, without assistance, he would never be getting into these cells. Fortunately, his employer had provided exactly that - some cell breaking assistance.

He paced gently, and silently into the room. The elves in their cages looked up as he entered. All, silent, but wary. Cautious and curious glances came his way, as the captive elves had no clue as to what new torment the Queen of Autumn had in store for them. The Queen of Autumn, was, after all, one of the Unseelie Fey. In a world where good and evil ran up and down a sliding scale, she was more grey/black than white/grey.

Not that he cared, he was an assassin, and predator born - morality was something for the birds, and deer - it was a cloak they covered their control with - for without strength, they needed a means to control others.

He was under no illusion that the elves in the cells, royal hostages used as bargaining chips, had not had an easy existence in the dungeons of the immortal Queen. In some respects, their death would be a mercy.

Looking into the cells, he could clearly see the elves according to their types. The Summer elves, all royalty, five in all. Golden haired, blue eyed and regal, some, their skin still holding the kiss of the sun, even after all their time in the cells beneath the ground. The seven of spring, youthful and pale, like the first plants that bud through the soil after winter. Eyes brown, hazel, green and gold. Finally, the six of winter. Pale, tall, sharp boned, physical manifestations of the frostiness of winter itself.

Before today, he had never killed an elf. Now he had killed dozens, and after today, he would have made enemies of all 4 of the houses of Fey. If, they ever knew it was him.

Up against the wall a few feet to the right of the door, was a stone column - waist high - with a brass dial atop. This was the control for the magical disruption grid, which controlled the magic of those in the cells in two ways - One - the cell bars themselves dampened any other magic that happened within them, and two - the Manacles ran a permanent power drain that somehow managed to weaken one's ability to access the power of magic. It was, all in all, a well-designed prison, and Hai wondered if it could hold him. Elves were inherently more magical than regular humans...they were like... a sort of human variant. Like you got different breeds of chicken,

even though they all bled the same, even if some had more meat on their bones, and tasted better than others.

Elves were basically a nicer looking breed of human with their magic more natural - almost, a combination between a magical creature, like himself, and a human. A better looking, smarter chicken, basically.

Being elven royalty, all the unfortunates manacled in the cells were delightful to look at. Despite months of containment, torture, and deprivation, you easily could see how they could be undeniably gorgeous, in the totally unattainable way that fey and magical creatures were. In the way that men and woman had lusted after since they had first gathered around fires to talk about the one that got away.

They were beautiful and it would be a shame, in some respects, to kill them. He did admire beauty - he was a predator, not a savage, after all.

However, the job was agreed, and a contract taken. And so, needs be done what will be done. It was that simple.

He reached into his jacket and pulled out a small black cube, not much larger than a six-sided dice, on the end of a wooden beaded necklace, much like a rosary, or a set of Buddhist beads.

He placed it on the brass dial and was about to press its sides in the prescribed sequence to activate it, and power down the cells, when he smelt a presence nearing the door from the outside. His nose twitched, fox like and his whiskers bristled. A foe was on its way.

He pulled out his shortened katana and held it in his right hand, tip pointing to the right, and down to the floor. A figure walked through the door. He was tall, shoulders just broader than average, black hair tied in a ponytail, but not in an aging programmer kind of way, but in the cool kind of way that the programmer had once envisaged as a child but had never been able to emulate.

This figure that walked through the door was cool, the kind of cool that made black leather pants and grey, floor length overcoats look cool. He sauntered in casually, chin held high and shoulders relaxed back, like an eighties action hero. As he walked in the room, he turned to look at Hai, and his grey eyes widened.

With great respect, he addressed the assassin.

“I have heard of your kind but have never met one. Well met Kitsune.”

Hai nodded. “Almost Elf. Kitsune are the white foxes...I am a black one - I am Nogitsune.”

The elf nodded back. "I am pleased to meet you Nogitsune. I have seen your handiwork so far - your skills are admirable. But you no longer face guardsmen and scholars. Now you face me - Gareth High-oak, Captain of the queen's personal guard, victor of many battles, undefeated in a hundred years. You will not find me so easy a mark as some dungeon dwelling, glorified security guards. I am the son of a line that saw the birth of civilizations. You will not win easily against me. If, at all."

Hai smiled, if this elf fought as well as he talked, then maybe, just maybe - this was the challenge he had been looking for. Maybe this elf was the foil to his sabre, the buckler to his arming sword, the indomitable iron, against which his own iron would be sharpened. Maybe, he had found his nemesis.

Gareth High-oak reached into his long grey coat, arms crossing, reaching towards each opposite hip. A steel shing rang through the air as he pulled out two short, straight edged swords, light looking, but Hai could easily see that they were gloriously made. Intricate runes ran along the swords edges and the swords glowed faintly with a magical light. These were weapons of power.

They whipped sharply through the air as the elf captain flicked their points towards him.

He kept the left one low, and raised the right one above his head, and took a slight step back with his right foot, so that his left slide was pointing forwards, protected by the low sword, with

the right above his head, ready to attack. He sunk his weight lower and settled his weight lightly above bent knees.

A fine stance for two blades. Hai's grin widened. He waited to see if his opponent could hold his poise, or if his mind was weak.

Hai stood open, with his katana at his side waiting. Gareth stood, weight low, rear sword poised high...waiting.

They stood for what seemed like an age, but in actuality it was a few breathes...but the longer Hai waited, the greater would be his chance of mission failure.

The elf Captain inched forward, shuffling his feet, slowly, peacefully, inoffensively forward. He was creeping for range, preparing to launch an offensive. If he was smart, and he seemed smart enough, he would wait for Hai to attack, before launching his own. Presumably, he was unnaturally fast, of course, because any other option would result in his immediate demise.

The fox settled his weight, sword out in his right hand. His single bladed katana was shorter than a regular one - it was in fact a ninjato; the same as a katana in every respect, except that it was about four inches shorter. Perfect for speed.

Hai, breathed out, and narrowed his eyes. He bent his knees slightly, feeling his weight on the floor beneath his bare feet, Purity, his ninjato, resting lightly in his right hand.

Tension filled the gap between them, until nothing but the two of them existed. Two points on either end of a tense wire, pulled taut with intent and deadly peril.

Gareth was waiting, clearly, because he knew that he could. Hai admired that he didn't gloat or talk to hide his nerves. This was good. The fox assassin was ready.

With blinding speed, Hai lunged forward on his right leg, Purity slicing up towards the front thigh of the Elven captain. Instantly, years of training kicked in, and Gareth High-oak dropped the tip of his lower blade and drove it down and out to intercept the rising blade. As the blades kissed, barely touching, the sound of two metals sliding against each other hissed across the room.

Still moving forward as a part of one continuous movement, Hai grabbed the handle of his ninjato - now held with both hands - and the moment it touched the defensive blade of the elf captain, he flicked the blade out, around, over his head, and down onto the head of the elven captain.

Again, the response was instantaneous, this time The Elven captain shifted his raised blade down and across the top of his head to intercept the onrushing katana. As their blades touched, before Gareth high oak - Captain of the queen's guard could even settle his weight into the parry,

the sharper than razors- katana of the legendary fox spirit, flicked off the down rushing blade and rebounded off to move back up towards Hai's head, before spinning it sideways and diverting its path to slicing diagonally down into the right side of the elf.

High-oak shifted to his left, away from the incoming blade and brought both of his rune covered blades into the path of the blindingly fast strike, forming a perfect X, to wedge the ninjato between his two glittering elven short steels.

There was a pause.

Not enough time had passed for a thought to form and already Gareth could have died three times. He had been up to every attempt.

The two men were locked still, blades crossed, weight pressed into their intertwined weapons. Hai began to shift, circling slowly to his left. Gareth shifted to his left. The two men stared at each other across locked blades. The powerful elven captain strained against the small, powerful fox spirit he duelled with.

Hai smiled at the taller elf, between the cross of their blades - This Captain was good. Apart from his sensei, there wasn't a being who had got to stop three strikes from him in a long number of years...maybe he was the one...the nemesis.

If magical weapons could talk (and some indeed can), Purity would have been snarling at the two short elven blades. The elven blades would have been tossing insults back. It wouldn't have been a child friendly conversation.

Hai's smile grew, and his canines, sharp and fox-like protruded further. Maybe, after all these years, he had found his adversary - a noble Queens Captain, a tall lean hero built for action pitted against the bent and dark, ancient assassin.

In an instant, Hai jumped away, his sword unlocking with the captain's blades, as he flew backward, his left hand reached into his coat and shot out forward to propel a short, dense steel spike - a bo shuriken - across the gap, and into the face of the elven captain.

Responding, almost a second too late, Gareth high oak flinched backwards and raised his right forearm to cover his face. The spike thudded with a dull impact against his grey coat and fell to the floor with a clink. Clearly, his coat was magically armoured, and over and above looking like it was made by Hugo boss, in a tailored slim-fit, it also had significant armour to stop one of Hai's shuriken.

He sniffed indignantly. IF a fox was to wear a long flowing charcoal coat, he supposed that one like this would be suitable. If he wanted to look like an anime villain, then perhaps he could get one. If...

The two adversaries viewed each other across the gap. A lone bead of sweat had sprung from Gareth's right temple.

Matching the speed of a Nogistune was difficult, but he had done it, so far - thanks to years of arduous training, pitched battle against numerous foes, an armoured coat and magical swords that enabled him to fight a foe, faster than he'd ever faced.

It was time to see if this Japanese fox could get as good as he gave.

Gareth High-oak leapt forward into Hai, right sword batting at the Katana in front of the assassin, left sword spearing forward in a deadly thrust. Hai let the tip of his katana be turned aside by the first strike, allowing the tip to circle around, and point to the floor, while raising the handle above his head. He leapt aside, to the outside of the incoming thrust, and now with his hands above his head, he was poised to bring *Jundo* - Purity - down in one strike to carve through his adversary's head, like a spoon through jelly.

There was a moment. In that moment, lay the seed of a thousand different moments. Parry, riposte, cut thrust, turn, jump. Comment, laugh, shout, battle cry. The seeds of all these lay in that moment. Hai, ever efficient, said nothing. He simply brought his blade down. Of course, it was not a simple bringing down of a blade, that would be far too mundane. It was, an ancient

creature of nightmare, who also was a master assassin, bringing down a magically sharpened ninja sword, faster even, than the speed of thought. Too fast, even, for some to see.

In response, Gareth - seeing the trajectory of his opponents cut - dived to his right in a roll, allowing him to drop beneath the approaching blade, and change his angle and distance for the next clash.

Except he had never fought anyone as fast as the black ash fox. It was, in essence, a perfectly executed move against almost any other swordsman, save for a handful still left in the world, who could cut so unbelievably fast.

A trailing left foot was less than a mili-second behind the body of the elven Captain. It was all the time Hai needed to carry his slice on further down, and sink it through the leg of the captain, who was moving (To be honest) at an implausible speed. But not implausible enough.

So, the seed, in this moment, turned out to be one of despair.

Gareth high oak finished his roll, and landed, only to find he no longer had a left foot to stand on. It had been severed mid-shin, and apart from the initial surprise, he was shocked at how painless it felt. He fell backwards against the wall, left leg now stretched in front of him, pouring out blood at a rate that spelled a quick death.

He drew in a breath to cast a spell that would arrest the bleeding - he knew dozens - but sadly, it was the last breath he would ever take.

A fox didn't live nine hundred years by leaving wounded foes behind. Even ones as worthy as the good Captain.

Gareth High oak died with a length of steel through his heart. He closed his eyes, and his head fell to his chest, a trickle of blood running out the left corner of his mouth and down his chin. Against the grey coat, and the white shirt beneath, the dark red was very fetching.

The body slumped against the wall as all life left it and the famous elvish short swords clanged, like dropped cutlery as they bounced off the floor.

Hai sighed. He pulled *Jundo* out of the elven Captain and wiped the blade against the fine grey overcoat. He sheathed the blade, and picked up the two elven short swords, which truly, were of the finest quality. The slipped into a pocket inside his jacket, that gave the impression of being able to hold much more than it should be able to.

He looked back at the dead body of the captain. Another let down. Another foe, not worthy of the title. His shoulders sagged, almost imperceptibly. Life was full of disappointments.

The small fox spirit in the shape of a Japanese grandfather, turned to the plinth, where the black cube was still resting. He pressed its sides, in the sequence instructed - It let off a short ping, and a wave of power spread from the small black cube, into the plinth on which it rested. There was a spark, like a light bulb blowing out, and the stream of power that ran along the bars of the cages, fizzled out.

That easily the containment was overcome. Now, to the killing.

He walked over to the first cage, easily manipulated the lock, bypassing the rudimentary spell, and swung the door open.

The woman inside had waist length golden hair that still shone lustrous in the dim light. She was on her knees, hands chained and affixed to the floor, and she looked up at the incoming assassin with wide, deep blue eyes, her expression a mixture of defiance, and fear.

She was the most gorgeous woman he had ever seen, and he had seen many. Incidentally, Nogistune could mate with humans, and if there was one thing he could appreciate, it was beauty. It would be a waste for her to die...but, also, there was beauty in a quick and sudden death.

His hand flashed out, and another piece of steel flew from the assassin this day. In the blink of an eye, it had crossed the space of the cell, and the beautiful summer elf died with a black steel shard in her throat.

She died with her beautiful blue eyes open.

Nogitsune Hai backed out and made his way to the next cell. The elf in this one was also of the Summer court, but he was younger, and gentler in spirit. He opened his mouth to plead, but the bullet like shrunken embedded in his temple, and he fell to the floor, still manacled, a small, crumpled pile. It was pitiful, really.

Two down, sixteen to go.

Hai moved on to the next cell in workmanlike fashion - he had to be done before the queen arrived