

ONYX DAWN

A COLLECTION OF L5R FICTION
BY THE LEGEND OF THE FIVE RINGS STORY TEAM

FEATURING FICTIONS BY:

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L5R 4TH EDITION RPG GRAPHIC DESIGN
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IS OUR HOPE THAT THESE FICTIONS WILL
PROVIDE SOME CLOSURE TO THE IVORY
EDITION STORYLINE FOR FANS AND IS
WRITTEN IN ANTICIPATION OF A NEW AGE
FOR LEGEND OF THE FIVE RINGS.

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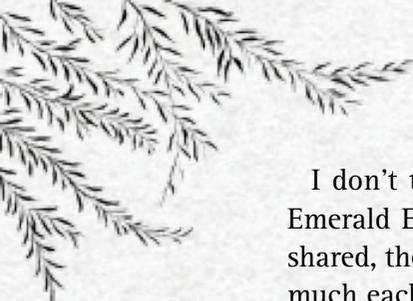
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I don't think anybody could properly thank you, the L5R players and fans, for creating the Emerald Empire. Mere words aren't worthy of the passion you have shown, the joys you have shared, the community you have formed, and the stories you have crafted. Trying to express how much each of you mean to the L5R Team and I is an impossible task.

But I have the privilege to make the attempt, and am honoured to try.

This collection is the final set of fictions penned by the current form of the L5R Story Team. It is our gesture of gratitude for journeying with us through Rokugan (and the Colonies, and beyond). They are intended to provide a peek into some of the stories we had in mind for you in the years to come. We have changed things from our original plans so that you can have some closure.

It doesn't feel like enough. There are prizes still outstanding, ideas not formed into completed tales. I apologize that there isn't more.

L5R is at its purest when what you do, and what you want, matter. Through well over a decade involved in the design, development, and story of L5R, I've been guided by the idea that L5R players should have meaningful decisions to make, and for those decisions to become part of the fabric of the universe. While the execution has not been perfect, we have tried to honor your passion, your involvement, and your love of the setting.

Although I haven't seen any of the specifics, I think Fantasy Flight Games will do some amazing things with L5R in the years to come. I hope that, sometime in the future, we all meet again to reminisce about new memories, reflections of as-of-yet-untold-stories in the Emerald Empire.

But in the meantime, thank you from the entire L5R Story Team. It has been a joy sharing this journey, and and it has been a unique pleasure to help put form to all your collective imaginations.



Fred Wan
July 25, 2016
Vancouver



This official L5R fiction was originally published on the Imperial Assembly on October 31st 2015, at www.imperialassembly.com

WHY HE WROTE

BY ROBERT DENTON III

L5R HALLOWEEN FICTION - 2015



"It is the fate of every lord to betray his vassals.

It is the fate of every vassal to be betrayed."

- The Prophecies of Uikku

In all of Rokugan, there is no playwright quite like Hirohashi. He was not the greatest, nor the most acclaimed. His works lack the technical skill of Kakita Morushijin, the exquisite detail of Miya Hatori, or the vision of the esteemed Miya Mai. But Hirohashi had a way of telling a story that built a world around the viewer and made them feel as though they lived within it. He once told me that the audience could sense when the playwright was dishonest, portraying something of which he had no knowledge or experience. If the author had never held a sword, released an arrow, or fought for his life, then he could not convincingly portray these things. Even with the greatest actors and stagehands, the lies would show through. For this reason, he tried to relate to everything he wrote so that it would seem genuine. He approached his work as personally as possible. He wrote from the heart.

Such an emphasis on honesty won him few allies in our family. But I think this is because they misunderstand him. What is a play if not an elaborate lie in which all are willing to participate? What is a story if not a fiction the listener wants to believe, if only for its duration? The honesty is meant only to suck the viewer in. The author folds his truths into his greater lies. Only the skilled can tell them apart.

This is why the honesty of Hirohashi's works did not betray our lords. Like every other Susumu, he served two masters: the Spider and the Empire. In fact, I have never before met anyone so dedicated to this principle. Our family has worked for over twenty years to overcome the prejudices against our clan. Every morning the Susumu rededicate themselves to breaking the barriers between us and the rest of Rokugan. We sacrificed and endured much to accomplish this, and although there was much left to do, the Susumu had many successes to claim. Slowly, the other clans saw us less as enemies and more as another part of the Empire. In return, the Susumu felt less like opponents of the great clans and more like fellow Rokugani. Their ways were becoming ours. Hirohashi was proud to be a part of this. But to him, Susumu's purpose was more than bridging this gap. He looked past what we'd accomplished and saw only what was left to do.

I first met Hirohashi two years ago during one of his projects. I was fresh from gempukku and unfamiliar with him. He was only a minor playwright of some note, having few works to his name. I knew only that I was to be his assistant and that he would be my sensei. I went to live with him at Kyuden Shizuka, the only significant palace of our family. The evening sun was crimson when I arrived and was hastily directed to his study. I heard him arguing with someone as I approached, a heated discussion that was rapidly escalating to a duel. Fearing both that my new master had a short temper and that I would be rid of him prematurely, I rapped on the door. He beckoned me to enter, and when I did, there was no one else there.



Hirohashi was a man always preoccupied. Thoughts came to him suddenly and he would pause mid-sentence to write them down. Even so he was genuinely friendly. He was an older man than I expected, snowy-haired and soft-eyed, fingers visibly calloused where they cradled a brush. I flattered him as I was trained to do, speaking well of his works. The truth was that I did not know them from any other. I believe he saw through me, but drew no attention to this. Instead, he asked me what the most important thing was to playwriting.

“Dedication,” I replied. “Love of the art. From this, all other things will eventually come.”

It was the answer every prior sensei had ever expected. I was trained to offer it unhesitatingly. But Hirohashi deflated at this answer. He simply nodded and said I would assist him in his work, starting tomorrow. Then he said, “We’re done for today.” He turned his back to me, facing his open balcony and the waters of Golden Sun Bay beyond. I let myself out.

My work began by transcribing all of his plays. A collection of his work was ordered by Susumu Kuroko no Daimyo, and Hirohashi considered himself too busy to attend to it personally. There were no woodblocks of his plays, so I copied them each by hand. Most of his plays were short Noh pieces of which there was little direction and dialog, although there were also several three-act Kabuki plays which took more time. Some were merely disorganized collections of notes that I reconstructed using various methods. It felt like busywork, but I did not complain. It was a chance to familiarize myself with his plays.

I gradually came to realize the full extent of my master’s work. His greatest accomplishments were not under his name. They were instead attributed to others. Susumu Noriyabe. Kakita Hiro. Or often a simple pseudonym: Bukimina. Once I knew his writing I began to recognize it in many works commissioned by our daimyo. There were his unique annotations, instructions to the actors, and the vague connections that united his works, fragile silk threads that formed into one world and somehow made it real. These accomplishments were not groundbreaking. Indeed, they were beginner’s works, not that of a master. But I saw fleeting moments of greatness in his writing. I was stunned when I read them. They became real to me as I read. I recalled them easily as they replayed in my thoughts. But I realized that Hirohashi’s works were inherently unfinished. Something seemed to hold him back and I suspected it was himself. I began to think that if I could tap into his mind somehow, if I could replicate his technique, I could add it to my own meager talents and become greater than my sensei. Thus I resolved to become more than just his student. I would become his friend and ally.

To do this, I would need to know him. Fortunately, I had his work. I knew that he would reveal glimpses of himself through his writing. All authors do. It was how I came to befriend my prior sensei, who revealed his life philosophy through his sumi-e paintings. It was how I began my pre-gempukku romance with the lead of an acting troupe, reading the poetry she hid in her nightstand and deducing her hidden desires. If I paid attention and studied his plays I could eventually come to understand him. I procured a small notebook and recorded my observations. I noted recurring themes, attitudes, and philosophical positions. Whenever we conversed, I revised my notes based on what I had learned. As a tapestry is woven thread by thread, I would soon comprehend the larger picture.

I studied his process. He spoke dialog aloud as he wrote. He researched every aspect he could, going as far as to attempt many of the things required of each character. There were times when he came to me frustrated and began a strange discussion, only to abandon it partway when something I said would cause his eyes to widen, his mouth to make a grin, and his brush to write.

He entrusted me with more tasks once my transcription was finished. Minor jobs, little ghost-writing assignments from our lords. Whenever one came he would become excited, but the guidelines often disappointed him. Amendments also arrived as he worked, requiring creative



concessions, often changing the meaning of the play. I had the notion he was dissatisfied, like a man living on thin broth when he craved rice. Although he was grateful for the assignments, he could never truly write as he pleased. But nothing could be done about it. He wasn't about to displease his lords.

He effortlessly created stories within their guidelines, capturing them on scattered notes, sometimes vague and sometimes detailed. These he gave to me to "finish." I would polish his rough work, he would revise my edits, and the finished copy would be delivered to a servant. Never once did I see him sign a work. I began to do so myself, writing "Bukimina" on the bottom of each scroll.

"Why use a pseudonym?" I once asked. "Your works will not be attributed to you."

He seemed amused by my question. "If they knew the author was a Susumu, they would not read the work." I watched him deliberate over a selection of masks, finally selecting that of a grinning demon. "We are associated with the Daigotsu, so they do not trust us. This is problematic; trust is required for the story to work. The audience must trust what they are seeing and hearing, even knowing full well that it is a lie. They must trust that the play will not hurt them, or else the playwright must convince them that they want to be hurt."

I did not understand. "Why would they knowingly believe in a lie?"

He slid the mask over his face. His eyes twinkled behind the demon's grin. "Because they want to. They want it to be real."

One day a messenger came that I did not recognize. She had come from the imperial capital where our lords perpetually dwelled in the Spider embassy at "the center of the web." I was one year older and beginning to experimentally write my own works when I saw her come into my master's study. The scroll she held bore not only the seal of Lady Susumu, but also that of Daigotsu Kanpeki, our clan champion. Hirohashi's hands shook as he broke the seal and consumed the words. The Empress' three heirs were appearing on Nakodo lists, and it was time to prepare for their eventual marriage. The Spider were going to give the new Emperor, whoever it would be, a play as their wedding gift. Daigotsu Kanpeki wanted Hirohashi to write that play.

It is upon honors such as these that playwrights are forever remembered. No one knew Miya Mai until The Emperor's Blessing. Kakita Morushijin's works were not notable until No Man's Bride. Even a ronin's low existence becomes noteworthy to history, as it was with the playwright Sosuke when he wrote The Secrets Beneath Lord Hiragawa's Calligraphy. Such chances are rare. The full implications of this order did not elude Hirohashi. This play could be a doorway to greater things. So he resolved that this play, the Emperor's play, would be his greatest work.

The undertaking would not be easy. The play had to be fit for an Emperor! Most playwrights would seek to know the tastes of the Imperial Heir so as to cater to them. But the Iweko Empress was unshackled by convention and mysterious, so none knew whether Seiken or Shibatsu would take the throne. The mechanizations of the Susumu, at the behest of Kanpeki himself, started the rumor that the Empress might elevate the younger Shibatsu over his brother, and as predicted the Imperials now considered it a possibility. Even so, we could not be certain of the Empress' whims. For this reason, the play had to be written such that it suited either heir. This fact, coupled with the conventions of which imperial plays had to conform, presented the greatest challenge of Hirohashi's life. Yet he was not worried. A fire was lit within him on that day. He knew exactly what to present to the future Emperor.

"We shall portray a united Empire," he decided. "There is still unrest. Seiken's followers clash with Shibatsu's, in the courts and elsewhere. Some even whisper support for Miaka in spite of her youth. These three lines divide an Empire, all beneath a facade of cooperation. And still the



clans squabble among themselves. The Emperor's greatest task will be uniting his people beneath his banner. It will be proving that he is a leader they can rally behind."

"I understand." I poured his sake and followed his line of thinking. "We will assist him. His play will present an Empire they want to live in."

His inner fire danced in his determined eyes. "I will make that world real."

Progress was swift at first. He was always writing. He would sequester himself away from the study that had become our shared work space, dwelling instead in the auditorium beneath us. I would hear him walking around down there as I transcribed or finished his other assignments. Or I would look out over the balcony and see him walking the beach of Golden Sun Bay, talking to himself. Once I delivered his lunch while he was in the auditorium. He'd set up these mannequins and dressed them, painted their faces like dolls, and placed them around the stage in various positions. He strode around them, speaking for them, improvising lines, marking their positions. He did not stop even when he saw me in the audience. Indeed, my presence encouraged him, and his voice grew louder. I learned then he had some talent for acting. Perhaps that was his first passion, as it was mine. He improvised himself as the Avatar of the Unicorn Clan, his language growing metaphorical and poetic as he spoke. He did this until a line fell from his lips that caused his eyes to widen. "That is the line of the play!" he declared, and I dutifully copied it down.

I felt that I'd integrated myself into his process. We discussed his play many times over dinner or in-between my own work. He stayed over in the evenings and cultivated ideas instead of sleep. He came to rely on me, not for my approval or feedback, but as someone to listen to his ideas. I was willing soil for his planting. Importantly, I was finally coming to understand who he was. In his play, I saw his thoughts and feelings, his doubts and aspirations. He craved the freedom that this assignment would ultimately afford him. He created for the sake of creation, taking sheer delight in the act of writing. He obsessed over word choice and pacing. I once remarked that he would be happier with bunraku. One could better control puppets than actors. He found this to be endlessly amusing and quoted it himself on many occasions. I earned more than his trust. I was seeing his true face. And I was learning.

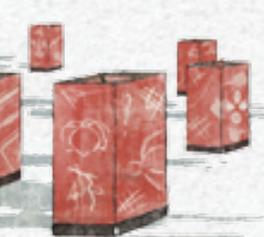
Commissions continued to flow in. I became the ghostwriter for those works. Hirohashi was too busy with the play to write them himself. I was good at mimicking his style; I finished the assignments and signed them "Bukimina." I was a little dissatisfied with this task, but was my job to assist him after all. I just thought of how much he relied on my help and how we would both see greater things once the Emperor's play was completed.

After the first few months, the messenger returned. I recognized her sharp features, her intense eyes, her jet hair. She spoke little until Hirohashi arrived, giving him a scroll as before and departing to return to the capital. As he read, I noticed the dark rings around his sockets, the way his face seemed to sag. It occurred to me that I had not seen Hirohashi sleep in a long time. He spent even more hours within the auditorium. Sunlight touched his flesh less and less.

The scroll had new orders. Things to be included in his play. The Susumu leadership wanted it to make specific political implications. They were hedging their bets, thinking that Shibatsu would ultimately be chosen as heir. They wanted the play to subtly remind the younger Iweko brother of how much he owed to the Spider. Shibatsu as heir would have certainly benefitted us, and I felt encouraged to know the leadership was anticipating this outcome. Irritation flickered across Hirohashi's features.

"I will make it work," he mumbled.

I brought him lunch in the auditorium later that day. He'd strung the room with bright colored lanterns. The number of mannequins had doubled. Their costumes were more elaborate than



before. I recognized the fashion work of Seppun Kyosuta; Hirohashi had spent his own stipend on expert costumes. He was on the edge of the stage, his notes scattered in front of him, the new scroll unfurled and hanging from the far wall. He rubbed his forehead and paid me no notice, not even when I laid the rice and soup in front of him.

“You’re obsessing,” I noted.

He grunted. “The motivations of the villain escapes me. Every aspect of him must say what I mean for it to say. He must represent only what I intend for him to represent.”

“You should move on,” I suggested. “Work on something else for a while. Clear your head and come back to it.”

He made a weak smile. “Then the problem will taint my other work,” he remarked. After a long moment of silence, he stood. I watched him don the costume nearest to him, stripping the mannequin and cloaking himself.

“The ego is a spider,” he said, “and so the mind is full of webs. Sometimes a thing gets caught in there. Entangled by the web, it can be difficult to free. This is why artists express the same thing over and over. Writers tell the same stories. Poets obsess over the same feeling. Painters make a series, focusing on the same subject. They become fixated. Frustrated. Whatever the thought is, it is caught in the web. Any other thought that comes, the first will infect it.” He offered his smile as he straightened the kimono sleeves. “If one is hasty, a captured thought can tear the web.”

I remember how he closed his eyes. It was so methodical. His eyes rolled back as his lids came together. His posture changed, his shoulders straightening with his uncurling back, his fingers flexing as if to free themselves from his palm. I watched his shadow change behind him, dancing in the light of his lanterns, intertwined with those of this dolls. His still body tethered his writhing shadow like a flag against the wind. Like a web against the struggle of a fly.

“We are done for today,” he whispered. I left him as he recited lines in a voice that was not his own.

I saw him progressively less as days passed by. Our meetings dwindled to less than occasional. It was a long winter; he spent days on end within that auditorium. I could hear him beneath my feet, walking the stage, speaking to himself. Speaking to others. At times I leaned against the door and listened, but whenever I did I could hear nothing. His lunches went uneaten. I slept in the study, laying on his overstuffed zaifun, inhaling the sandalwood and vanilla that was his fading scent. I could hear him beneath me at night. Dragging things across the auditorium. Whispering. Writing.

I told no one of his troubles. I could not compromise his face. It would be shameful to imply he could not handle his own problems. It was a secret I kept for him. Only I understood my master’s struggles. Only I knew how he suffered. Even when the messenger returned four more times with more additions to his play, I made excuses for him. She paid no mind, leaving the scroll each time and leaving at the earliest opportunity.

I hated the sight of her. Every time she crossed the threshold I wanted to pelt her with my inkstone. She had no appreciation for his vision. None of them did. People like her think any playwright is interchangeable. They think anyone could have written *No Man’s Bride*, or *The Dangerous Popinjay*. They fancy themselves creative-minded, believe that they know better how to do what they assigned to my master. They don’t care about the work itself. They only care if they can use it for their own purposes. They cannot see the art in things. They see only gifts. Product. Every time she came for my master my hatred for her grew a little more.

Yet even now, I could not tell you her name.

Spring came with little change. I expected to see Hirohashi resume his bayside walks, but this did not happen. The servants began referring to the auditorium as “The Playwright’s Chambers,” arranging their own schedules to accommodate his eccentricity. The others within the palace treated him as an oddity, but otherwise tolerated him for the sake of face. The lords of the Susumu never came to Kyuden Shizuka, and no one ever inquired on the progress of the Emperor’s play.

Until one day at the end of spring. The letter stood out from the others; requests for Hirohashi’s services that had gone unanswered. These were patrons that would not accept the work of an apprentice. My sensei was too busy with the Emperor’s play to pay them much mind. They would only detract his attention. But this letter came in a black envelope tied with golden string, the Mon of the Daigotsu stamped onto the surface. It was a request from the Daigotsu family to know the progress of the play.

I listened to my master at his work downstairs. Dragging things. Shouting.

My knowledge of the play itself was limited, but I knew his passion and vision well enough to write a short synopsis. All those nights of conversation, all that I had gleaned from his process, from his work... I knew I could accurately convey the meaning of his play. The plot and details eluded me, but the essence of the work I understood. I transcribed this and sent it back.

This I did without mention to my master. I did not wish to disturb his work. What was I for if not for this?

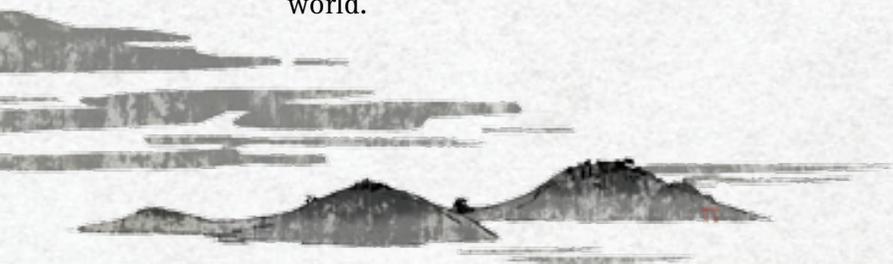
The first cherry blossoms had only just bloomed when word came to Kyuden Shizuka from the imperial capital. The Empress had chosen her heir. Iweko Seiken would ascend to become Son of Heaven. To honor him, she declared twenty days of festivals.

Throughout the castle, Susumu were disheartened to hear this news. The Spider were counting on Shibatsu’s movement to pick up, for the mechanizations to influence the Empress’ decision. But they carried on with dignity, knowing that the seeds they’d sown would one day bare fruit regardless. It was a defeat, yes, but still one from which the Susumu, and the Spider, could recover.

I alone was joyful in hearing the news. It meant Hirohashi needn’t guess at his intended audience any longer. He could compose his play with the knowledge that Seiken, the eldest Iweko, would receive the gift on his wedding day. I rushed to tell him the news, throwing aside the massive doors of the audience chamber.

A bizarre lantern-lit statuary met my eyes. Two mannequins on stage froze mid-draw in an iaijutsu strike. Their costumes virtually glowed in the light of the stage, their Kabuki masks painted with vibrant and contrasting colors. Pieces of manuscripts were scattered around them, littering the floor, hanging from the walls. They were surrounded by two dozen faceless figures in full costume. The screen behind the stage itself depicted a painted landscape. The dim light gave an eerie life to the dolls on stage. I felt the deep belly guilt that comes from interruption.

Hirohashi appeared within moments, blinking at where I stood. His clothing was loose around his shoulders, his hair bound without much care, his skin loose and pallid. I was stunned to see how he’d withered like a fruit in the first frost. As I told him the news, he smiled and nodded his head. Knowing who would receive the play was a great comfort to him. He was two-thirds finished, and now that this final piece had come into place, he could complete the rest rapidly. I felt relief for the first time in several seasons. I wanted him to be done with this work. Standing on the stage, it seemed to me that the mannequins were staring. That I was an invader in their world.



I eventually convinced my master that this news required celebration. Twenty festivals were declared, after all. He agreed to meet me at the sake house in nearby Houritsu Mura. By sunset we were halfway through a bottle of Maneki Neko, hanabi painting the sky outside above dragon dancers. The streets were not as busy as I expected, but the village was small, so I gave this little thought. What mattered to me was the demeanor of my master. Away from his chamber, Hirohashi seemed his old self again. He laughed easily and spoke cryptic riddles that became tales partway through. Halfway through a sentence, he got an idea for his next play, and I dutifully recorded it. Together we mused on the art of theatre until the bottle was empty and the fireflies replaced the lights in the sky.

“Something troubles you,” he said in the latest hour, just before the house began to close.

“I must confess something.” My words were encouraged by the sake in my belly. “I have great respect for you, and I did not wish to interrupt your work. So as other requests came in, I wrote them myself.”

He grinned. “So you’ve had good practice, then?”

“I have,” I admitted. “Yet I fear that I have betrayed the art.” When he bade me to continue, I explained: “All my life I have enjoyed the act of writing. I found writing to be rewarding in-and-of-itself, and I cared not what it was for. Plays, stories, poetry... anything was good enough. But for the last year, I have written only assignments, and I have not found this to be nearly as satisfying. I confess, I do not enjoy writing as much as I once did.”

My face burned. I would not have spoken those words to any other. It was not fair to have burdened my master with my own problems, and yet to my shame, I spoke them freely. “I have meditated on this for some time,” I continued. “And I have come to a conclusion. I am no longer writing just for the love of the art. I am no longer writing without concern to how the work will be received. I have betrayed the very teachings of the art. I no longer speak honestly from my heart.”

Hirohashi was unconcerned. His smile was gentle as ever. “Why, then, do you still write?”

I kept my eyes on my cup. “I write for you, master. I write only to please you.”

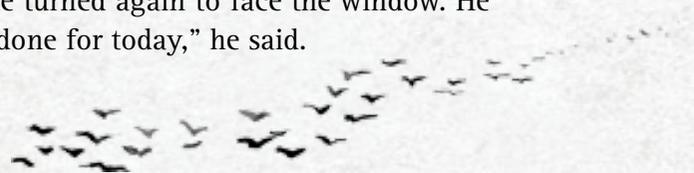
After a long while, Hirohashi nodded. “I understand,” he said. “I also write to please my masters.”

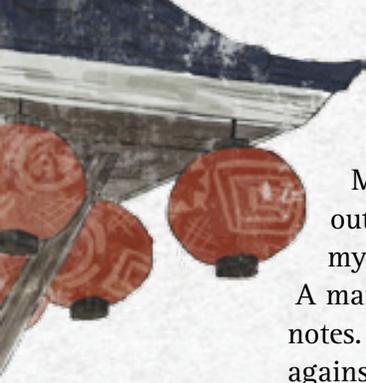
The world stopped. I raised my head. He was staring out of the window at the void beyond. In his eyes, the fireflies danced. “I would never have written anything were it not for my patrons,” he confessed. “Writing is not always easy. I do not always enjoy it. We are told that we can never admit this. We have to say, ‘I always enjoy writing.’ That the act alone satisfies us. We must write only for the sake of the art and no other reason. But this is delusional. It is the greatest lie any artist in any medium has ever told.”

He met my eyes. “Man creates not just for his own joy. He is in denial if he believes this is so. He speaks because he has something to say. He writes because he needs others to feel the same as he does. The proper thing is to say you write only because you love to do it. But had I no audience, I would not write anything at all.”

The question bubbled up from my lips. I tried to bite it down, but I could not stop it. “Sensei, if everyone universally loved your work, and your plays knew only praise, and every man and woman in every household in every province knew your name... would it be enough to satisfy you?”

Hirohashi stared into my eyes for a long while. Then, he turned again to face the window. He seemed loose and deflated as an empty kimono. “We are done for today,” he said.





My sleep that night was restless. I made troubled dreams. I woke often to the glowing moon outside my window and the cloudy fog rising from my parted lips. I curled, unwilling to leave my warm cocoon of blankets to light the coals again. My thoughts dwelled on my master. A man who longed for recognition, who craved the approval of others. This did not match my notes. It did not match anything revealed in his plays. It did not make sense. My vision snagged against the demon mask hanging on the wall and I wondered if I'd ever truly met my master.

That morning I rose before the sun. I began my morning ritual on the balcony overlooking the bay. From this vantage, I saw a messenger riding hard against the east wind. From the Spider banner on her back, I knew at once who she was. I wrapped myself in kimono layers and sat by the door. The place where I usually felt hot anger in her presence was instead empty and silent.

But she never came to the upper chambers. I waited until I felt the doors open below me, heard the muted voice of my master. She'd gone straight to him in the auditorium. My stomach churned then, and my heart threw itself against the cage in my chest, as if desperate to break free. By the time I reached the bottom of the stairs, she had left the auditorium and was preparing to disembark again. I asked her what had happened. She looked at me with what might have been compassion on that grim face, but she only shook her head. She was gone within moments. Behind the doors of the auditorium, I heard something fragile smash brightly against the wall.

Believing that Seiken would never hold the Spider as equals, Daigotsu Kanpeki had renounced his position as Clan Champion and declared war on the Empire. Throughout the lands, assassin squads executed orders, striking against the Great Clans. There was a rumor that the lands of the Sparrow had been invaded. Kanpeki himself embraced the darkness long locked within him. They would not tell me what he had done, but their faces grew pale whenever someone asked. Kanpeki's demands echoed throughout the Empire. As the son of the last Hantei, he claimed the throne.

10

Twenty years. For twenty years the Susumu sacrificed. Twenty years and the Susumu suffered to advance the station of the Spider Clan. Shamed for actions taken before they were even a named family. Broken to save the face of the Daigotsu. Slain in duels for past slights. Humiliated in recompense for the Spider's past deeds. Mistrusted. Slandered. Paying for sins inherited. Living in the shadow of another clan's past. Torn between two masters. For twenty long years the Susumu fought and worked and bled so that the Spider might be considered equal to the rest of the clans. They arranged marriages, conceded resources, and smiled at their foils. All the while believing with unwavering faith that one day... one day their work would be rewarded, and the Spider might stand alongside the other clans as true Rokugani. As part of the Empire and not its enemies.

Twenty years of work. Gone. Immolated in less than a moment.

For what had I fought all of my life? What purpose did the Susumu serve now?

It made no sense to me. Kanpeki surely would not throw all of this work away. He would not betray an entire family sworn to his allegiance. Reality was slow to sink into the oceans of my mind. There would be no purpose for the Susumu in Kanpeki's plans.

Just as there would be no use for my master's play.

Hirohashi never left the auditorium. Not a single sound emanated from that place. I dared not enter those chambers for fear of what I might find within. His *wakizashi* was long missing from his study. For all I knew, he might have left this world in protest of his master's decision. I would not have blamed him. I considered much the same. But in the end, I am too empty to take this action. I cling too heavily to this world. I know the mouth of hell is waiting for me. I am not eager to feed it.



The palace lords spoke many assurances. Of course there would be need for the Susumu in the new Spider Clan. They urged us to continue our works. Yet I could see in their eyes that they knew no more than the rest of us. The optimistic looked for word from the imperial city, word from the Susumu daimyo. But the rest of us knew word would not come from there; if Kanpeki had turned against the Empire, then there would be no more Spider embassy.

By sunset of the following day, hearing and feeling nothing beneath my seat in my master's study, having seen no one enter or exit in twenty-four hours, I resolved to enter the auditorium and see for myself the fate of Hirohashi. It was then that the servant came to me. All Susumu were summoned to the court of Kyuden Shizuka.

On the dais was Susumu Kuroko herself, daimyo of our family. Wrapped in silk layers, face inscrutable, she sat flawless on a stuffed cushion. Beside her stood Gyushi, head of his own family, blacksmith arms crossed before a tight frown. They were accompanied by the highest-ranked members of the family. They'd escaped the Imperial city and reached their only holding of note.

Among them was the messenger I recognized. Our eyes met briefly and she looked away.

A lord upon the dais spoke. "By now, you have all heard. We are at war with the Empire."

"What will become of us!?" someone blurted. "Lion and Crane provinces are just over a day's ride from here! The Palace of the Emerald Champion lies to the north! A Tsuruchi village is but a stone's throw away!"

"Show some dignity," our daimyo spoke. When it was silent, she continued in the lord's place. "We were escorted here by a force of Daigotsu samurai. They will soon assist us in the evacuation of the palace. In the meantime, we've something more pressing to discuss."

She pulled a letter from her sleeve and slapped it on the dais. I recognized it instantly; it was the letter I wrote regarding my master's play.

In that cold moment, I felt as though a pit had opened before me. I wanted to fall in.

Kuroko looked into my face. "Who is Bukimina?"

Another answered before I could, identifying that as the pen-name of Hirohashi. Kuroko frowned. "This tone of this letter suggests that the true allegiance of the Susumu lies with the Empire and not with the Spider. Kanpeki-sama was considerably troubled." She rose and swept the room in her ice glare. "Who here feels this way?"

My chest was too tight for me to speak. The room was silent.

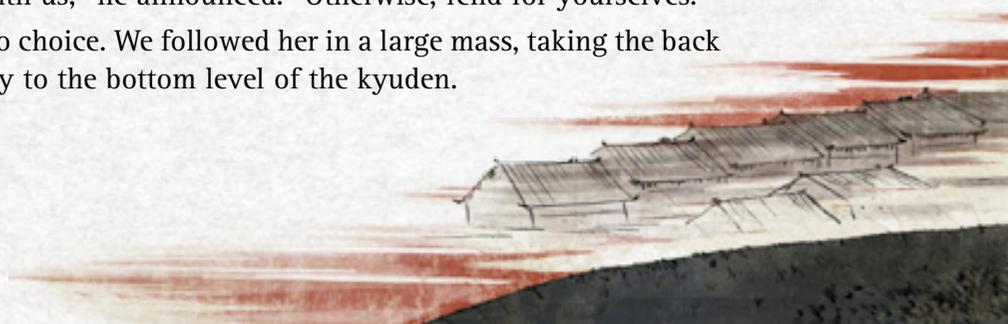
"Perhaps our work will be discarded," she said. "But that is our lord's right to do. We have no say in the works of our master. If there was any doubt, I shall banish it: you are vassals of the Daigotsu. We will endure and carry on. The Susumu served two masters... but now we must choose." She centered herself on the dais and raised her voice. "You may either stay as vassals of the Daigotsu family, or you can—"

Outside, the town bell was ringing. Kuroko's brow pinched. There was smoke beyond the window.

Then came the screams from below us. Servants cried out. There was a fire in the palace.

Kuroko's guard formed a circle around her. As one, the leaders of the Susumu made to leave. "If you follow the Spider, then evacuate with us," he announced. "Otherwise, fend for yourselves."

Many of us exchanged looks. It was no choice. We followed her in a large mass, taking the back exit from the court and making our way to the bottom level of the kyuden.



We found the main hallway cut off by flames. The thin paper walls glowed orange with the light of fire. Black curtains rolled along the ceiling. A similar sight met us as we made for another exit. I could not comprehend how a fire could spread so quickly. Everywhere we turned, flames trapped us in. I heard the screams of the burning, their begging and pleading, as the world immolated around us. Our leaders kept calm, walking slowly with great control as we followed, but with each failed path out I could see in their eyes growing wider, their faces paling ever more gradually. We passed crushed and trampled bodies in the hallways but found no passage out. Every breath became like fire in my lungs.

Until someone saw the auditorium doors. There was a passage outside through the main theater. I thought instantly of my master alone in this chamber, but said nothing.

We poured into the room. It was dark. No lanterns were lit, and the high windows, impossible to reach, showed only a slit of the night sky. There was smoke in here, but it was better than the deteriorating hallway outside. We crossed as one entity for the far door that would open into the courtyard. Gyushi himself reached it first and pushed the iron doors to fling them aside.

They didn't budge. He looked back. "Locked."

"Break them down," Kuroko ordered.

They began pounding on the doors, slamming them with their shoulders. The booming echoed through the chamber. In the hall, I heard the chewing of the flames as they consumed everything, just now crossing the threshold into the auditorium.

Then the lanterns came alive. The room flooded with light. As one we turned. Standing on the stage was Susumu Hirohashi. Donned in elaborate costume, his face painted in kabuki colors, he was surrounded by dressed mannequins. Samurai, courtiers, jesters, and monks. They stood around Hirohashi as he looked out into the audience, his audience, with plain madness on his face. I watched a tear fall from his eye. I could nearly hear the pounding of taiko drums as she struck the pose iconic of an Emperor.

"Where one man sees death," he shouted, "another sees birth!"

The guards exchanged looks. They did not know what to make of this.

"Ignore him!" ordered Kuroko. "The doors! Hurry!"

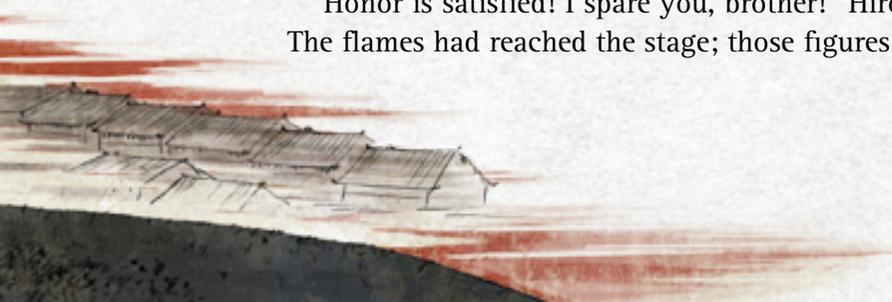
The pounding resumed. But I could not watch. I was transfixed to the stage. My master danced, his costume flaring and furling around him, the silks catching the light in elaborate displays. I watched as the flames crept around him, growing brighter and hotter. A black cloud formed, thick hot smoke. Behind, the desperate slamming against the door, growing frenzied, less organized.

Master Hirohashi changed his voice. "Sister Shinjo! I cannot apologize for fulfilling the duty of my clan, even as it has offended your honor. But if it will satisfy, I freely offer my life!"

A voice came from elsewhere. Fortunes' mercy, I swore it came from the lips of a mannequin. "I would not take your life, Brother Shiba. That you offer it is enough. Compassion is what we hold in common!"

"Let us out!" cried one courtier. From the corner of my eye, I saw him cut down by one of the guards. They began to throw themselves at the door as the walls began to crackle into open flame.

"Honor is satisfied! I spare you, brother!" Hirohashi bowed to a mannequin dressed as a crab. The flames had reached the stage; those figures in the back were lit aflame.



In all my life, I'd never seen a performance like this. I was enthralled. Every detail, every movement, I believed. The mannequins tethered their shadows in flailing light. In the fragments of time where the darkness raked my vision, I could swear they were moving. Posing as kabuki actors. Dancing. Laughing! Crying out their lines. The shadows cast from the flames danced along the walls, becoming mountains, rivers, castles, even dragons! I knew this was not real, and yet I wanted to believe it. I wanted the lie to be true! It was true! He weaved a new world!

I looked back at my master's audience. I saw them trampling each-other, clawing one-another, slamming fruitlessly against the doors. I saw my daimyo Susumu Kuroko cut down two men who dared to approach her, their blood sizzling on her hot blade. I saw one man bite down into the face of another, hot blood splashing into his eyes. The flames were above them now. They coughed. They vomited. They pleaded. They slammed their fists against the unyielding doors. Red, glistening handprints steamed on the hot surface. They were wild-eyed animals. It never occurred to them to escape into the world my master was creating.

I sobbed open tears. I was not worthy to enter that world. I was not worthy of my own life!

Hirohashi pulled down his face. He became the Iweko Emperor. I saw him hold a banner high as the wooden actors on stage fell into prostrations before the glorious son of heaven. A chorus of screams broke the sky before the flaming maw of hell. "Let us be united!" he declared. "One glorious Empire! In the embrace of universal brotherly love, united beneath heaven!"

The Susumu snapped their limbs on the iron gate holding them in. Screaming. Tearing. Burning.

The slamming on the doors were taiko drums. The anguished cries of the dying were thunderous applause! The actors stood as the sun rose on a new Empire behind them! A new world, a burning horizon! "I serve two masters!" the Emperor declared. He froze in a pose of triumph. "My two masters are one!"

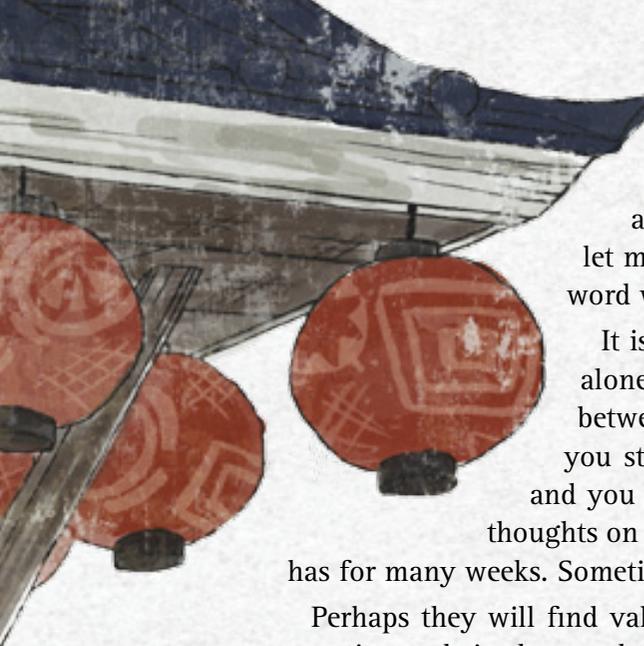
I fell to my knees, shouting his name. "Hirohashi!"

Behind me, the doors broke. Bodies crashed into the courtyard like a tsunami. I felt myself pulled by a great current. I could not tell if I was grabbed and torn from my seat, or pushed away by my master's will. Or perhaps my fear had finally won, and I simply ran for my life. I was gasping on the stone earth in the courtyard, my temple laid against the ground, my flesh tainted by licking flames and the blood of others. A mountain fell behind me, and I looked up to the massive pyre that was once Kyuden Shizuka. The auditorium fell in, collapsing with the force of an earthquake. There was no sign of any life behind. The endless fire ruled over all.

I know not how long I laid coughing blackness on the irregular stones of the courtyard. The other survivors scattered as they could. My daimyo, the injured Gyushi, the messenger, and their entourage vanished beyond my scope of vision. I imagine they fled, but I know not where. When I was aware of my surroundings again, I saw a ring of armed and armored men had formed around me. They hid their faces behind helmets of war. They extended their swords and asked for my surrender. On their chests, I saw the mon of the Spider.

It was then I learned that the Daigotsu were responsible for the flames. Uncertain of the loyalty of the Susumu dwelling within Kyuden Shizuka, our champion elected to burn all inside.

I sit now in a quiet room. It is peaceful here. There is only the quiet trill of the cicadas outside my locked window and the rustle of the pines and maples. I cannot say for certain where this room exists. I only know that I am in the custody of the Daigotsu family. My lords. I am afforded all of the luxuries due to one of their honored vassals, but I cannot leave this room. My only glimpses of my captors come when they leave rice or soup. No one will speak to me, not even the



guards stationed right outside the sliding door. Weeks have passed and I am no wiser as to if they will let me live or if they are content to let me die. I still do not know what will become of me. Someday, maybe word will come. Lord Daigotsu will decide. I wait.

It is a strange thing to be held hostage by one's own lords. Even while alone and sequestered in the quarters they created, even with the barriers between yourself and the outside world, the way their treatment changes, you still feel as though you are serving them. Days pass, weeks slip by, and you wait. They say nothing. I dwell in this waiting place and write my thoughts on this paper. The barred door to my chambers remains closed, just as it has for many weeks. Sometimes I think they have forgotten me. I am not sure what to hope for.

Perhaps they will find value in my simple work. Perhaps there is a role for me in whatever constitutes their plans and this new world they are constructing will have some small place for me. But with every passing day of oppressive silence I feel ever more certain that they see no use in what I have made. That my years of service, my unique voice lent to theirs, my loyalty, will ultimately mean nothing. I used to beg the Fortunes that my time as their vassal and a student of the brush was not in vain. Now I simply pray to know what will become of me. These last four years replay in the theatre of my mind, a four-act Kabuki of transient and faceless actors, where beginnings and endings blur together and I know not my own role in them. Villain? Hero? Bystander? I cannot say what part was mine in my own life. My sleep is restless. My appetite fades quickly. I can no longer keep the passage of days. All life now is simply waiting.

Waiting for their decision. Waiting to die.

I think of the fire often. I never before knew how deafening a fire could be. The thunderous snapping of support beams as their strength burned away, the resounding boom of the kyuden buckling in, the roar of the flames, the town-cryer's bell, and the panicked screams. Yet nothing will ever be so loud in my mind as the insane laughter of the playwright Susumu Hirohashi. I heard it long after he died in the flames, long after his world collapsed beneath the weight of reality. When I close my eyes, I can hear it still. Rather than live in an unforgiving world he could not abide, he died in one he created for himself. A world of shadow, light, and flame.

I write uncertain if this will ever reach your eyes, and yet I feel I have no choice. I write because there is nothing else. Nothing but to knowingly believe in a lie. I want only for the lie to be true.

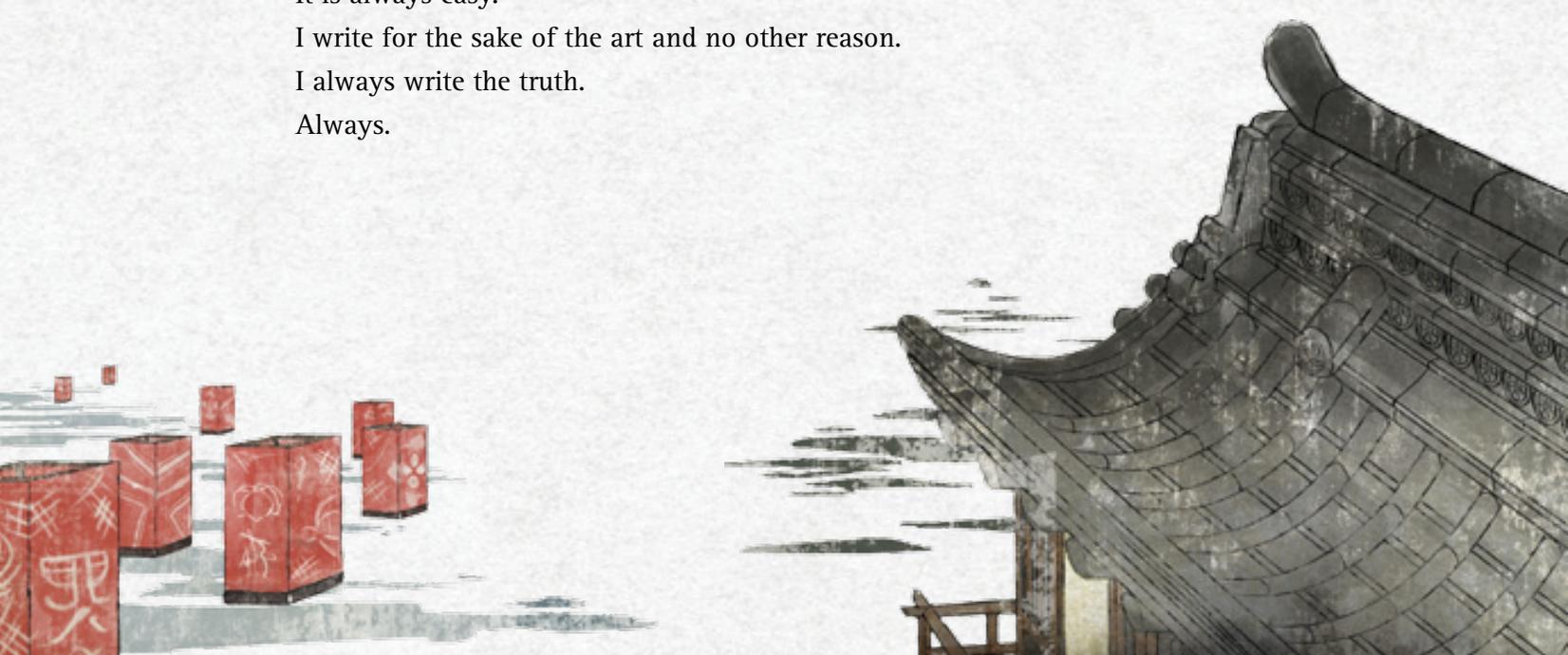
I always enjoy writing.

It is always easy.

I write for the sake of the art and no other reason.

I always write the truth.

Always.



THE BATTLE OF THE FIRST SEAL

BY SHAWN CARMAN

EDITED BY FRED WAN

The Shinomen Mori was the largest forest in the world, at least as far as the people of Rokugan were aware. There were vast jungles in the Colonies, to be sure, but those were tangled, overheated masses of trees, vines, and undergrowth in a disordered mass, not a proper forest. And for all the danger and threat those jungles possessed, all the unknown nightmares that hid within the shadows after the death of the Ivory Kingdoms, the quiet, understated menace of the silent depths of the Shinomen was somehow worse.

Still, Kuni Renyu reflected bitterly, anything in Rokugan was better than the Colonies. He had hated every moment of every day he spent there, and had rejoiced when he had returned to the Empire proper. His current undertaking was folly, however, and he could scarcely imagine being more unhappy than he could at this particular moment. He was a priest of the kami, the lord of the Kuni, and the trusted lieutenant of his brother, the Champion of the Crab Clan. Yet he was tromping through the forest with one hundred hand-picked men, consummate warriors, at the behest of a filthy Spider monk.

“We have seen too often what happens when threats go ignored,” his brother had told him when Renyu had protested the task. “I will not see it happen again if it can be avoided.” In theory, Renyu agreed with him. Many times the short-sighted buffoons elsewhere in the Empire had overlooked things that even a fool could see, and it had cost them dearly. Which he wouldn’t care about, of course, except that it always seemed to cause the Crab suffering as well. The injustice was so rank that it soured Renyu’s mood whenever he dwelled upon it, although to be fair he had been told on many occasions that his mood was never far from soured in the first place. The very thought caused his eyes to flit over to the prisoner.

A monk bearing the Spider mon walked among the Crab, flanked at all times by no less than four of the largest Hida warriors. His hands were bound by iron manacles, chained not only to one another but to his ankles as well, causing his movement to be inconvenient, but not so much as to slow him down. Speed was necessary for this endeavor.

Hida Toranosuke appeared at his side as if summoned. “Do you wish to speak to the prisoner, my lord? Or, if the sight of him offends you, I can move him elsewhere in the formation.”

“No,” Renyu said at once. “I want him where I can see him.”

“As you like, my lord,” Toranosuke said dutifully. “If it puts your mind at ease, he has made no ill movements since we placed him in irons after leaving Kyuden Hida.”

“Nor would you, if you knew it would mean instant death,” Renyu remarked, his voice full of scorn. He had not had the monk chained until they were out of Kyuden Hida because he feared, for reasons he could not name, that his brother might have countermanded the order. The thought troubled him greatly, but he would not voice it. “What of the others?”

Toranosuke cast a glance over his shoulder at the other contingents that were accompanying them, one clad in green and another in brilliant orange and yellows. “The Mantis seem quite skilled in navigating the forest,” he acknowledged. “The Phoenix seem quite skilled in complaining about navigating the forest.”

Despite the circumstances, Renyu chuckled. The Mantis had been present in the outer Crab lands, there on some pretense of diplomacy or alliance or some such nonsense, Renyu had never bothered to find out the details. When they had heard that the Crab were sending a contingent to the Shinomen Mori in search of some ancient ruin, the Mantis commander, a Tsuruchi veteran of some renown, had offered the services of his men as guides and escort. In a rare show of relative diplomacy, Renyu had told the man that he did not care if they came or not, and so the Tsuruchi had formed up his men and accompanied them. There were nearly as many Mantis as there were Crab, which made for a strange procession, which had only become all the stranger when the Phoenix had intercepted them on their way to the forest.

“Greetings, brother,” the obsequious Isawa had said when the two groups met. He had smiled broadly with ridiculously white teeth. “How does the day find you?”

“It finds me with but one brother, and you are not he,” Renyu had retorted. “Why have you delayed us with mindless pleasantries?”

If the Crab lord’s demeanor had put the Phoenix off, he did not show it. “We are brothers in service to the kami, are we not?” He had gestured to the scroll satchel Renyu wore, similar in many ways to the one the Phoenix carried as well. “I am Isawa Norimichi, the Elemental Master of Earth in service to the Phoenix Clan and the glorious Emperor Iweko II.”

“In that order?”

Norimichi raised an eyebrow. “You seem in search of a quarrel, bro... Kuni-sama.”

Renyu rolled his eyes. “You mean to join us as well? I cannot imagine what else your purpose might be.”

“I received correspondence from a kinsman among the Agasha,” Norimich had replied. “He advised me that your undertaking was of the greatest possible importance, and begged me to offer you whatever support and aid the Phoenix might be able to present in a timely manner. I was of course intrigued, and I traveled to the Second Pit and commandeered my brothers and sisters stationed there to meet you. So,” he had rubbed his hands together briskly, “where are we going?”

The very thought of it brought another scowl to Renyu’s face. He knew, in theory, that he should be pleased. After all, a hundred valiant Crab warriors, with another hundred canny Mantis scouts and half that many Phoenix in a mixture of shugenja and yojimbo... his little force had nearly tripled in size since he departed Kyuden Hida. Still, he was unhappy with the entire affair, and he knew the reason why. He glanced sidelong at the Spider who walked in chains, seemingly unconcerned with the weight and inconvenience of it all. They had been within the deep reaches of the forest for hours, yet the Spider seemed utterly nonplussed.

As if he sensed Renyu’s eyes upon him, the Spider turned to regard him frankly. “We are here, my lord,” he said flatly.

Renyu frowned and looked all around. They were standing on the edge of a small valley, little more than a hollow between two forest ridges, but he could make out nothing out of place. “Is this some deception?” he said, hoping he did not sound too hopeful.

“Fortunes,” Norimichi said, his voice just above a whisper. “Look at it.”

Renyu looked again. “Look at what?” he demanded. If this was some manner of joke, it would only be funny for the briefest of moments, he swore to himself.

“There.” Norimichi pointed to the vastly-overgrown ridge opposite them. It was stone, probably granite. Good for repairing the Wall, Renyu was thinking, and then he saw it. It was part of the stone itself, part of the very earth. If you looked upon it from any angle other than that which the Spider had brought them, it would not have appeared as anything more than simple rock.

But from this angle, you could just barely make out the shape of... what? A temple? Some sort of building. It was strange, but more than its appearance, it was the energy that it seemed to give off. A sort of deep, undisturbed serenity that Renyu had never felt before. Stone normally radiated strength and calm, but this... this was something altogether different.

"It..." Renyu said haltingly. "It's... real?"

"As I promised," the Spider said. His voice held no recrimination, simply a statement of fact.

"Those stones were ancient when mankind was first born," Norimichi said, entranced by the sight of the temple. "No mortal hand has ever touched them, nor eyes even gazed upon them. They are perfectly pure in every way." He looked at the monk. "How did you find this place?"

"It was not I," the monk assured him.

"Then who?" the Elemental Master demanded.

"The Disgrace," the monk said, his voice dripping with disgust.

It had been increasingly difficult for Iweko Shibatsu to move through the Imperial City unencumbered ever since his brother's coronation as the new Emperor of Rokugan. The guardsmen that dogged his steps everywhere he went did so at his brother's command. Until the Empress bore him a child, after all, Shibatsu was next in line for the throne. The idea left a sour taste in Shibatsu's mouth. He did not doubt his brother's sincerity in his forgiveness for whatever sins he perceived the younger heir having committed, nor did he doubt the Emperor's genuine desire to keep him safe. He also held no delusions that everything he did or said would be reported by his guardsmen, either to the Emperor himself or, more likely, one of his attendants. And that, more than anything, was inconvenient in the extreme. Shibatsu did not doubt that once his brother's wife had their first child, his position in the Imperial Court would become less valuable and more of a liability. He could look forward to a duty post in some distant corner of the Empire if here were lucky, or more likely the Colonies if his brother did not see that entire part of the world burned for its non-traditional nature.

Temples were the simplest place to avoid his guardians. Shibatsu was known to have developed a rather pious streak since his brother's ascension, and would spend hours at a time sequestered in private chambers in the largest shrines and holy sites in the Imperial City, his guards remaining dutifully outside to watch for any threat that might dare present itself to a scion of the Iweko line. Or so it was believed. In truth, Shibatsu had many friends among the Brotherhood of Shinsei, and discreetly existing a temple while he was believed to be inside had become something of a hobby of his in recent months. It was perhaps mildly sinful, but it did permit him to conduct business that was best kept private. Such as today.

The Inn of the Wilted Rose was as ramshackle as its name suggested. It had stood in Toshi Ranbo since before the city had become the Imperial City, and thus was perhaps one of its oldest establishments. No one could remember if it was named for its condition or if its condition came to mirror its name, and frankly no one cared to dwell on it any longer. It was never busy, and rarely had more than one or two patrons at a time. Fortunately for its owners, this seclusion afforded those who desired it remarkable anonymity in conducting their business, which is what Shibatsu desired above all else. Should his activities today be discovered, he might find himself a permanent guest within the Imperial Palace so that his brother could guarantee his safety from undesirable elements.

For the briefest of moments, Shibatsu wondered if he had made a mistake. There were two others in the inn's serving room, but they bore no resemblance whatsoever to the individuals he had come to meet. Of course, he thought, if they did, there would hardly be any point in such a

clandestine meeting, would there? Chiding himself inwardly, he crossed the room and sat beside the two others. "Greetings, friends," he said quietly. "You are looking... well."

"Are we not?" the man replied happily. He was dressed as a wandering priest, a ronin, with filthy robes, long, unkempt hair, and nails that were both long and encrusted with all manner of filth. Just looking at him made Shibatsu feel unclean. "I feel positively scandalous."

The shaven headed female monk sitting with the priest gave him a long-suffering glance. "Darling, if you could try and control yourself."

"Of course, my love."

Shibatsu had always wondered at the relationship between the two. It had never been perfectly clear to him if their mutual fawning adoration was an act or genuine. If it was the former, then it was masterfully done and could shame even the greatest actors and playwrights of any generation. However, Shibatsu suspected it was the latter, which made perhaps even less sense, but he could not deny that it seemed legitimate. "I assume that we did not confer today to compare our skills at disguise and deception."

"Well of course not," the man replied. "How much time do you think we have?"

The woman sighed slightly. "We wanted to speak with you privately, my lord, to ensure that you know that the Susumu are your servants, as ordered by your brother."

Shibatsu smiled, but there was little warmth in it. "It was not my intention..."

The unrecognizable Susumu Kuroko raised a hand. "Forgive my interruption, my lord, but there can be no question that this situation is wrought of your brother the Emperor, not your own desires. There is no one among our ranks who holds ill will toward you for this. Indeed, we do not even hold ill will toward your brother. It was clear to anyone with any sense that your brother's ascension to the throne would not end well for the Spider. That our family has been granted the privilege of serving you without any punitive measures in place... we regard ourselves as fortunate indeed."

Shibatsu smiled again, but this time it was filled with sadness. "The service you have provided my mother was suspected by virtually all samurai, and yet you have never wavered in your devotion or the execution of your duties. You have suffered more than is your lot. The other clans... they will not allow this opportunity to pass them by. You will suffer persecution such as you have never known."

"Everything is relative, my lord," Susumu Takuan said, trying in vain to carve some kanji or other into the surface of the wooden table with his false nails. "We Susumu are thirty-six in number, and we serve you loyally, as we are bid. If the clans truly wish to assault us, they will trip over one another trying to hit so small a target, and fall to squabbling among themselves."

Shibatsu chuckled. "That may be true, my friend."

"Of course it is," Takuan replied. "I am very wise. Am I not very wise, beloved wife of mine? Everyone always tells me so."

Kuroko sighed lightly. "If we are to discuss the assets of our family, I can tell we will require something more substantial than tea to endure the conversation." She gestured for the innkeeper to bring sake.

The temple was not complicated. There were a few passageways and even fewer chambers, most of which were empty. Moving through the place caused Renyu to feel uncomfortable because the passageways were strangely shaped, too tall in some places, too short in others, with a floor that was rarely even. The first time Renyu stumbled, he cursed, drawing a strange look from

Norimichi. "It is we who are imperfect," he said simply. "This place stood long before the first men walked this world." Renyu waved the man away, convinced he was a fool.

Harder to ignore was the apparent lone purpose for the temple's existence. Within the innermost chamber was what Renyu could only describe as a large, circular table of sorts. Norimichi remarked that it was similar to the one found in the Elemental Council chambers, but that meant nothing to Renyu. The stone circle was divided into three equal thirds, the center of each one marked with some sort of stone pin that was fitted deeply into the stone of the table itself. Its surface was covered with elaborate kanji that no one in the group had ever seen before. Renyu had never felt more uncomfortable than when he was around this strange stone table, not even during the sweltering summer he had spent in the Colonies. Whenever he was not looking directly at the table itself, it seemed to be moving in the corner of his eye. Twisting, perhaps. Something in the back of his mind whispered to him that there was something beneath it, trying to escape. And perhaps there was.

Isawa Norimichi finished a quiet conversation with the Spider monk, then approached Renyu and gestured for them to step aside into a small alcove to speak. Renyu complied without thinking, not taking his eyes from the strange table that the monk insisted on calling the First Seal. "Is what that man says true?" Norimichi demanded. "Did he explain exactly what this thing is to you and your Champion?"

"He told us a fancy tale, if that is what you mean," Renyu replied.

Norimichi gaped at him. "How can you stand in the presence of that artifact and question its significance?" he demanded. "Fortunes, are you a priest of the earth or not?"

Renyu finally turned to look at the Phoenix, his smoldering gaze sufficient to cow even an Elemental Master. "Speak to me in that tone again and I suppose we will find out," he said darkly. "To answer your question, however, I can stand in the presence of that artifact and wonder exactly what manner of twisted game the Spider are playing. I will not take them at their word, because their word is worth less than nothing."

"Surely you can sense that this is not an evil thing," Norimichi insisted. "Even a Crab cannot be so stubborn."

Renyu opened his mouth to retort.

"My lords."

Both priests turned to face Toranosuke. "What?" Renyu demanded.

"My lords, forgive me, but we need to determine what should be done here," the calm Crab warrior said. "We are a small force of but three hundred samurai, but the trail we blazed through the forest could be followed by a blind man. If the Spider are indeed seeking this place out as we are, then we have made their task a great deal easier."

"I have no idea," Renyu admitted. "I trust nothing the Spider says, but this thing... I do not know for certain what it is, but I know that it is dangerous."

"If your prisoner speaks with even a hint of truth, then this Seal is of great importance. Its destruction could have terrifying ramifications. It must be protected at all costs."

"Certainly," Toranosuke said. "How, precisely?"

The two priests looked at one another uncertainly. "I do not know that," Norimichi admitted.

"All I know for certain is that this thing must be protected from the Spider. Whatever they want with it, we cannot allow it to happen when they come."

"They are not coming," the monk said suddenly, staring off into the distance.

“What?” Renyu demanded. “What does that mean?”

The monk nodded toward the south. “They are already here.”

The monk named Hira frowned deeply, the already worn and weathered face beneath his blindfold growing more lined by the moment. “I had hoped that would be more productive.”

Agasha Kurou shrugged lightly and continued slicing pieces off of the pear he was holding and popping them into his mouth as he chewed noisily. “Well, to be frank, I have no idea why you thought that might prove informative.” He smiled slightly and dabbed at his mouth with his sleeve. “There is scarcely a village anywhere in the Empire that does not have some manner of lesser prophet or old crone gifted with the ‘second sight’ or something equally ridiculous.”

Hira nodded glumly. “Still, this particular charlatan, as you say, had a reputation that extended across an entire province. I thought perhaps there might be some hint of truth behind the tales.”

“None whatsoever!” Kurou said cheerfully, throwing away the core of his fruit. “I suppose we should contact the lord of this province and inform him that his people are being taken advantage of. They will doubtless send someone to remove the problem permanently. Peasants are not meant to take such liberties.”

Kitsune Narako shifted uncomfortably. “Is that really necessary?” she asked softly. “There is little harm being done, and the villagers clearly take comfort from the little prophet’s presence.”

“It is presumptuous,” Kurou insisted. “Perhaps even blasphemous. The lesser castes must be reminded on occasion of their place in the Celestial Order.”

Narako’s lip curled downward. “And you are suitable to do such a thing, naturally.”

Kurou’s expression seemed confused. “Well, of course. I am the lord of a great family in service to one of the Emperor’s clans. Why would I not be?”

“This is not a productive line of conversation,” Hira interjected, eyeing the obvious anger in Narako’s gaze. “Our purpose is to seek out any who might have gained some insight into the coming... event, whatever that might be. Just as we did.”

“I still find the notion that someone among the lower castes could receive such a vision from the Heavens ludicrous,” Kurou said. “There is a reason you do not see peasants with the gift of speaking to the kami, after all.”

Hira fought a smile at that, but continued. “We have sent letters to all the families we know of who have the gift of divination in their bloodlines. Until we hear back, we can do little but explore possible other options.” He frowned a bit. “Have you had any luck in contacting your Phoenix kinsmen to find more potential recipients?”

Kurou’s expression grew strangely blank, as if he were forcibly suppressing some thought or member, and was not particularly skilled at doing so. “Unfortunately, they are not going to be of much aid to us in this regard.”

The other two stopped and looked at Kurou curiously. “Why?” Narako asked.

Kurou was strangely silent for a moment, chewing his lower lip slightly. Finally, he sighed. “There has been an... incident,” he admitted. “The record that the Isawa family maintains of divinatory bloodlines has been stolen.”

“Stolen?” Hira exclaimed. “By who?”

“A ronin,” Kurou answered, his face twisting up into a sneer. “A man living on time stolen from the Heavens. He will be found and the information recovered soon enough, at which point I feel certain I can convince the Isawa to share it with us. Until then, unfortunately...” he shrugged.

The old monk shook his head. "This cannot be coincidence."

"Coincidence is troublingly commonplace, I find," Narako replied.

The three stood for a moment, saying nothing. Finally Hira withdrew an old scroll from the bag at his hip and looked it over. "There is one other that might be of aid to us who is close enough for us to reach him," he said. "An old associate of mine from many years ago. A fellow monk, in fact."

"At what temple does he serve?" Kurou asked.

"None," Hira countered. "Enomoto has never favored temples."

In the days and months to come, Renyu reflected bitterly, this would likely be known as the Battle for the First Seal. It was a gross misnomer, however, as this was not a battle.

It was a slaughter.

The Spider had been seeking the First Seal for a long time, it seemed, far longer than the Crab had even known that it existed. Once the location was clear, all their forces in the area convened on it, and they outnumbered the meager forces at Renyu's disposal by as much as fifty to one, if the Tsuruchi scouts' estimates were to be believed. The tomb, such as it was, was a marginally defensible position, but even that could not overcome the sort of numerical disparity that the Crab, Mantis, and Phoenix delegations were facing.

Toranosuke appeared suddenly at his side, as he was wont to do, moving with the sort of quiet speed and grace that only a seasoned Shadowlands scout could muster. "I think we will die today, my lord," he said. There was no fear or regret in his voice, nothing whatsoever. He had several minor wounds that he did not appear to notice, but his weapons looked as though they had been dunked into a barrel of gore. "Do you wish me to employ any specific tactics?"

"What tactics are you currently using?" Renyu demanded.

Toranosuke shrugged lightly. "I am killing every enemy that comes across my path."

"Keep doing that," Renyu said. "And do not die! No matter what!"

"As my lord commands," Toranosuke said with a bow.

The Spider were using nothing in the form of subtly, or scarcely even tactics. They came at the temple in waves, using a wide assortment of infantry and beasts of the Shadowlands. The Tsuruchi were concealed in every conceivable place, anywhere that was large enough for a samurai to hide and still wield a bow. They took a terrible toll on the Spider at first, but their rate of fire had diminished significantly due to attrition in the ranks as well as their flagging supply of arrows. Likewise the Phoenix hurled magic at them at every opportunity, sometimes wiping out dozens of them at a time, but even the most powerful priests could only call upon the kami a limited number of times per day. It was inevitable that they too would begin to wane in their defense, and the Spider would move ever closer to their goal of taking the temple and the Seal that it contained. The stench of cooked flesh washed over the defenders in waves in the same manner that their attackers did.

Hida Toranosuke shattered the skull of a corrupted warrior who leapt at him, then turned and spun his tetsubo in an arc, hopelessly crippling three more in one fluid movement. His men were fighting with equal ferocity around him, but one by one they were falling. Soon, if the Fortunes were merciful, he would remain but there would be none of his brothers left to watch his flank, and then he too would die. Toranosuke did not fear death. He had seen too much of it, brought it to too many enemies and been too close to it himself far too many times for it to be a thing he feared. It was an old acquaintance.

There was a surge amid the ranks of the Spider, and then they inexplicably withdrew twenty feet or thereabouts. Toranosuke braced himself, knowing that whatever was about to happen would be terrible, and he was not mistaken. The Spider ranks quieted, and a masked figure emerged. It was lithe and athletic, bearing a blade in each hand, its features inscrutable behind a full mask that obscured all but its hateful, inhuman eyes. Toranosuke opened his mouth to command his men to kill the thing, but it acted almost faster than his eye could follow, cutting down two of his brothers before he could even utter a word. Then it came toward him, the glint of blood-stained steel catching the thin rays of sunlight that broke through the forest canopy. In that instant, Toranosuke knew that his time was over.

Something struck the ground between the two combatants before the masked figure could reach the Crab warrior, and a shockwave of earth drove both of them apart. The masked figure was cast back into the Spider ranks and Toranosuke found himself hurled backwards. He might have been injured ignominiously if his brothers had not caught him and helped him right himself.

“Hello,” the man alone in the clearing said. “I am Isawa Norimichi. I am the Elemental Master of Earth. Make your peace with your dark god, Spiders, for you go to meet him.” He reached up and a tetsubo of pure earth sprang into being from the world around him. He set upon the Spider like a wrathful Fortune.

“Regroup,” Toranosuke ordered at once. “He cannot hold them alone, and I have no idea what that thing with the mask is.”

“That is Daigotsu Yuhmi,” the prisoner monk said, appearing among them suddenly, still clad in his chains. “He is born of the flesh of Daigotsu himself. He is an avatar of death, and you would do well to run before him.”

“Crab do not run,” Toranosuke informed the monk. “How did you get here?”

“If I am to die, I will do it on the front lines, not in a temple.”

Toranosuke nodded at that. It was something he could respect.

“You are a warrior,” the monk continued. “I need to speak to a warrior, not an arrogant priest or a proud samurai lord, but a man who knows what it is to wage war. Please, listen carefully. The temple is lost. You know this, yes?”

The Crab warrior nodded, albeit grudgingly.

“When the First Seal is destroyed, the veil that protects the Second and Third Seals will be weakened. They will be difficult to find, but no longer impossible. If Kanpeki’s forces find them first, I do not know exactly what will happen, but I know that the Empire we have both served will perish in flames. Do you doubt that?”

“No,” Toranosuke acknowledged.

“Then you are wiser than your lord Renyu,” the monk said. “You must make your lord understand when this is over.”

“I will be dead when this is over,” Toranosuke said. “As will you.”

“You are partially correct.”

There was a scream of agony behind them, and Toranosuke turned to see the beast Yuhmi holding a severed human arm. The Master of Earth lay on the ground, a frighteningly large pool of blood all around him and growing. Dozens of Spider were dead from the last time Toranosuke had looked.

“You must go now,” the monk said. He suddenly snapped the chains holding his arms as if they were a children’s woven grass toy. “I am Tetsuo, Master of the Order of the Spider. I will hold Yuhmi for as long as I can. Do not forget what I told you.”

The monk leapt at Yuhmi. Cursing himself and the world around him, Toranosuke ordered his men to fall back with him.

It was the dead of night in the Imperial City. It was not uncommon for there to be significant activity in the city even in the darkest hours, but the Imperial Palace itself was typically silent. The newly crowned Emperor Iweko II was a man of a military nature, and preferred strict hours to ensure that he was prepared for each day in the event that something untoward would present itself for him to deal with. Thus it was that he was deep asleep within his chambers when a soft whisper broke into his dreams.

“My lord Emperor.”

The Emperor was alert at once, his hand upon the blade that he kept by his bedside at all times. He had already devised three methods of dealing with the figure crouching next to his mat when he recognized his Imperial Advisor. “Makoto?” he asked, slightly confused. “What is it?”

“Forgive me for intruding upon you in this most indecent manner,” the normally brusque Crab said, and the Emperor could see the worry in her eyes, “but... something has happened.”

The Emperor was on his feet at once, shrugging into a kimono. “Where is my council?”

“They await your convenience, my lord,” Yasuki Makoto replied, rising to her feet. “Forgive our impertinence but we have already drafted a decree calling for the mobilization of the Imperial Legions. It awaits your review and approval.”

The Emperor frowned. It was unlike his Chosen to take such initiative. He had chosen them for their skill and wisdom, but despite that, they were loyal men and women, and preferred to wait and take their cues from their lord. “Which legions?” he asked, placing his daisho in his obi.

Makoto’s eyes were murky pools. “All of them, my lord,” she whispered.



ODD FORTUNES
THE BATTLE OF TREACHEROUS PASS
BY ROBERT DENTON III
EDITED BY FRED WAN

PART ONE

“They have to know we are watching.”

Shiba Kakei nodded from his saddle, the rocky breadth of Treacherous Pass unfolding beneath him. “They make no attempt to hide their numbers,” he murmured. “They want us to see what we’ve angered.”

A village of tents and military yurts occupied the south end of the pass among white and purple banners and pillars of smoke. There were hundreds of soldiers. Perhaps even thousands, more than Kakei could count. They segregated themselves into distinct units; over two-thirds of the forces were Ashigaru, hardy peasant soldiers trained in basic tactics. The rest were samurai.

This was far more samurai than a normal army would field. Kakei recognized the heraldry of striders as they ran drills with long spears. The rest would be the legendary Unicorn cavalry, almost five-sixths of their samurai forces. Their noise filled the valley, the hammering of blacksmiths, the banging of copper pots, the din of voices. They conducted drills, lines of men repeating kata with swords, spears, and bows. Some practiced their horse archery. Kakei winced as he spotted a group of engineers constructing a massive ballista.

He estimated he was looking at over 3,000 men and women. He could not tell servant from Ashigaru soldier. He remembered once hearing that the Unicorn trained even their servants in combat and that every single man and woman was fielded when taking to battle. Was this only a rumor? He grimaced.

Kakei’s subordinate, a man fresh from *gempukku* with innocent stars still in his eyes, pointed to a cluster of purple-robed men and women among the Unicorn camp. They readied a fleet of paper kites, wide-winged and bright, each marked with unique and strange sigils. Some held them aloft to test for air-worthiness while others fastened lengths of rope to the kites. An older woman tossed coils of ribbon above her head and watched them fall, testing the breeze. Even from this distance, the whistling howl of the wind passing through the kites’ bamboo flutes sang brightly. They sounded like death keens to Kakei’s ears.

“Their kite-runners are quite skilled,” the subordinate remarked. “The size of this army will prove no obstacle for their general’s orders.”

“It seems the Khan’s forces have learned well from the Lion Champion.” Kakei’s eyes narrowed, even his ruined milky one. “They’ve been waiting for us here. What we took for a retreat was actually an invitation to a direct battle.”

“Were there this many before?” The younger man idly counted the tents. “They’ve tripled,” he finally concluded, deflating.

“Reinforcements. They must have come through the Kintani Valley.”

The kite-runners began their drills, practicing their signaling. Kakei wondered if the rumors of man-carrying kites were true. If they were substantiated, he wondered if they were truly unique to the Lion Clan. After all, the Lion and Unicorn had grown rather close as of late...

“To come through the Kintani Valley, the Unicorn would need the blessings of the Crane.”

Kakei frowned at his subordinate's words. It was an uncomfortable implication. "Perhaps the Crane are too preoccupied to care," he replied. He wasn't sure which theory he believed. For as long as anyone could remember, the Crane were steadfast allies of the Phoenix. But times were changing. Not even the face of the heavens remained the same.

The sound of a slowing approach reached Kakei's ears. He looked behind at an Ashigaru messenger urging a donkey up the rocky slope. Immediately spotting the Unicorn army, the man's jaw went slack, whatever message resting on his lips instantly forgotten. He stared at the army as one might a growing tsunami.

"Yes?" Kakei spoke.

The man jolted, bowing stiffly as he barked his words. "The Master of Fire is prepared to receive a report." His gaze never left the Unicorn in the pass.

"Of course." Kakei turned his horse around. "We will deliver it in person. Lead on."

The Ashigaru did nothing, transfixed upon the pass.

"A frog does better at catching flies."

The man shut his gaping mouth, face burning. "A thousand pardons," he managed before urging the donkey back down the slope. He cast one last lingering glance at the army before vanishing beneath the lip of the climb.

The younger man looked to his superior. "We should probably keep him from telling the others what he's just seen, right?"

"Don't bother." Kakei sighed long into the stirring wind. "I've only enough patience for one losing battle."

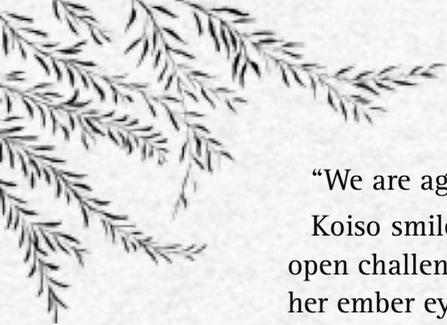
They were quiet for the rest of their trek. The three rode down the winding path into the northern side of the valley, passing hardy pines and tall grasses as they descended. The silence followed them; not even the calling of birds or the buzz of loud insects accompanied the clapping of their canter.

They entered the Phoenix camp within an hour. They relinquished their horses and made their way between tents, portable shrines to the Fortunes, and practicing soldiers. There were four ashigaru for every samurai, most conscripted from the surrounding farmlands. Of the remaining samurai, only half were bushi, the rest being shugenja and thus unaccustomed to war. They could defend themselves with the prayers of the kami, even fight alongside the Shiba, but war was not their art. Even of those samurai preparing for battle, far more were repurposed yojimbo than practiced soldiers. They were trained to save the lives of their charges, not to fight as a unit in an army. Even the students of the legendary Heaven's Wing, sparring with their naginata, were dojo fighters and kata exhibitionists. They had never seen true battle. Their art was untested.

There were just over 1,000 combatants in total in the Phoenix's forces. Kakei thought of the teeming Unicorn village at the other end of the pass...

The Phoenix command tent stood at the top of a small hill, erected beside a massive white stone jutting from the dusky-red rocks of the pass. The Phoenix recognized it as a sacred *iwakura* and bestowed the stone with a length of blessed rope, a *shimenawa*, to protect it from misfortune and to honor the kami residing within it. Kakei had seen shugenja in prayer before this stone just as the sun was rising. The remnants of their offerings surrounded the rock in a loose circle.

The tent opened. The samurai bowed as a regal woman in green and gold stepped into the light. Moshi Ikako, daimyo of the Moshi Family, was immediately followed by a small entourage of servants and shine maidens. The Elemental Master of Fire Isawa Koiso came soon behind with her own retainer. Kakei and his follower both lowered their bows into proper prostrations. They were ignored by the conclave of priestesses.



“We are agreed, then?” Moshi Ikako’s oaky voice seemed older than her painted face.

Koiso smiled as the wind tugged her flowing silks, her bare shoulders and neck seemingly an open challenge to the conservative Moshi. “Why speak what no-one doubts?” Her smile touched her ember eyes.

Ikako nodded curtly. At this, a shrine maiden stepped forward in her immaculate forest-green hakama, procuring an object from her white kimono sleeves. She held it out: a large spiraling conch shell with a wooden mouth-piece attached to the narrow end. A *horagai*, or shell-trumpet, larger and more elaborate than the ones familiar to Kakei. The maiden bowed as she offered this prize. Koiso’s retainer, a shugenja named Isawa Ichimon, retrieved the offering and returned the bow.

“The Isawa are grateful,” Koiso spoke. “We will remember the generosity of the Moshi.”

Ikako looked into Koiso’s eyes for a long time. “I knew your father,” she finally said. “He felt a great connection to the Valley of the Centipede.”

“So I have been told,” Koiso replied. Her retainer hid her face behind the conch shell trumpet.

“I do not envy you.” Ikako made a sound that could have been a chuckle. “We launched our own investigations at the behest of your family, attempting to find some fault with the Isawa’s report. Naturally, we discovered none. Your clan is correct. The karma of the Moto is deeply marred. They are still cursed.” She paused. “We reached out to them ourselves and were vociferously rebuffed. I lost two yojimbo in resulting duels.” She gestured to where Koiso stood. “Were it not for timing, it could have been the Moshi who were under siege, and I would be where you now stand.”

Koiso smirked. “The Phoenix willingly accept the ire of the Unicorn so that no other Clan need to.”

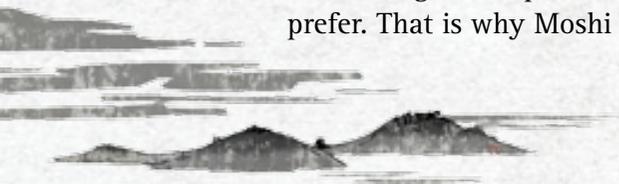
“Do not presume that I approve of this war.” Ikako frowned, an expression that could have blotted out the sun for its darkness. “I have followed your career for some time, Koiso-san. You have finally received the war you have always wanted. As consequence, a Unicorn army now rides just beyond my clan’s provinces. Violence is ready to spill into the Valley of the Centipede, blood that will desecrate our sacred lands and ruin our precious farms. All for the Phoenix’s pride!”

Ichimon rose in outrage, eyes ablaze. But Koiso instantly stepped in front of her ward, inclining her head to the Moshi daimyo, keeping their eyes locked. “You have my word, Mother of the Centipede.” Upon the utterance of the ancient title, Ikako’s eyes softened, and her shrine maidens closed their eyes in reverence. Koiso straightened her back as she spoke. “If the Phoenix must give their lives to accomplish it, not one Unicorn will step foot into the Valley of the Centipede, and not one drop of Moshi blood will fall as consequence of this war. As we did in better times, the Phoenix will protect the Moshi.”

Kakei dared to glance at the Moshi daimyo’s face. She seemed placated. “The Moshi thank the Phoenix,” Ikako spoke.

Her entourage withdrew as Ikako turned to leave. She paused, glancing back to the Master of Fire and briefly at the brilliantly painted conch shell trumpet. “Since I need not pray for the safety of my people, seeing as we are in the hands of the capable Phoenix, I will instead pray for you.” Another pause. “I will ask the Jade Sun that the Phoenix will not be required to lower themselves by using their sacred prayers for basic violence.”

At last Koiso showed some emotion. Her eyes narrowed as her fists clenched. “We want the same thing,” she spoke. “But we are alike in that circumstances do not permit what we would prefer. That is why Moshi Kamiya’s daughter so excels at what the Moshi decry.”



More than one shrine maiden stiffened at this comment. Ikako merely shook her head. "The Isawa are the greatest of us," she murmured, almost sadly. "It is easy to destroy and difficult to protect. When the greatest servants of heaven use the sacred prayers of the kami for violence, it disgraces all shugenja." She met Koiso's ember eye. "Don't you think?"

The Master of Fire said nothing as the Moshi procession descended the hill.

Ichimon spun towards her mistress. "How dare she?!" the younger woman demanded. "Has she no inkling of whom she is addressing?"

But Ichimon anger faded as she took in Koiso's expression. Where she'd expected to see the fiery anger for which her sensei was legendary, instead the face of the Master of Fire was as a dying hearth. Ichimon lowered her gaze, embarrassed.

Koiso seemed to notice Kakei for the first time, nodding in his direction. "Kakei-san. Your report is ready now?"

He rose. "It is, my lady." He hesitated. "Please forgive my presumption, I could not help but overhear. Your promise to the Moshi... in order to keep it, we will have to advance further into the pass."

Koiso nodded.

"If the battle goes poorly, such a maneuver will make smooth retreat impossible."

"Yes," Koiso said. "It will."

Kakei clenched his jaw.

"You say you overheard her?" Koiso tilted her head. "She said I wanted this war. What do you think, Kakei? Did I want this?"

After a long time, Kakei spoke. "I think so, my lady. I think you wanted the Phoenix to be feared again."

All bodies withdrew from Shiba Kakei. Eyes avoided him as if he were nude. Faces barely concealed horror, as if he were tainted. Kakei became a pariah in that instant. He steeled himself for whatever consequence of his words would come.

Isawa Koiso smiled. "In that case, Kakei-san, let us say that I have had my fill." She gestured to the command tent. "I will hear your report. Then, I want you to gather a diplomatic envoy to the Unicorn army. See what it will take to end this without bloodshed."

Kakei blinked like a mouse spared by the owl. "Of... of course, my lady." He bowed. "So be it."

"I will not compromise our face," Koiso whispered. "Keep this in mind. The Unicorn will have demands... you know what the Council of Five will consider acceptable."

Kakei nodded over the distant whistling of war kites. "Of course, my lady."

In his rough hands, the gold-leaf folding fan seemed fragile and small. It caught the light and glinted, leading his eyes from its slender folds to the delicate length of linen cord swinging from the loop at the bottom. Weighted by the swinging pendulum of a *netsuke* bead, the cord dangled from between his fingers. The paper-thin fan was so fragile to his eye, but the linen cord seemed unbreakable.

"Bored, Kyung-Won?"

Moto Kyung-Won calmly tucked the fan away before lifting his white-painted face. "Apologies, General."

Moto Tadasu crossed his arms in the filtered light of the command tent. Beside him, the death priest Moto Chizura watched in silence. Tadasu scrutinized his subordinate for a moment longer before returning his eye to the map on the table. "With Orange Flame Village in our hands, we now control this entire area. Word will not reach the Phoenix until it is too late to matter. Even now they pursue us into the pass. When they realize their mistake, they will have nowhere to run." He smiled distantly at the wooden pegs on the map. "Nowhere to flee from our retribution."

"Except for the Centipede Valley," Chizura spoke in her airy voice.

Tadasu grunted. "Do that, and they risk the ire of the Mantis. If their desperation pulls another clan into this conflict, it will be more egg for their faces. Either way suits me fine." His smile spread evenly across his painted features. "By the time the Khan arrives, I'll have defeated the bulk of the Phoenix army and scattered their resistance. I'll have secured our clan's victory."

His voice dropped to a whisper. "Finally, I'll have achieved my destiny! I'll be forever remembered among our clan's greatest generals..." Remembering himself, he turned his smile to Kyung-Won and Chizura. "They'll remember all of us. We'll share in this victory. Even if not, any outcome that includes Phoenix blood on our swords is a good one, eh?"

Kyung-Won said nothing.

General Tadasu frowned, reverie broken. "If you've got something to say, Kyung-Won, I suggest you say it."

"His wife is an Isawa," Chizura said.

Kyung-Won glared at the death priest, who gave no discernible reaction. "She was my wife," came his brittle reply.

Tadasu looked away. No one spoke for a while.

The tent flap opened. A wide-eyed Unicorn in the trappings of the Ide bowed hastily. "Lord General," he spoke, "Something has happened."

The general followed as the Ide led him through the camp, Chizura and Kyung-Won close behind. As they passed by tents and soldiers, Kyung-Won's hand returned frequently to the fan tucked into his obi. Tadasu pretended not to notice, but internally he began to re-evaluate the trustworthiness of his right-hand man.

The Ide led them to the far end of the camp. Tadasu grew more concerned with each step, noticing how his soldiers whispered, the concerned glances they intermittently shared. When at last he saw the *heimin* constructing a large pyre he knew what had happened was more serious than he originally believed.

They stopped before a set of white tents. Tadasu saw dozens of soldiers laying on thin mattresses, many doubled up in pain. Some staggered around, trying to remain standing, only to bend at the gut. He heard wet coughs and gagging, the heavy splash of vomit on the stone ground.

He turned to the Ide. "How many?"

"Two whole units. Plus three more who can still march, but experience... difficulties."

"Why are they not quarantined?"

The Ide shook his head. "A disease of the wind is not the cause, my lord."

Tadasu understood when he was led to the supplies. They broke open a crate of rice to show him. Buried beneath the pristine surface of dried grain were hidden veins of blue and green. The cured meats and dried vegetables fared no better, showing fresh spoilage and clusters of flies. Peasants upturned ruined drink, poured out tainted water, and carried away spoiled food. There was no telling how significant the spoilage was or how far it had spread.

“Impossible!” Tadasu growled. “I oversaw the boxing of our supplies myself!”

Only the Ide dared to speak. “Perhaps some moisture leaked into the crates, or-“

Tadasu interrupted, his thundering voice causing many peasants to reflexively throw themselves on the ground in prostration. “These supplies were flawless before we left the Kintani Valley!” He stomped to a crate, his brow furrowing. “It is sabotage,” he finally said. “Someone sympathizes with the Phoenix.”

Kyung-Won unsuccessfully hid his discomfort. “Lord General,” he said, “Such a thing is highly unlikely. The Phoenix are above such tactics, and no one here would have anything to gain by-”

“I can think of a few who might,” Tadasu spoke. It was just short of an accusation. The death priest raised an eyebrow at Kyung-Won.

Kyung-Won instantly fell to a knee and drew his scimitar, holding the edge to his own wrist. A thin red line appeared where the blade tasted its master’s flesh. He whispered, “How might one demonstrate their sincerity, Lord General?”

Tadasu stared at his subordinate for a long moment, then bade him to rise. Kyung-Won exhaled a long breath as he put his blade away. None would second-guess his loyalty again.

“Round up some men to hunt for supplies,” Tadasu ordered the Ide. “We need meat and grain. Send word to the occupying forces; divert the Phoenix’s supply lines.” He thought for a moment. “Shiro Akatsuki is north of here. Send a diplomatic...”

His voice trailed as Shinjo scout rode his horse into the small clearing. Dismounting, she fell before the general’s feet in salute. “My lord! A Phoenix envoy approaches our camp through the pass. They travel beneath a banner of peace. We suspect they wish to speak. Shall we turn them away?”

Tadasu raked his beard with his fingers. “Not this time. We’ll hear them out. How long?”

“They will be here within the hour, my Lord.”

He nodded. “Good. Keep them waiting.” He regarded the death priest. “Chizura! With me.”

The Ide bowed as Tadasu departed, recalling his orders. As he rose, he saw Kyung-Won tarry before a crate of spoiled venison.

“Perhaps it was just improperly cured,” Kyung-Won spoke.

“It is not my place to speculate,” said the Ide.

“If it was?”

The Ide frowned. “There was no sabotage,” he said with complete confidence. “There would have been signs of such. Things like this happen and they are hardly a calamity. Poor fortune, nothing more.”

“Poor fortune...” whispered Kyung-Won as the Ide left to carry out his orders.

“Leaving so soon?” asked Asako Miyabi. The Master of Water sat in the lotus position before a small shrine. She looked over her shoulder at the woman hesitating at the entrance to the dark tent.

Isawa Nairuko swallowed and bowed. “I would not disturb your meditations, my Lady.”

Miyabi’s eyes danced and she gestured beside her. “Please. Join me. You needn’t worry.”

Nairuko sat without a word, folding her hands in nervous *seiza*. She glanced sideways at the Elemental Master. Calm, flawless, without peer. Nairuko could not help but notice yet again how the Master of Water was nearly half her age. It made her feel inadequate.

Miyabi smiled at the other woman. "How fares your research?" The question was casual, not a Master requesting a report, but a colleague expressing interest in the life of another.

"Fits and starts," Nairuko confessed, instantly flushing. No matter how casual, she was still speaking to an Elemental Master. Miyabi had a way of causing those around her to forget this. "I struggle to see more connections. I must have looked at five generations of star maps and consulted the kami one-thousand times..."

"Keep at it," Miyabi encouraged. "You'll find the pattern." A pause. "Are you adjusting to...?" She gestured around her.

Nairuko nodded. "It is more activity than I expected, but I manage."

"You won't be participating in the fighting, I hope."

"I could," Nairuko replied, determined. "If called upon. I am more than capable. You need have no concerns of that, my lady."

Miyabi's eyes dimmed somewhat, her smile weakening. She nodded and returned her attention to the shrine.

"I apologize," Nairuko said. "I... I thought—"

"Nothing to apologize for," Miyabi said. "It is good that I needn't worry about your safety. It is only that I'd rather you won't have to do what is required of bushi." The Elemental Master sighed, her shoulders dipping. The gesture seemed to shed a layer of her station. "What you're doing now is far more important than fighting will ever be."

"I'm not sure the Shiba agree," Nairuko remarked with a smirk.

"If there is one thing this position has taught me, it is that sometimes one must commit to unpopular decisions." She paused. "Sometimes one has no choice but to do so." She leaned forward, lighting incense as she continued. "When I was appointed, I made a promise to myself. I swore that I would use my power to enable a new age of peace. I would never condone of violent action. It only took a few weeks before I broke my promise."

She sighed again. With each breath she showed her youth. Her inexperience. Nairuko bit her lip. "Nothing could be done about it," she offered.

"I used to think that the higher one climbed in status and rank, the more freedom one received. I believed the Elemental Masters had the greatest freedom of all. That they could do whatever they pleased." She cast Nairuko beneath wry eyes, an expression befitting one much older. "I know better now. One of high rank is no more free than a farmer. You have more power, but not more freedom. Choices are made for you." She paused for a moment, collecting her thoughts. "In the last few months, I've had to make many decisions I despised. In each instance, the choice I wanted to make was one that circumstance made unthinkable. I know some may hate me for it. But I had to do so anyway. It is the nature of this service to make enemies without trying."

"No one could hate you," Nairuko whispered.

Miyabi chuckled. "Are you so sure? The truth is, even if I could fully explain the reasoning behind my decisions, even if I could present the many ways in which my hands are tied, even if I could show why what I did had to be done... in the end, they still would not understand. I can give them knowledge, but not the insight to comprehend it. Without intuition, the knowledge is useless. I can never fully convey why what has happened needed to be done, even if I were the greatest speaker in the Empire. This is the difference between knowledge and insight... knowing is not understanding. They can never understand, even if they believe they do, if only because our perceptions will always be different." She gestured to the shrine before her. "Just as a swordplay manual alone cannot make a great swordsman. Just as a master painter cannot make

his student his equal. Just as your sensei could not simply tell you how to speak to the kami. There are aspects to our art that we can never convey in simple words. They will either see it or they won't. If not now, then perhaps someday."

They were silent for a while. "You don't regret it, do you?" Nairuko asked. "I mean... if you could go back..."

Miyabi shook her head. "I would accept the position again. I do not regret becoming Elemental Master. I do not long for the past. I merely... see the differences better now. I observe better where I was wrong." She looked at Nairuko for a time, then smiled. "I shouldn't be saying these things. You have enough to worry about."

Nairuko turned inward. A smile came soft to her features. "I'm... glad you did, Miyabi-sama. It would be a great tragedy if you felt you could not show the contents of your heart, because that is what the kami see."

Nairuko murmured a prayer to the Fortunes, following the strict rituals shown to her by her long dead elders. When she raised her head again, she saw that Miyabi was watching her with amused, introspective eyes. For a moment, it seemed the Master might say something. But then she simply looked back to the shrine.

"Is everything alright?" she risked. Perhaps she'd said the wrong thing...

Miyabi grinned. "It is nothing. Do not worry." She glanced at the older woman a final time, her smile knowing, but not telling. "I am merely remembering your name, nothing more."

Tadasu breathed the incense deeply as he sat in the lotus position. Eyes closed, he heard the clatter of finger bones scattering across the table between him and the death priest.

Chizura chuckled. "The Lords of Death are pleased. You are assured to spread their blessings among many with your current path."

A grin spread across Tadasu's features. "Will I be remembered for this? Is this how I will fulfill my destiny and become a hero of my clan? Is this how I redeem my ancestors?"

"Patience," she said. Tadasu heard her opening the pine box, casting the finger bones inside. "These things are not yet revealed. Time must keep some secrets."

He nodded, then lowered his head to the floor. "When I become the Lady's Hatamoto, I will remember your service. You will be an honored retainer within my court."

She did not reply, but an amused smile danced in her eyes.

As Tadasu rose, he heard a sound from outside his tent. It was a woman's voice protesting above the sound of struggle.

Leaving the tent, Tadasu spotted the commotion's source: a woman in lavender kimonos and midnight hair untouched by shears struggled to bypass two of his personal guards. The afternoon sun glinted on glass beads around her neck, a long cypress baton tucked into her ghost-white obi. She argued, demanding to speak to the general of this army. Moto Kyung-Won tried in vain to reason with her. The sight befuddled Tadasu until he spotted the mon of the Unicorn stitched into each of her long, swinging sleeves. His confusion gave way to anger.

"What is the meaning of this?" he demanded. Stepping forward, he pointed at the girl as the guards continuously stepped into her path. "Who is this woman? Why isn't she preparing for tomorrow?"

Kyung-Won bowed as the woman pulled her arms away from the guards a final time, warding them off with a hot glare. "This is Iuchi Karuri," he said. "She is not a part of the army. She

traveled for many days to get here.” Kyung-Won held out a stack of traveling papers. They rustled in the relentless breeze, displaying the mons of the Scorpion, Lion, Crane, and Tortoise.

“Are you the general of these forces?” she spoke. Beneath her jet hair and olive complexion, she pierced him with pale and urgent icy-blue eyes. “We must speak.”

Tadasu crossed his arms. “You storm into this camp without so much as a nod and demand to speak to me?” He scoffed. “Little woman, you have traveled far, but forgotten your manners along the way.” The guards barred her once more as he turned his back, making to return to his tent. “You can try again tomorrow. I haven’t the time-“

She shouted, “You’ve suffered a setback, right!?”

He paused.

“Something went wrong. Your supplies, maybe?”

He spun, marching directly to her. The guards pulled away. He towered over the woman who looked up at him with those sky-hued eyes. She spoke again. “I’m right, aren’t I? It was your supplies?”

Tadasu growled, bringing himself to eye-level with the woman. “What do you know of it?”

Unflinching, Karuri rummaged through a pouch hanging from her obi. “Ever since the Phoenix went public with their report, the Iuchi have studied. At last, we better understand the nature of this new curse.” At last, she withdrew a small black cube from her pouch and held it aloft. It was a die for *Fortunes and Winds*, the moon die, lucky but for one side. This she boldly placed into the hand of Moto Tadasu. “Roll it,” she said.

Tadasu looked from one face to the other. Kyung-Won watched with visible concern. Chizura’s curious look came from the tent. Beyond them, soldiers and guards watched with suspicion. Tadasu set his jaw and let the die drop from his fingers.

It bounced several times before resting. The kanji displayed on the face was red. Lord Moon.

It was the only losing face on the entire die.

“What does this mean?” Tadasu asked.

The woman stepped back, recovering the die as she explained. “You can roll this one-hundred times, Lord General. The result will be the same. The new Moto curse manifests.” She met his eyes. “You’re bad luck.”

His eyes narrowed. “Bad luck?”

“Once in every Moto’s lifetime, during a crucial moment in his or her life, that Moto’s fortune will dramatically turn for the worse. It could be something relatively little. It could be something with far-reaching consequences. It could be important to that samurai or to the entire clan. Whatever it is, that Moto will fail. This is the nature of this new curse.” Held up the die once more, face serious as death. “This is what the Phoenix meant when they said your bloodline was ‘jinxed.’ Once in every Moto’s lifetime, they will suffer a stroke of bad luck that will sabotage them, no matter how they try. It will be impossible to predict when it may happen, but now the Iuchi know how to identify when it is happening.” She paused. “And it’s happening now, to you.”

Tadasu looked away. He saw the faces of his soldiers, men and women whose lives were entrusted to him. He saw his own reflection in the puddles at his feet. A man destined for greatness, a man striving all his life to rise in the ranks of the Unicorn and redeem the shame of his ancestors.

“What would you have me do?” he asked.

“The responsible thing. Relinquish your command. An army led by your hand cannot win. Not until this passes. Not now.”

Tadasu looked into the woman’s eyes for a long time. At last, he smiled. “With my army at the Phoenix’s doorstep?” He shook his head. “Never.”

Karuri’s gaze widened. “You don’t understand. What you’re doing will...”

With a fast swipe, he batted the black die from the shugenja’s palm. It vanished into the depths of a puddle. “I will decide my own fortunes!” he declared. “I fear nothing! If I fall in battle against the Phoenix, it will only be after I have claimed twenty of their lives!” He rose to his full, impressive height, laying his hand on the hilt of his blade. “My course was decided the moment the Phoenix spat slander from their lips. There is nothing to be done about it now. It is too late to bet as the dice fall.” He laughed, his white face-paint all but glowing with the intensity of his eyes. “I refuse to be intimidated! I welcome any fate, so long as it is by my own hand!”

The Iuchi trembled as she numbly shook her head. All her confidence was gone. Her words tumbled clumsily from shaking lips. “By saying this, you choose death for all your soldiers.”

Tadasu looked at the men and women around him. “Who here fears death?!”

None spoke.

He cast the woman his proudest, most defiant smile. “Death holds no power when you give it no hold within your soul.”

Karuri lowered her gaze. Through clenched teeth she hissed. “You are a fool. You deserve what is coming. I will pray it affects you alone.”

Tadasu ignored her comment. “You came far to tell me this news,” he said, resuming a casual tone. “I am grateful. In exchange, I will grant you one boon. Anything you ask within my power.”

“I wish only to be away from here,” she spoke.

“Very well.” The general gestured to Kyung-Won. “Procure for Iuchi-san our fastest horse.”

From the entrance of the command tent, Chizura smiled.

Neither one spoke as Kyung-Won led Karuri away from the camp, guiding a fresh horse prepared to ride. They were a good distance before Kyung-Won gave her the reins. He pointed south. “Ryu Bannin Toshi,” he said. “Show the magistrates your papers.”

Iuchi Karuri met his gaze. He found himself staring into those impossibly blue orbs, transfixed on their depth and color.

Her lips parted. “A golden fan.”

He blinked. “What? What do you-?”

“It is a sign of happiness,” she continued. Her voice was barely a whisper, yet her words rang clear in his ears. “The golden fan represents the joy of a shared life, while the linen cord represents the strength that comes of binding oneself to another.” She turned to mount the horse. “The fan is fragile. It breaks so easily. Yet the cord remains strong, even after the fan is broken.”

Kyung-Won’s trembling fingers reached for the fan in his obi.

Karuri sat sure in the saddle, her fingers curled around the reins. She looked down at Kyung-Won one final time. “If you ever want to see her again, you should go to her now.”

The horse leapt into a gallop without so much as a kick. It thundered away, kicking dust into the sky as it shrank in the distance, finally vanishing from sight. Kyung-Won watched for long minutes, not daring to move until it was gone.

The banner of the Phoenix fluttered loudly above Shiba Kakei's head. His horse stirred beneath him, as did the five others accompanying the rest of the envoy. The other samurai were motionless in their bright red armor, their feathers stirring in the wind, gold trim catching the light. Among them, he alone was unarmored, clothed in the traditional courtly garments of his clan, a lone diplomat among those ready for war. Yet of them, he was the only one who had seen true battle.

Opposite of them flew the banner of the Moto, proud in vibrant royal purple. The mon, a grimacing white face, glared at the Phoenix envoy. At the lead was Moto Tadasu, recognizable by his personal heraldry. He was accompanied by twice as many soldiers as accompanied Kakei, each one armed and armored.

Tadasu made a show of looking around him. "No Elemental Masters, I see. Is Koiso so ashamed of her clans' actions that she will not show her face?"

A Phoenix flinched, as if to make for her naginata, but was stilled by a sharp look from Kakei. He'd anticipated this reaction; all his life he'd led this unit and he knew each of them as he knew his own heart.

Kakei focused his attention on the amused Moto general. When he spoke, it was with a clear voice, ringing with authority. "I am Shiba Kakei, *Chui* of the Wave Legion, son of Doji Miren and Shiba Ofuka, empowered to speak for the Master of Fire Isawa Koiso. Am I addressing the general of this army or an appropriately-appointed representative?"

Tadasu flashed a smile. "You are addressing Kawabe no Moto Tadasu, Shireikan of the Khol, youngest son of Moto Rumiko, and leader of this army in the temporary absence of our Glorious Khan."

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A murmur rippled through the Phoenix. Kakei kept his face perfectly still. "Youngest son of Moto Rumiko?" He swallowed. "You mean to say that your father...?"

"You knew him as Moto Chagatai." Tadasu smirked. "Did no one tell you, Shiba-san? My father had many sons, after all."

"I see." Kakei released a slow breath, wondering how this development would change what he intended to say. Deciding his approach, he continued. "Honored son of the Fortune of Yu, it is with the desire to avoid needless bloodshed that the Phoenix approach the Unicorn in this manner. I ask that we set aside our blades so that we might seek a peaceful resolution to our dispute. Let us work together in the best interests of the Empire, as your father would have desired."

"I am afraid it is too late for that." Tadasu shook his head. "The time for words has long passed, Shiba-san."

Kakei extended an open palm. "In the Imperial Winter Court, the delegations of the Unicorn and Phoenix worked endlessly towards a peaceful resolution. It is clear both sides do not wish to continue fighting, Moto-dono."

"The Phoenix presume to better understand the motives of a clan other than themselves." Tadasu crossed his arms. "How surprising."

Kakei bristled.

"Do not waste our time," Tadasu continued. "If you wish to avoid a battle, then I will give your masters this opportunity to surrender." His smile returned. "I know the Phoenix are fond of surrender, so I took the liberty of writing out the terms ahead of time. Shall I show them to you? I promise, the Phoenix do not lose too much..."

“Will you not listen?” Kakei spoke, struggling to maintain his composure. His words slipped between clenched teeth. “I know you are not blind to what is happening in the Empire. Wheels are turning, Moto-dono. The Clans move opportunistically. The Spider have betrayed our Emperor. The Shadowlands taint is again unleashed! There are funeral songs on every side. The Empire needs unity more than ever before. It needs the Unicorn. It needs the Phoenix!” He held out his arms and raised his voice. “Why waste our strength here when it will soon be needed by our masters? It would be a waste of blood, needlessly-spilled! I beseech you, let us go in peace!”

Tadasu shook his head. “You would have me leave this insult unanswered. I cannot! The Isawa have impugned the dignity of my family. If your masters had been more discrete, then perhaps—

“You gave them no choice!” Kakei interjected, his patience finally gone. Weeks of built-up frustration slipped from his fingers at once. “We tried to handle this discreetly, to help the Unicorn with this affliction, but you pushed us away! Our words fell on deaf ears! Had the Unicorn cooperated with us from the start, things would never have escalated this far! Instead, the Moto would have the Phoenix remain silent while they put the entire Empire at risk. To do so would betray the very oaths sworn by my clan to the Empress herself!”

Tadasu barked a laugh. “How altruistic! I wonder if the Phoenix would have been so eager to publicly shame another clan if it had been the Crane whose blood was beneath their scrutiny. Or the Lion. Or even the Scorpion.”

Kakei hesitated. He looked into the eyes of his enemy. “What... what are you saying?”

“It is simple. You do not consider us Rokugani.” The Unicorn general dropped all brevity. His face became a mask of death. “Courtesies you would extend to others you do not extend to the Moto. Even after four-hundred years we are still outsiders to you.” As he spoke, his face contorted. “All my life I have watched as the clans criticized our ways. They whisper that gaijin lead the Unicorn. I have heard my family’s name spoken with derision. I have seen my father mocked on kabuki stage, quietly enduring the laughter at his misfortune. I have watched my Clan Champion bend her back to the other clans and make apologies for who we are. All forget what we have done for the Empire.” Tadasu shook, his eyes all but glowing. His voice rose, echoing off the stone walls of the pass. “And now the Phoenix, the same clan who set into motion *my father’s death* with their interference at Toshi Ranbo, dares to bring our very blood into question!? It was good enough to shed in defense against the Destroyers! Is it not good enough for you now, Shiba-san!?”

Kakei’s jaw fell slack.

“Unforgivable.” Tadasu whispered the word, never leaving the eyes of the Shiba. “Let the Empire witness what becomes of those who would dare to mock us. Nothing less than your masters’ foreheads pressed into the mud will satisfy my Khan! Blood demands blood, Shiba-san.”

Shiba Kakei opened his mouth. He was ready to refute the general. A hundred arguments swam at once to his mind. But he knew, in that moment, that any such discussion was futile. A wave could not be placated once it had become a tsunami.

He laughed. It drew the eyes of his followers. It gave the Moto pause. It made him seem foolish. Yet he laughed all the same, a hollow, futile laughter, as a man might laugh at his home’s burned remains. At last, he shook his head. “It is *cursed* blood, son of the Moto. Cursed blood.”

Tadasu grunted. “What difference does it make?” He lifted his head to the impossibly-gray sky. “In this world of suffering, who isn’t cursed?”

As the sun set early over the ridge concealing the lands of the Moshi, a low sound carried through the Phoenix camp. The sound of a conch horn drew samurai from their tents, Ashigaru from their encampments, and shugenja from their prostrations. They assembled beneath the rocky ledge that bore the sacred stone, the largest Phoenix army to have assembled in recent memory. It did not even fill the full width of the canyon.

Isawa Koiso left her tent and stood above them. As one, the Phoenix bowed. She regarded her army with a plain face, her shadow tossed behind her as the sun lowered into the mountains. None spoke. The forces beneath her feet regarded her with rapt attention.

“Honored servants of the Phoenix,” she began. “We are here because-“

Distant thunder. She stopped. The sound was soft at first, but growing in intensity, filling the pass with its sound. They were drums. War drums from the Unicorn camp. Following were the voices of the Moto, raised high and proud. Calling out for Phoenix blood. The cacophony droned beneath all else, oppressive, threatening, and boasting. They dared the Phoenix to take the field tomorrow. They warned of oncoming death.

Koiso saw the reaction among the troops at her feet. Their shoulders hung. They exchanged uncertain glances. Many seemed resigned. The Moto were already declaring victory.

The Master of Fire frowned. “There was a time when the word of a Phoenix meant something.”

The others lifted their heads. Some faces burned. A few looked angered.

“Is there a clan whose duty is beneath greater scrutiny than ours?” she continued, voice growing in strength. “The Crab’s importance is beyond question. They defend the Empire from the tainted lands. When they say there is a shadowlands threat, none question them. The Crane’s duty is likewise unquestioned. They protect our culture. The word of a Crane is beyond reproach. Even the Scorpion’s word is not scrutinized beyond its surface. What of us? What of the Phoenix?” She darkened. “The very nature of our duty... to protect the Empire’s spirit... is such that only our word can defend it. Yet it would seem that the word of the Phoenix means little as of late.” She looked to the horizon, in the direction of the Unicorn forces. “But mark me, servants of the Phoenix. If we do not defend our word, then we have nothing.

“There are many who would claim our duty as their own. The Empire turns elsewhere for spiritual guidance. We are an afterthought at best. And look what it has wrought. The return of the old taint. Open squabbling among the clans. Lip service to the throne while hiding their disunity from the Son of Heaven himself. Shugenja disgrace themselves, using sacred prayers, gifts from the blessed kami and children of the gods, for simple violence. For war.”

She paused, closing her eyes, and her brow pinched in shame. There were whispers. None could recall having ever seen the expression before on the woman’s face.

“I am as guilty of this as any other,” she whispered. “I have used the gifts of the kami for fighting. In as recent as our great-great-grandfather’s time, for a shugenja to taint their soul by engaging in battle was unthinkable. Now, it is commonplace. It is no small wonder the Empire turns away from spiritual guidance. They have lost their way... but perhaps so have we.”

Her eyes opened. There was bright fire within them.

“But not after tonight.”

Koiso raised her hands. “Where many see death, the Phoenix see rebirth. Let us be so reborn tonight. Shugenja of the Phoenix! Bless this army. Bless all who would give their lives to defend our lands against those who would harm us.” As they did so, incantations and prayers lifting from the bowed heads of the priests, Koiso continued. “But do not ask for harm against the Unicorn invaders. We must not hate them. Instead, we should strive to help them even still. For the good of the Empire, let us carry no grudges.

“So I ask that all shugenja present bless our clan in the name of Heaven. I ask that we make sacred the battlefield, the pass, and our soldier’s weapons. Let the kami know that their servants are in need. Let the eye of the heavens be upon this place.

“But then, when this is done, stand down. I forbid any shugenja to participate in tomorrow’s battle.”

The valley stopped. Eyes widened as mouths drew gasps. Looks exchanged in disbelief. More than a few seemed alarmed. Among them, Isawa Nairuko slowly smiled.

Koiso continued. “All shugenja should prepare to aid the wounded. If directly attacked, then I permit self-defense. But upon penalty of dishonor, no Phoenix shugenja here will fight. Pray not for pain inflicted upon our enemies. Use no magic to interfere in the battle. If we win tomorrow, that victory will mean nothing if we disgrace ourselves to achieve it.” She looked back to her followers and smiled. “We will lead the Empire by example. Once more, we will demonstrate how a shugenja conducts herself. I hold no fear in my heart, for the Heavens side with us, and the Fortunes will defend their servants. I place my trust with the Celestial Heavens...” She looked through the crowd, catching the unbelieving expressions of the Shiba samurai. She nodded. “... And also, with the Shiba.

“To that effect,” she added, “I am relinquishing command of this army to Shiba Kakei. Effective immediately.”

The crowd burst into murmurs. Koiso bowed as Kakei’s unit pulled back, making a path for him to climb the steep hill. Shiba Kakei’s face went pale with disbelief. He hurried up the hillside and fell to his knees before the elemental master. “Koiso-sama,” he whispered, “I beg you to reconsider! Tomorrow is too important for-“

“It is important,” Koiso whispered in reply. To the crowd, their lips were moving, but no sound carried to them. “You were right, Kakei-san. I see clearly now my mistakes. It was not in insisting upon our duty. It was in forgetting the role of the shugenja. It was in taking pleasure in war.” She bowed, pulling the conch-shell horn from her sleeve. She presented this to Kakei with great reverence. “You have my trust, Kakei-san. There is no better man present to lead this army.”

He shook his head. “I would never presume...”

“Take it,” she whispered. “Make your ancestors proud.”

He rose. The army beneath him gave a cheer. They chanted his name. They filled the pass with their voices, drowning out the sounds of the distant drums.

“I will do what I can,” he said as he accepted the shell.

Koiso nodded. “You will carry the Fortunes.”

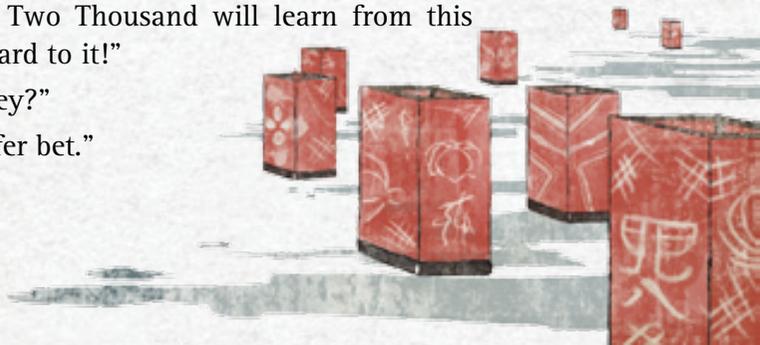
“Shall I light the brazier, my lady?”

Utagawa shook her head, withdrawing from the banister overlooking the valley. “That is fine, Aikiren. I have seen enough for today.” She collapsed the spyglass with her weathered hands. “But do ensure these balconies are cleared for tomorrow morning. I wish for every samurai within this palace to be in attendance. This is a rare event for us. It will prove a great opportunity for learning.”

The ronin bowed. “Of course, my lady. The Legion of Two Thousand will learn from this demonstration.” He grinned as he rose. “I am looking forward to it!”

The older woman smirked. “Where’d you drop your money?”

“The Unicorn.” Aikiren shrugged. “I always prefer the safer bet.”





She chuckled. “We shall see.” The woman paused, then looked beyond Aikiren to the figure just now approaching. “Ah, honored lady, you have finally arrived.” She held out the spyglass as she bowed with reverence. “Perhaps you would like to observe while there is still light?”

Moto Naleesh thanked the old woman and took up the spyglass.

ODD FORTUNES

THE BATTLE OF TREACHEROUS PASS

BY ROBERT DENTON III

EDITED BY FRED WAN

PART TWO

The servants of Shiro Akatsuki slid aside the massive balcony doors at the first sign of daylight. At each level of the palace, the balconies soon filled with ronin observers. Overlooking the valley at Treacherous Pass and all the way to the crashing seas beyond, the view was virtually unmatched throughout the surrounding provinces. The Empire unfolded around them, but all eyes were on the valley.

The seventh tier balcony was the smallest, but it afforded the greatest view. Utawaga sat on her plush cushion on this level, closing her segmented spyglass with a snap. She held it close with her withered hands; it was the only one they had, one of the most priceless possessions in the entire palace.

“It would have been a good battle to watch,” remarked Kuronada. His impressive bulk towered behind the old woman as he looked out over the balcony, the other six extending farther stacked beneath him. “They would have learned much.”

“They might still,” Utawaga replied. “Once the fog clears.”

The entire body of treacherous pass was consumed by a thick fog. It was as though a cloud had lowered from the sky like a blanket, a thick mass of raw wool resting in the bowl of the valley. There was no sign of either army in that massive fog. Not the red banners of the Phoenix, nor the purple flags of the Unicorn. The valley was nothing more than the negative space in a sumi-e painting.

“So much for the kites,” Nakadai spoke. “They will mean nothing in this fog.” She sat as the lotus to Utawaga’s left, the position of an honored retainer.

Aikiren loudly crunched a round pear. “Same for their archers,” he said. “And that ballista they built. And their cavalry, for that matter. Speed means nothing when you can only crawl.”

Kuronada grunted. “It is not only the Moto who suffer from this. The Phoenix can see no better.”

“Thick fog is a challenge for any general,” Utawaga acknowledged. But her old eyes held a spark of knowing. “The Phoenix, however, are now in the superior position. Less reliant on cavalry, more familiar with the valley, they lose less than the Moto in this circumstance.”

“In that case,” said Kuronada, “were I the Phoenix general, I would advance. Engage the Moto while they are at disadvantage.”

“How would you organize your advance?” Nakadai asked, never looking from the valley. “You cannot signal in a fog like this.”

Utawaga only smiled.

The sound of clashing steel echoed through the valley. Distant shouts raised above the fog.

"It begins," Kuronada said.

But then it was silent again. The bulky man looked to the others with a hint of confusion. "Over? Like that?"

"A brief skirmish," Utagawa remarked. "The first of many. We will not see open warfare. There will be only skirmishes in these conditions."

After a moment, she looked over her shoulder to their guest. Moto Naleesh watched from the other side of the shoji track, arms crossed. When she turned, Naleesh looked away from the valley, and their eyes met briefly.

"You wish to go?" Utagawa asked. "I can see it in your eyes. You want to be with your people."

Utaku Eun-ju stepped out from the darkness, bowing at Naleesh's side. "My lady, I can have you there in instants! Your guard is ready to ride at your command."

Naleesh thought for a long moment. At last, she shook her head. "No. I want to, but..."

The face of the Unicorn Champion hardened. She returned her gaze to the fog-shrouded valley. "It is not yet time," she whispered. "I have to know something first."

Moto Tadasu maintained his On as the officer dismounted. Three shugenja, including Moto Chizura, stood ready to advise him depending on the *chui's* report. Standing to Tadasu's right, Kyung-Won held his breath as the officer strode to the general. He knew the rest of Tadasu's honor guard were nearby, but so thick was the fog, he could barely see three feet ahead. They were floating in a world no farther than he could reach. In all his years, he'd never seen a morning mist this heavy.

"What news?" Tadasu asked.

The *chui* bowed hastily as he reported. "It is impossible. The fog is too thick. We cannot maintain the wedge if we cannot see where we are going."

Tadasu frowned. "We cannot allow the scouting forces to advance unsupported. We must meet the battle line."

"There is no battle line," the *chui* replied. "We cannot verify without seeing, but the Phoenix seem to have deployed in small skirmishing groups. We cannot conduct the battle as planned. All but basic coordination is impossible. Every unit is acting autonomously in the fog. A forward advance will fall apart."

"Can we not coordinate through the kami?" He looked to his shugenja.

Chizura lowered her gaze. "It... does not work like that, my lord. That would require significant communion first. We would need to prepare an offering, the nature of which may require things which we don't currently have access."

"We did not foresee the need," another shugenja conceded.

Tadasu grunted and turned back to his *chui*. "What of our scouts?"

"No word in over two hours. I must presume the worst."

Tadasu hid his frustration well, but they all supposed at his great displeasure. "Is it not possible to manage?" Tadasu finally asked.

The *chui* grimaced. "One of my gunsos literally walked into a Phoenix soldier. It is like stumbling in the dark. There is even difficulty hearing. I am told a few of our units accidentally mistook each-other for the enemy. There were casualties before they realized—"

"Enough." Tadasu looked to Kyung-Won. "I welcome your advice."

"We could wait for the fog to dissipate," he offered. "We still outnumber them, and we still have superior reach. Once the fog clears we can confirm their deployment. If they are in scattered skirmishing groups, then we can brush them away like dried leaves in the wind."

"There is no telling how long this will last," Chizura spoke. "It may lead to a prolonged engagement, raids, or a night battle. Considering the state of our spoiled supplies, this would be disadvantageous. There is also the chance that the Phoenix will simply advance into us. Like it or not, we cannot just wait."

"They can't march if we can't," Kyung-Won countered.

Chizura's nose wrinkled. "Fog favors a smaller army," she lectured, "and one unreliable on cavalry."

"How could a fog have formed so quickly?" Tadasu glared at his shugenja. "Did you not say today would be clear?"

One of the shugenja, an older Iuchi, shrugged. "It is possible the fog rolled in from the shore of the Moshi valley. We are not that far from the coast, my lord."

From the distance came a low sound. Two notes played at a low frequency, a deep-throated call from beyond the gray. It carried easily, far louder than their own voices. It was soon followed by a distant clash of blades.

"That was a conch-shell horn," Chizura observed. "Unmistakable, although I've never heard one so low-tuned before."

Realization washed over Kyung-Won's features. "They're using sound to coordinate their units. They must have known the fog was coming."

"The Phoenix did this," Tadasu said. None dared reply. Tadasu looked to Chizura. "Is it not so?"

She closed her eyes, clasping prayer beads between her fingers. After several moments she replied, "From the activity of the kami, it is doubtful they were asked to conjure this fog. It is naturally-occurring." She shook her head. "Were I to guess, my lord, I'd say this was nothing more than a stroke of bad-

Tadasu held up his hand. "Don't say it." With the other, he drew his oxtail sword, a flat-backed saber with a flaring tip. "I will not be undone by simple fog! Arm the archers with yari and redeploy in tight formation. We will advance regardless!"

Before the officers could carry this out, a messenger stumbled from the fog. Kyung-Won nearly chopped the man's head clean in half before the purple colors stayed his blade. The man bore wounds, his heraldry identifying him as one of the Khol Regulars. He walked without his horse.

"What happened?" Tadasu demanded.

The man fell to his knees. "We accidentally engaged a unit of Phoenix, my lord. The Heaven's Wing."

"Accidentally engaged." Kyung-Won shook his head. "This is no way to conduct a battle. Where is the dignity in fighting this way?"

"We surprised each other," the soldier continued. "They claimed more than we, but they withdrew immediately after the initial blows." He extended a scroll. "One of them remained just long enough to drop this at my feet. It is addressed to you, my lord. I regret that I must deliver it in place of my commander, but he is... unable to deliver it himself."

Kyung-Won seized the document and gave it to the general, who poured over it with eager eyes. After a moment, he read aloud: "I must formally request your presence at the midway point of Treacherous Pass. We have much to discuss."

“An obvious trap,” Kyung-Won advised.

Tadasu’s eyes widened. “This is Shiba Kakei’s chop. I recognize it from yesterday. He’s their general, it seems.” A slow smile spread over his features. “I knew when I first laid eyes on that man that I’d have to take his head.”

Tadasu sheathed his sword and turned to his officers. “We will take him up. Honor guard! Be ready to ride. And prepare a force of Striders,” he added. “Instruct them to remain several paces behind as we advance, and to attack on my signal.”

As officers scrambled to relay the orders, Tadasu offered Kyung-Won a vicious smile. “The Phoenix won’t ambush us. Kakei doesn’t have it in him. Of course, if things go awry, I cannot say the same for me.”

From his seat on the balcony, Kuronada pointed. “The fog is clearing at the center of the valley.” The ronin gathered on the balconies beneath him began murmuring, noticing the same thing.

“I see some red-armored men,” Aikiren remarked. “It looks like they’re waiting.”

“Watch closely,” advised Utagawa as she extended the spyglass. A momentary glance behind her confirmed that the Unicorn Champion and her retinue were gone.

“The fog clears,” confirmed Kyung-Won from the seat of his horse. The guard advanced slowly, surrounding their general, who sat with crossed arms in his saddle, his banners flying proudly behind him. Slowly the world revealed itself from behind misty curtains, and although sight was still limited, they could tell that they’d arrived near the center of the pass and that the visibility had significantly improved.

They spotted the Phoenix by their bright red *nobori* banners. They were primarily ashigaru, brown-armored and armed with spears. But soon enough the Shiba came into view, their fiery armor, adorned in gold with bright-dyed feathers, announcing their presence. Their golden Legion of the Flame mons caught the light, as did the flawless blades of their naginatas.

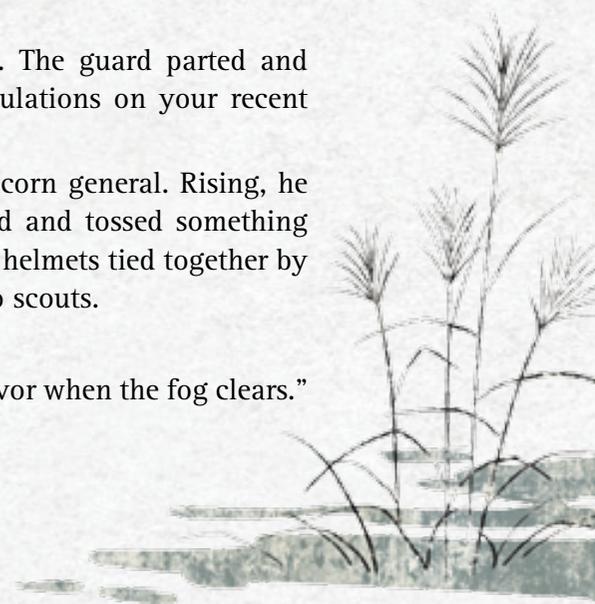
Looking up in the thinning fog, the Unicorn finally saw the Phoenix general’s personal banner, his Uma-Jirushi. It was a three-dimensional figure constructed of thin paper and bamboo, held high aloft on a massive pole; a giant bird with orange paper streamers for feathers, its wings spread wide and embracing flight. Beneath this standard was the Shiba general, seated upon a horse and resplendent in his bright lamellar armor, exquisitely ordinate with gold trim and brightly-painted patterns. His armored shoulders and arms had the appearance of elegant wings thanks to bright feathers and silk streamers. He wore no helm, but his hair was pulled into a traditional topknot and adorned with a single golden feather. In his hands, he held a brightly-painted conch shell horn.

The Unicorn stopped just within charging distance of the Phoenix. The guard parted and Moto Tadasu rode forward. “You look different, Shiba Kakei. Congratulations on your recent promotion.”

Kakei gave the horn to a subordinate, then bowed deeply to the Unicorn general. Rising, he gestured to the soldiers behind him. A woman stepped boldly forward and tossed something heavy. It landed between the two forces with a clatter. They were purple helmets tied together by their chin cords, instantly recognizable as those belonging to the Shinjo scouts.

“I return these to you,” said Kakei.

Moto Tadasu was unfazed. “My thanks,” he replied. “I will repay the favor when the fog clears.”



Takei gestured around him. "Moto-san, it is obvious that this battle cannot continue. The heavens have intervened. One cannot conduct war in this way. It would be irresponsible to fight in an arena where one cannot tell friend from foe."

"I see my foe just fine," Tadasu countered. He gestured, and a line of Unicorn Striders appeared on each side of his command unit. The Phoenix drew their weapons, holding out their spears, and the Ashigaru tensed. Takei raised a hand, stalling them. Both sides stared tensely as the mist stirred around them.

"You cannot manage your numbers in this fog," Takei addressed. "You cannot make use of your cavalry. Your attempts to probe our deployment have cost you your reconnaissance units. Advance, and you hand me the advantage. Wouldn't it be better to admit you are defeated?"

"You forget," Tadasu argued, "I can simply wait for the fog to clear. One hour, one day... it is the same to me."

Takei's eyes narrowed. "...No," he said, "I do not think so, Moto-san."

The Unicorn general held his On perfectly in place, giving only a confident smile. His subordinates didn't flinch. They offered nothing to Takei for his words.

Yet the Shiba's confidence grew. "How soon before the Khan arrives?" he asked. "A few days? Tomorrow? Tonight? If this pass is not taken by the time she gets here, if we are not defeated, will she consider you a failure?" His gaze hardened. "Will you fall on your blade?"

"You make strong presumptions," Tadasu observed.

"There's something about your urgency, Moto-san. Something about your pride. Whatever the reason, I think you cannot afford to wait. But neither can you continue."

"Is that so?" Tadasu's lips peeled back from his teeth. "So we are at an *impasse*, then?"

Takei nodded. "So it would seem."

"In that case, there is only one option." Tadasu lifted himself out of the saddle, landing solidly on the ground. He rose to his full height, unfastening his helmet and casting it aside. "If a battle cannot settle this, then let it be decided by single combat!" He threw aside his arms and shouted. "Face me! I challenge you! Here, before your soldiers and mine! Before the fates themselves! Duel me, or be proven a coward!"

The smile dropped from Takei's features.

"You are empowered to speak for your masters," Tadasu continued. "You said so yourself! Well I am empowered to act for mine! A battle is nothing more than a duel between generals. Since that is not possible, let us cross swords instead! Best me in single combat and the day is yours. Lose to me, and it is mine."

The Shiba exchanged glances. They murmured. Takei thought. "If you lose," he said, "you will surrender?"

"Let the victor decide the terms," the Moto replied.

Shiba Takei lowered himself from his horse. "So be it," he agreed. "The duel is sacred to Heaven. Because it is sanctified, I will agree. Let the ways of our ancestors decide this."

The soldiers withdrew, forming a wide circle around the combatants. They approached one-another, stopping little over a dozen feet away.

"As the challenged," Takei said, "I decide the terms. We begin with *iijustu*. First blood wins."

"The first to bleed loses," Tadasu agreed. His hand clutched the hilt of his ox-tail sword as he adopted his stance.

Takei loosed his weapon from his obi, a two-foot curved katana handle with a lacquered sheath of equal length, something between sword and polearm. He held this weapon, his *nagamaki*, to the side, left hand on the sheath near the disc-shaped *tsuba*, the other on the handle.

They froze. Time held still. Not even the fog stirred as the two warriors measured each-other, just beyond sprinting distance. Their soldiers watched closely, the Unicorn shugenja whispering sacred prayers, sanctifying the duel. The world faded from the view of the two duelists leaving only their opponents.

Takei sprinted, sliding the sheath from the *nagamaki* blade, letting it clatter aside. Tadasu leapt forward, his scimitar gliding into his hands. Time slowed as the gap closed. Takei shifted his hands, raising his blade, readying his superior reach. Tadasu's smile never faltered.

It was at the last moment that Takei became aware of the thundering hooves. He skidded to avoid being trampled as Tadasu's horse ran between them and stopped, blocking the Phoenix's path. Takei's momentum carried him as he broke contact with his opponent's eyes. He stopped inches from the mount, caught completely off-balance. His instincts screamed and he blindly pulled his sword up in defense.

Then Tadasu was upon him, darting around his calm steed with a savage slash. Steel rang. Takei barely deflected the strike on instinct alone before the second one came. Tadasu was too close to utilize the full length of the *nagamaki*. Takei relinquished ground, barely deflecting strike after merciless strike, struggling to regain an advantage, to find an opening. Tadasu's unstoppable advance pushed the Shiba back, hungry ox-blade zipping by Takei's ears, each time ever-closer.

The crowd parted. Tadasu's wide strikes afforded Takei no chance to recover. His back struck the stone wall of the pass. He planted his foot against it and dragged his blade up. Triumph flashing in his eyes, Tadasu chopped down. Takei pushed forward into his opponent, thrusting out. Tadasu only partially abandoned the strike as Takei spun by.

The scimitar sunk into Takei's shoulder-armor and embedded itself. Tadasu yanked it free, cleaving the *sode* into two pieces. Takei cried out, his arm nearly wrenched from the socket. He backed away and held his *nagamaki* at full length, keeping Tadasu at the tip.

The Moto spat and gestured to the cleaved armor pieces on the ground. "That should count!"

"No one yet bleeds, Moto-san." Takei held out his left arm. "See for yourself, if you've run out of tricks!"

Tadasu roared. "Then I will show the world your guts!"

The Moto leapt, singing blade leading the way. Takei met him, keeping him at length with measured, controlled strikes. Their blades no longer clashed. They slid one-another aside in diverting cleaves. Tadasu's attacks grew ever more savage, but never pushed beyond Takei's reach. The Shiba caught his stride, matching his opponent move for move.

Until Tadasu forced Takei to divert a high strike and then kicked. The force pushed Takei back. He stumbled, landing on one knee.

"You're done!" Tadasu shouted, crossing to slash at Takei's neck.

The Shiba sprung. He caught the scimitar's blade tip in his *nagamaki's* hand guard. It was inches from his face. He strained forward with all his strength as Tadasu put his full weight into the blow. Pain tore Takei's muscles. He felt the *nagamaki's* long handle nearly slip as he gave it all he had.

The scimitar blade shattered.

Tadasu's face contorted as his blade disintegrated. It was too late to stop. Too late to pull back. Too late to avoid the shard of steel flying into his eye.

The Moto's pained cry echoed through the pass. His soldiers winced as he fell to his knee, a red river flowing from between his clutching fingers. The shard scraped the back of his socket, showering his senses with icy daggers of pain.

Kakei staggered back, panting from exertion. The tip of the Moto's weapon, now just a jagged piece of metal, was still lodged in the narrow gap of his *nagamaki's tsuba*.

"Bastard!" Tadasu spat, clutching his ruined eye with one hand. "Take my head! Finish it!"

The Phoenix refused. "Those weren't the terms of victory. I won. You will have to live with that, and yield."

Tadasu pulled away his hand. Blood spilled down from the wrent flesh of his eyelid, tracing his cheek and saturating his beard. Yet his painted face was eerily calm. "Moto can die," he whispered, "but cannot yield."

His *wakizashi* was in his hand in seconds. It was far faster than Kakei could react in his exhausted state, far faster than he could lift his *nagamaki* to deflect. Tadasu crossed their short distance before those witnessing could draw a breath.

Yet the Master of Water still stood between them.

Tadasu froze as Asako Miyabi's palm struck his ruined eye with a loud splash. The force numbed his fingers. The *wakizashi* fell.

Miyabi exhaled her words. "For this service, I will float one-hundred candles along the Coast of Jade Dawn."

The Moto stared, unblinking, uncomprehending.

Miyabi darted back, landing beside Shiba Kakei. At once Moto Kyung-Won ran forward, stopping beside the Unicorn general. His breath caught when he saw Tadasu's face. Where there was once blood, now only pure water trickled down the Moto's cheek. Where there was once ruined flesh in his socket, there was now a cloudy but intact eye.

The Master of Water unfurled her hands. A moist sliver of steel fell harmlessly to the dirt. She whispered her thanks to the kami of the fog.

Moto Tadasu blinked experimentally. He cast an incredulous look at the Master of Water. "You... healed me?"

"I closed the wound," Miyabi replied. "I cannot say if it will ever see again, Moto-san. But if blessed, it may yet be healed." She paused. "That is all the Phoenix wanted. To heal your family's wound."

Kakei looked around him. The fog had cleared considerably. Only now could the samurai of the Wave Legion be seen. They stood directly behind the Unicorn Striders, hands on the hilts of their undrawn blades. The Unicorn slowly realized they'd been followed this entire time. Surrounded.

The clearing fog revealed more. There were Phoenix Shugenja just beyond the line formed by the Flame Legion. They were scattered about, kneeling beside men and women on the ground. Some were conscious, others asleep. Some sat upright, watching the gathering. But they were all Unicorn. Shinjo scouts. Khol regulars. All wounded. All receiving treatment and care from the hands of the Phoenix.

"We saved whom we could," Miyabi spoke.

Kyung-Won blinked in disbelief. One by one, the command unit of the Moto each turned to their general. They watched him for any reaction.

Not knowing how to react, they would follow his lead.

At last, Tadasu bowed to Shiba Kakei, his face stiff. Beneath his white face paint, it was reddening. "Your terms," he croaked. There was nothing else he could say.

"There are two," Kakei replied. "And I speak for the Masters. Let all witness and record." When all eyes were upon him, he continued. "The first term: The Unicorn agree that no Moto may marry out of their Clan, nor may any Unicorn of Moto lineage, without documentation of approval from the Phoenix. To this end, only the Phoenix may officiate Unicorn marriages henceforth."

Tadasu's eyes widened, betraying an anger that was only matched by the glowers of every Unicorn present.

"The second," Kakei continued, "is to accept this gift."

At the Shiba's gesture appeared Isawa Nairuko. She kept her face lowered as she approached, passing Moto Kyung-Won's following gaze to kneel before the Unicorn general. A massive scroll rested in her outstretched hands.

"Nairuko-san just completed it this morning," Kakei said. "Therein is a way to defeat your family's curse. It is a gift from the Phoenix to the Unicorn in the name of peace."

Bewildered silence dominated the clearing until Tadasu finally spoke. "A cure? Just like that?"

Kakei shook his head. "Not a cure. A path. A way of living that might free the Moto of their karma."

Moto Tadasu glared. "You mean the death of our family's ways. To change who we are."

"It is a change of lifestyle," said Kakei. "But it will not require the Moto to cast aside their ways. Merely to embrace another path. Those who do, and who defeat the curse, the Phoenix will free from the first condition I listed, and will no longer be bound by this agreement." He paused. "We ask only that you accept the gift, Moto-san. You need not walk this path yourself. But every Moto should have the choice. With time, if enough Moto embrace this new path, if enough undertake this Musha Shyugo, then perhaps the curse will be permanently undone."

"If all do," Miyabi said, "then the curse will be gone within one generation."

"Those are the terms of our victory," Kakei concluded.

A woman's voice came from beyond the clearing. "Then the Unicorn will honor them."

As one, the Unicorn bowed at the arrival of Moto Naleesh and her honor guard. The Unicorn Clan Champion nodded at her warriors as her horse brought her to the clearing. The Phoenix lowered their heads in respect as she dismounted, her immaculate kimonos fluttering around her.

Moto Tadasu lowered his forehead to the ground. "Forgive me," he spoke. "I have failed you, my lady. At your word, I will fall on my blade."

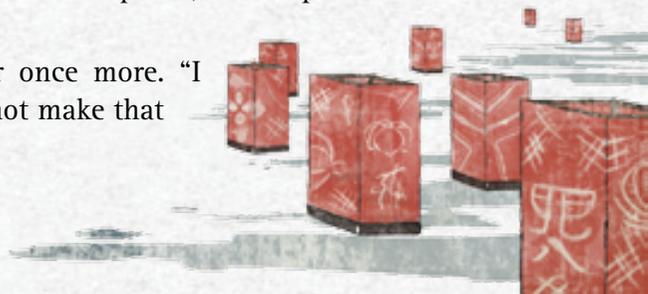
"Perhaps you lost this battle," she replied, "but a warrior of your conviction may yet serve, Tadasu-san. With all circumstance turned against you, you gave it all you had. There is nothing for me to forgive." She raised her head. "The heavens have spoken. I have witnessed the compassion of the Phoenix Clan. It is something we have in common."

"Then let there again be peace between our clans," Miyabi said, bowing deeply to the Unicorn Clan Champion.

"As far as I am concerned, honor is satisfied." Naleesh returned the bow. "On behalf of my clan, I accept the Phoenix's gift."

As they rose, Naleesh smiled at the Master of Water. "In the spirit of this peace, let us speak further. I have... questions fit for Elemental Masters."

As the leaders stepped away, the generals regarded each-other once more. "I underestimated you," Tadasu admitted to Kakei. "Next time, I will not make that mistake."



Shiba Kakei bowed, but then the Moto stepped forward and seized his wrist, giving it a firm shake in the manner of his family. Kakei winced at the breach, but managed a nod. "Let this be a step forward," he said.

Tadasu smiled coldly. "We shall see, Shiba-san."

Moto Kyung-Won watched as his Champion spoke with the Masters of Fire and Water, Moto Tadasu obediently by her side. Tucked beneath her arm was the Phoenix's scroll. He watched it for some time, wondering at which of their family's traditions would be threatened by its contents, and whether the Moto could endure the consequences of their loss. For her part, Naleesh seemed to rise above it, and the Phoenix were more than willing to allow the Unicorn to save some face. None spoke of the hostilities unfolding as early as mere hours ago. None spoke of the siege at Kyuden Agasha, the humiliation at winter court, the battle at Nikesake, or the countless duels and skirmishes that had resulted from the insult over the two seasons. The scars of this conflict were not mentioned. Even so, Kyung-Won suspected their sting would still be felt for months to come. Perhaps even generations.

Lost in these thoughts, he kept his eyes on the scroll and away from the Isawa woman standing beside him.

Until she spoke. "Are you coming home?"

Kyung-Won thought. "I am not sure," he admitted. "It... will depend on much. We will see."

Isawa Nairuko nodded. They were silent again. Kyung-Won's hand drifted to his side, his fingers touching his obi where the golden fan rested.

"I miss you," Nairuko whispered.

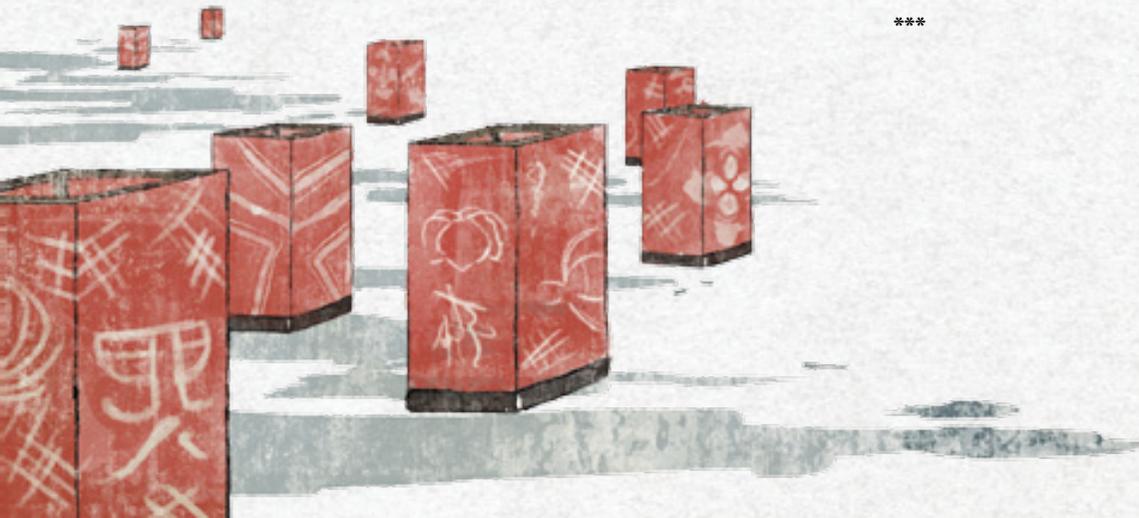
The Masters and Naleesh bowed. Their discussion, whatever it was, had ended. The Unicorn would soon depart. Kyung-Won turned away. He had a long trip to prepare for.

But he paused for a moment just within the tent flap. "Would it have been so bad?" he asked. "Even if the child was cursed?"

Nairuko's eyes softened. "It would have been our child," she replied. "Nothing else would have mattered to me."

He nodded. "I miss you too," he said, then left the tent and his wife to her thoughts.

There were a great many things she knew to be true. She knew the nature of the curse that still followed the Moto. She knew that she was a servant of heaven and now enjoyed the favor of the Elemental Masters. She knew that the wheels of fate were turning, that a greater destiny now called out to her clan. She knew the world was merely the result of the collected karma of every living being. These things she knew for certain, these things and far more. Yet for all her insight, for all her blessings, she did not know if she would ever see the man once called Isawa Kyung-Won ever again.



Some Time Later

Shinjo Min-Hee slammed her fist into the table, shattering the ceramic cups that stood there. "It is an insult!" she shouted. "Completely unacceptable! These terms are a backhanded slap to our faces!"

The servants rushed out of the room, as did the messengers who had delivered the news. Only Min-Hee's advisor, Moto Nergui, stood unflinching at her lady's wrath. "This is the chop of the Unicorn Champion," she spoke.

Min-Hee looked to the papers again. Her anger turned to open confusion. "Naleesh would never agree to this..." she whispered. "It is humiliating! Doesn't she realize how this will make us look to the other clans?"

"I wonder if the Phoenix will observe our marriage ceremony traditions or insist upon their own," Nergui mused. "The Iuchi will have to endure it, I suppose, but it will be bitter tea for them to concede their marriage duties to the Phoenix."

"If I had been there," Min-Hee insisted, "I could have advised her against it! If even Takeru-san were present, he would have..."

She stopped. For long moments, Min-Hee stared at the chop of the Unicorn Champion. At last, she lowered her gaze. "No. She would not have listened. She did not listen when I warned her of that bastard Shikei. She did not listen when I advised her against embracing the Spider Clan. Even when we were children, she would just..."

Nergui shifted uncomfortably. She watched the Khan with close eyes.

"She just does as she pleases," Min-Hee whispered. "No matter what I say."

"She is the Unicorn Champion," Nergui said. "Is it not her right?"

"Leave me," Min-Hee ordered.

The death priest did as instructed. Alone, the Khan reached into her collar and drew a small trinket hanging from a chain. Only a small wooden disk, old and weathered, a carving representing the four winds. She turned it in her hand and ran her fingers along the back. A name had once been carved there, but it had long been smoothed away by the same hands that had taught her to aim a bow, to ride a horse, to guide her sword. The hands that had tossed her in the air as a baby.

"You would have been a great champion, father," she whispered. Her eyes returned to the papers and darkened. "You would not have accepted such terms. You would not have yielded to those who wronged us."

You are the future of the Shinjo, Musume. You will redeem our family.

"If the Fortunes so will it," she whispered, and tucked the trinket away.

Renewal 2014 Kotei Vote:
Moto Chagatai will become the
Minor Fortune of Courage

Winter Court 4 RPG: The
Phoenix discover a way to cure
the new Moto Curse

GenCon 2015 Clan Dinners:
The Shinjo will contest the
Moto's leadership and begin a
civil war in the Unicorn



A COLD WIND

EXCERPTS FROM THE BATTLE OF THE SECOND SEAL

BY SHAWN CARMAN, ROBERT DENTON III, AND FRED WAN

Note: Due to circumstances beyond the control of the authors, this story was never completed in full. We present the existing draft of this fiction, consisting of the most-complete versions of its comprising scenes, with our apologies.

Many Days Before...

The Dragon were silent as they picked their way through the ruins. The Mirumoto soldiers had previously chatted with one another on occasion, the simple banter of men who were well accustomed to one another's company. More than a dozen men moving in such silence was strangely eerie. Even the pair of Togashi monks had grown silent as the group had entered the boundaries of what had once been Ootosan Uchi, their seemingly non-stop conversation finally coming to an end. Tamori Daishuu found it somehow more troublesome now that they were quiet, but he would not allow it to deter him from his purpose.

As if on cue, the gunso stepped beside him. "Daishuu-sama," he said quietly, "if you can give me more information as to the nature of our objective, it would aid us in helping you find it."

It was not the first time the gunso had requested more information since their group had departed from Nanashi Mura, heading for the cursed ruins of the Empire's former capital. Daishuu had seen the glint of ambition in the man's eye from that moment, but now it seemed strangely absent. The reality of their surroundings had impacted the man at last, it seemed. What Daishuu saw in his eyes now was an appreciation of what they must be doing. No one came to Ootosan Uchi without a very good reason. "Very well, Mirumoto-san," Daishuu replied gruffly. "Fortunately, what we seek will be very simple to find. It lies within the city's heart."

Realization dawned in the soldier's eyes. "The former Imperial Palace?" he asked, his tone partially incredulous and partially horrified.

"Yes," Daishuu confirmed. "The connection between the Hantei Dynasty and the Celestial Heavens is well known. We have need of a... let us call it a tether, that will allow us easier access to the mysteries of the spirit realm."

The soldier licked his lips, a habit that seemed nervous, but his eyes did not betray anxiety. "It will be difficult to navigate," he said after a moment. "Much of the structure has collapsed from what I have read of the last survey, and that was more than five years ago."

"The kami will guide us," Daishuu said confidently. "You need only protect us from anything else that might be present within the ruins."

The man frowned. "Such as what?"

Daishuu shrugged slightly. "If we find anything, drive it away if you can, kill it if you must. We shall identify them after the fact, I suppose."

"Very reassuring," the gunso muttered.

Daishuu had not yet been born when Toshi Ranbo had become the Imperial City, seat of the Emperor's power, and thus he had little reverence for Ootosan Uchi. It was unusual, if one contemplated it, he thought. Samurai revered their past, but in this case it was almost as if they were ashamed of what had become of the city. The deeds that had been performed within it were still lauded, but the city itself was rarely mentioned. Perhaps, he mused, the more militant clans

were disgraced because they could not protect it, sacked as it had been by enemies over and over again throughout its history. How many times had the Shadowlands laid siege to the city? Daishuu honestly could not recall. He would have to look it up when he returned to the Dragon provinces once this unpleasantness was over.

Despite the destruction it had endured, the Imperial Palace was not difficult to locate. There was a certain majesty to what remained, that much was clear, but it was overwhelmed by a sense of tragedy and despair that turned Daishuu's stomach. The kami here were silent, seemingly cowed. Daishuu had never encountered such a phenomenon. It made him... uneasy.

The interior was still relatively intact, meaning that it was completely shielded from sunlight. Rather than risk calling upon the kami and depleting those within the ruins, Daishuu had his men take up torches. The flickering light only enhanced the terrible atmosphere. As they neared their destination, the gunso suddenly put his hand upon Daishuu's arm. "My lord," he said, his voice just above a whisper. "Listen."

Daishuu shook the man's arm off, annoyed, but he did listen. He strained, and it seemed that there was the tiniest hint of a noise somewhere just at the edge of his hearing, something that he could not quite hear but still sense regardless. "What is that?"

The gunso shook his head and slowly drew his weapon, causing no sound, and gestured for his men to do the same. "Chanting, my lord."

Someone had reached the same objective, and done so before the Dragon. It was impossible. No one knew what the Dragon knew of the Three Seals, not even the Phoenix. There was no way for anyone to know of their purpose here, no one except...

"The Spider," Daishuu said in a low growl. "Prepare yourselves, men."

The Mirumoto fell into perfect form, splitting into two teams and hugging the walls as they went. Half of them doused their torches, leaving them scarcely enough light to move, but the Togashi moved to the fore, picking their way around the worst of the rubble and blazing a trail for the others to follow. The Scorpion would have been shamed to see such stealth, Daishuu thought, and felt embarrassed that he had questioned the ability of these men. Slowly they crept forward until they found the throne room.

It was the source of the chanting.

Within the center of the chamber there was a circle of a half dozen cloaked Spider sitting in the lotus position around a Chuda priestess. Beyond that there was a larger circle with a full dozen heavily armored Daigotsu samurai. The Chuda continued for a moment, then stopped and tilted her head to the side. She turned and looked directly at the Dragon. She smiled. "Hello."

"This is obscene," Daishuu said, his features twisted in disgust. "There is truly no end to the blasphemy that you and your ilk will commit."

"There really is not," the priestess agreed. "You are here to divine the location of the Second Seal, I presume? My lord believed that you, alone among the clans, might comprehend their nature and understand how to locate them. Won't the Phoenix and Scorpion be wroth when they learn you kept such secrets. Particularly when sharing them might have saved your Empire."

"The Empire will not need saving," Daishuu insisted. "Your clan will never hear of what you have learned. This will be your tomb."

"That is adorable," the Chuda said. She snapped her fingers and from the rubble rose two massive beasts, hounds forged from stone and fire. "My name is Chuda Teraiko. I will kill you and all who accompanied you. I will bring back to my lord the location of the Second Seal, which is near Cold Wind City, by the way, and then I will dance on the grave of your Empire when nothing remains."

The chamber shuddered, the floor split open, and from the substance of the stone floor itself a massive figure rose. "Your techniques are not unique," Daishuu said, his voice rumbling like thunder. "We shall see whose gifts are superior."

Teraiko smiled. "Yes. Let us."

The Month of the Dog, Weeks Before...

Tonbo Inuyama lowered himself carefully to the stone's surface. His inhale was like embracing shards of hot glass, but the exhale, emptying himself, brought the bliss of relief. He closed his eyes and let the pain remind him of impermanence. Breathing in, he acknowledged the mortality inherent in all things. Breathing out, he returned to the present. Over and over, until the mantra replaced the pain.

"You alright?" Hida Tadama slammed his massive tetsubo vertically into the dirt, leaning on the handle. The filtered light of the bamboo canopy dotted his black-plated armor.

Inuyama looked up at the human mountain. "Thank you for your concern, Tadama-San." He smiled. "I am merely catching my breath. A bit more activity than I had anticipated."

Tadama nodded, then focused on something in the distance. Laughter came from further down the path. Likely the result of one of Daidoji Sakuzou's jokes, Inuyama reasoned. He mutely discarded the notion that his frequent breaks were slowing the group down.

Tadama spoke without looking at the shugenja. "Close call back there, eh?"

Inuyama nodded. "It is unfortunate people had to die."

"You're not cut out for this." Tadama smirked. "I mean no disrespect. You've aided us a great deal. But I'm right, aren't I?" He regarded Inuyama, looking for a reaction. When none came, he shrugged. "When we get to the city, just go to the docks. There are ships going to the Mantis Isles all the time. Go. Be with your betrothed. Rumi will be happy to see you."

There was a long silence before Inuyama spoke again. "Thank you Tadama-san, but for now my place is here."

"You think you'd be abandoning her?"

Silence again.

"She'd understand." Tadama's serious face broke into a smile. "She's stronger than you think. Stronger than even she herself thinks."

A woman peeked over the crest of where the path dipped over a hill. The fiery trappings of the Phoenix contrasted brightly with the green bamboo surroundings. She called down in an oaky voice, a long kiseru pipe dangling from her fingers. "If you're both done with your tea party, we're waiting for you to catch up."

Tadama barked his laughter. "You should've been a Hida, Hibana-chan!"

She grinned around the bit of her pipe. "Your clan would be so lucky, old man."

Amusement winked in Tadama's eyes as the Isawa left. "We shouldn't keep them waiting, then," he said to Inuyama and shouldered his studded tetsubo.

They followed the path until it led them from the forest. The group of travelers stood on a precipice a short distance from the path, affording a sprawling view of the surrounding area. Vast flood planes and rice paddies unfurled beneath raised paths, crystalline pools of water stacked against the sides of the valley and reflecting a gray sky. Beyond this was the sea, cerulean and calm.

The Hida and Tonbo quietly rejoined the party. They were samurai from all walks of life, a small group of men and women of different clans, different families and traditions, and different social classes. People who would never be united were it not for one common purpose. Together they looked out over the swaying grasses and still pools of the valley.

“Impressive,” whispered Ikoma Masaru, a Lion archer trained by the Koritome family. The wind tugged at his jet hair. “This is quite the view.”

“The Crane prefer their guests awed,” Hibana remarked. She looked to the Daidoji standing beside their group’s leader. “Isn’t that right, Sakuzou?”

The tall man’s white hair nearly glowed in the late-morning light as he flashed a grin at the Phoenix. “How nice to know we are so transparent, Hibana-chan.” He shared a joking glance with Tadama, who smirked at the comment. He then swung his gaze to the woman standing to his right. “It is slightly less impressive the second time, isn’t that right Kinuyo-san?”

Tsuruchi Kinuyo nodded. The wind tussled the black dandelion fluff of her hair and rippled the white headband covering the scars on her face and her missing right eye. “Only slightly,” she replied. A part of her mind was elsewhere.

He lowered his voice. “Nothing like a view to stir up memories, eh?” He offered a knowing look.

She chuckled wryly. “Yeah.” She looked back to the others. “We’ll keep going,” she said, her rough voice still unaccustomed to a leadership tone. “We should reach the city within an hour or so. We’ll resupply and drop off the wounded. We will tell the Crane what we know.”

“Then we continue our search,” Hibana said.

She nodded. Kinuyo turned back to the view and pointed out each location before them. “Cold Wind Village. Cold Wind Port. Cold Wind City. Cold Wind Palace.” She made a sweeping gesture to the horizon. “Cold Wind Shore.”

Masaru chuckled. “All this talk of cold winds, but I actually feel rather comfortable.”

“Forgive my interjection,” spoke Kuni Sango. Her painted face was serious as her amber eyes. She stepped forward, her kimono rustling, her arm in a tight sling. “It is possible there are other Spider patrols in the area. He should not stay in one place for much longer.”

“They would have to be bold to patrol this close to the city,” remarked Shosuro Yoshiyuki. The handsome man cast a prolonged look into the bamboo forest. “Unless they are waiting in ambush, that is. Maybe I should sweep the area once?”

Tadama laughed. “What of it? I say let them come! We’ll just swat them aside! Anything they muster against me will be nothing more than a kappa’s fart!”

Hibana smirked and clicked her tongue. “Charming as always, Tadama-san.”

Kinuyo looked at the varied ensemble behind her. She looked long with her humorless expression, from one face to the next. “Remind me again how I got stuck with all of you?”

When she finally smiled they laughed together.

All but Tonbo Inuyama, whose gaze had gone to the sky. Kinuyo noticed him with some concern, her eye barely masking a hint of deeper emotion upon seeing him. “What is it?” she asked. The laughter stopped. All attention turned to the Tonbo with her words.

The Dragonfly squinted. “Is it normal to have so many birds here?”

Sakuzou followed his eyes. The sky was dotted with dozens of gulls. “Now that you mention it...”

Inuyama ambled forward, towards the shore. “What is that?” he asked, gesturing to slender forms scattered across the beach.

Within an hour they reached the sands, but what they'd seen revealed itself long before. Dozens upon dozens of beached fish, their massive silver bodies glittering in the sun. They were elongated and eel-like, lending them an odd reptilian appearance. They seemed deflated and flatter than they should be. The entire beach reeked of salty brine and rot.

Masaru covered his nose with a cupped hand. "What are they? Some kind of eel?"

"Not eels," Tadama replied. "Oarfish. Fishermen sometimes catch them in the deep nets. They make poor eating, so they're usually tossed back." He frowned as he took in the sheer number of them. Their corpses littered the entire length of the shore. They were beyond counting.

Kuni Sango chimed in. "I've seen these once before when I was a child. About five washed up on the beach near our home. I remember it because we had an earthquake two days later."

Yoshiyuki shook his head. "If this is a deep sea fish, then why are so many washed up here?"

"Evacuate the village," said Inuyama.

All paused. The Tonbo's face was pale, eyes urgent. "Evacuate the village," he repeated. "And the city. They need to evacuate everyone."

Kinuyo's lone eye widened. She had ever heard such urgency in his voice before now.

Doji Makoto, the calm and composed Crane Clan Champion who never appeared in public with so much as a single hair out of place, swept into the chamber with a flourish and an expression that could have killed anyone who drew his ire. Daidoji Akeha glanced at her closest advisor, a much older man and a decorated general. There were no servants in evidence, nor were any of the Champion's other advisors present. Something was amiss, and Akeha suddenly had a very cold feeling deep in her soul.

"The affliction," Makoto said without preamble. "The one that struck down so many among the Asahina and other shugenja families in the Empire recently. What do you know of it?"

Akeha looked at Daidoji Tametaka, then back to her Champion. "Very little," she admitted. "The Asahina my family's magistrates investigated insisted that some manner of balance between the spirit realms had been altered in some way, but they were unable to be more specific in that regard."

"My discussions with Asahina Akikusa and her correspondence with other shugenja daimyo bear out that same conclusion," Makoto agreed. "If one takes into account the decrees from the Emperor, then we have to assume that this... this situation... with the Three Seals? Is in fact legitimate." He shook his head. "I had suspected, perhaps hoped, that someone had been manipulating the Emperor for some preposterous gambit, perhaps a move to increase the power of the Jade Champion..." his voice trailed off as he rubbed his chin.

"My lord," Akeha said, "what else has happened?"

"A monk arrived," Makoto said. "A Dragon. Centipede tattoo or something like that. Apparently he ran the entire way from the ruins of Otosan Uchi. Spat out a message and then collapsed into... I do not know. The shugenja said he's asleep but I have never seen a man sleep so deeply."

"It is here, then," Tametaka said flatly. "One of these Seals. It is in the Crane lands."

"It is," Makoto said. "The Second Seal is supposedly somewhere near Cold Wind City."

"We have almost a legion in that province," Akeha said at once. "Shoreline defense maneuvers."

Makoto nodded. "I know. The martial presence in the city is increased ever since the unpleasantness two seasons ago." He shook his head. "If we knew then what we know now, we would have realized..."

Akeha allowed her champion to trail off, rather than speak aloud their mutual mistake.

He continued. "There is also a reasonably sized detachment of both Lion and Scorpion in Cold Wind City itself. There was an ongoing attempt to mediate their dispute. It was going poorly, so perhaps presenting them a mutual enemy might prove a more effective means of diplomacy."

"What would you have us do, my lord?" Akeha asked.

"Marshall all the forces in the province, convene as much of the Lion and Scorpion as possible, and gather whatever additional forces you might require. I have sent overtures to the Phoenix, the Unicorn, and the Mantis. Should they arrive in a timely manner, there is no chance that the Spider will be able to access this Second Seal."

Akeha nodded to Tametaka, who bowed sharply and left immediately. "Where is the Seal, my lord? We need to establish defenses."

Makoto smiled. It seemed tired. "We have no idea. That would be the other thing I need you to take care of, Akeha."

Akeha rubbed her eyes for a moment. "As you wish, my lord."

Some Days Before...

"I fear that fatigue has made me foolish," Makoto said calmly. "Could you please repeat that statement so that I can be certain I understand you correctly?"

The courier licked his lips nervously. "My... my lord," he stammered, "the Mantis Champion's representative in... in the Imperial City hired me to bring you... ah... news. After the destruction of the First Seal, the Sea of Shadows has expanded and the... uhm... the creatures? The creatures from it are threatening the Mantis Islands. He has recalled the fleet and... cannot send aid."

Doji Makoto pursed his lips and nodded slowly. "I understand," he said. "Thank you for coming so quickly. I assume that it was quickly, was it not? This is not information you have had available for some time and simply did not feel it was suitable to act more expeditiously?"

"No!" the man said, nearly shouting. "No, my lord, no. I found out only yesterday morning. I left immediately. I have not slept or halted save to give my horse water. Your groomsmen in the stable chastised me. They said she would likely not survive." He paused, not sure what else to say. "I love that horse," he said lamely.

"Of course. Well, one can hardly blame the messenger," Makoto said with a smile that did not seem to possess the slightest bit of cheer. He gestured to the trio of servants. "Will you please escort this fine vassal and see he is given the finest accommodations and food for his trouble? Should his horse perish, please inform the groomsmen to select one of my personal herd to replace it."

The messenger blinked rapidly, not really comprehending. Even as the servants ushered him out, he looked around, confused. "Thank... thank you, my lord," he said.

"Of course," Makoto said absently. He waited until the shoji screen slid shut. He waited until the footsteps disappeared from the hall. He waited a handful of moments longer than that, then drew his blade in a flash so quickly that no human eye could have followed it, had any been there to witness, and sliced the table before him into two pieces, sending a flurry of papers and porcelain troop markers to the ground. "Damn the Mantis," Makoto hissed. "And damn Yoritomo Hiromi. I will see him burn for this."



A trail of steam rose from the cup as Daidoji Akeha poured her tea. "I do not question your need," she said, "it is only that your request is... unconventional."

Daidoji Sakuzou nodded. Even kneeling before his daimyo, he radiated confidence and charm. "It is an unconventional matter, my lady."

Akeha turned and stepped into the light of the lantern. The tent interior was dim, shutting out the day beyond the flap of the entrance. She settled her gaze on Tsuruchi Kinuyo, the dusty hayseed seated obediently on the floor before her.

Sakuzou continued. "The man we seek is here, my lady. He is dangerous. This is the man who summoned an oni in the middle of the imperial Winter Court. I would not have believed this was even possible had I not witnessed it firsthand." He licked his lips. "I believe he is the man responsible for the incident occurring within this very city months ago." He allowed a hint of anger to touch his eyes; gracefully he implied a blood feud against the man, that this was a matter of honor, but he left this fact so far unspoken. "You do not want him to join the coming battle, my lady. We only ask for a few soldiers to help us to remove him as a threat. We would be eternally grateful."

The daimyo stared at Tsuruchi Kinuyo for a long time.

"I cannot help," she finally said. "My apologies. I simply cannot spare anyone. But I wish you good fortune, all the same."

Kinuyo's expression was hidden by her steep bow.

"Forgive my impudence," Sakuzou spoke, "but I beg you reconsider."

Akeha set down her cup. "I organized this army in an instant's notice," she said. "We are spread thin. Everyone is either making war preparations or conscripting peasants. That, or seeking this... 'seal.'" She frowned. "It is not that I don't wish to help. It is that I simply cannot. There is not enough tea for every cup, as the saying goes." She paused, then looked squarely into Sakuzou's face. Even so, her words were not aimed at him, but at the Tsuruchi seated on the floor. "Had the Mantis seen fit to answer our call for aid, then perhaps I could have spared some men. Sadly, that is not the case."

Kinuyo swallowed as she looked up. "It is in our mutual interest that this man be defeated. He has... a history."

Akeha raised an eyebrow. "Does your daimyo know you are here?" A pause. "I ask only because her chop is absent from your papers."

Kinuyo clenched her jaw.

"I see." Akeha turned, haori furling around her like the wings of a swan. "Ryushi-san."

The scout at the entrance raised his head, now at full attention.

"See that their weapons are sharpened and polished. Stamp their papers with the Mon of Sagi-Shi No Chikurin. Feed them, and give them two days of rations each." She nodded at him from over her shoulder. "Then see them on their way."

"Hai, my lady," came the reply from the tent flap.

Kinuyo left at once. Sakuzou made to follow, but Akeha spoke before he could.

"A moment, Sakuzou-san."

The Crane grimaced inwardly and bowed to his champion.

Now

The first light of dawn crept across the horizon far beyond the sea, ending the need for torches, campfires, and lanterns. As they were gradually extinguished, a calm came over the assembled troops, and Akeha found the sudden dimness strangely peaceful. It would be today. She could not know that, but she did. Perhaps this, then, was the calm before the storm that the Mantis spoke of. The Mantis. They had utterly failed to meet their obligations.

They would not be forgotten.

Akeha turned and nodded to Tametaka. "You have the men, old friend," she said. "I would speak with the Phoenix."

"Be on guard, my lady," Tametaka replied. "The Phoenix are, in my experience, jittery before battle. Too concerned that they may be called upon to injure someone's feelings."

Akeha laughed despite herself, and urged her horse forward. The Phoenix had assembled a short distance down the beach from the Crane forces, ostensibly so that they could conduct their ritual preparations in peace. Personally she wondered if they did not feel that the other clans were suitable company, but that hardly mattered at the moment. As she rode up, Asako Miyabi detached from the other Phoenix and walked out to meet her, patting her horse affectionately on the jaw as she did so. "Welcome, Akeha-sama," she said with a smile. "I hope the dawn finds you well."

"Well enough," she acknowledged. "They will come this morning."

Miyabi did not question it. "Our divination suggests much the same," she admitted. "There are suggestions of something... unexpected. Calamitous and unexpected."

Akeha frowned. "Against the Spider, I would expect nothing less. Still, if you will forgive me, I will focus on what is at hand rather than what I cannot foresee."

"A wise commander must deal with what is before him, but be prepared for what is not," Miyabi said. "I only wished to advise, not concern."

"It is appreciated," Akeha said. She glanced southward. "My scouts did not return. Conventional acts of sabotage against the Spider are largely useless, but I had hoped we might have some meager effect. I..." She stopped short when she saw a flag waving from her men to the south. "The Spider's ships have been spotted to the south," she said flatly. "It begins."

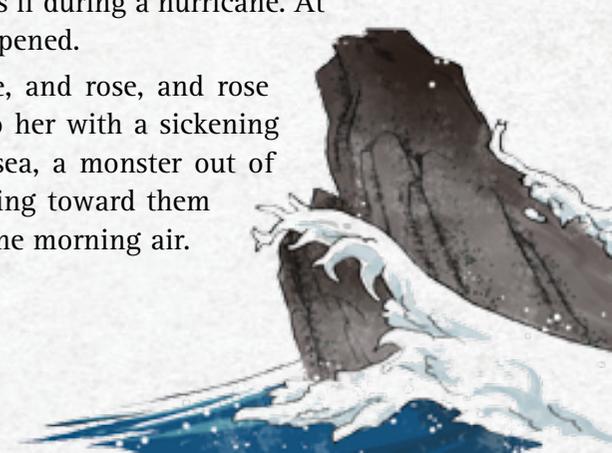
"Yes," Miyabi agreed. "The Tsunami Legion, what remains of it, shall be with you." She bowed slightly, but then cried out suddenly and swayed, her hand going to her temple.

Cold terror leapt into Akeha's heart. "What is it?" she demanded. "Has a Seal been broken?"

"No, nothing as strong as that," Miyabi said, gasping for breath. "But something dark, terrible is coming something..." her voice simply stopped as she stared with wide, almost unseeing eyes out at the sea.

Akeha followed her gaze and prayed that what she was seeing was a lie. The clouds above the sea had been growing lighter with the dawning sun. Now they seethed and roiled as blackness spread among them like a plague. The sea churned suddenly, surging as if during a hurricane. At first it seemed simply poor weather, but then something far worse happened.

Far out from the shore, something crested amid the waves. It rose, and rose, and rose further as it grew closer. At first Akeha was confused, but it came to her with a sickening realization that this was some manner of beast, a demon from the sea, a monster out of proportion to anything they had ever seen before. And it was marching toward them with obvious malice. It opened its massive jaws and roared, splitting the morning air.



“Return to your men,” Miyabi said quietly. “The Phoenix will not be joining the battle against the Spider.”

“What?” she demanded.

Miyabi’s gaze was even. “We will hold this beast at bay, with our lives if need be. But the Spider will fall to you.”

“Fortunes be with you,” Akeha said as she spurred her panicked horse forward.

She needed to be with her men.

Kinuyo paused on the hill, looking back. The camps in the distance swarmed with activity. Far beyond that, stirring in the sea, an indistinct form cast a shadow across the ocean’s surface.

Her fingers gripped her bow. Without fully realizing, her other hand rose at the sight of the creature, hovering slightly in front of her missing eye.

A group of Crane on horseback rode out at the signal of a flag. They were too far to identify. She wondered if Sakuzou was among them.

She realized the others had stopped. They watched her, unspeaking. She looked from one determined face to the next. She knew, if only she said so, they would abandon this quest and resist the Spider invaders. She knew the army at Cold Wind City would need every man and woman they could get.

The image of Sakuzou’s smile flashed in her mind and pulled at her heart in a way she did not realize was possible.

Then, she released a futile breath. “Let’s go,” she said. Her cold eye remained fixed on the horizon. “It cannot be helped.”

Daidoji Akeha was no stranger to war. War was her life. It was her duty, her service, and her specialty. It was everything. This was not war.

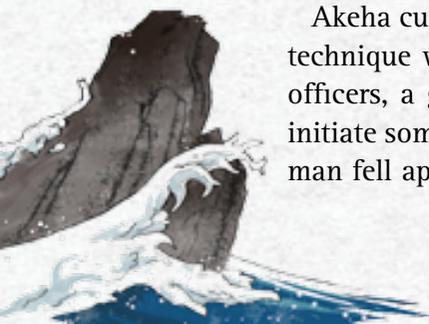
This was carnage.

No sooner had the first creature finally succumbed to the wards and prayers of the Phoenix shugenja than a second rose from the deeps. And then a third. The following wave of massive beasts cost the defenders the entirety of their shugenja contingent. They had not been lost in battle, but so completely consumed were they with the task of the keeping the monstrosities at bay, they could offer no other means of aid. The loss of shugenja support was devastating, but not as devastating as it would have been if the creatures, each the size of a fortress, had rampaged onto the coast unchecked. The battle would have ended before it began.

As it was, the defenders were in a chaotic state. Removing one of the support elements mere seconds before the battle started was, in her very recent experience, one of the single most fracturing effects possible. Her forces, already strained by the introduction of so many different elements from different clans, had begun to fall apart almost at once. Each individual samurai, each individual unit, fought to the best of their ability, but there was little in the way of cohesion. It was not their failing.

It was hers.

Akeha cut down two more Spider that attempted to catch her in a flanking maneuver, but their technique was hopelessly sloppy, and it cost them their lives. She saw one of her subordinate officers, a gifted man named Rikaro, and she called out to him. Together, perhaps they could initiate some sort of rally. Before his name was even finished and out of her mouth, however, the man fell apart in two neatly sliced pieces.



“You!”

The Spider warrior was almost beautiful, so perfect were his features and his attire. Blood splattered all across him, but it seemed to only enhance his dark majesty, and she was sickened by it. “That was my vassal,” she said, shifting her sword to point toward him.

“You are magnificent,” the Spider said, smiling viciously. “I do not mean physically, of course, although I suppose you are serviceably attractive. Your form, though... truly magnificent. You are worthy to face me.”

Hatred for this unnamed beast boiled up inside Akeha’s chest. “I regret that I must stain the soil of my homeland with your unclean blood,” she snarled.

“Oh, yes, just like that,” he said with a laugh. “You do know what I like, don’t you? I am Daigotsu Atsushi. Let us begin.”

As the two samurai came together in battle, Akeha quickly realized that she was outmatched. She was a soldier, not a swordsman, and this man, this thing that she fought, seemed not to care about anything other than the confrontation immediately before him. She had too much on her mind, too many things she could not shove aside. Concern for her officers, her men, fear for the sanctity of the Crane lands, fear that this Second Seal might spell doom for the Empire she loved, and a dozen other nameless concerns that she would normally be able to keep in check. The chaos, the carnage all around her... it was simply too much to bear and maintain her perfect focus.

And Atsushi was the perfect killer. “No, no, no!” he said, clearly frustrated. “Too sloppy! Show me your finest form! I am worthy only of the best!” Akeha snarled and riposted after he casually deflected her strike away, but his defense was too strong. “Better,” he admitted. “Try again!”

A loud keening wail interrupted the two of them, allowing the din of the battlefield to rush back in. A Spider warrior with a spear lunged in from the sidelines just as Atsushi was coming in for the strike. Caught between both warriors, Akeha’s armor deflected the spear, but the strike caused her to falter just as the duelist’s blade dipped in between the laces of her do-maru and bit deeply into her flesh. She gasped with the exquisite pain of it.

“No!” Atsushi roared. “You clumsy, impertinent oaf!” He cut the other Spider’s head off with an irritated backhand slash that sent it tumbling end over end, striking the beach some twenty feet away long before the body slumped to the ground. He looked at Akeha, frustrated and, impossibly, apologetic. “My apologies for that,” he said, his voice seeming sincere. “That slice, when executed properly, as I always do, dips into the armor, slices between the ribs, and nicks the heart. It kills within moments. It is magnificent, but this foolish beast of burden interrupted our dance.” He shook his head. “What a ridiculous waste.” He smiled again. “Perhaps in the next life, hmm? Well... your next life. Not mine. I am not the one dying today.” He twirled his blade absently and moved in for the killing blow.

In contrast to the bellowing Spider, the Crane warrior’s arrival was completely silent. He came from somewhere beyond Akeha’s field of vision. Despite that he was in Atsushi’s blind spot, the swordsman somehow sensed his approach and began to pivot, but the reflexes of Daidoji Tametaka had been honed by decades of warfare, and he adjusted instantly. The head of his spear plunged deeply into Atsushi’s thigh. Even as the spear came to rest, the old general was drawing a short blade from his belt and moving to stab the warrior in the stomach.

Atsushi’s speed was nothing short of inhuman. He rolled away from the attack, suffering only a long slash along his stomach. In return he drew his wakizashi with his off hand and buried it into the old man’s stomach up to the hilt.



Daidoji Tametaka's only response to his death blow was a wince and a slow, respectful nod to Akeha, who found her eyes swimming with tears as the old man slid unmoving to the ground.

"Disgraceful!" Atsushi nearly shouted. "Look at this! Look at us! What kind of destiny is this?" He flicked the blood from his blades and sheathed them. "I might as well wait for you to recover and hope that we face one another again, since I must heal as well." He shook his head in disgust. "I will see you again, Lady Daidoji. You may count upon that."

Then he was gone. Though she'd been staring directly at him, Akeha wasn't sure which direction he'd retreated.

Akeha fought the heavy weakness flooding her limbs and rose steadily to her feet. She knew her wound required urgent attention, but she would not disgrace herself by acting unseemly. It was only after she'd risen to her full height that she realized the battleground had grown silent. Around her, the fevered skirmish had dwindled to nothing. The silence turned her gut.

What has happened? she thought.

Chuda Tairao stood near the center of the wooded glen. It seemed no different than any other inconsequential forested spot in the Empire. Bugs and frogs teeming near a wispy creek, gray rocks jutting from grassy earth, and sunlight filtering through the canopy of an ancient oak. A thick rope hugged the trunk of the massive tree while strips of inscribed paper hung from its branches, designating it truly ancient and home to any number of forest spirits. This glen could be transposed into any other forest in the Empire and not seem out of place. It was completely typical, easily overlooked.

Tairao smirked, showing a hint of yellow teeth. "Very clever."

He felt the object twitch in his hands. He looked down to what he carried. The arm of Isawa Norimichi tensed in his grasp. He could feel the muscles tighten, even through the rocky plates covering the severed appendage.

His mottled eyes twinkled. "Ah, so you told the truth, Ikikashi-san! It seems Kanpeki was right to trust you." He extended the arm. It unfurled its fingers and held them apart. The ground began to hum and vibrate. Leaves fell from the ancient tree.

"Too bad for the Crane."

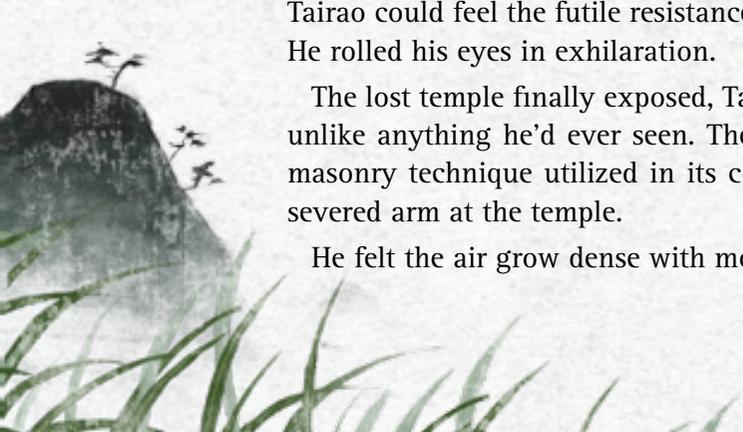
The ground split. The earth spat a shower of hot rock into the air as it engulfed the ancient tree. The fingers of Norimichi's severed arm curled, as and they did, massive trenches dug themselves into the earth, shoveling aside mounds of hard rock as if it were merely sand.

The work was done in moments, the pristine glen irreparably destroyed. Exposed at the center was an ancient home of otherworldly-glowing stone that could only be described as a temple, although a temple to what Tairao could not say. States of bird-like humanoids flanked the entrance, which was still filled with a thousand years of mudslide earth.

The clearing filled with Tairao's laughter as he channeled Norimichi's arm. The earth swelled at the gesture, bringing the ancient temple to the surface. The brittle earth crumbled around it. Tairao could feel the futile resistance of the earth kami like tiny fists pounding against his chest. He rolled his eyes in exhilaration.

The lost temple finally exposed, Tairao marveled at it for a few moments. The architecture was unlike anything he'd ever seen. The pointed archway of the door didn't seem possible for the masonry technique utilized in its construction. He shrugged at his observation and levied the severed arm at the temple.

He felt the air grow dense with moisture. He paused.



Before his eyes, a massive pillar of water rose from the base of the temple. It completely surrounded the structure, first swirling like a vortex, then suspended like a tower of glass. He sighed as he turned around.

Asako Miyabi unwound the string of prayer beads from her hands. Her outermost kimono sustained many rips in the sleeves, and she let it fall to the ground from her shoulders. Her hair was mussed, her cheek baring a superficial cut. The wakizashi of her dead yojimbo jutted from her obi, the result of a promise she made to return it to his family. She set her jaw as she held the length of beads in both hands. "So you are the swine who took Norimichi's arm?"

Tairao shook his head. "My apologies. No, that was not me, although I have benefitted greatly." He held up the arm by the elbow. The fingers wriggled in a macabre "hello" gesture. He tilted his head. "You must be Asako Miyabi. You look young for a Master of Water. And exhausted," he added. "I think fighting Obake took a lot out of you."

She scowled. "I can tell you won't listen to reason. So I offer just one warning." Her usual soft eyes turned to ice. "Leave now, or never."

He scoffed. "Don't insult me," the Chuda said, turning his back completely to her. "We both know you won't do anything. You have no bite in you." He showed his yellow teeth. "Pacifist."

Miyabi snapped the line. The prayer beads fell in a twinkling shower.

The broken creek swelled as Miyabi leapt at the Chuda. The water kami carried her across the span between them like a thrown stone.

As he turned her fist met his gut. His eyes bulged as his breath abandoned him. He dropped the arm. She dug a wet knife-hand into his cheek and sent him sprawling. He reeled, scrambling on hands and knees, pulling a short blade from his obi. The water kami danced around Miyabi's limbs.

"This day has tested me in new ways," she spoke. "I will atone later."

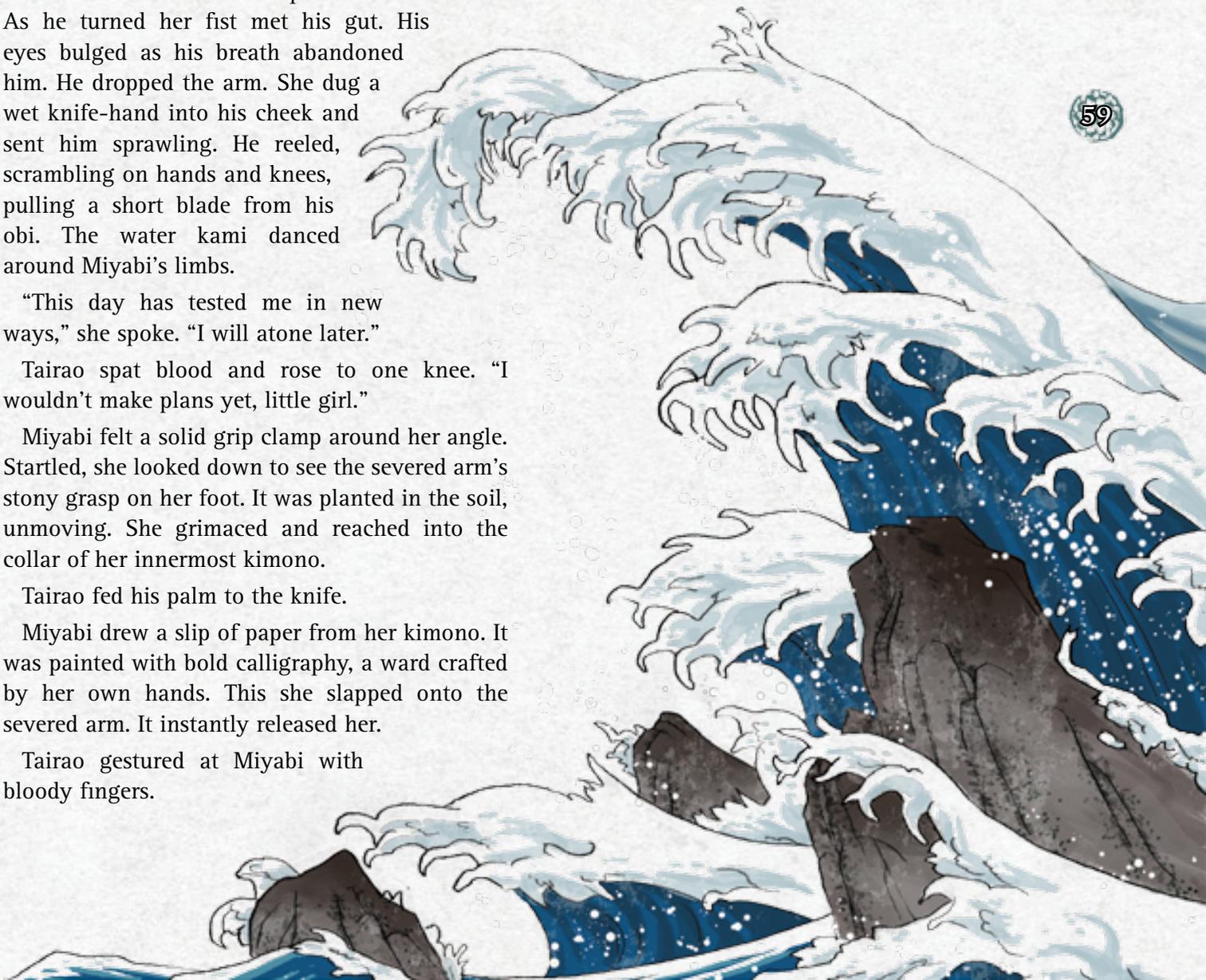
Tairao spat blood and rose to one knee. "I wouldn't make plans yet, little girl."

Miyabi felt a solid grip clamp around her ankle. Startled, she looked down to see the severed arm's stony grasp on her foot. It was planted in the soil, unmoving. She grimaced and reached into the collar of her innermost kimono.

Tairao fed his palm to the knife.

Miyabi drew a slip of paper from her kimono. It was painted with bold calligraphy, a ward crafted by her own hands. This she slapped onto the severed arm. It instantly released her.

Tairao gestured at Miyabi with bloody fingers.



A torrent of blood gushed from Miyabi's mouth and nose. Her legs crumpled beneath her. She landed on her knees and pressed a palm to her face. She felt the air within her lungs rebelling against her, as if it had come alive, like a storm of razors within her chest. She whispered a prayer of healing between red-stained teeth. The water kami soothed the raw flesh of her throat, but left her sputtering on her hands and knees.

Tairao laughed as he stood. "See how lucky I am! How many in the Empire can say that an Elemental Master kneeled at their feet?"

Miyabi struggled to raise her head. Her bones were like lead bars inside her limbs. Beyond the taunting Chuda, her tired eyes glimpsed a shimmer in the surface of the water barrier surrounding the temple. The surface wavered. Weakening.

She reached out to the water kami with her thoughts, mouthing a prayer. Do not give up, my friends! Maintain the barrier! Do not let him through! Her fists clenched, digging fistfuls of wet earth. Do this, and I will surrender to you all of my tears! I will collect you drop by drop and show you the ocean!

Tairao dropped all joviality. "How long will they answer your prayers?"

Miyabi stopped. She looked up at him. In his cloudy eyes, she saw the look one might cast at an ensnared fox.

"They respect strength, and yours is drained." He shook his head. "How long will yours hold out?"

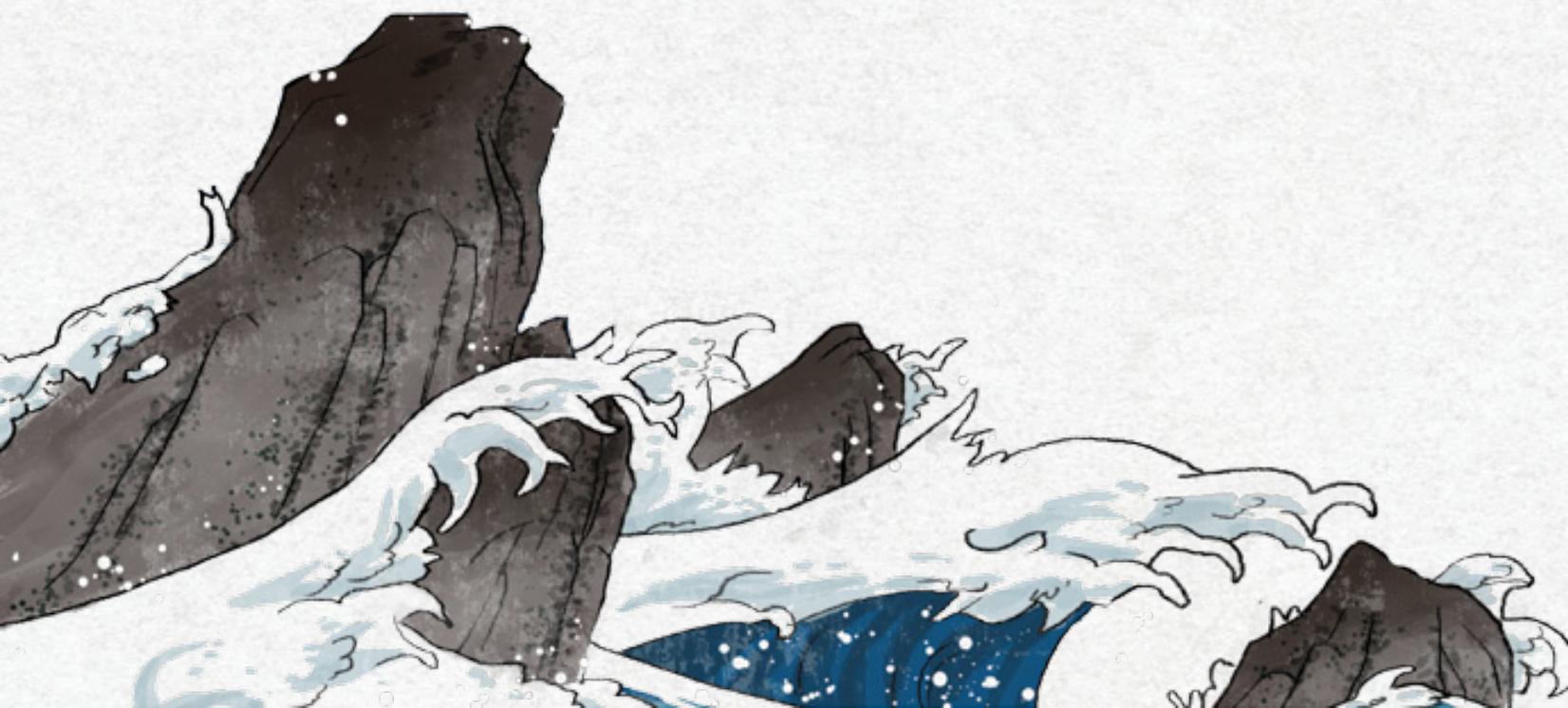
"You have not yet seen my strength," she told him.

He regarded her for a quiet moment. "It's a shame to let such potential go to waste. Such determination. Such insight. I think I would regret killing you." He extended his bloody hand. "Why don't you join us, then?"

Her eyes widened.

"There is no need to throw away your life," he continued. "The Spider will accept anyone. You spent the last hour fighting Obake. You have seen their strength. Wouldn't you like some of that power for your own?"

Miyabi felt herself pulled as time slowed. Even the falling leaves seemed to hold still in the thick air. He seemed to speak in the time between a breath.



“Be it the kami, your friends, or your allies, you are always relying on others. Never yourself. Wouldn’t it be better to rely on yourself? Others will often fail you.” He darkened. “And you will often fail others.”

In that moment, she saw the sad face of Asako Maemuki. She faltered.

Tairao’s eyes twinkled in surprise. He grinned. “That’s it, isn’t it? That’s what you fear. You have to be liked. You desperately need their admiration. You cannot fail anyone.” He shook his head. “Poor flaws for a leader. You’re too young for this. They saw your power and pushed you into a position you didn’t want. They knew you wouldn’t say ‘no.’ It’s not in your nature.”

“Damn you,” she hissed, not knowing from where those words came.

“It is better to be feared than liked,” he said. He took a step forward and offered her his knife. “Take it. Join us. See that which you are truly capable.”

Miyabi looked first at the knife, then into his eyes. “Never.”

Neither of them saw Daidoji Akeha until she was on top of him. Her blade bit deep into his shoulder. His inhuman cry shook the clearing.

Miyabi blinked. Akeha panted as she spun, kneeling defensively in front of the Elemental Master. Tairao’s arm lay in the dirt some distance away. He dragged himself on his belly, spitting curses from his lips. He crawled towards the severed arm of Norimichi.

“Stop him,” Miyabi shouted.

Akeha nodded. As she sprung forward, dark forms intercepted her. Humanoid bodies of earth and stone rose from the ground, one for every drop of blood Akeha had spilled. They surrounded her, relentless, reaching. Akeha’s blade danced, dulling with every cut of their unnatural bodies. Their heavy hands clattered against what remained of her armor. Only then did Miyabi see the growing red stain on Akeha’s tunic. Her movements grew slower and weaker. She knew then that Akeha was bleeding out from within her armor. It was only a matter of time. A matter of seconds.

Miyabi reached into her obi and drew a cypress wand. The prayer was already on her lips.

But then she saw Tairao. On the ground, he rolled onto his back and extended his arm towards the Daidoji daimyo.

It was Norimichi’s arm, replacing the one the Crane had severed.

Miyabi felt the invisible movements of the earth kami. She saw the ground swell beneath the daimyo’s feet. In an instant, it would swallow her up and drag her into the breathless earth.

She didn’t think. It was instinct that took her then. Miyabi hurled the cypress wand and shouted with her mind. *Save her! Save her now!*

The water kami obeyed.

The earth sloughed away as soon as it rose, laden by the sudden weight of water. Unable to keep its own shape, it collapsed into a useless muddy pool, taking the enemies with it.

Akeha’s fall slowed with the hands of the water kami. She basked in healing vapors.

Miyabi felt a wave of relief. Akeha was saved. The daimyo of the Daidoji would live.

She froze. Realization jolted her stiff. The barrier of water was gone. The kami who sustained it had answered her desperate plea.

Tairao snapped his new fingers.

The crack of the temple stone deafened Miyabi’s ears. It was as if the entire clearing had been struck with a hammer of light. The world bleached away before her eyes. All faded but the laughter of Chuda Tairao.

Akeha woke without knowing that she'd fainted. She accessed her position in moments, recalling her fall, the grasping hands of the creatures...

As she sat up, her eyes took in the massive tear in the earth where the temple once stood. It was not a hole, not a pit. Nothing so natural as that. It was a tear, as clear as day, no different than a cut in a bolt of fabric or a sheared piece of paper. It yawned vague humanoid darkness into the clearing. She dared not look into it.

Rising, Akeha became acutely aware that her wounds had healed. There was no pain or tiredness. Not even the residual soreness of unrelenting battle. She was restored, inside and out. She remembered Miyabi.

She found the Master of Water on her knees before the unnatural tear. Miyabi didn't move. She just stared at her empty hands. She looked so young, then. Like someone who should have been dancing bare-legged in the shallows of the sea, or dancing before a bonfire in the summer before adulthood. Too young for her station. Too young for her eyes.

A tear slid down the Elemental master's cheek. It turned to ice before it reached her chin. The water kami cried with her, causing a gentle snow to fall throughout the clearing, blanketing her shoulders in perfect white.

Akeha paused as her heart cracked. Her mind flooded with the implications of this battle, the priorities of leadership fighting for her attention, but she pushed them aside to kneel by the Asako. "We need to go," she said.

But Miyabi was frozen. Ice formed around her knees and ankles. Fog came from her breath.

"It does one no good to hold still," Akeha insisted. She let the authority drop from her voice. "The rain falls regardless, Lady Asako. The land is in ruins, but there are still mountains and rivers."

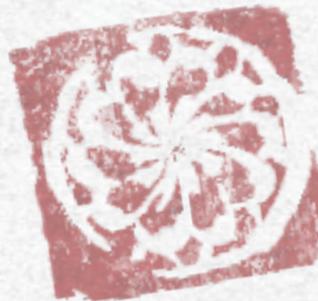
The Elemental Master looked up into the daimyo's face. Her shame flowed openly.

Akeha would not compound Miyabi's shame by acknowledging it. She offered the girl a warrior's hand and lifted the woman to her feet. The ice broke as she stood.

"You saved my life," Akeha whispered. "When this is over, I will repay that debt."

The warm oceans within Miyabi's eyes were frozen over, as cold and still as her voice. "Then sever my head," she said, emotionless. "For in my weakness, I have chosen one life over tens of thousands."

Akeha regarded the Master of Water in open horror. For all the grave markers these battles would leave behind, for all the pyres their wars would feed, until the end of her days, Akeha would never see a death so complete as that which lingered in the defeated master's eyes.



DRAGON RETURNS TO THE SKY

BY ROBERT DENTON III

Tiny shadows darted across the ground, drawing Ikoma Ezuna's eyes upward. Pigeons, like a spreading cloud, scattered across the sky. There had to be hundreds of them, all heading south into the Empire. Ezuna sighed. He would be joining them, soon.

"You haven't said anything," Kyo whispered.

Ezuna regarded the Togashi with soft eyes. She stood in the oak position, one foot planted on the sundered cypress stump. An ocean of mist churned a gray horizon around the base of the monastery, disturbed only by piercing mountain tops that raked the sky.

Kyo turned in her stance. The relentless wind tossed the velvet ribbons of her black hair and rustled the silks around her lithe frame. Ezuna felt himself pulled by the wind, his kimono sleeves billowing like a kite, as if to carry him south to the provinces of the Lion. To join the kites and banners of the Lion armies and the blood-soaked soil of war.

Ezuna smiled sadly. "Why speak, if one is not improving on the silence?"

Her smile matched his own. "I think you've changed, Ezu-kun."

"For the better?"

Kyo laughed and the wind carried the chiming sound. But it also carried her sigh. "Do you think the Dragon are selfish?" she asked.

He blinked. "Selfish?"

She looked back to the mountains. "If the Dragon are selfish, then it will not change anything for me to keep you here for myself."

They said nothing more on the subject. No further words carried by the crisp mountain wind. So Mirumoto Shikei stepped back from the balcony of the High House of Light, brewing in his stormy mind.

"My apologies for the poor accommodations. Your arrival was sudden." Tonbo Asami tilted her head. "Has... something happened?"

Mirumoto Masunobe smirked.

The Tonbo Daimyo nodded. "Ah, of course it has."

Beyond the lowest balcony of Kyuden Tonbo, a village of tents spread in all directions. The banners of the Dragon families displayed proudly above them. They numbered in the hundreds.

Masunobe set aside his tea. "I have a gift for the Tonbo." He gestured to the lacquered box by his side. "Let us set aside ceremony. It is an alms bowl once belonging to The Little Teacher. Please accept it on behalf of the Zurui."

Asami's eyes widened. It was some time before she spoke. "The Tonbo are grateful, but such an artifact should surely be with the Brotherhood."

"It was." Masunobe looked out to the fluttering banners of the tents. "Until Daigotsu samurai desecrated the shrine that kept it." He picked up his tea cup. "In fact, every temple we visited on our way was either attacked by the Spider, or about to be."

"The Little Teacher was always an enemy of Jigoku." Asami followed Masunobe's gaze. In so doing, she noticed a banner with the Crow mon fluttering among that of the Dragon. "I see the monks followed your caravan."



“We brought them with us, if that’s what you mean.”

Asami looked again to the lacquered box. Her brow pinched. “I see.” There was a long pause. “In that case, would it not be safer among the Dragon?”

Masunobe sipped his tea. “We carry artifacts from sixteen temples. We can spare one to honor the family that has served the Dragon so loyally throughout the centuries. Besides.” His eyes met hers. “The Mirumoto have no doubts regarding its safety.”

Two Dragonfly slid the vibrant shoji screen aside to approach. They bowed before their Champion. “The Kitsuki contingent has arrived, my lady.”

Asami bowed to Masunobe and left him sipping his tea on the balcony.

She met the representative of the Kitsuki with all due formality. “I am honored to meet you, Kinaro-san. I deeply regret our inability to accommodate you all. We are admittedly surprised by this visit from so many Dragon. Indeed, there seems to be significant representation from every Dragon family.”

Kitsuki Kinaro smirked. “You mean the Tonbo didn’t, er... foresee this?”

Asami smiled patiently. “Where the Dragon are involved, we have become accustomed to surprise.”

“A good policy.” He laughed. “We have supplied our tents. You need not worry about accommodation.” After a pause, he extended his hands, revealing a small box. “It has been a long time, Asami-chan. Too long. That is my shame.”

The Tonbo Daimyo shrugged her shoulders. “Come now. There is no need for that. You’ve been too busy to visit a childhood friend.”

“Well, some good may come from these circumstances after all. We will have plenty of time to catch up.”

She tightened her smile. Two more Tonbo passed in the hall. They exchanged whispers and glanced at the Dragon.

“Are you ready for the journey?” Kinaro asked. “Perhaps we can accompany you.”

“I have not yet decided if I am going.”

Kinaro looked at her sideways. “I see. How many of the Tonbo feel similarly?”

“I am not certain. I have given them the option of leaving or staying. It is not my place to choose their path.” She looked at Kinaro. “This is all they know.”

“You would not be the only family leaving their ancestral home. The Kitsuki have few holdings north of Last Step Castle.”

Asami said nothing.

“It will come here,” Kinaro spoke. His voice was low, as serious as his good eye. “Soon enough, the war will reach even this place. If Shikei has foreseen it, then I know the Tonbo have.”

“Death holds no power over one at peace.”

Kinaro watched her expression for a time. “Death is the least of our concerns, lady Tonbo.”

The wind fluttered the papers on the balcony, struggling to pull them free from the stones holding them down. Mirumoto Shikei watched the futile efforts, the wind unsuccessful in achieving its great desire.

“You should reconsider, my lord.” Tamori Wataru funneled his conviction through his eyes. “It is not too late.”

“He has no choice,” interjected Togashi Noboru. “Were I Champion, I would have done the same.”

Wataru boldly met Noboru’s eyes. “You’re not.”

The Mirumoto House Guard exchanged looks, tensing. Noboru’s eyes flared, but instead of a curse, his lips mouthed a sacred mantra.

Kitsuki Itsuma lowered his head. “My Champion. I know I cannot dissuade you. I have no intention of doing so. If this is the path the Dragon must take to ensure the future of the Empire, that future generations are equipped to restore the Empire to glory, then it is a duty the Kitsuki embrace fully. But it is also my duty to make obvious the implications and consequences of this direction.” When Shikei did not stop him, he continued. “To do this, we must abruptly abandon the Empire in a time of war. The other clans will no longer trust us. They would be justified in that position.”

They exchanged serious looks, but no one replied.

“The clan’s resources will be taxed to their limits,” Itsuma continued. “It is difficult enough to feed the clan through winter, so reliant are we on the other clans. Without them, or the farmlands we must yield in order to fulfill this plan, it will be virtually impossible.”

“I have made arrangements,” Shikei spoke absently. “There is nothing more to be done about it. We must endure and carry on. Like our ancestors, we will prepare for a day that is yet to come.”

One of the Mirumoto stepped forward. “My lord, the Empire needs the Dragon.”

The commander of the House Guard immediately bowed. “Forgive him, Shikei-sama. He is young. He has much to learn about duty.”

Shikei looked away from the fluttering papers. Something about the young man’s face struck him as familiar. “Higashi,” Shikei said. “That is your name, right?”

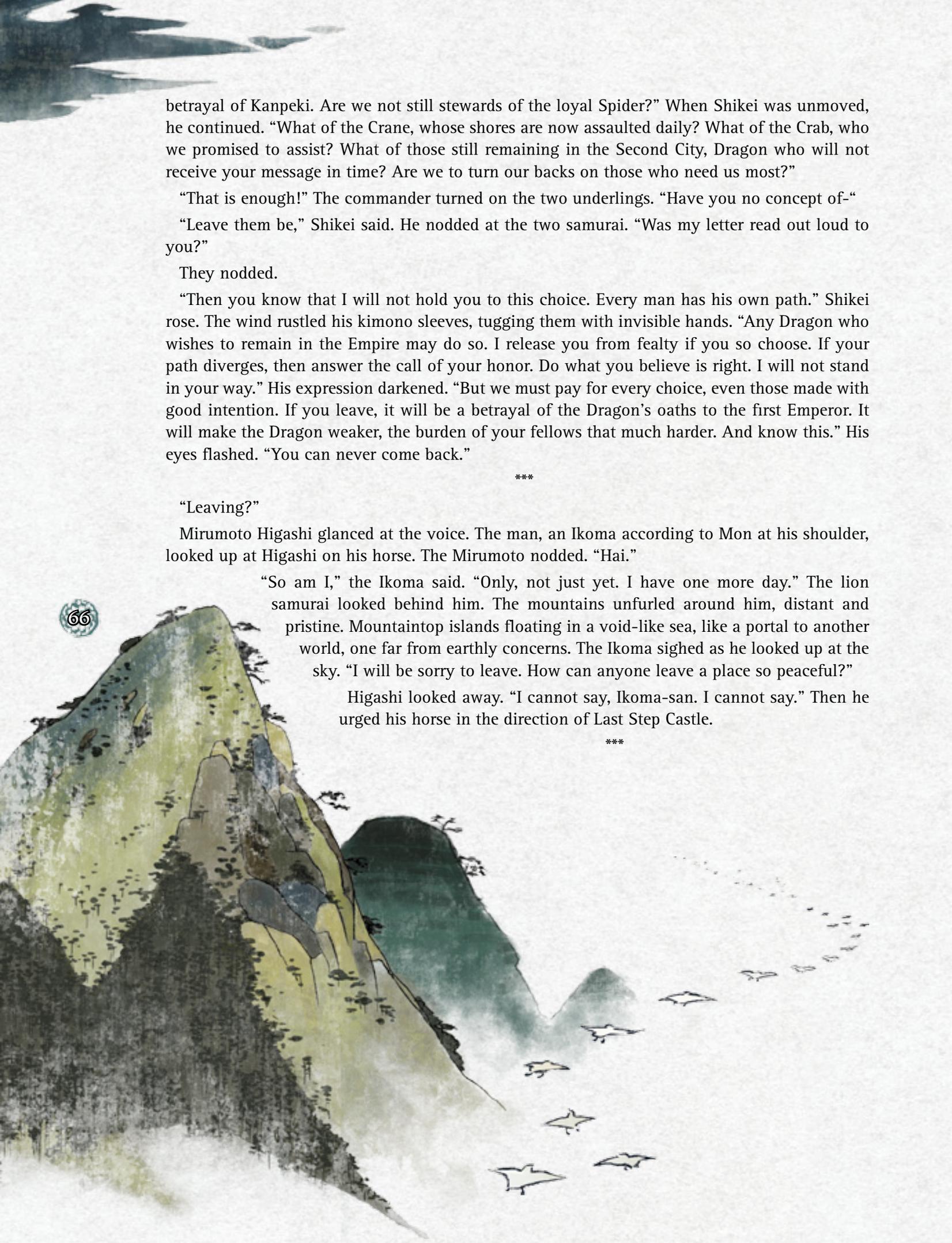
The others looked to the dissenter. Higashi failed to hide his surprise. “Hai, my lord.”

Shikei nodded. “You say the Empire needs the Dragon, yes?”

“And the Dragon needs the Empire!” The boy stepped forward. “Enlightenment is not found by remaining within the mountain. It is found in the world outside! There is still the third seal, and time to stop the Spider! As wards of the Spider Clan, abandoning the Empire would be a failure of our duty! There is still much good we can do! We cannot give up! Even if it means the destruction of our clan, it is better for the final step to be a step forward!”

Shikei listened to the young man with full attention. He was silent for a time. Then, he spoke. “This decision is not to preserve the Dragon. It is to preserve the Empire.” He looked from one face to the next. “The teachings of Shinsei will not survive in the Empire that is to come. The Spider will destroy them. The other clans will reinterpret them. Either way, they will be lost if we do not act.” He closed his eyes. “Those teachings once saved the Empire from darkness, and they will do so again. Someone must be its stewards, even if it means sacrificing everything. To deny our duty to the Shining Prince and run recklessly to a samurai’s death would be the ultimate victory of Jigoku over this realm.” He opened his eyes and levied his gaze on the misty horizon beyond the balcony. “It would be the most selfish thing we can do.”

Another Mirumoto stepped forward and knelt beside Higashi. “What of the Dragon’s other obligations? The house of Susumu burns. Tetsuo’s order is now hunted by bakemono for their



betrayal of Kanpeki. Are we not still stewards of the loyal Spider?" When Shikei was unmoved, he continued. "What of the Crane, whose shores are now assaulted daily? What of the Crab, who we promised to assist? What of those still remaining in the Second City, Dragon who will not receive your message in time? Are we to turn our backs on those who need us most?"

"That is enough!" The commander turned on the two underlings. "Have you no concept of—"

"Leave them be," Shikei said. He nodded at the two samurai. "Was my letter read out loud to you?"

They nodded.

"Then you know that I will not hold you to this choice. Every man has his own path." Shikei rose. The wind rustled his kimono sleeves, tugging them with invisible hands. "Any Dragon who wishes to remain in the Empire may do so. I release you from fealty if you so choose. If your path diverges, then answer the call of your honor. Do what you believe is right. I will not stand in your way." His expression darkened. "But we must pay for every choice, even those made with good intention. If you leave, it will be a betrayal of the Dragon's oaths to the first Emperor. It will make the Dragon weaker, the burden of your fellows that much harder. And know this." His eyes flashed. "You can never come back."

"Leaving?"

Mirumoto Higashi glanced at the voice. The man, an Ikoma according to Mon at his shoulder, looked up at Higashi on his horse. The Mirumoto nodded. "Hai."

66
"So am I," the Ikoma said. "Only, not just yet. I have one more day." The lion samurai looked behind him. The mountains unfurled around him, distant and pristine. Mountaintop islands floating in a void-like sea, like a portal to another world, one far from earthly concerns. The Ikoma sighed as he looked up at the sky. "I will be sorry to leave. How can anyone leave a place so peaceful?"

Higashi looked away. "I cannot say, Ikoma-san. I cannot say." Then he urged his horse in the direction of Last Step Castle.

It came in the early morning. The thunderous boom echoed throughout the valleys of the Dragon. It woke the guests of Last Step Castle. It woke the entire landscape.

Where once there was a wide pass through the mountains, now there was a great wall. It stretched to the top of the mountainsides, from the high base of Morning Frost Castle to the other side of the pass. At its feet was the path out of the mountains, completely barred.

A Crane was the first to see from his view off the balcony. Completely calm, and with grace befitting his clan, he lobbied for the attention of the Kitsuki Daimyo. When he was not present, the Crane insisted to speak with the highest remaining authority. When this fell through, he did not protest. He simply waited until the morning court of Last Step Castle began to approach the dais, pay his respects, and then politely ask why the pass out of the mountain had completely vanished.

Not long after, every guest of the Dragon Clan, great and minor clan alike, gathered at the foot of the pass, waving their traveling papers and demanding that the great wall be opened. They had duties to their clans. Duties to their families. Some were family hostages waiting to be returned to their clans. They had every right to travel the lands of the Dragon. This was unlawful imprisonment. They should have been warned. The pass should be opened.

But there was no way to open the pass now. There was no gate, no door. The solid rock wall was like an extension of the mountains. Nothing would enter the mountains of the Dragon. Nor would anything leave.

Before long, the Mirumoto deployed a group of samurai to stand at the length of the wall. The guests were informed that the Dragon would extend their courtesy to their needs indefinitely. They apologized for the misfortune, but it could not be helped. Word of this plan entering the Empire could be disastrous.

The guests levied their protests, some more ardently than others. There were a few who became notable to the Dragon for their objections. A Kakita drew his blade and challenged a Mirumoto for the right to leave. Although there was little the Mirumoto could do should the Kakita win, he drew his blade regardless and bested the Kakita in a duel. One samurai, a member of the Toku family, threw himself against the wall and began climbing. He made it one-fourth up the wall before a stone came away in his hand and he fell. Had there not been a tall maple nearby, the fall would have surely killed him. In the end he shrugged his shoulders, remarking that it had been worth the try.

Most simply accepted. Without protest, without so much as a word. They bowed their heads.

Among them, one samurai, a young member of the Ikoma family, a man named Ezuna, simply smiled and looked in the direction of the High House of Light.



“It is done,” said Tamori Wataru. “They are closed. It will take great efforts to enter or leave.”

“All arrangements are finished,” Kitsuki Itsuma spoke. He nodded at the others as they entered the chamber. “If nothing goes awry, we should be able to cultivate enough to last for some time.”

Togashi Noboru entered the chamber with crossed arms. “The artifacts are safe, as are the texts. The Togashi Family embraces this new duty.”

“Do they all know?” Wataru asked.

Noboru shrugged.

“Then, I suppose that is that.” Itsuma looked around him. “At some point, the Empire will notice. Or they will hear from those who stayed outside.”

“Trust in Heaven,” Wataru said. “Our destiny is painted in the sky.”

Noboru grunted. “The way is not in the sky. It is in the heart.”

“Trapped in the mountains with you two.” Itsuma shook his head. “Well, I suppose there are worse fates. At least there is...”

It occurred to them all at once. They exchanged looks and shared their realization through their eyes. But it was Itsuma that asked the question.

Mirumoto Shikei’s quarters were empty. His belongings were there: the dashio of his family, his suit of armor, his other things. They searched the High House of Light seeking any sign of the Dragon Champion.

They found, in the throne room beneath the keep, a small scroll resting on the throne once belonging to Togashi No Kami. Beside it was a small note. It said, simply:

Our paths no longer intersect. The Dragon embrace their destiny. I embrace mine.

The three daimyo unfurled the scroll. Within, among the visions that Shikei described, they saw the new purpose of the Dragon Clan.

“Are you sure this is fair?” the merchant asked. He counted the coin in his hands, many Koku worth, glancing at the pile of silks and a box of polished Baoding balls at his feet. “I understand that samurai need horses, but it hardly seems like an even trade.”

The tall man shrugged. The merchant caught sight of the many tattoos dancing across his neck and arms. For a moment, he swore they moved.

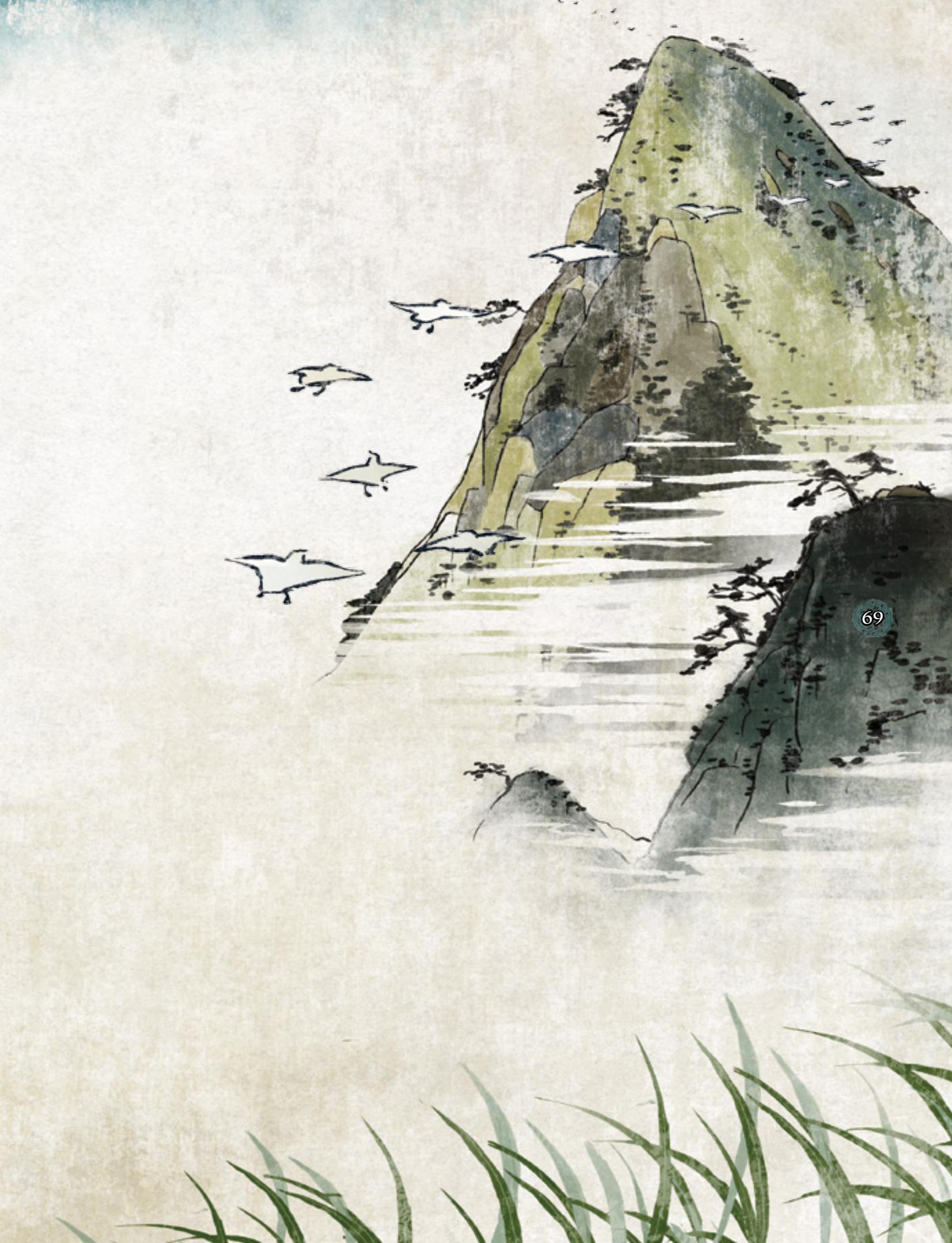
“Well, I am grateful,” the merchant said.

The man nodded as he mounted the horse. He smiled at the merchant. It seemed a genuine smile, as if he felt a great peace.

The merchant bowed. “I thank you again.” After a moment, he added, “You don’t say much.” The samurai’s smile parted. “Why speak, if one is not improving on the silence?”

The merchant chuckled. “Sounds like something a Dragon might say.”

Shikei laughed. Then he steered his new horse west, galloping towards the lands of the Unicorn.





BLOOD MOONS

BY MARI ANNE MURDOCK
EDITED BY FRED WAN



Shiro Shiba

Shiba Tsukimi roamed along a path of stars, a dream that held her fast in its grip. She shivered at the cold of space but burned beneath the proximity of a hundred fiery orbs. The celestial spheres danced closer and closer before merging into a crust of suns around a strangely shaped shadow that twisted and writhed in a rhythm that rippled through the air, through her soul. She reached out but her hand felt nothing.

A stillness struggled from the shape, thick and perverse like the silence of a grave yet alive with a distinct song that resonated from its depths, a heavenly refrain in tune with the whole universe. She sensed a pulsing throb as the space between all the stars of heaven waxed and waned, bending beneath the infinite weight yet flowing free, lighter than air. A voice echoed through her into eternity, and she turned to see two eyes gleaming through the shadow. The star bridge collapsed, and she fell.

Tsukimi shuddered awake, her head pulsing with confusion at the vision of stars and suns and shadows. A cold sweat prickled her body, and her hair stuck to her cheeks. She brushed it away and sat up, the cool of the night comforting the tension left by her feverish dreams.

The need to meditate, to contemplate the vision, slithered in her skin. Getting up from her futon, she dressed in the dark, knowing where every article in the room was without sight. After tying a loose kimono around herself, she knotted her red silk blindfold around the ruined mess where her eyes once were. Her heart grew calm, and she listened.

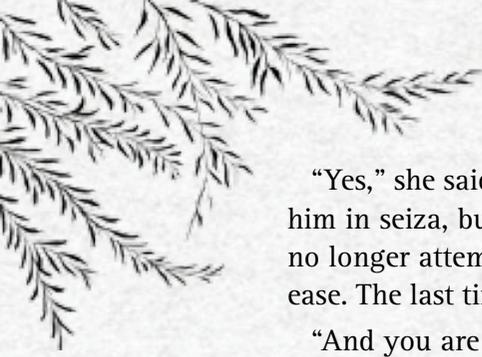
A familiar footstep crept outside her room. The door opened.

"I never thought I'd hear those footsteps again," Tsukimi said, reaching for and drawing her katana in a slow, graceful arc. Her blindfold felt itchy, and despite the confusion that mounted at the first sound of footfalls, she checked her emotions, reaching out to the Void. It calmed and steadied her core, filling her with balance. However, the Void did not fill her mind with the bright light and swirls of energy that she was now used to seeing by. The room remained black, and the figure before her stayed dark. She ignored the inconvenience and held her katana before her, letting the Void fill her body with the swell and pull of the universe, ready for the enemy. "I am ready for you, Nitoshi."

Tsukimi heard no drawing of steel though. She could hear the Scorpion Champion's smothered breath beneath his mempo, calm and untroubled by thoughts of violence. She heard the swish of his kimono and the soft pull of the paper door behind him as he shut it. Nitoshi then merely sat before her on his knees, seiza, the polite posture of a guest. She exhaled, unsure, feeling the calm of the Void waver against her doubt. Why had the Void not illuminated his being? Why was had it abandoned her in this moment of need? Why did Nitoshi not stand and fight?

"Calm yourself," Nitoshi said, his deep, sinister voice strangely soothing. "I come with no intention for battle."

Tsukimi bit her lip, realizing the intensity of her ready stance. Her usual quiet contemplation and reflection were jarred and stretched tight like an archer's bow string, and she struggled to soothe her whirl of emotional reactions. Perhaps the dream had... unnerved her in some way.



“Yes,” she said, shaking her head. “Forgive me. I am out of sorts this evening.” She sat opposite him in seiza, but she did not let down her guard, wary of the trickster. She sheathed her katana, no longer attempting to temper her suspicion with steel. “Also, forgive me if I do not share your ease. The last time we faced, I relearned the valuable lesson of being cautious around scorpions.”

“And you are now more than you ever were because of that lesson.”

Tsukimi smiled. “Indeed. Since when have you become a philosopher, Nitoshi?”

“Darkness changes us all, Tsukimi,” he said simply.

The Void bloomed within her, and she saw Nitoshi in her mind’s eye. His radiant energy was fiery red with deep swaths of purple which tremored with black swirls and stars. She could see a sorrowful heart beating within his chest, yet his mind was clear with pure, white light. Around him, the Void rippled and misted away, like smoke, drifting into the empty space of the room. She reached out a hand as if to touch it. She could feel its vast expanse connecting all the elements, all the energies, eddying them around in the harmony of the world – connecting her to Nitoshi. She let her hand fall, astonished.

“Why are you here?” she asked, humbling herself before the power of the Void. She could feel his eyes staring into her mind’s eye despite the darkness of the room.

“I am here with a proposition for you,” he said. He untied his katana from around his waist. Tsukimi watched as none of his chi entered it in acts of aggression. Rather, he placed it before her in a sign of peace. She took the blade in an accepting gesture and set it beside her, far from his reach.

“I accept your gift,” she said, her spirit growing calmer, clearer, the Void growing stronger within her. “And I shall listen to your proposal.”

Nitoshi crossed his arms before him, and Tsukimi watched as a small yellow fire of anger burned within the sorrow of his breast. “I petition your help in crafting a deception.”

Tsukimi kept her spirit calm. “To deceive whom?”

“Kanpeki.”

Tsukimi folded her arms in front of her, suspicious of the Scorpion’s tricks. “Your Clan sees him as a threat to your interests? Or perhaps you find him a more difficult pawn to manipulate in his stance against the Emperor?”

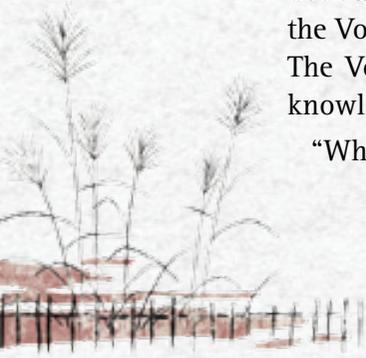
“You mistake our motives, Phoenix. We do not act on behalf of selfish motives or personal glory or honor. All we do is for Rokugan.” Tsukimi could see his energies remain clear, lacking falsehood.

“Forgive my accusations, Nitoshi,” she said humbly. “They stem from common opinions, reputation.”

“All the Clans must sacrifice for the greater good of the Empire. All samurai know this pain,” he explained. His voice growing strangely sentimental. “The Scorpion have made the sacrifices no other Clans dare make. But right now, I am asking that you, Tsukimi, share in our portion of sacrifice.”

Tsukimi said nothing, waiting for an explanation, not daring to allow more questions and doubts to disturb her connection to the Void. Instead, she reached out, searching for truth, and the Void reached back, filling her with a strange sense of... trust. She almost sat back bewildered. The Void was telling her to trust the Scorpion. Again, she struggled against her instincts, her knowledge, her experience, all simple, all an illusion compared to the calm of the Void.

“What would you have me do?”



“You must make a choice. You can choose death, or I can choose it for you, for the sake of Rokugan.”

A small fear trembled in her heart, troubling the calm of the Void – not fear of death but fear of losing to Nitoshi once more. Had she not learned enough from their last duel? She frowned, her hand stretching toward her katana. “You fiend.”

Tsukimi could see Nitoshi smile, a scarlet thread of wily amusement staining his energy. “I find your suspicions amusing, Tsukimi. However, I am sincere, and your relationship with the Void should tell you this. Should you choose to ignore my sincerity, I shall use force as the means of my end. Therefore, I present you with the choice.”

“What choice is there in that?” she whispered, mastering her voice despite the qualms which boiled within her. “You ask that I willingly set down my life for a Scorpion’s whim. Perhaps you wish to weaken my Clan, leaving them without a figurehead in this time of crisis? You are asking that I submit the Phoenix to chaos.” Her fingers brushed the silk of her hilt. She suddenly realized her retainers were missing. She could feel the emptiness of the rooms around hers. Not a soul was close – she was completely alone with the Scorpion. She clung to the Void, hoping it would steel her nerves.

“This choice is the sacrifice we must make for a matter that transcends all of us, Tsukimi,” he said. “This is beyond our personal interests or petty squabbles between Clans. We are dealing with Kanpeki, the enemy to all who battle against evil and destruction.”

Tsukimi felt the Void suddenly burst within her, nearly sweeping away her mind, her soul. It filled her body, and her hands shook as she tried clutched at her head, her face. She could feel Nitoshi even cowering away from its impact as it roiled beyond her control. The Void writhed and howled within her whole being, filling her with the emptiness of the universe, waxing and waning like the night before the day.

The empty calm slowly returned, leaving its placidity, the silent space between the stars. Her entire body slumped down, free of the Void’s raging power. She could feel the truth balance within her, shining like a single star within her mind.

Kanpeki. The true enemy of them all.

Tsukimi sat up again, her limbs weak, but her discipline kept them from trembling. “What do you need me to do, Nitoshi?”

Tsukimi could see the Scorpion Champion’s energy regaining its composure after the powerful blast of Void energy. He bowed before beginning his explanation. “I claim no ability for fortune telling or seeing visions of the future,” he said. “But I know death. I know that with Kanpeki’s claim for the throne, all who defy him shall perish. The Mantis have already fallen. The Crab barely control the borders as they once did. The Clans must fight together if any of us are to withstand Kanpeki’s threat to Rokugan. We must unite.”

“Are you suggest we join forces? Raise an army against Kanpeki?”

Nitoshi chuckled. “I am no Lion, Tsukimi. What faith do you believe I put in a standing force against Kanpeki’s tainted samurai and Shadowlands creatures? I only recently escaped from one such battle... and if Dairuko survived it as well, she can attest to my lack of talent in that arena.”

“So you propose a stratagem. A deception.”

Nitoshi’s soul smiled again. “Precisely.”

“And how does my... Clan’s sacrifice play into this deception?”



Nitoshi continued. "I will approach Kanpeki and offer him my services, and the services of half of my Clan. The other half will renounce me as insane, a traitor, as will the rest of the Great Clans, yours especially. They already believe that Scorpion motives are suspect, which makes me the ideal defector against Emperor Seiken, making it a lie everyone is already willing to believe. I think that Kanpeki will believe it as well. However, he does not trust easily... so I must prove my allegiance."

"How will you do that?"

"By delivering the other Clan Champions to him as a gift."

Tsukimi felt her face pale. She clenched her fists and gritted her teeth as if in pain. Yet, the Void flowed within her, calming her in despite danger. "So this is my choice?"

"Yes."

"And if I do not comply, you will use force to take what you came for?"

"I do not pretend like this is a trifling matter, Tsukimi," he said. "I sacrifice my own self and the souls of half my Clan who follow me to die at the hand of the Spider. Makoto has already complied on behalf of the Crane."

"Makoto?" Tsukimi said, noticing a strange blue ripple of pleasure entering Nitoshi's energy. "He's dead?"

"I have his head in a basket outside with my horse. I'm afraid he made his contribution unwillingly, but his legacy will be remembered."

"And who else will be making this sacrifice?"

"I left Dairuko alive to staunch the Shadowlands creatures of the Second Pit and to command what samurai I leave behind, and with Kanpeki moving fast toward the capital, I have no time to hunt the other Champions. I came here, trusting in your wisdom to do the right thing for Rokugan."

"You're trading the lives of two Champions for your own."

"Have no illusions, Tsukimi. My death is just as sure as Makoto's was. None of us can face Kanpeki and live. However, together, Tsukimi, we will strike at the heart of his campaign, infiltrating past every safe guard and power he wields. In this fight, you and Makoto are the blade, and I will be the poison."

Tsukimi sat silently, the conflict raging within her. She did not trust Nitoshi, and yet the Void calmed her mind in the face of his plan. Could she believe in him? Could she abandon her Clan?

Suddenly, an image flickered before her mind. Her vision. A sudden realization opened her mind, unlocking the confusion as the vision returned to her in every detail. The crust of suns around the shadow, the silence and singing of an ethereal truth, the throbbing stillness of all the space between stars, a snarl of fangs, two eyes that smoldered in the night. The shadow.

"Dragon of the Void," she whispered, reverence flowing through her in the face of her vision. She saw the creature her entire soul venerated, and she felt its eternal presence cooling her mind to the clarity of darkness and light, the balance in nature and the heavens. The purity of the Void. "The Void will show me the correct time..."

She lifted her face, the rapture of its magnificence echoing in vast cycles through her being, filling the room with peace. The night lay heavy in the air, and Tsukimi could feel between every particle, the surging, flowing, burning, cooling energies of the universe, all crystalized together in the pattern of the Void. The Dragon's eyes glowed before her.

“The time is now,” it said. The voice shattered in her mind, heaving and drifting throughout every piece of her, every piece of her communing with the harmony and emptiness of the Dragon’s power. She felt the pause between every pulse of her blood and the empty spaces between each of her breaths. She watched as the infinite distance between herself and Nitoshi vanished in a union of the space between them, their energies merging in unity of purpose.

She stood, facing the Scorpion Champion with complete faith, and bowed to him in solemn respect.

“I entrust my life to you, Bayushi Nitoshi,” she said, feeling the Void swell for a final time within her body. “I entrust the future of my Clan to the Void, and may Isawa Shunryu find a future for them in this dangerous new world you seek. I entrust Rokugan to those who will follow us, Nitoshi, after we both die.”

Tsukimi unsheathed her katana for the last time and handed it to Nitoshi. He accepted it with reverent hands, bowing over it in thanks for her sacrifice. He then stood, towering over her, drawing her long silver hair away from her neck with reverent fingers.

“You will see me again in the afterlife,” he said, lifting her blade.

“I will see everything in the afterlife,” she whispered.

A Few Days Later, Kyuden Miya

Daigotsu Kanpeki stood on a balcony of the newly gutted Kyuden Miya, savoring the flames of destruction as the fields and houses of the surrounding village smoldered... vestiges of his conquest. His troops, battalions of Shadowlands creatures and tainted samurai, had drawn themselves into ready regiments again, a motley mob streaked with ash and gore, awaiting his command. He signaled their captains to disperse for the evening to enjoy their spoils. A low howl roared as the ogres, goblins, oni, and other nameless horrors lumbered and scuttled away into the growing shadows of the Shinomen Forest. The sun sank red on the horizon over the bloodshed, and Kanpeki could feel his tainted body gloat with rage, satisfied with the carnage.

Miya Kiyokaizu huddled in a corner of the balcony, his head bleeding from a club wound, while his wife Shinjiko cowered behind him, attempting to hush their small son.

“The Emperor will stop you,” Kiyokaizu bravely stammered, still honor-driven in the midst of the nightmare. Daigotsu Kendo, who stood nearby, kicked him into submission. The child screamed and his mother paled at the sound. Kanpeki barely seemed to notice, his vision still on the bloody sunset.

“You know, Kiyokaizu,” he said, pensively, “As the next Hantei in line, I am the rightful emperor. How quickly everyone has forgotten.”

The Miya daimyo spat at Kanpeki’s feet, and his wife sobbed in despair at her husband’s decision to apparently doom the family. Kendo kicked him again and drew his katana.

“My lord,” he said, holding his weapon aloft. “I think the Miya family require a lesson in etiquette. His insolence will not do as an example to the rest of the Empire.”

Kanpeki turned slowly, his dark eyes gleaming with approval. “Kendo, you know my mind. I don’t intend to kill everyone. How would my empire function without its sniveling heralds?” He laughed and nodded.

Kendo lopped the herald’s head clean from his shoulders, and blood sprayed high into the air, drenching the man’s wife and child. The boy screamed again, too horrified to rub the blood from his eyes. Kendo kicked the head over the edge of the balcony where it bounced away on the black



shingles. Shinjiko leapt to her feet and cried out as it disappeared below. She clutched at her son, her tears falling into his soft hair.

“Your son I spare for the sake of his family name,” Kanpeki said, looking away from her to stare at the sunset once more. A smile curled around Kanpeki’s lips, the joy of carnage wriggling inside his heart. “Should you betray me, I will feel no remorse in removing the both you.”

Kanpeki lifted a hand to signal he was finished with them, and Kendo dragged the still sobbing woman away roughly, her child in tow. As Kendo’s steps receded, Kanpeki turned to face the sliding doors to acknowledging the hidden presence there.

“You wish to speak to me, Bayushi Nitoshi,” Kanpeki said gruffly, watching with cautious eyes as the Scorpion Champion’s figure melted free from a hiding place.

“Kanpeki-sama,” Nitoshi responded with respect, his voice soft in a reverence though deep with mystery. He came forward to stand in the bloody sunset light, his Scorpion arrogance etched deep into his eyes above his lacquered mempo. “I have come to affirm my allegiance.”

Kanpeki laughed. “I knew the Scorpion would show themselves at the most opportune moment. What lies will you peddle to sell me your treason?”

“Your words do my clan credit, Kanpeki-sama,” Nitoshi said, his voice light with mysterious amusement. “We are loyal to ourselves, and in that, we appear disloyal. However, my clan has no room for traitors. It is why we established our Traitor’s Grove.”

“Heh. I heard Dairuko burned it to ash, along with Kyuden Bayushi.”

“I set fire to it myself. A price of war,” Nitoshi said, as though the cost were nothing. “But these can be rebuilt in a new empire.”

Kanpeki laughed again, but his voice grew malicious. “You dare come here begging boons of me, glutting yourself on our victories? I should cut your throat and throw you over the balcony with that damned fool Miya, before you have a chance to sting me.”

“That would be unwise, Kanpeki, particularly when I am still of use to you.”

Kanpeki turned, drawing his katana in a lightning-swift motion. Nitoshi stood firm, unafraid and unmoved by the act, even as Kanpeki slid his blade between Nitoshi’s armor and neck, inching the steel along the skin, opening a trickle of blood.

“What use would the Spider have for the Scorpion?” Kanpeki sneered, the muscles in his arm tensing as he played with the weight of steel against Nitoshi’s flesh. “What do you have that I do not already possess? Ninja? Slimy courtiers? Pleasure houses, perhaps?” He laughed again, slicing deeper. The Scorpion Champion remained stolid. “You know, your establishments at the Ryoko Owari Toshi were to my liking, and I promised its proprietors to keep it. But what need do I have for you, Nitoshi the Poison Mask? Nitoshi the Liar? Nitoshi the Traitor?”

Nitoshi bowed cautiously, the precision of his movements tempered well with his etiquette. Kanpeki did not remove his katana from Nitoshi’s throat. “I have a story to tell you, Kanpeki. One that you have heard but you have not understood.”

Kanpeki paused, wondering how the Scorpion Champion dared be so bold. Where did such confidence come from in a situation entirely against his advantage? He leaned against balcony and stared at his adversary with gleaming eyes, sheathing his weapon. “Enlighten me, Scorpion.”

Nitoshi drew from his sleeve a large furoshiki parcel of red and black silk and set it upon the balcony at Kanpeki’s feet.

“A gift, should you accept it,” Nitoshi said, his posture perfectly straight and his eyes sharp with remembrance. “My clan’s most famous champion Bayushi Shoju once chose sides. All citizens

of Rokugan know of the Scorpion Coup, and they remember with disgust the ambitious madness that overcame Shoji as he slew the Emperor Hantei XXXVIII and placed himself on the throne. However, this over-ambitious, power-mad monster of a man was destroyed, his clan disbanded, his lands divided, his wife taken for spoils. We all know the end to this tale.”

“Yes,” Kanpeki said. “And the moral is that we should all be wary of you. The Scorpion all sting and their deals are full of poison, never to be trusted, never to be brought close, to the heart of things.”

“Yes, the lesson the delicate-minded Crane have taught their soft-bellied children. The lesson the Lion, in their stubbornness, use to fuel their warmongering. The lesson all the Great Clans swore to learn: the Scorpion are a traitorous, dangerous clan, self-serving, and not to be trusted...” Nitoshi paused, taking his turn to stare into the bloody sunset as it fell behind the far reaches of Shinomen Forest. “Now, I must now tell you the lesson that my clan has learned from this story.”

Kanpeki laughed. “And what have the Scorpion learned in their defeat and humiliation?”

Nitoshi continued. “In the wake of Shoji’s legacy, Rokugan also remembers Bayushi Kachiko, the wife of a traitor... yet she is revered as one the Seven Thunders. Despite Shoji’s failure, she maintained her position near the throne, poisoning the Emperor until he fully emerged as Fu Leng. Rokugan acknowledges her efforts, seeing her use of her Scorpion wives for good, absolving her own actions as a traitor to the two men last on the throne.”

“What is the point of this, Nitoshi? Shoji, Kachiko, dead names in the blighted history of my family.”

Nitoshi removed his mempo and set it on the balcony, a sign of openness and sincerity, a gesture not lost on the Spider Champion.

“My clan remains loyal to the Empire, not the Emperor. This loyalty comes at the cost of our reputation, as Shoji teaches us. Sometimes it comes at the cost of our family, as Kachiko teaches us. Loyalty comes at the cost of all other relationships, desires, or opportunities, and sometimes even at the cost of pieces of ourselves. My clansmen do not balk at that price.” Nitoshi removed the red and black cloth from the parcel, revealing a large bamboo box. “Nor do I shy away from it.”

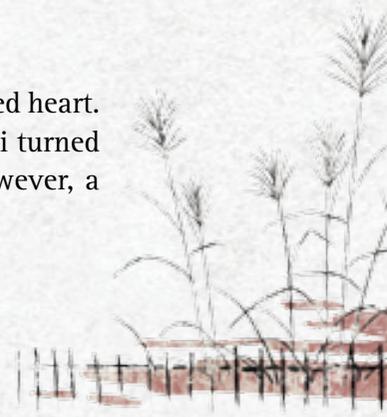
Kanpeki nodded and Nitoshi removed the lid to reveal its grim contents. A pair of heads lay nestled in bloody silk. Shiba Tsukimi. Doji Makoto.

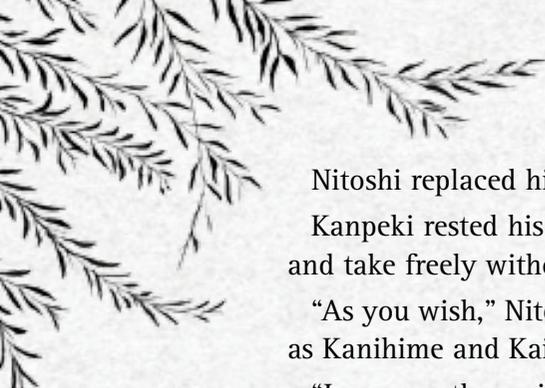
“You cannot perhaps trust my words. However, you can trust that I will serve the Empire, and right now, you, Kanpeki, are what Rokugan needs. The only time there has been peace in this Empire was when the Hantei were on the throne. Since the Iwoko have taken it, the Clans fight like bickering children, divided by avarice and petty squabbles, both here and the Colonies. This weaknesses spreads throughout the great families under weak leaders and kowtowing figureheads, sycophants to a wilting Empire. Seiken’s most recent nepotism in removing you in favor of his brother only confirms the fracturing that precludes the doom I foresee should the Iwoko dynasty be allowed to continue.”

Kanpeki laughed. “I never saw you as a traditionalist, Nitoshi,” he said, turning the Scorpion’s words over in his mind.

“Perhaps I am, but there is nothing traditional in my gift to you.”

Kanpeki pointed to the heads, the shriveled remains tickling the blood thirst in his tainted heart. “Chaos is what you bring. The downward spirals of the Phoenix and the Crane.” Kanpeki turned again to stare over the horizon. “I accept these gifts, and I accept your allegiance. However, a place in my army comes at a higher price.”





Nitoshi replaced his mempo. "And what is that?"

Kanpeki rested his hand on the balcony. "Send your wife and daughter to me. Death you give and take freely without cost, but life, I think, you will find a dearer price to pay."

"As you wish," Nitoshi said, bowing slowly. Kanpeki guessed the hesitation came from surprise as Kanihime and Kaiko's existence had been little more than a rumor, even inside the Scorpion.

"I am sure they will enjoy the imperial city very much," Kanpeki laughed.

Nitoshi nodded. "Perhaps you are right. My wife has never been to Toshi Ranbo. And from what I hear, your own daughter is the same age as mine."

Kanpeki grunted but made no response. He hadn't thought of his daughter since... Machiko. The thought was a flicker and vanished before he could grasp it. "Yes."

"I will send for them at once," Nitoshi said, moving to leave. "In the meantime, all my clan's ninja are at your disposal. Shosuro Keiichi stands just inside the Shinomen, awaiting your orders. My samurai were captured by the Lion, I'm afraid."

Kanpeki waved his hand and Nitoshi disappeared, leaving the box with the heads of Makoto and Tsukimi behind. Kanpeki smiled at them before throwing them over the balcony, just like Kiyokaizu's. They plunged away into the growing dark, their bloody hair fluttering like broken wings.

"Our first steps," he said, turning away and entering the castle.

Imperial Palace, Toshi Ranbo



Bayushi Fuyuko tightened her grip on her kimono sleeves, her knuckles white and her face grim. Her blood pounded in her fingers, her temples, her throat. She ripped away her mask and laid it aside, its heaviness crowding her thoughts. The silk zabuton cushion where she knelt felt slippery, a precarious perch from which she felt she would tumble into an endless abyss.

Nitoshi.

Her stomach writhed.

Nitoshi killed their Clan Champions.

She bit her lip until she could taste blood.

Nitoshi has doomed us.

"Don't think like that," she hissed to herself, taking her head in her hands.

Bayushi Makiko turned away from the window, staring at Fuyuko with sharp, bright eyes.

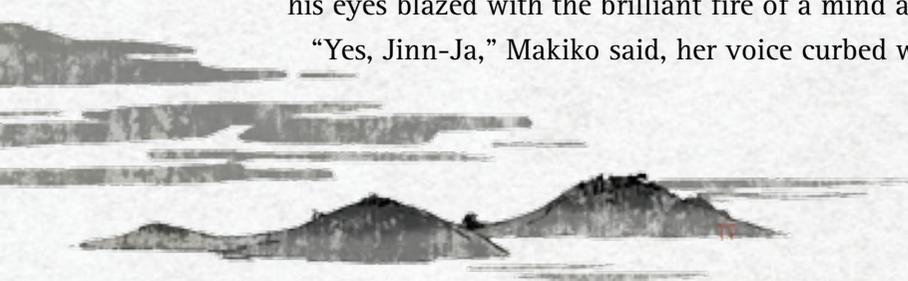
"Fuyuko, now is the time for patience and cunning. This is our test, our turn for battle."

Fuyuko nodded, replacing her mask and mimicking Makiko's composure. "Yes... Our turn for battle." She unfurled her fan and attempted to cool her hot cheeks, glad to hide her face again before the fight.

"Remember, Fuyuko. Nitoshi has divided our clan, and you must stand for what remains. We must unite the families and resist confrontation with the other Clans. Or else..."

"... Or else Emperor Seiken will eradicate us," a harsh voice rumbled from the next room. Bayushi Jinn-Ja staggered in, slamming the shoji screen behind him and plunging himself down beside Fuyuko onto the bare wood. He reeked of sake and his mask hung askew over his face, but his eyes blazed with the brilliant fire of a mind at work.

"Yes, Jinn-Ja," Makiko said, her voice curbed with contempt. "We all know the stakes."





“But can you navigate us through this storm?” Jinn-Ja rudely glared at Fuyuko’s fan as though attempting to expose her discomfiture for all of them to see. “This is the direst crisis Scorpion Clan courtiers have faced to date. Our own Clan Champion has murdered, without warning or provocation, two other Clan Champions. His actions declare himself in open rebellion against the Emperor, and he has taken half of our Clan’s forces and fled to rally to a blatant traitor’s cause. And our kami-forsakened job is to defy public outcries for our imprisonment, our banishment, our execution! We have to look Seiken-sama in the eye after this extravagant and pernicious betrayal and beg for mercy. How do you plan on swimming this sea?”

“Lady Kachiko faced similar trials with Lord Shoju,” Fuyuko began.

“And she failed at court!” Jinn-Ja snapped, his voice growing to a roar. “After Shoju’s coup, she, the Mother of Scorpions, was unable to stay the anger of the Emperor or his vassals, and our Clan was abolished! Our families were reduced to living as ronin or being executed as traitors!”

Makiko pursed her lips. “Is this the fate you see for us, Jinn-Ja? A repetition of the darkest portion of our history?”

Jinn-Ja laughed. “Makiko, do you not think our situation as dark as that? Nitoshi has taken nearly all the vassals and ninja of the Yogo and Shosuro families to rally under Kanpeki’s banner. Most of our samurai were destroyed or imprisoned by the Lion, and we have yet to hear the fate Dairuko has passed upon them. All the Clans bay for our blood, calling down the sentences for murder and treason in our faces. Darkness has swallowed our Clan.”

A jumble of angry voices erupted in the hallway before the shoji screen burst open. Bayushi Kayo grappled a Crane Clan yojimbo who struggled in violent throws. Kayo managed to slam him against the opposite wall, but in the free entryway, Doji Natsuyo rushed into the room. Her beautiful white hair was tangled, and her eyes were red from weeping.

“You traitor!” Natsuyo screamed, pointing at Fuyuko in fury. Her kimono flayed around her, following her frantic gestures, so disparate to the usual decorum and fragility of Crane courtiers. “You liar! You murderer! I curse you! All of you Scorpion traitors!”

Fuyuko felt her heart wrench at the sight of her friend’s rage. The throbbing ache of guilt sealed her throat again, and she remained quiet as Natsuyo openly grieved before her.

“You dared call me your friend with murder in your heart and your secret evils!” she wailed, still pointing at Fuyuko in desperate rage. “How could you show your faces among us! You savages! Animalistic killers!”

Makiko approached Natsuyo, her face hard and her voice raised with her own anger. “Doji Natsuyo, you forget yourself! Control your emotions and act with diplomacy. Your words are those of a fool, and you would do to remember your place.”

Natsuyo cringed beneath the words but did not shrink. “Makoto is dead! Your Champion has proven the wickedness of your entire Clan, and I accuse you of your sins!”

By this time, the Crane yojimbo had broken away from Kayo and stood in the room behind Natsuyo. Doji Dainagon had also entered the room, her face pale with anger, but her propriety still intact. She touched Natsuyo on her arm. “Natsuyo, this is not our place. These traitors shall receive their reward at the hand of the Emperor himself.” She glared at all the Scorpion courtiers as if promising them retribution. Natsuyo flung herself into Dainagon’s arms as if to begin sobbing, but Dainagon squeezed her arm. “Not here, Natsuyo. Do not give them the satisfaction.”

Fuyuko’s raised her hands to her friend. “Natsuyo... I...”

Jinn-Ja silenced her by flinging an arm before her to stop her words. “Save your words for Emperor Seiken,” he whispered to her. “Don’t lose your head like this artless Crane.”



Fuyuko again bit her lips and turned a pleading eye upon Makiko, who glared at the Crane courtiers. "You will remove yourselves from our quarters at once. There is no place for outrageous hostilities at the palace of the Emperor, and you besmirch the honor of this place with your actions."

"What do you know of honor, Scorpion?" Natsuyo moaned, her face still buried in Dainagon's shoulder. "May Jigoku take all of you!"

With this, she and Dainagon stormed from the room, and their yojimbo followed. Kayo bowed in apology and was about to shut the door when Shosuro Yamazaki appeared with a scroll in his hands. The fangs of his horned oni mask glistened menacingly, but his true intimidation was the ominous depth of his voice.

"I come with strange news from the Phoenix," he said, seating himself after Makiko pointed out a zabuton for him. "In outrage at the death of Shiba Tsukimi, they have publically denounced the Scorpion Clan and called for the immediate arrest of all Scorpion family daimyo, magistrates, and other officials. They also demand that the Emperor execute Nitoshi and his family immediately upon capture."

"Preposterous," Jinn-Ja exclaimed, slamming his fist into the floor.

"The trouble does not end there," Yamazaki continued. "The Crane have circulated dangerous rumors, accusations against us involving Iweco Miaka. Since Lady Miaka was scheduled to tour Scorpion lands before her marriage to Bayushi Karyudo, the rumors suggest we were attempting to kidnap her for a hostage. The rumors also suggest that her betrothal to Karyudo has already been dissolved by Seiken himself. I even heard that there was a secret bounty issued on Karyudo's head!"

Makiko muttered under her breath and turned back to the window. "This is worse than we assumed," she said.

"Yes," Yamazaki said. "I passed Dainagon on my way here, and by the look she gave me, I am sure that she will make sure Seiken-sama is aware of these falsehoods herself."

"Bah! Whatever the Crane or the Phoenix do, the possible outcome is still the same," Jinn-Ja snapped. "We face the annihilation of our clan, Fuyuko, dogged on all sides by the enemies Nitoshi has conjured. The Lion. The Crane. The Phoenix. The Emperor himself. The lies and accusations and demands for our annihilation will only grow! We will be swallowed by these depths!"

Nitoshi has doomed us all.

Fuyuko's mind struggled to find refuge in the crashing waves.

The Scorpion will be no more, and there is nothing you can do.

She thought of the hatred in Natsuyo's eyes, the livid despair of betrayal that glistened and stormed with tears.

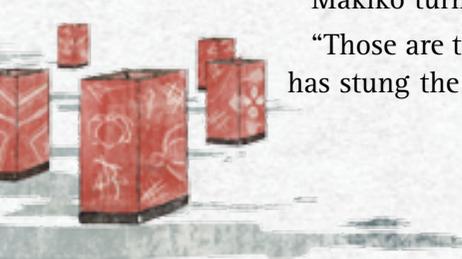
We will be swallowed by these depths.

Fuyuko stood slowly. Her knees quaked in anger and her thoughts whirled in confusion at the possibilities, but she tried to be firm.

"I can swim," she whispered, looking at Jinn-Ja. Then she looked at Yamazaki, whose oni mask showed little but fearsome disapproval. "I can swim," she said.

Makiko turned away from the window. "What do you mean, Fuyuko?"

"Those are the words of our family. Bayushi. I can swim. As that family story suggests, Nitoshi has stung the frog that ferried us across the river. Now everyone expects us to drown." Fuyuko



walked to the door with small, hurried footsteps, but with each, her resolve grew. “But I can swim.”

Jinn-Ja sat back and heckled her. “In this chaotic swell Nitoshi has plunged us into? All we can do is splash around until the Emperor orders our throats slit.”

“What is your plan, Fuyuko?” Yamazaki asked, his voice still twisted with pessimism. “What can we do?”

“Nitoshi has chosen this path for himself,” she said, resolution tightening her voice. “It is full of darkness, and leads to death, but though he has dragged us along, his darkness will be our deliverance. I know what to tell Seiken-sama.”

The shoji screen slid open once more. Kayo entered, her face grim. “Fuyuko-san,” she said. “They are here.”

Six imperial guards with the gold chrysanthemums emblazoned on their armor followed her. “We have come to escort you into the presence of Emperor Seiken for your audience.”

Fuyuko nodded and made to follow them. Makiko caught hold of her hand.

“Be careful, Fuyuko,” she warned. “Resolution and boldness can be our weapon today, but humility must be our armor.”

Fuyuko smiled and squeezed Makiko’s hand. “You are always the wisest, my teacher. I shall return with good news.”

Toshi Ranbo, the Throne Room

Fuyuko bowed lower than she ever had before. The weight of her task pressed hard upon her shoulders, and the quivering in her stomach had turned into lead. The Emperor sat upon the Steel Throne with an unreadable expression. She hardly dared to breathe, but forced a quick exhale to clear her head before rising to face him again.

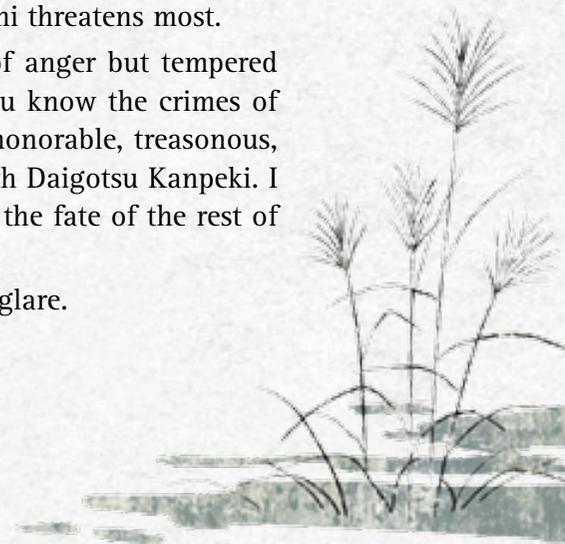
A knot of Crane courtiers, including Doji Natsuyo and Doji Dainagon, stood to the left of the throne, their blue-clad forms rigid with judgement and their eyes sharp with anger. Natsuyo’s face still showed some small traces of her tears, but her porcelain hair and posture were back to their perfect level of dignity. Opposite from them stood a few Phoenix courtiers and several shugenja, including Isawa Kaname. Kaname’s eyes sparkled in rage, but she quelled all traces of it in her face.

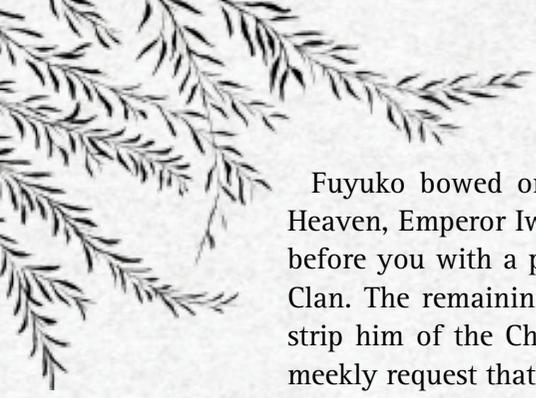
Surrounding the dais of the throne stood twenty imperial guards. As a precaution, Fuyuko had not been allowed closer than a dozen paces. Her person had been searched for weapons and poisons, and her mask and hair ornaments had been removed. Feeling naked and vulnerable, her voice withered in her throat under the baleful eyes of everyone present.

Maybe it will lend an element of humility to my plea, she thought. Her stomach clenched again. But I need strength to ask the impossible... protection from the man Nitoshi threatens most.

“Bayushi Fuyuko,” Emperor Seiken said, his strong voice not devoid of anger but tempered with control. “I know you are aware of the reports I have heard, and you know the crimes of Bayushi Nitoshi against the Crane and the Phoenix. His actions were dishonorable, treasonous, and sinful, and I declare him a traitor against heaven in his collusion with Daigotsu Kanpeki. I bring you before me to answer for Nitoshi’s actions so that I may decide the fate of the rest of the Scorpion Clan.”

Natsuyo and the other Crane nodded. The Phoenix merely continued to glare.





Fuyuko bowed once more, closing her eyes in a final desperate search for hope. "Son of Heaven, Emperor Iweko II..." She paused as the air in her body fluttered in fear. "I humbly bow before you with a plea in my heart for your pardon and a petition for mercy on behalf of my Clan. The remaining families disavow the actions of Nitoshi the Traitor and request that you strip him of the Champion's title. His dishonor belongs to him and his followers alone, and I meekly request that you remember those of my Clan who remain faithful. Just as there are those among the Spider who hold a claim to your mercy, I ask that you grant the same leniency to my clansmen and myself."

Seiken shook his head. "I cannot give mercy merely on those grounds. The Spider have proven their own loyalty, but that sacrifice does not prove your own. What can you say that would convince me of your loyalty?"

"The reassurance I bring to you comes with the complete condemnation of Bayushi Nitoshi and..." Here she paused again.

I can swim.

"... I beg for the right commit seppuku as an entire Clan to absolve our name."

A cry of surprise reverberated around the room. Dainagon's eyes grew wide with surprise. Natsuyo had turned her head and lifted her fan before her face to hide her face. Kaname's lips tightened, but her expression hardly changed. Seiken furrowed his brows and sat back as if in shock by the news. "You offer the death of your entire Clan?"

The swell of incredulity around her bolstered her resolve. "I have spoken with the daimyo of all the Scorpion families, apart from Nitoshi, and they know that his behavior has doomed us. Too many of the Shosuro and Yogo families have fled into dishonor with Nitoshi to rally under Kanpeki's banner. The Soshi have also lost many to Nitoshi's cause, while the Bayushi, abandoned by our daimyo, remain scattered, broken, or prisoners of war to the Lion in their own lands. With so much sin and blood mixed into our ranks, we fear that our only course of action to disperse the clouds of suspicion is for us to die an honorable death with permission from our Emperor."

"This is a trick, Seiken-sama," Kaname hissed out of turn, her characteristic fiery spirit threatening to blast forth. She stepped forward and pointed at Fuyuko with an accusing finger. "You murderers deceive us with more death. You deceive the Son of Heaven!"

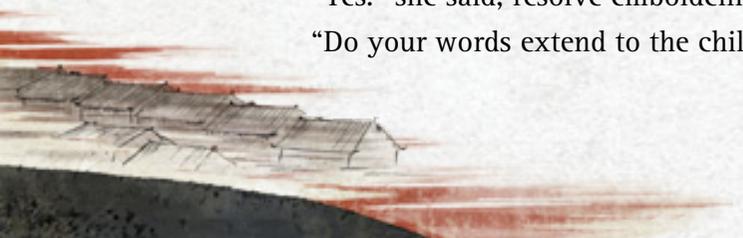
Fuyuko fell to her knees and bowed her forehead onto the wooden floor, her hair hiding the tears that began to flow. Her voice quivered in her sincerity. "Kaname-san, I understand your pain, and I bow myself before our Emperor for its sake. Our sacrifice does not attempt to atone for the sins of Nitoshi nor to deceive. I acknowledge that our offer can never undo the evil that has been done. We only offer ourselves to our Emperor, as his humble servants, for destruction if he finds our crimes unworthy of mercy. We only beg that we be allowed to die with honor as a testament to the loyalty the Scorpion Clan hold sacred, that loyalty that only Nitoshi and his followers have forsaken."

"Seiken-sama," Dainagon whispered, ignoring Natsuyo who attempted to silence her by tugging on her kimono sleeve. "I agree with Isawa Kaname that this must be a trick, some attempt to manipulate your decisions by forcing you..."

Emperor Seiken lifted his hand, silencing her. His frown deepened. "Bayushi Fuyuko, you are willing to die for the forgiveness of heaven?"

"Yes." she said, resolve emboldening her words. "As are my Clansmen."

"Do your words extend to the children of your Clan?"



Fuyuko raised her head from the floor only for a moment before bowing once more beneath his authority. "We will do as you see fit," she replied. "Some of your subjects here would say that even a small scorpion can sting, and our total annihilation may be the only way to quell their and prejudice hatred."

The Emperor shut his eyes, pondering, the anger in his face unchanged by her plea. Then leaned forward in his throne, opening his eyes. He nodded to a guard who lifted Fuyuko to her feet. She kept her head bowed to her chest, meekly awaiting his decision.

"Dainagon, Kaname," Seiken said, keeping his eyes on Fuyuko. "Your convictions move me, and I see the dilemma at hand in a new light. My enemies have declared themselves – Daigostu Kanpeki, Bayushi Nitoshi, and their followers – and they seek to weaken our kingdom with fire and bloodshed in a war that they will spread to these very walls. We must not let it happen."

Dainagon's haughtiness returned in an almost imperceptible loosening of her grimace, as if in triumph, while Kaname stayed immovable as stone in her wrath.

"Crane, Phoenix... Nitoshi intends to destroy your Clans. He took your Champions to breed hatred in your hearts to cripple us from within. Should we act on this hatred, the divisions that weaken Rokugan would fracture our Empire into the pieces that Kanpeki can devour. There can be no doubt of Bayushi Fuyuko's loyalty to me and our Empire. Shall we then murder her and help Kanpeki defeat us?"

The courtiers remained silent. Fuyuko lifted her eyes to meet those of her Emperor. He stood.

"No, we shall not," he said. "We are still the descendants of the kami. Rokugan shall still have nine Great Clans. Nine, united together. We will win."

Silence echoed Seiken's speech, but the moment had melted the hardness from Kaname's face. She looked ashamed but resolute and turned to share glances with her clansmen. Natsuyo brushed passed Dainagon and rushed from the dais toward Fuyuko, her friend. She stopped only a step away, her eyes shining with tears as her full heart overflowed.

"Fuyuko-san," she said, bowing low in public apology. "Gomen nasai. I spoke in anger and deceived myself. Forgive my words and accusations."

Dainagon followed Natsuyo toward Fuyuko, her pride wilted, but bowed respectfully and with propriety. "Forgive me as well," she said. "I will be sure to pass on this news to the rest of our Clan."

The other courtiers took turns to approach and acknowledge Seiken's decision as well, and Fuyuko, her heart still trembling, nodded to each of them. As the throne room emptied, she gave a last, long bow to the Emperor.

"Your mercy is generous," she said, bowing low again for a final time. "My Clan lives only to serve you, our Emperor."

He nodded his approval, and Fuyuko took her leave. As the throne room doors shut behind her, she nearly collapsed, steadying herself under the strain of relief. Natsuyo was waiting in the hall for her, rushing to meet her.

"Fuyu-chan," she said, smiling though not in complete happiness. The hurt of Makoto's death still forced an awkwardness into her features, and Fuyuko took her hands.

"Thank you," she said, bowing to her friend again. "Thank you for forgiving me."

"I did not realize this before," Natsuyo said, her voice soft with sorrow, "but we both have lost Clan Champions, haven't we?"

Fuyuko nodded. "Yes. But we..."

Her voice trailed off as an imperial guard stormed through the hall, nearly crashing into them. He burst past them into the throne room to Emperor Seiken. Suddenly, an alarm bell clanged outside the palace followed by an unearthly shriek that blasted through the air in piercing howls. The two courtiers sped to the window to see the sky blackened as with an impending storm. The horizon was black with soldiers and oni that roiled before the walls of the city. Plumes of smoke began to shuffle into the sky.

Kanpeki was here.

A Lion Encampment outside Renga Mura, Lion Lands

Days had fled since the Lion withdrew from Seiketsu Pass. Visions of blackened claws and broken blades lingered in Akodo Kano's mind as he paced circles around his tent, hands folded behind his back, head sunken in defeat. The image of endless myriads of monsters and madmen that Daigotsu Kanpeki had led out of the Shinomen Forest continued to march before his eyes, and the memory of the brutal destruction left in their wake still burned deep behind them. The Lion army that had stood in the pass, a thin line between darkness and the end of Rokugan, broke like a spider's silk. Though Dairuko had fought well, leading Lion and Crab forces in defense, the onslaught had been too heavy, and the Champion had been forced to withdraw.

Kano hadn't dared to acknowledge it at the time, and even now he was afraid to admit it to anyone but his own conscience, but he knew it would happen. This time, the darkness would win. This time, the Rokugan would fall. He had seen the future and felt in his soul it was true.

If that is our fate what else can do we do? he thought. There are no Thunders to save us. Should Kanpeki take the throne, the Thousand Years of Darkness will be upon us.

The doubt infested his heart, his bones, his soul. Ages of villains had tried to destroy the Empire, and ages of heroes had stopped them. However, here, now, the scale would tip, and that legacy of Rokugan would come crashing down. He had seen it. It was known.

Just give up, little lion. You have done what you could and have lost. It is done...

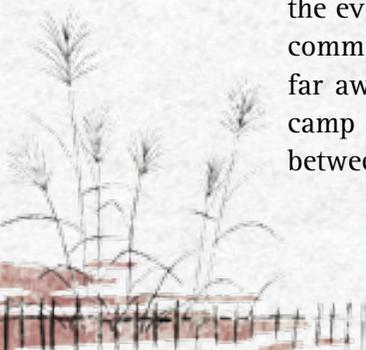
"To hell with that," Kano roared to himself, slamming his fist onto the table, jarring the specters of hopelessness from his mind. "As Dairuko lives, so do the Lion."

His mind raced with the strategy, shuffling the pieces around and weighing the possibilities. If only the Crab reinforcements would arrive.

"We could catch the Spider from the rear," he said to himself. "We could smash them between Toshi Ranbo and the combined forces of Rokugan." But there had been word of another seal and another battle. Kano had no idea if the Crab still existed, and he had heard the fate of the Mantis...

"We still have time," he said to himself. Toshi Ranbo was far from Seiketsu Pass, and an army the size of Kanpeki's was powerful but slow. It would still be a day and half before the ocean of tainted samurai and Shadowlands creatures reached the Imperial City. However, if the Crab did not arrive by morning, Dairuko would have to move without them. More pessimism wriggled within him, and he nearly bellowed in rage.

Kano burst out of the confines of his tenmaku to clear his mind and refocus his energies for the evening's preparations. However, instead of calm in the twilight, he could sense an ominous commotion. The lowlight of the campfires shifted and sputtered in a rising wind. He could hear far away shouts. He strode in their direction. Several scouts and sentries hurried through the camp in the direction of Crab lands, and Kano overheard the words "they've come!" spread between the tents. He grabbed a nearby samurai who ran toward him.



“What is going on?” he demanded. “Who is here?”

“The Scorpion!” the soldier gasped. “A small contingent has just ridden up to our camp.”

“How many?”

“About two dozen or so. They are led by Yogo Amika, but Yogo Haruto rides with her.”

Kano clenched his fists, a fury building in his chest. “Haruto? Follow me!”

He ran in the direction of the uproar, nearly crashing into Dairuko as they raced toward the Scorpion shugenja.

“Don’t let them get too close to you, Kano!” she ordered, her katana already drawn. “And keep your wits.”

Kano remembered Haruto’s ploys during the War of the Twins and drew his own katana. “What do they want?”

They stopped running at edge of a hill that sloped down into a darkened valley. The sun was setting, but he could easily make out the red figures seemingly suspended at the edge of the Lion encampment like crimson ghosts on their horses. No sooner had the two Lion commanders entered shouting distance than Dairuko yelled, “Here to join your fallen brothers, Scorpion filth?”

The stoic eyes of Yogo Haruto stared unflinchingly out from behind his painted mask, showing no signs of fear or anger at Dairuko’s taunt. However, as Kano and Dairuko rushed closer toward Amika, it was clear the shugenja showed no intention of hiding her contempt, smirking with disgust at their approach.

“We have brought enough death to the Lion for one war,” replied Amika. “We have different intentions tonight.”

“If you plan on sowing chaos in my camp, I will permit you to take no step closer. I should slay you and be done with it. Perhaps you have not heard, but there are more pressing matters than Scorpion negotiations at present,” growled the Lion Champion.

“You look like a soldier, but you act like a child, Lion, speaking much faster than you think,” Yogo Haruto sneered. “We draw no blades. We cast no spells. We have not entered your camp, yet you have no mind to ask yourselves why.”

“I have no mind to swat flies when a tiger is in my home!” Dairuko roared, fury written on her brow.

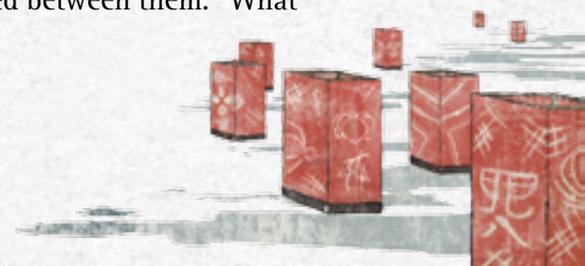
“You Lion give orders as often as you breathe, but I am afraid we have orders of our own, and we will not leave until they are accomplished,” Amika hissed, showing her hands as a sign of non-aggression.

Akodo Kano stepped forward and commanded, “State your intent and be gone, Scorpion. You have tried our patience enough.”

Dairuko regained composure before addressing Amika again. “Yes. I will not waste an instant more on trifles.”

Amika dismounted, careful to keep the folds of her riding kimono well-pleated. “We know your pressing engagement with Kanpeki and his fiends, but their victories bring darkness to all of Rokugan. Soon, a night will fall that will swallow all of us. We have been ordered to bring you a light in that darkness, a way to see through the fog of war and find the enemy we all fight. In the end, for all its strength, a blind lion is no more dangerous than a housecat.”

Dairuko cursed under her breath and raised her katana, but Kano stepped between them. “What is this light you speak of?”



Amika motioned toward her shugenja, and three of them approached with a large, lidded basket woven from black grasses and red silk thread. They set it before the Lion commanders, and Kano and Dairuko took a precautious step away from it.

“What is this?” Dairuko snapped, pointing at it with her sword.

Amika withdrew the basket’s lid and a flash of light dazzled the Lion for an instant. Kano’s body lurched into fighting stance, ready to counter an enemy with a defensive kata, but the Scorpion samurai did not move. There in the basket lay an enormous crystal, glittering red in the dying rays of the sun.

“What is this?” he asked, almost hypnotized by the strange stone as it glistened before him. “Some powerful nemuranai?”

Amika nodded, taking a step back in pageantry in offering of their gift. “We present to you the Oni’s Eye, a scry stone to see all within Rokugan’s borders. It is a gift... from our Champion.”

“Nitoshi?” Dairuko exclaimed, once again growling and lifting her sword. “A trick.”

“We have no purpose for tricks right now,” Amika said, laying a hand on the crystal. “You said yourself there are more pressing matters.”

“Trick or no, this is a powerful artifact with tactical benefits,” Kano whispered, turning to Dairuko and sheathing his sword. The glitter of the artifact soothed him. “We are in no position to decline.”

“By no means is this a permanent contribution,” Haruto snarled, reticence and frustration pinching his words. “Our gift is its use. You can see anything in Rokugan, so long as the Shadowland’s influence does not grow too strong.”

Kano stepped forward. “Show me our Crab reinforcements,” he said, careful not to sound too commanding.

The three Yogo shugenja muttered and gestured over the face of the giant crystal, and in its depths shimmered a cold image of an encamped army of Crab forces. Despite the dim light of the dying sun, Kano could see land surrounded them, marking them as just south of the city of Tonfajusten.

“They are still half a day away,” Kano said, pointing into the heart of the Oni’s Eye. He could feel the whirl of strategies begin to materialize into cogent threads of thought. The elements were coming together. “We can rendezvous with them tomorrow afternoon, giving us enough time to hopefully catch Kanpeki just as he approaches Toshi Ranbo.”

Dairuko nodded. “Perhaps. But our scouts observed Kanpeki moving his forces north, toward the City of the Rich Frog. He must intend to follow the road along the Drowned Merchant River.” She suddenly paused as though a dangerous thought flickered into her mind. “Oh no. Amika, show us Kanpeki.”

The Yogo shugenja repeated their ritual, and the crystal glittered with a new image. The walls of Toshi Ranbo.

Dairuko staggered back, her face paling a little and her jaw sinking in disbelieving despair. “Kano, he traveled by river. We are too late.”

Kano stared at the image of Kanpeki’s forces converging on the imperial capital. Great columns of smoke already flew above much of the city, and the red sun had fallen far enough behind the horizon to reveal fire everywhere. Oni, goblins, demons, undead, and tainted samurai all boiled through the streets, preceding the charge of Daigotsu Kanpeki as he slew every creature that fell into his path. They poured over all resisting force as though unopposed, approaching the palace. He could even see ninja speeding along the rooftops, showering the soldiers below with kunai, arrows, and poisoned darts.

“The Emperor,” Kano said, his own incredulity tightening in his chest. “He must be saved! Show us the throne room!”

The Oni’s Eye shimmered again, but the image that materialized once again caught Kano off guard. His breath left his body, and he staggered as if to fall. He reached his arms out and steadied himself on the crystal, its cold surface chilling him to the bone. In the throne room at Toshi Ranbo, upon the Steel Throne itself, sat Bayushi Nitoshi.

The Throne Room, Toshi Ranbo

Bayushi Nitoshi sat on the Steel Throne, his katana Churetsu across his lap, sheathed but ready. His eyes were closed in meditation, but not a meditation for calm. This was a meditation for bloodlust. He could feel his heart echoing in his skull, the push and pull of his blood through him, readying him for battle, readying him for death.

Bayushi Fuyuko entered the throne room through a secret panel, her clothes and hair splendidly arrayed in gold and black-steel ornaments. Her mask shined with new lacquer, and in her delicate hand, she carried a short knife with a jade blade. The edge dripped with blood.

She stood before her Clan Champion and bowed. “Nitoshi-sama,” she said, reverently.

He did not open his eyes but made a slight nod. “You have done well, Fuyuko.” His voice sliced through the quiet of the room. “Our efforts were not in vain.”

“No, Nitoshi-sama. Our Clan lives and our Emperor shall lead it.”

Nitoshi opened his eyes. “And Seiken-sama?”

The sound of a struggle and the scream of a dying man reverberated through the walls nearby. Fuyuko turned toward the sound only for a moment. “The Phoenix have begun preparations for Walking the Way. They will take Seiken-sama, the dowager Empress, Lady Ayameko, Lord Shibatsu, and Lady Miaka to a secret location.”

Nitoshi nodded. “And Karyudo?”

“He has decided to stay. The spell takes time, and for more travelers, more time.”

“Time can be bought.” Nitoshi paused. He would pay that price.

“And Lady Kanihime? Your daughter? Kanpeki still has them, I presume?”

“Soshi Kitaiko is with them. She will get them out.”

Fuyuko bowed. “Then all is accounted for. All goes as planned.”

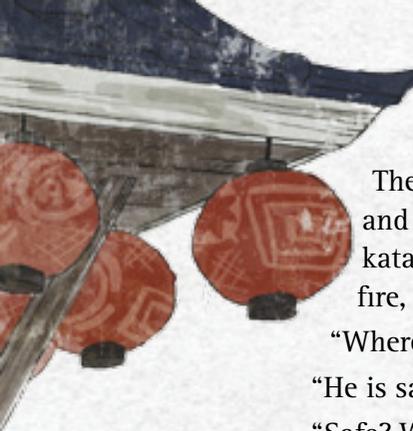
Nitoshi nodded. “You have served faithfully, Fuyuko.”

“Nitoshi-sama, it was an honor...”

He opened his eyes, freezing her mid-word. She bowed in reverence. “Go. Tell Karyudo that we send him with our Clan’s blessing. And again, tell Seiken-sama that the Scorpion live only to serve.”

Fuyuko bowed one last time, low and deep. “Yes, Nitoshi-sama.” She hurried from the room and disappeared once more through the secret door. Nitoshi did not miss the glint of a tear in her eye. He drew Churetsu from its sheath. The blade shone with a magical red gleam. He could see his face reflected in the pristine steel, crimson as though painted in blood.

“Kanihime,” he whispered to himself. “Kaiko-chan.” He sliced a deep wound into his thumb and slid it across his forehead and cheeks, streaking his face in a bloody completion of his mempo. The coppery scent cleared his mind and readied his soul. “Tonight, I must be more than myself, Bayushi Nitoshi. I must be a price to be paid, a soul to be saved, a hope for Rokugan. Tonight, I must be Bayushi Shoju.”



The far door to the throne room crashed open, the wood shattering and the hinges twisting and squealing as Daigotsu Kanpeki entered. His clothes were stained in gore, and his katana dripped scarlet as he thundered into the throne room. His eyes blazed with black fire, and a maniacal smile coiled his face in his bloodlust.

“Where is Seiken?” he roared, approaching Nitoshi, keen in his victory over Toshi Ranbo.

“He is safe,” Nitoshi replied, remaining seated on the Steel Throne.

“Safe? What do you mean safe?” Kanpeki raged. “His death marks the dawn of my new empire.”

Nitoshi smiled, though his mempo hid the sentiment. “One cannot rush the rising sun.”

Kanpeki glared. “You mock me! Where is he?”

The Scorpion Champion chuckled but made no answer to the question. Instead, he caressed the cold armrest of the Steel Throne, tracing the intricate patterns with his bloody fingers. “You know, the old imperial throne was made of jade, which wouldn’t be suited for tainted flesh. You are lucky this one is made of steel, though no Hantei has ever sat on it. This throne even has a history with your father, a corruption from an earlier time. Fitting wouldn’t you say?”

“Enough of your lectures, Scorpion!” Kanpeki’s rage swelled in his hulking form, and his hand quivered around his katana in impatience.

Nitoshi rose and stepped from the dais toward the would-be emperor. “My Clan was charged with cleansing the taint from this throne... Today, that responsibility is mine.”

Kanpeki’s eyes narrowed. “Always the traitor, Nitoshi.” He raised his sword and pointed it at Nitoshi. “How predictable. The Scorpion are ever full of poison. But I will crush you like an insect and paint this room with your blood. You will not save Seiken, and after I have destroyed you both, my first decree as Shadow Emperor will be to exterminate every Scorpion in Rokugan.”

At that moment, Daigotsu Jemaru snaked into the room followed by a dozen tainted samurai. Kanpeki pointed beyond them. “Find the Emperor while I deal with this traitor,” he commanded.

Nitoshi laughed, a wild glint forming in his eye. “It won’t be that easy, Kanpeki. Remember the story I told you at Kyuden Miya? We Scorpion are famous for killing Hantei.”

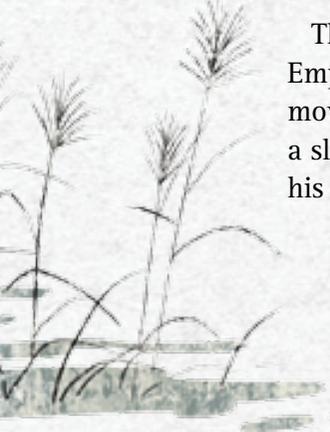
Suddenly, an explosion shook the entire castle. The Spider infantry toppled into one another, only to disappear as the floor beneath them crumbled away. The lamps pitched and shattered on the floor, and a small fire sprung up in the corner. The walls swayed, groaning and straining against the ceiling, which began to collapse. Wood and stone smashed into rubble, sealing the entryways. Then all was quiet.

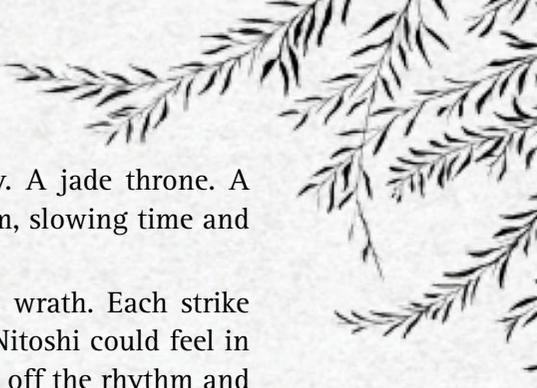
Confusion marred Kanpeki’s rage and he whirled around to find an exit like a trapped beast.

“Neither of us will be leaving here anytime soon,” Nitoshi said.

Kanpeki said nothing, only marking Nitoshi for death with a baleful glare. Nitoshi stood from the Steel Throne, meeting his gaze with ready eyes. Without waiting another second, Kanpeki raised his katana, dark energy emanating from his body, through his arms, and into the blade. Shadows and smoke curled around him, and he lunged toward Nitoshi, his weapon screaming as it sliced through the air.

The Scorpion Champion leaped to the side, dodging the unimaginable power of the Shadow Emperor. Remaining quick on the balls of his feet, he danced around Kanpeki’s thundering movements as a flurry of attacks chased him, knowing that speed was his only hope for survival, a slim one at that. Kanpeki bellowed in hellish fury, and Nitoshi felt the icy trickles of fear enter his heart.





Suddenly, from deep within his soul, Nitoshi felt a flicker of familiarity. A jade throne. A Lion's charge. He had danced this step before. The images flashed before him, slowing time and connecting him to a past lived long before. Tonight, he must be Shoju.

Kanpeki charged again, this time quick as a viper, gaining speed in his wrath. Each strike shrieked in the air, the whistle of the blade growing closer with each slice. Nitoshi could feel in the air Kanpeki's death strike approaching, and he knew he needed to throw off the rhythm and regain initiative.

He spun away from the barrage of strikes and laughed, "To think, I once feared you, Kanpeki. You disappoint."

The Shadow Emperor howled in a maniacal frenzy, but the taunt had worked, and he overstepped in his haste to end the Scorpion Champion. Instead of dodging the blow, Nitoshi stepped into the attack, catching Kanpeki's katana at the hilt, ripping the sword from his hands and flinging it across the room. Kanpeki, without losing momentum, turned and tore the Steel Throne from the dais, hoisting it above his head in unholy power. He hurled it straight at Nitoshi, catching the Scorpion Champion's leg, shattering the bones and pinning him to the floor.

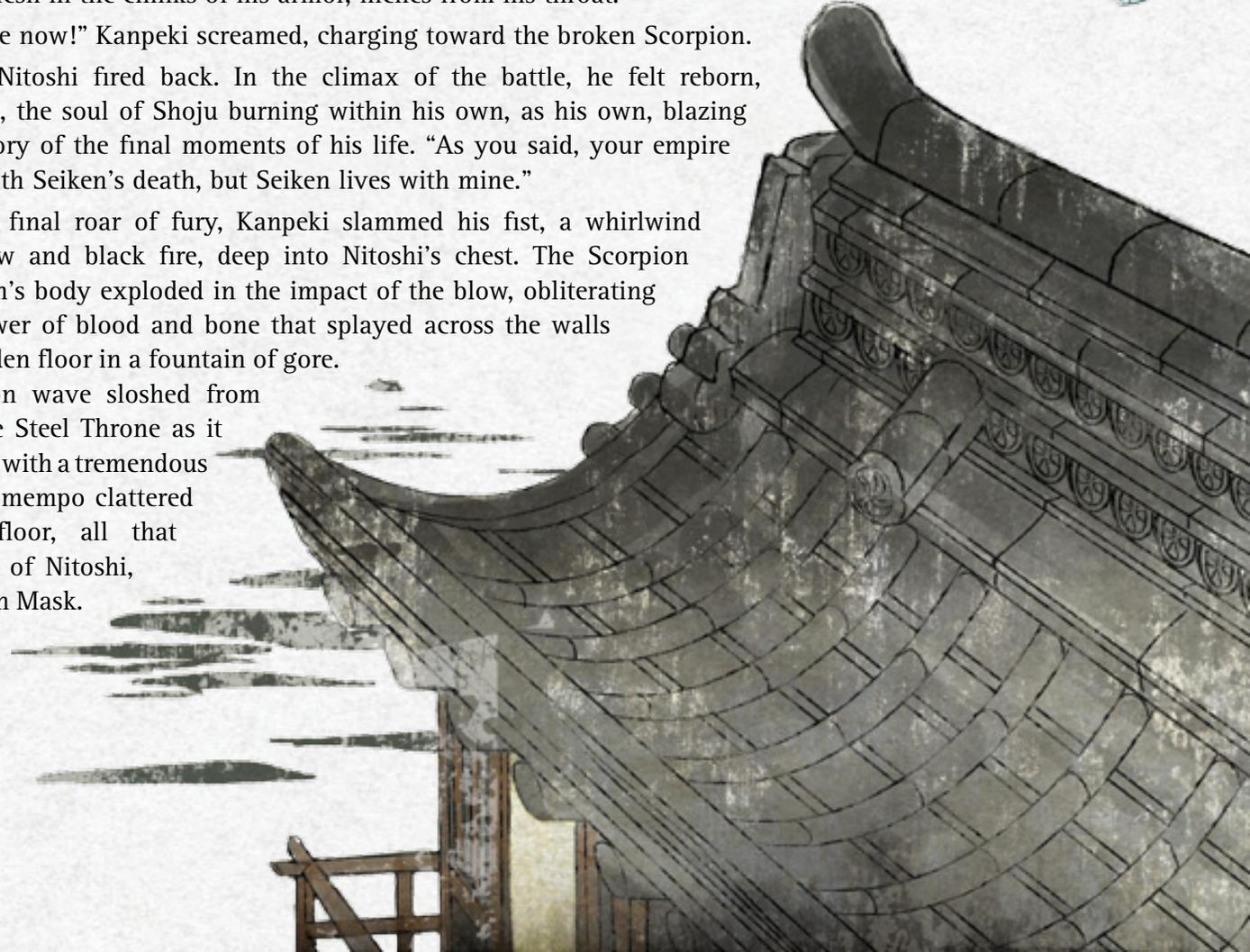
Pain convulsed within Nitoshi's body, but though he slumped sideways, he did not fall. Another image flashed before his mind, again the ancient familiarity echoing within him. In the shadow of his soul's memory, he raised his sword and slammed it into throne. Churetsu's blade shrieked as it cleaved a deep scar in the steel, showering him with sparks. A green flash caught his eye, and he saw, inside the metal of the throne, dozens of hidden jade talismans had been buried within to cleanse it from taint. Nitoshi acted in an instant, knowing he only had seconds before Kanpeki recovered his katana. He ripped shards of jade from the throne and cast them in succession like a kunai at the Shadow Emperor. They plunged deep into Kanpeki's shoulder, neck, cheek, stabbing into his flesh in the chinks of his armor, inches from his throat.

"You die now!" Kanpeki screamed, charging toward the broken Scorpion.

"Yes!" Nitoshi fired back. In the climax of the battle, he felt reborn, redeemed, the soul of Shoju burning within his own, as his own, blazing in the glory of the final moments of his life. "As you said, your empire begins with Seiken's death, but Seiken lives with mine."

With a final roar of fury, Kanpeki slammed his fist, a whirlwind of shadow and black fire, deep into Nitoshi's chest. The Scorpion Champion's body exploded in the impact of the blow, obliterating in a shower of blood and bone that splayed across the walls and wooden floor in a fountain of gore.

A crimson wave sloshed from under the Steel Throne as it collapsed with a tremendous boom. A mempo clattered to the floor, all that remained of Nitoshi, the Poison Mask.



The Lion Encampment outside Renga Mura

Akodo Dairuko stepped back from the Oni's Eye, her mind reeling from the vision of Nitoshi's death. Surprise had shaken her, and her mind still raced over the ramifications of the Scorpion's sacrifice. She lifted her eyes, searching for the right emotion, the right response to the death of her old enemy.

Nitoshi was dead. Yet he had saved the Emperor. She recognized the honor in his demise, almost envious as it tickled her secret desire to meet her fate in like manner – a sacrifice for the Empire, duty as a samurai.

"Damn you, Nitoshi," she whispered, turning away. "You poison even my hatred of you."

Akodo Kano still held himself steady, both arms latched onto the giant crystal, a strange sense of dazed remorse drawn on his face. "Nitoshi, a hero," he absentmindedly said.

Yogo Amika stared blankly, shaken by the gruesome end of her master. She reached a shaky hand out to Yogo Haruto who stood silent and unmoving as a stone beside her. She steadied herself on his arm. "It is done," she said. "He's dead."

"At least, there is no corpse for Kanpeki to reanimate," Haruto said, his voice almost sneering in his bitterness.

"A strange sight to witness," Kano whispered to himself again. "Nitoshi, a hero."

Nitoshi knew, Dairuko thought. He showed us this in the Oni's Eye for a reason.

Her mind whirled, thinking tactically about the vision, wondering what she was to glean from Nitoshi's gift.

"With Kanpeki's breach of the city, Toshi Ranbo's fortifications are in shambles," she said, thinking out loud. "The city now is more of a trap than a shield for Kanpeki and his army. And his swift approach to the city means there's no rear guard."

"If ever a chance to take the fight to Kanpeki existed, Nitoshi has shown us one," Kano said, regaining himself after the shock. He stood and stared into Dairuko's hard face. "The time to strike is now."

She nodded and sheathed her katana, turning back toward her soldiers. "Send riders to the Crab. Tell them to move, as we no longer have time to wait. Nitoshi has shown us how a Scorpion Champion dies. Now to see how a Spider does. Strike the tent. We march."



ECHOES OF THUNDER

BY ROBERT DENTON III, SHAWN CARMAN, AND FRED WAN

Another glint on the serene beach caught Nobu's eye. Dashing barefoot over the ivory sands, he was there in moments. The sapphire waves rolled warm over his ankles and then drew back into the sea as he scooped his hand into the sand. He grinned at his treasure, another oblong piece of ocean glass. Frosty and green, it glinted as he held it towards the jade sun. For a moment, Nobu wondered where it came from. Ocean glass was relatively common on the shores of Gotei island, irregularly-shaped transparent beads of varying colors, but none Nobu knew could explain its origin. All he knew was that Old Man Gempei would pay two *zeni* for a handful of the green ones, three *zeni* for a handful of the red, and one entire *bu* for each piece of blue, purple, or yellow.

Nobu dropped the smooth glass fragment into his pouch and scanned the blue horizon. He judged there were hours left before his Sensei would call the afternoon *kata*. Plenty of time. He returned his attention to the beach and combed it for other valuable fragments.

As the tide retreated, it left something half-buried on the beach. Nobu spotted it after a few moments, brow furrowing. He approached, blinking as his eyes verified his suspicions, unsure if the object was truly as it appeared. With the object at his feet, he looked up and down the breach. He was alone but for the call of gulls and the thundering crash of the deep ocean. No one else had seen it. Nobu knelt to get a closer look.

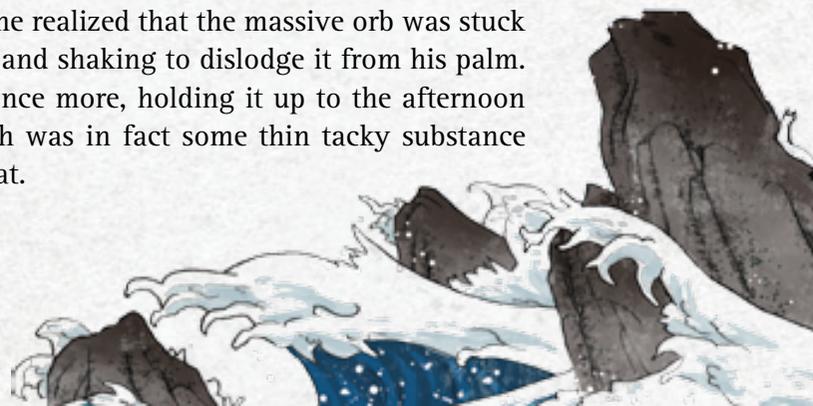
It was a flawless pearl the size of a fist. Smooth, eggshell white, polished by the sea and glowing in the sun. It was almost metallic in sheen. Nobu could recognize a pearl; the heimin of his father's estate were pearl and coral divers, so he had seen them before. But the typical pearl was gray or brown, sandy, marred, and irregularly-shaped. Never had he seen a pearl like this. It was a perfect ivory sphere resting in the sand.

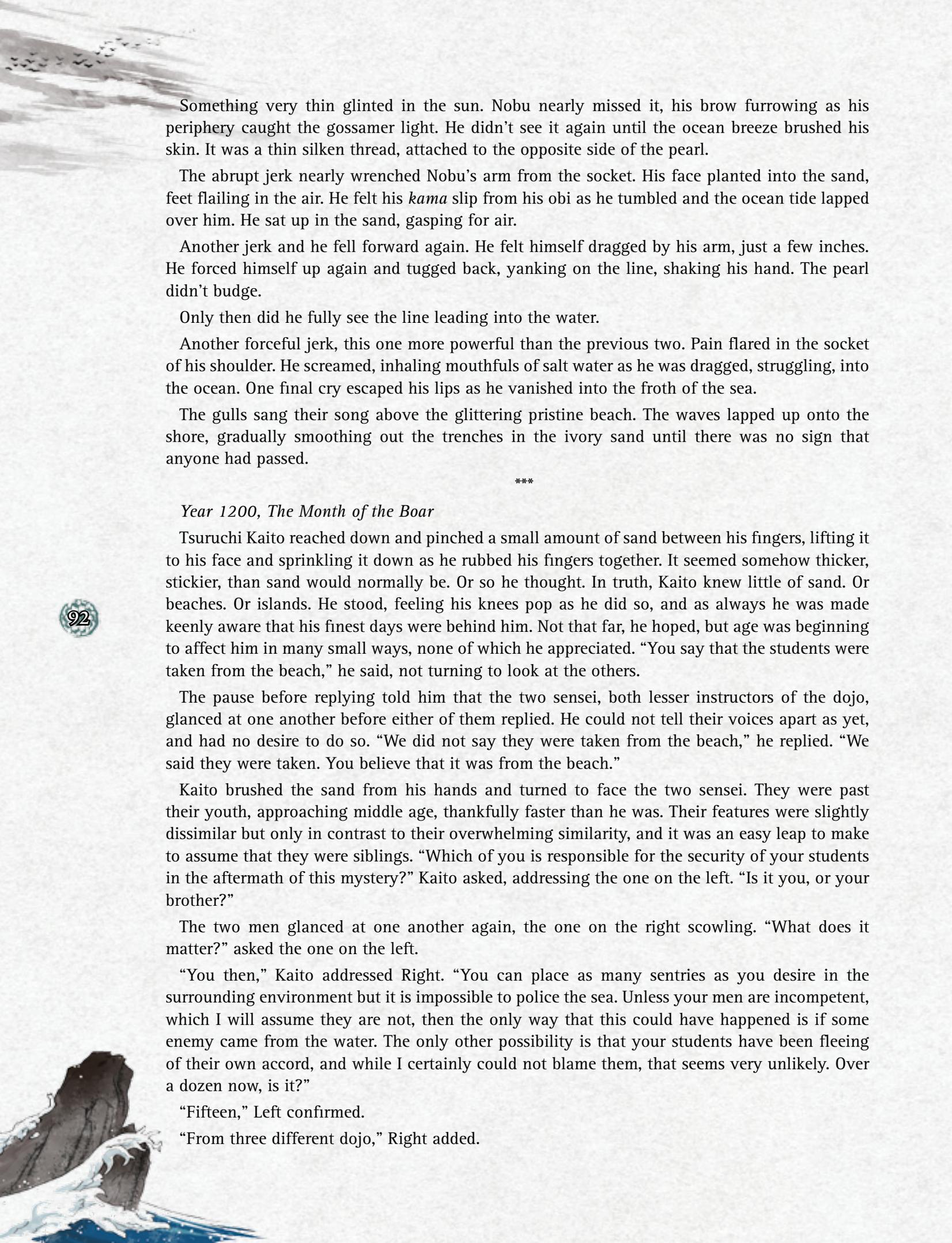
Nobu looked once more at his surroundings. Affirming that he was still alone, he gently lifted the bauble from the sand. The pearl was heavy in his palm. On its perfect reflective surface he saw himself wearing fine silks and drinking rich wines. He saw the promise of gold. Nobu licked his lips in the salty air of the beach and whispered thanks to Daikoku.

As Nobu stood, a thought crossed his mind. He could always offer this as a gift to his sensei. The dojo needed a new roof after the last storm had torn its clay shingles. They needed new mats for the beginning students. A pearl this size could easily replace those things. There would be no need for his sensei to shame himself by asking these things of his lord. It would place Nobu into his teacher's favor.

Nobu smirked. No, this pearl was not for the old man. Better that the money should serve Nobu than a sensei that couldn't even manage the upkeep of his own dojo. That man's life was nearly over, but Nobu's had just begun. With this pearl, Nobu could begin the foundations of his own estate, of his own stake in the Silk and Spice markets. He could be as wealthy as his father by the time of his own *gempukku*. Why waste it on someone who-

Nobu stopped. In attempting to tuck the pearl away, he realized that the massive orb was stuck to his hand. He frowned, turning his hand at the wrist and shaking to dislodge it from his palm. The pearl remained affixed. He scrutinized the pearl once more, holding it up to the afternoon light. What he took as the sheen of the ocean's polish was in fact some thin tacky substance coating the orb. He'd never heard of something like that.





Something very thin glinted in the sun. Nobu nearly missed it, his brow furrowing as his periphery caught the gossamer light. He didn't see it again until the ocean breeze brushed his skin. It was a thin silken thread, attached to the opposite side of the pearl.

The abrupt jerk nearly wrenched Nobu's arm from the socket. His face planted into the sand, feet flailing in the air. He felt his *kama* slip from his obi as he tumbled and the ocean tide lapped over him. He sat up in the sand, gasping for air.

Another jerk and he fell forward again. He felt himself dragged by his arm, just a few inches. He forced himself up again and tugged back, yanking on the line, shaking his hand. The pearl didn't budge.

Only then did he fully see the line leading into the water.

Another forceful jerk, this one more powerful than the previous two. Pain flared in the socket of his shoulder. He screamed, inhaling mouthfuls of salt water as he was dragged, struggling, into the ocean. One final cry escaped his lips as he vanished into the froth of the sea.

The gulls sang their song above the glittering pristine beach. The waves lapped up onto the shore, gradually smoothing out the trenches in the ivory sand until there was no sign that anyone had passed.

Year 1200, The Month of the Boar

Tsuruchi Kaito reached down and pinched a small amount of sand between his fingers, lifting it to his face and sprinkling it down as he rubbed his fingers together. It seemed somehow thicker, stickier, than sand would normally be. Or so he thought. In truth, Kaito knew little of sand. Or beaches. Or islands. He stood, feeling his knees pop as he did so, and as always he was made keenly aware that his finest days were behind him. Not that far, he hoped, but age was beginning to affect him in many small ways, none of which he appreciated. "You say that the students were taken from the beach," he said, not turning to look at the others.

The pause before replying told him that the two sensei, both lesser instructors of the dojo, glanced at one another before either of them replied. He could not tell their voices apart as yet, and had no desire to do so. "We did not say they were taken from the beach," he replied. "We said they were taken. You believe that it was from the beach."

Kaito brushed the sand from his hands and turned to face the two sensei. They were past their youth, approaching middle age, thankfully faster than he was. Their features were slightly dissimilar but only in contrast to their overwhelming similarity, and it was an easy leap to make to assume that they were siblings. "Which of you is responsible for the security of your students in the aftermath of this mystery?" Kaito asked, addressing the one on the left. "Is it you, or your brother?"

The two men glanced at one another again, the one on the right scowling. "What does it matter?" asked the one on the left.

"You then," Kaito addressed Right. "You can place as many sentries as you desire in the surrounding environment but it is impossible to police the sea. Unless your men are incompetent, which I will assume they are not, then the only way that this could have happened is if some enemy came from the water. The only other possibility is that your students have been fleeing of their own accord, and while I certainly could not blame them, that seems very unlikely. Over a dozen now, is it?"

"Fifteen," Left confirmed.

"From three different dojo," Right added.

“And all along the shore, I believe,” Kaito insisted. “Unless there is anything else that you have not told me, that link seems strongest, and the one most worth pursuing.”

Again, the two men looked at one another. It filled Kaito with a desire to strike them. “There is nothing else,” Right said sourly.

Kaito looked from one to the other. “Why are you standing in my path? Do you or do you not wish to see this matter resolved? Did you not send for a magistrate from the mainland?”

“We sent for Yoritomo Kinshikirai,” Left said. “A decorated magistrate.”

“Who is otherwise engaged and could not be here for weeks,” Kaito said, his temper flaring. “Would you rather the Tsuruchi stand aside so the Yoritomo can deal with this themselves? Would you like more of your own children disappear into the sea because you are too proud?” He paused. “Do you dare countermand the orders of your Clan Champion, on whose orders I am acting? Then there is nothing I can do for you.”

Right’s glower spoke volumes, but Left seemed more contrite. He cleared his throat anxiously. “Perhaps we have been... overly recalcitrant. Losing so many of our students to unknown circumstances has been difficult, to say the least.” He actually reached out and poked the other one.

“Difficult,” Right parroted.

“I am certain we can help one another,” Left said, and forced a smile.

“I am certain you are correct,” Kaito said. He felt far less than certain, however.

Two Weeks Prior

Kaito’s arrival in the Islands of Silk & Spice was inauspicious to say the least. The port nearest to the Clan Champion’s palace was busier than Kaito had ever seen any port, although admittedly he had not been to the islands before. He had been to other ports, however, and what had struck him most significantly was how quiet the port seemed. There was the typical noise, but most of those working there seemed to be keeping to themselves unless they had something pertinent to their work. There was no joking, no jocularly of any sort... just a surprising lack of the clamor to which he had become accustomed during previous port visits. It was unsettling.

Two members of the Yoritomo Elite Guard, both women, stood ready to receive Kaito as he departed the Sinking Blossom, the ill-named vessel that had brought him from the mainland. One of them was the largest woman Kaito had ever seen, taller than any man, with broader shoulders and a horrifying scar on her cheek. The other was no larger than a teenager, a petite and beautiful girl with a board smile. The tassels on her sword’s hilt spoke to her lethality, however. “Greetings, Tsuruchi-sama,” the younger one said with a broad smile. “Lady Oak and I have been sent to escort you to the Champion.”

Kaito blinked. “Lady... Oak?”

“She does not talk,” the girl said. “We call her that and she hasn’t killed any of us, so we assume she does not mind.” She laughed. “I am Tachiko. If you will follow me, please?”

Tachiko took the lead, with Kaito behind her and Lady Oak somewhere behind them. Kaito would normally feel more comfortable with a rear guard, but the massive mute woman made him somehow more uncomfortable than any potential assailant. They wound their way through the streets toward the palace. People parted before them, most averting their eyes, but Tachiko called out to numerous citizens, often calling them by name. They replied, but did not seem overly warm toward the tiny woman. Most seemed afraid. “Are you a duelist?” Kaito asked during a lull in the conversation.



“What?” Tachiko replied. “Oh,” she glanced down at her blade’s hilt, “you mean these. No, I am not a duelist. I prefer to think of myself as a... let us use the term skirmisher.” She laughed again. It was such a cheerful sound. “Several enemies have had occasion to initiate conflicts with me in the past, and I have been skilled enough to dispatch them.” Kaito found her continued laughter over the death of her enemies disquieting enough that he did not attempt further conversation as they continued to the palace.

The palace itself was a significant surprise. Its décor was overly ostentatious, but Kaito knew enough of Yoritomo sensibilities not to be surprised by such things. What did surprise him was that the mood of the port seemed to extend within the palace as well. There was all the activity that Kaito would have expected, from courtiers collaborating in hushed whispers to messengers moving swiftly through every corridor he could see. What he did not expect were the furtive glances everyone seemed to be making, looking fearfully for anyone who might overhear their business. Even the guards, the ones standing outside the chamber that was apparently Kaito’s destination, seemed uneasy and more suspicious than usual. The atmosphere was, at best, uncomfortable.

Kaito had never met Yoritomo Hiromi personally, although he had seen him from a distance on three different occasions. The man he had seen then had been an angry, embittered young man who seethed with an energy he could only barely control. Kaito was shocked when he saw his Champion now, because the difference was so stark.

Physically, Hiromi was no different, but his movements told the story. He was measured, cautious, with none of the prowling, manic energy he had once displayed. “You are not the magistrate I sent for,” was the only thing the Champion said as Kaito entered. Hiromi had not looked at him.

“Please accept my apologies, my lord,” Kaito said, kneeling. “The magistrate you requested is one of my dojo’s finest, but he was deployed west of the Unicorn lands, dealing with a threat to the trade routes to the Colonies. Word was sent, but it would have been unacceptable to leave you waiting for weeks, and so my masters sent me in his place. If it is your wish that I depart...”

Hiromi waved a hand. “No. I need someone, and they would not have sent you if you were not capable of doing what needs to be done. I had simply wished to keep this a matter within the Yoritomo family.”

Kaito felt a pang of shame at those words. “I am sorry, my lord,” was all he could think to say.

“It matters little,” Hiromi said. His voice was so full of resignation that Kaito felt unsure of what to do or say. “You were briefed on the matter during your voyage, I believe?”

“Only the most basic elements,” Kaito replied. “Students have been disappearing from the island’s finest dojos and you want to know what is happening to them.”

“And unfortunately those are the only elements at our disposal,” Hiromi said. “We know little else, save that our island’s magistrates have proven unable to discover anything else. Someone trained by the Tsuruchi would doubtless have a different approach, and your school has been lauded for their techniques for decades. You are the finest.”

“You do us a great honor, my lord,” Kaito said. “I believe that the Kitsuki might take umbrage with your claim, however.”

“The Dragon,” Hiromi said, disdain obvious in his voice. “We cannot trust them. Indeed, I am not certain who can be trusted in the mainland Empire at this point.” He glanced at the magistrate. “My most trusted counselors advised against bringing even a member of the Tsuruchi to the islands. There are many of your people here already, of course, as well as many Moshi and a handful of the Kitsune as well, but...” his voice trailed off. He sounded impossibly weary.



“My lord,” Kaito said softly, “if my family has done anything to offend you in any way, if our service has disappointed you, I offer you my...”

“Stop,” Hiromi ordered. “I have no stomach for such things. The Tsuruchi have done nothing. It is merely that the mainland has changed. There are serious problems, many things that even those as perceptive as the Tsuruchi will not yet have taken note of. The simple truth of the matter is that the world has changed in ways no one yet understands, and I do not know who the Mantis can trust now. Everyone must be suspect until they prove otherwise. I wish it was not so.”

Kaito licked his lips anxiously. “I do not know how to respond to that, my lord, but I will do everything I can to discover what has happened to your students. Whether they are alive or dead, I will find out what became of them.”

“I expect nothing less.” Hiromi’s eyes narrowed as the door opened unexpectedly, but it was one of the messengers that Kaito had seen scurrying throughout the palace earlier. The young man knelt rapidly and offered a scroll. Hiromi took it quickly, but Kaito thought perhaps he had seen the Imperial crest upon the seal. The Mantis Champion broke it and read the contents quickly, his eyes darting across it more than once in short order. His expression darkened greatly. “You will have access to whatever you require. If you need something, you have only to ask my people for it,” Hiromi said, taking up his *kama* and placing it in his obi. “I have other things that demand my attention. Do not fail me in this.”

“I will not, my lord,” Kaito replied, but his Champion was already gone.

Now

The waters of the Silk and Spice coast were different than those of the colonies. Their color was closer to sapphire, their waves somehow more peaceful. Yet looking at them, Kaito could not help but be reminded of colonial waters. Standing on a burning ship, following orders he did not agree with, watching his comrades die to Daidoji arrows...

Kaito exhaled as if to dispel the memories. It was the purpose of the Tsuruchi to serve the Yoritomo, not to question. Better not to dwell on what could not be changed now.

Two of the three dojo that Kaito was investigating were a mere ten miles from one another along the beach, and the magistrate took the opportunity to make the trip alone, walking along the beach. It was quiet, and afforded him the time to think that was so essential to his understanding of any matter he looked into. Some of Kaito’s brothers-in-arms among the Tsuruchi despised the quiet times between investigations or combats, their minds working at their sharpest when honed by the din of battle. He had been much the same in his youth, although rarely to the same extent. Was it age, again, that caused him to be so different? He was not certain. It was the one enemy he knew he could never defeat. Idly, he wondered if his peers spent as much time contemplating their mortality as he did. He doubted it.

As he walked along the beach, the surf soothing his thoughts, he noticed another sound, barely audible over the sounds of the sea. It was soft at first, but grew very slightly more noticeable, enough so that someone without even the practiced senses of a Tsuruchi magistrate could hear it. It was a soft hum, a gentle cadence that had the same sort of sound as a chant. Kaito paused and surveyed the beach. There was nothing, of course; there was nowhere to hide amid the low sandy dunes of the Mantis Islands. He scanned the treeline as well, and finally spotted a color that was out of place. A soft, deep red, almost a maroon, just inside the shadows of the tropical vegetation that dominated the islands’ interior. Kaito drew his smallest bow, a han-kyu, and walked carefully toward the oddity he had seen. He was not sure what it was. It was almost certainly nothing, but it was best not to take chances.



As Kaito approached and the blinding sun receded behind the canopy, the enigmatic blurb of color resolved itself, and became a kimono. More specifically, the traditional robes of a shugenja, and the color was of course that of the Moshi family. It was a priestess, communing with the spirits. Kaito nodded to himself and began to retrace his steps. It was bad luck to interrupt a priest.

“Oh, it’s fine,” the woman said. “I was largely finished. To my disappointment, the spirits in this area have little information to share with me. Or at least, little information that is of interest to my current undertaking.” She rose slowly, as if she had been sitting for long enough that her legs were numb, but she managed a bow nonetheless. “I am Moshi Madohime.”

He returned the bow. “I am Tsuruchi Kaito.”

“The magistrate?” She asked, her expression one of keen interest. “I am familiar with your work, Kaito-san. Your career has been most impressive.”

“That is... very kind,” Kaito said cautiously. “May I ask why you are sitting here, in this lonely beach? There are no shortage of temples and shrines.”

“I know, and I have visited a great many of them since I came here,” Madohime said. “Unfortunately there is little to find there that can be of assistance to me now.”

“Assistance?”

“Indeed. May I ask why you are here?”

Kaito hesitated. Hiromi had not given him specific instructions concerning the profile of the matter he was pursuing, but his Champion’s demeanor did not suggest he would be keen on the notion of publicizing such a matter. “This beach stretches between two prominent dojos,” he said instead. “May I inquire as to whether or not you have visited the temples there?”

“Ah, I see,” Madohime nodded knowingly. “You and I are of the same purpose.”

Kaito frowned. “I do not take your meaning.”

“One of the students who disappeared was a Moshi. A second cousin of mine, actually. I was already present in the islands and I was investigating the matter on behalf of my family.”

“I see,” he said. “That is... fortunate.”

“It is indeed,” Madohime said. “With your permission, I will be your assistant in this matter. I am not accustomed to serving as a subordinate, of course, but since you are presumably operating with a mandate from the Yoritomo, doing so will grant me access to information I would not otherwise be able to get.”

“I am not certain this is a wise course of action,” Kaito said.

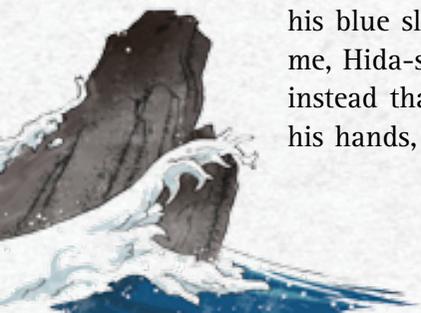
“You already have a shugenja, then,” she noted sagely. “So of course you are well aware of how invaluable a priest of the kami can be in securing information from the spirits. The elements see everything, after all.”

Kaito sighed and rubbed his eyes.

Three Weeks Ago

“An army does not vanish!” Kisada’s voice thundered throughout the chamber.

The scout grimaced and glanced at Kakita Ikura across the room. The Kakita Daimyo smoothed his blue sleeves, completely unfettered by the outburst. The scout cleared his throat. “Forgive me, Hida-sama, I misspoke. I did not mean that the Spider vanished, as if like smoke. I meant instead that they...” After a moment, he held out two fists which he then separated, opening his hands, extending his fingers. “Fragmented. Shattered. Some went south. Some went north.





Most vanished into the mountains. They abandoned formations and just... left. They scuttled like cockroaches in the light. ”

The Little Bear slammed a meaty fist into the table, scattering pieces off the map.

The scout withdrew, and for a moment, the court was silent.

But none as silent as Emperor Seiken, seated as he was on the Jade Throne. His cheek resting against his fist, his eyes closed, his face unmoving, he gave no acknowledgement of what unfolded within his court.

Yoritomo Hiromi watched Seiken from his quiet corner, inwardly wondering at the mind of the Son of Heaven.

“How are they coordinating these attacks?” Bayushi Kanihime wondered aloud. The wife of the Scorpion Champion tapped her mempo as though it were her own face. “Managing a standing army is difficult enough without it scattered and apart.”

“It could be that he has no need for this army for now,” remarked Utaku Ji-Yun from her cushion against the far wall. “We must glean some insight into his plan.”

Ikura’s blue eyes narrowed in one man’s direction. “I can think of one who might know.”

The collective gaze swept to the corner occupied by Susumu Takuan. The frowning man lowered his tired gaze. Dark rings formed beneath his eyes, weary rings he didn’t bother to hide with makeup or false smiles. He shook his head. “I cannot say. I have told you all I knew.”

“Convenient,” growled Kisada. “Two tongues and neither can speak anything useful.”

Takuan shot the Crab Champion a bold glare. “You may be surprised to learn this, Little Bear, but the Susumu were as unprepared for this turn of events as your forces were for Kanpeki’s.”

Kisada took a step forward. “Is there a reason we suffer the presence of a Spider?”

“One could ask you the same,” came the voice of Asako Chukage, the Voice of the Elemental Council.

Kisada stiffened. “Tetsuo’s order swore fealty to my brother and proved their loyalty by shedding blood in defense of the Empire beneath our banner. Perhaps Kanpeki’s little parrot would be willing to do the same?”

“Take what blood you need!” Takuan flung aside his arms as he yelled. “What does it matter to me? The Susumu have always served two masters. The first has traded loyal servants for monsters and put to torch all that I loved! What is a little blood to prove myself to the second?!”

“Such a productive discourse,” came Matsu Chizuki’s voice. She leaned against a pillar with crossed arms and open disdain. “As if spilt milk will return to the tray. With every breath, one of my sisters dies to buy time for the Empire, and you waste it in petty squabbles.” She stepped away and brandished a fist. “Well go on and be done with it so I can return to war, where I’m needed!”

Kakita Ikura clicked his tongue. “If the Emperor’s court is wasting your time, Matsu-sama, then by all means leave to find one more worthy of your presence.”

Chizuki spun. Were she not in the presence of the Imperial Court, no number of Seppun guards could have kept her from him. In that moment, Hiromi felt the tenseness in the air, Kisada’s icy stare at the Susumu, the quiet resentment between Ji-Yun and Chukage, the animosity between the Kakita and Matsu daimyos. Even Otomo Demiyah, normally smug as she oversaw the court, showed no sign of pleasure.

Iweko Seiken spoke. “So this is the fate of my mother’s empire.”

All turned to face the Son of Heaven. He stirred slightly, shifting on the throne, his lids parting just so. He was staring beyond the gathered samurai to a tapestry of the first tournament, the Kami engaged in honorable melee. "Our fate, it seems, to bicker as the world falls apart around us."

Chizuki's face burned as she looked away. Ikura closed his blue eyes. Kanpeki and Tetsuo lowered their heads in humility towards the throne. Hiromi watched the room transform at the unusually-soft words of the Emperor.

A chuckle broke the silence. Togashi Gozato spoke meekly, but his voice carried throughout the chamber. "Chief among all delusions is when one believes he is the dream and not the dreamer."

After several moments, Kisada rolled his eyes. "Very helpful, Togashi-san. That explains everything."

"He's right," asserted Chukage. "It is not our fate yet, so long as there is time to act." The Phoenix turned to the Emperor and bowed. "Son of Heaven, the Phoenix now seek the location of the Third Seal. That is where the Spider are headed. When we discover it, we can muster a final defense there to break Kanpeki's forces."

"How long will that take?" Chizuki asked.

Chukage's brow wrinkled. "The texts predate the Empire. In many cases, they are not written by human hands. Ningen-no-shiryō's research into the ancient writing of Nezumi has given us considerable insight, but it will take some time to decipher—"

"Time?" Kisada barked a laugh. "Time we do not have. The Spider already know where the Third Seal is. I guarantee it." He looked throughout the room. "We should provoke him into the open! Find something he will move to defend and threaten it!"

"He will not be fooled," remarked Ji-Yun. "He must be made to see why this path is foolish. Why it will lead to his own destruction."

Kakita Ikura shook his head. "I would be the first to condone diplomacy as a course of action, Lady Utaku, but I am in the uncomfortable position of disagreeing. Kanpeki has demonstrated that he will not listen to reason."

"Kanpeki has started a war just before winter," Bayushi Kanihime remarked. She was looking at nothing in particular, speaking as though only to herself. "He is the enemy of every clan. He stands in defiance of Heaven itself. Such stress, and just before the cold of winter, is not good for a man's vitality." Her eyes smiled. "I would be surprised if his good health lasted another week."

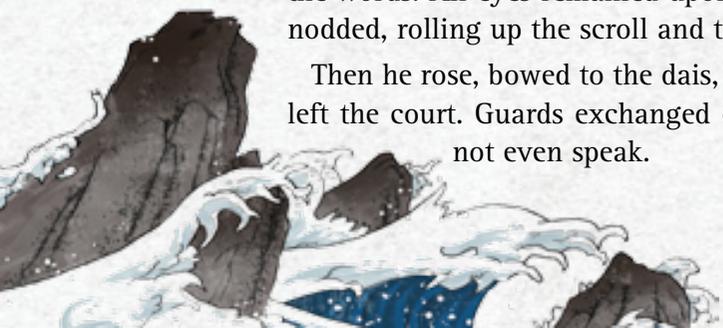
Many within the court simply acted as though she'd said nothing. Hiromi smirked.

"The school works for the fish only when they move in tandem," remarked the monk. Gozato regarded the room with soft eyes. "You have come short so far because you work separately towards the same goal. You would be served better to—"

A servant appeared before the monk. Hiromi blinked. He had not seen the girl approach, nor had, it seemed, anyone else. The servant bowed deeply and extended her hands, offering the old monk a scroll. Even from his distance, Hiromi clearly saw the Mon of Mirumoto Shikei, the Dragon Clan Champion. The servant made no effort to conceal it.

The monk paused, regarding the document, then took it. He unfurled the paper and scanned the words. All eyes remained upon him, although a few murmurs escaped the court. Finally, he nodded, rolling up the scroll and tucking it into his kimono.

Then he rose, bowed to the dais, and made for the door. The stunned attendants watched as he left the court. Guards exchanged confused glances. Seiken made no effort to stop him. He did not even speak.



Hiromi would only later discover the contents of the letter, and only because a servant had peeked at the contents and was caught in gossip. The letter was not in the Dragon cypher. It made no effort to conceal its meaning. It simply said that those who “still had a destiny in the Empire,” Shikei now “released from all obligations of fealty.” For the rest, he asked they join him in the High House of Light.

They did not know it then, but for many present in the court, Gozato would be the last Dragon Clan samurai any of them would see for the rest of their lives.

For a long time, none spoke. At last, Kakita Ikura dared, lowering his head before the dais. “Glorious Son of Heaven, what path would you have your samurai to walk?”

Seiken straightened. “The Way lies in the heart, Kakita-san.” He looked to the gathered court. “Do as you will. Keep me informed. I must meditate.”

One by one, the samurai bowed. Hiromi offered his prostrations to the dais and turned to leave with the rest.

“Yoritomo Hiromi,” Seiken spoke. “I would have a word.”

The Mantis Champion stopped, then turned to face the Emperor. He felt the glances of the others as they passed him by. He gave them no notice as he bowed to the dais.

“Of course, my lord,” he whispered.

Now

Madohime blinked mild surprise as the server placed a ceramic teacup before Kaito on the table. She waited until the servant was gone to speak, her voice drowned out beyond their table by the din of the teahouse. “Just tea?”

Kaito smirked. “I have failed to meet your expectations?”

“I expected sake,” she admitted. “Grandfather spoke at length of the Tsuruchi’s love of nigori.”

“It wouldn’t have offended you?”

She shrugged. “Sake is sacred. I would have endured.”

Kaito lifted the cup to his lips. “Perhaps so. When this is over, I will demonstrate the accuracy of your grandfather’s observations. But not until this matter is done.”

“And how far have you come?” She laced her fingers on the table. “What have you discovered?”

Kaito sighed into his cup. “Not enough. I visited each of the dojos with missing students and looked into their backgrounds. This took a few days and yielded very little in common, except for shared geography. I have deployed the techniques of my family... Sign cutting, things like that. I followed the trail of no less than five of the disappeared students. Each time, the trail ended abruptly. Four times on a beach, once on a dock. They just seemed to vanish.” He unfurled his fingers. “Like that.”

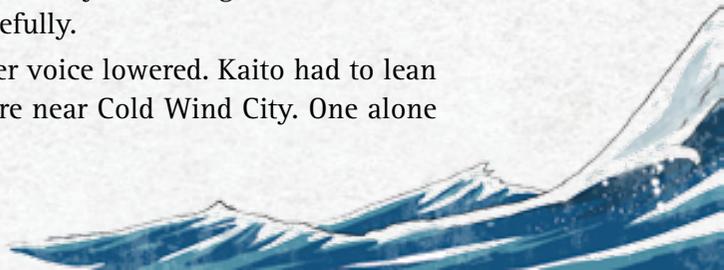
She glanced at a boisterous Yoritomo laughing loudly over a drinking game. “You suspect abduction?”

“How? By whom? To what end?” Kaito shook his head. “Abduction is the easiest answer, but I cannot explain it beyond a simple guess.”

“Do you believe in omens?”

He paused at the abrupt question. “Suppose I do,” he spoke carefully. “All things are connected, after all.” He said nothing more, watching the Moshi very carefully.

Madohime continued to stare at the boisterous Yoritomo. Her voice lowered. Kaito had to lean in to hear her. “I understand a school of oarfish washed ashore near Cold Wind City. One alone





is considered a strong omen. When things appear unexpectedly, it is often the first ripple of a thrown stone. I wonder if the same can be said when things vanish.”

Kaito focused on the woman across from him. He set down his tea. “You mentioned your cousin was among those who disappeared.”

She nodded.

“That is a break in the pattern,” he observed. “Unless she was a student of a nearby dojo?” When she didn’t reply, he continued. “So that would make her the first disappearance that wasn’t related to the Yoritomo’s dojos.”

Madohime shook her head. “Not quite. These disappearances have been happening for months.”

Kaito frowned. “Is that so? Hiromi-sama did not mention that.”

“Perhaps he didn’t know.” She sighed and looked away. “The first was a colonial ship destined for Koutetsukan. It vanished after docking in Distant Turtle City. The entire vessel.” She looked back to him. “You didn’t know? I heard about it on my way here. The people of Inazuma speak of it frequently.”

“Is that so?”

“I understand some went missing from Kyuden Komori as well. I wonder why the Komori would mention this to the Moshi, but not to the Yoritomo?”

“It seems you know a little more about this than I do.”

She shrugged again. “To be fair, Tsuruchi-san, I’ve been seeking my sister for a little bit longer than your investigation started. Given the same time, you would have doubtlessly discovered the same.”

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Kaito silently watched Madohime for some time. “What brought your sister to the Islands of Silk and Spice?” he finally asked.

“A family matter.” She met his eyes. “Private.”

Kaito placed his hands on the table. “If we are to work together, you will have to be more open, Moshi-san. You did say you would be my subordinate, did you not?”

The two sat unmoving for a long while. The table separated them, just far enough that neither could reach the other.

At last, Madohime smiled. “You say that you’ve been here a few days. In that time, have you ever seen the sunset?”

Kaito said nothing.

“On a clear day such as this, you can see the mainland. The Jade Sun gives a spectacular display from the island’s view. I notice it is nearly time... This teahouse has a western-facing balcony. Perhaps you’d like to see it?”

Kaito smiled. “Of course.”

When they were alone on the balcony, suspended above the streets of the town and with the docks and the sea stretched beyond them, Kaito closed the shoji screen. The din of the teahouse hummed from the other side. They leaned on the rail and watched the western sky.

“So what couldn’t you say in there?” he asked.

“My sister was but one of many,” she told him. “A group sent here to confirm my family’s suspicions.”

“Suspicious regarding what?”

Her reply was a gentle whisper. “The location of the Third Seal of Jigoku.”



Kaito stared at the Moshi for several moments before re-settling his gaze on the ocean. "I should have ordered sake after all," he remarked.

"There is still time," she replied, helpfully.

"So you believe the disappearances are connected to the so-called 'Seals,' then?" He shook his head. "I cannot claim to understand what they even are, but I have heard what happens when one breaks. I understand the Valley of the Wasp has seen its share of refugees from the fallen army at Shinomen Mori. We despatched the Spider pursuing them. You won't be surprised to know, there is little the Tsuruchi despise more than traitors." He paused. "The Moshi believe there is one here, on the Mantis Isles?"

"The Unicorn and Phoenix have ceased hostilities. They signed a treaty at Kyuden Moshi. My daimyo oversaw it."

"What does that have to do with-?"

She continued. "As part of the treaty, the Iuchi and Isawa agreed to more openly share information. For their role in bringing the two clans together, the Moshi entered this agreement as well. It was too late to further assist in the matter of the second seal, so the three families instead focused on the matter of the third. Specifically, to discover where it was." She smiled. "Then, something peculiar happened. Several days after the signing of the treaty, as the Jade Sun rose over the bay, a shugenja, a woman, simply walked out of the ocean."

Kaito's eyebrows rose. "Walked out, you say?"

"She was unsure how it happened. Her name was Iuchi Namida. She had quite the story to tell. According to her, she was haunted by strange dreams for several weeks. Then, while meditating before Chrysanthemum Petal Lake, she was pulled beneath the waters. When she rose back to the surface, she was in Thunder Dragon Bay."

"I might get that sake..." Kaito mumbled.

"She spent days on the nearby island, communing with the spirits, trying to determine where she was and how she came to be there. She says that she discovered an ancient temple there... that she was led to it. That she spoke directly with the Thunder Dragon herself. That it... revealed certain truths."

"I can understand why that might interest the Moshi," Kaito remarked, his eyes lingering on the representation of the Thunder Dragon stitched onto the shoulder of Madohime's kimono.

"The Isawa and Moshi found aspects of her story among the oldest documents within the Library of the Fiery Centipede. This, we referenced against documentation from the Kitsune Libraries, which has only just been opened to us. We found relevance in the ancient recorded testimony of several... err... animals." She met Kaito's look and shrugged. "I know. But it was transcribed by the hands of reputable shugenja."

Kaito rubbed his temples. "All of this ultimately led somewhere?"

"It led three Great Clan families to the same conclusion: The third seal is somewhere within the Mantis Isles. My cousin was among the envoy sent to confirm its location. That was over a month ago." For the first time, Madohime looked grim. "She never reported back. None of them did."

Kaito thought for a long time. He turned his head, closely watching Madohime's face. "Hiromi-sama told me none of this." After another moment, he added, "One would assume he would consider such details to be important."

Madohime frowned. She did not meet his face.

"He doesn't know," Kaito concluded. "The Moshi have taken matters into their own hands."

“We did not wish to burden his already-stretched attention. For the last five months Hiromi-sama has turned away lobbies for audience. It would not do to waste Hiromi-sama’s time with supposition.”

Kaito thought about this. “Hiromi-sama would wish to be aware of what occurs on his island,” he finally said.

“What is the Moshi’s purpose if not to tend to the spiritual affairs of the Mantis? One should never act until one is certain. Besides,” she added, darkening, “given the opportunity to commit forces to defend the second seal, the Yoritomo chose other priorities. Now the stress of three columns is laden upon one.”

Kaito clenched his jaw.

Madohime sighed, a breath laden with sadness. “We must all answer to our karma,” she whispered. “The Yoritomo will be no exception. Yet our fates are linked to theirs, for they are our lords. Whatever path they have walked, we have followed them. The collective karma of the Yoritomo now weighs heavily upon Hiromi-sama. He is having to make difficult decisions that are merely the consequences of the path the Yoritomo have chosen.” She turned her head, meeting Kaito’s eyes. “If the Moshi confirm the third seal is within the Mantis Isles, he will have to make one more.”

Kaito stepped away from the railing. The setting sun flung his shadow before him and against the shoji screen. “Perhaps it is not my place to say, but one might hear these words and think the Moshi have lost confidence in the Yoritomo.”

Madohime didn’t reply at first. He heard her drawing slow breaths in the amber light. The length of her silence strengthened Kaito’s resolve. He waited, unsure if his words would result in a challenge.

“We have become what they required,” she finally spoke.

He turned and looked at her. The distant sun bathed her silhouette in flame.

She spoke in breathy words. “There are more Mantis temples tended by Yoritomo than by Moshi. Once, my people were the servants of the sun goddess herself. Now more than half our number embrace the way of thunder. It would not be so without the explicit direction of the Yoritomo.”

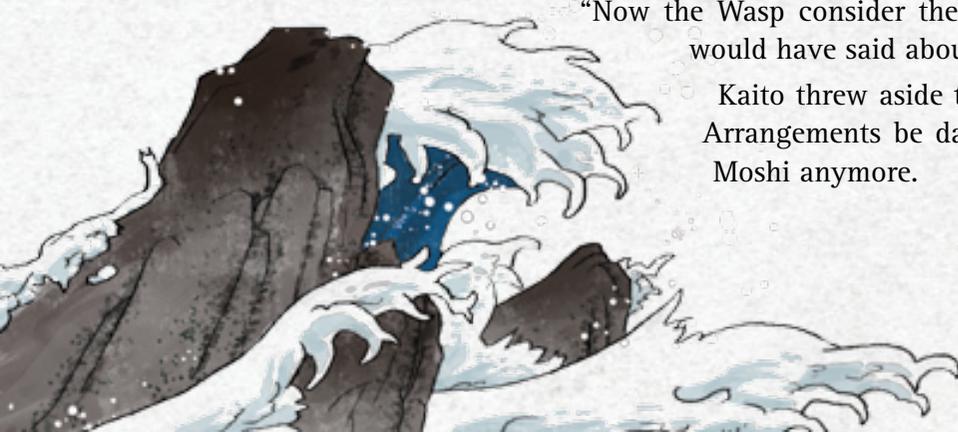
Kaito swallowed a lump.

“The Kitsune are finally part of a Great Clan,” she continued. “In exchange, they have lowered themselves, using their sacred prayers and divine gifts as nothing more than basic tools of violence. All our ways have been shaped to fit the needs of the Yoritomo, as metal is worked into a blade to suit its master. What have the Yoritomo changed to suit us? They seek their own goals without regard to those beneath them. They have become what they once fought. Their ambition has led them to ally with the Spider, enemies who have now betrayed the Empire.”

“It is not the place of samurai to question.”

In the contrast of light, he could barely catch her emotionless eyes. “Now the Wasp consider themselves samurai. I wonder what Tsuruchi would have said about this.”

Kaito threw aside the shoji door and slammed it behind him. Arrangements be damned. He wanted nothing to do with the Moshi anymore.



Three Weeks Ago

The crowd of attendants and servants fell away, leaving only Hiromi and the Emperor. Their footsteps seemed strangely loud in the otherwise empty corridor. “The situation is unsustainable,” the Emperor said. “It is funeral songs on all sides. Every demon slain returns from the blasphemous zone in a matter of days, perhaps hours. Not even the Lion can stand against such an onslaught. They are being slaughtered by the thousand.”

“Dairuko-san’s forces honor us all,” the Mantis Champion replied.

“You have been called the Growing Storm. The time for the storm has come.” The Emperor stopped and turned to face him. “I have come to a difficult decision. It is one I would rather not have made, one I detest, but even the grass must bend when the wind blows.” His face remained unchanged as he said this, completely unemotional, as if merely stating a fact. “We no choice but to evacuate as many people as possible to the Colonies.”

Hiromi’s brow furrowed. The two continued to walk, the corridor echoing with each step. They passed open shoji revealing the courtyard garden. In it, the plants were slowly drying, leaves changing color, dying.

“Evacuate to the colonies,” Hiromi finally said. “So it has come to this.”

“It is why mother established the colonies, after all.”

Hiromi paused. He knew better than to display emotion before the Emperor. It would be unbecoming. But he did tilt his head and dare to meet the Son of Heaven squarely with his gaze. “The Divine Empress... foresaw this?”

“She foresaw a possible future while hoping for another. She never believed Daigotsu. But she had little choice but to buy her people time. This is why, for twenty years, she prepared. She separated the Spider into two factions. Those too far gone, she made to tame the wild colonies. She forged the colonies so that, should the foreseen future come to pass, there might be a place where our traditions, where Rokugan, might continue. Where we might survive and grow stronger. And those who were not yet fully given to darkness...”

Seiken sighed. “She treated them like samurai. Gave them what she gave the other Great Clans. Showed them our ways. And she hoped that, in time, they would come to think of themselves not merely as Spider, but as Rokugani. That if this day ever came, if the Spider ever moved against us, its samurai would consider themselves a part of the Empire, as her subjects, and consequently reject the Dark Lord’s seductions.”

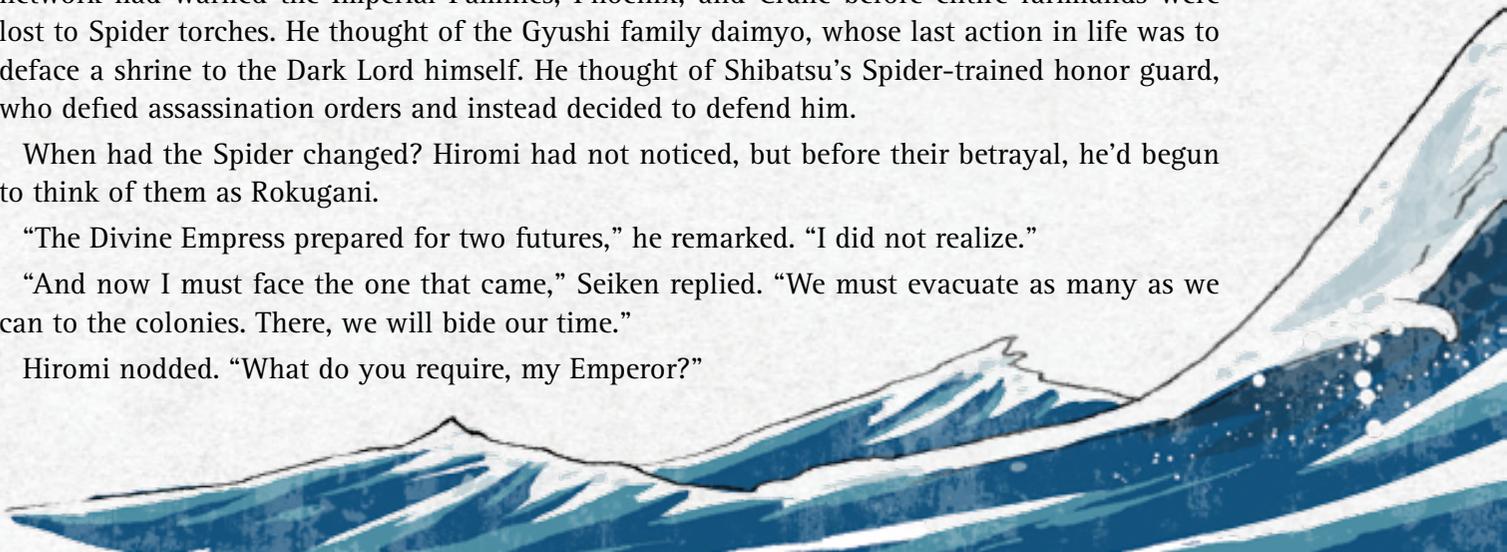
Hiromi thought then of the Empire. He thought of the Spider living among the Dragon, men and women who now embraced the Tao. He thought of elite samurai living among the humble Sparrow, sworn protectors who wore the Mon of the Marigold. He thought of the Order of Tetsuo, who now fought beside the Crab against the shadowlands. He thought of the Susumu, whose network had warned the Imperial Families, Phoenix, and Crane before entire farmlands were lost to Spider torches. He thought of the Gyushi family daimyo, whose last action in life was to deface a shrine to the Dark Lord himself. He thought of Shibatsu’s Spider-trained honor guard, who defied assassination orders and instead decided to defend him.

When had the Spider changed? Hiromi had not noticed, but before their betrayal, he’d begun to think of them as Rokugani.

“The Divine Empress prepared for two futures,” he remarked. “I did not realize.”

“And now I must face the one that came,” Seiken replied. “We must evacuate as many as we can to the colonies. There, we will bide our time.”

Hiromi nodded. “What do you require, my Emperor?”



Now

In his mind's eye, Kaito could still see the faces of the brothers who died fighting in the distant colonies. Most of them were born in the Valley of the Wasp, a poorer, more rustic place, utilitarian and built for war instead of pleasure. Yet most hoped to see that home again, if only for one last time.

He heard his own voice ask, *Why should the Tsuruchi have to die for a disagreement between the Yoritomo and Daidoji?*

He heard the explosions that tore his ship apart.

Kaito stalked the flooding moonlit beach, taking no time to enjoy the serenity of his surroundings, nor the beauty of the dancing moon across the glittering waters. He could not contain his stormy mind.

He took no pleasure in the notion of reporting the Moshi. It was no small accusation to make and Kaito wasn't sure what would ultimately come of it. His testimony was far beneath that of the Moshi leadership, but Madohime's words were her own. He knew the Mantis Champion would not suffer such dissension. But if he suspected it was widespread among the Moshi, then what would he do?

She'd said that the Yoritomo cared only for themselves at the cost of the other families. What what he'd seen, did he disagree?

"It is not my concern," Kaito whispered to himself. "In the end, I have no choice."

The ocean waves consumed his ankles and then drew back. Kaito paused to look back along the flat beach. The lights of civilizations glimmered dimly far behind him. Against the curtain of the night sky, there was no distinction between the lands of men and the halls of heaven.

Something caught Kaito's trained eyes just as he made to turn back. A small glint in the moonlight, showing even beneath a sudden wave that shortly withdrew.

He approached, brow furrowed in scrutiny, kneeling where the object rested the sand. It was a perfect white sphere not much larger than his fist. A pearl.

His troubled mind calmed instantly at the sight of it. He scooped it in his hand and rose, wondering at its perfect surface. He'd seen his share of pearls from the colonies. Many were quite large. But the larger the pearl, the larger the flaws. He'd never seen one this large, so perfectly shaped, so flawless. He wondered what manner of creature could have created such a thing.

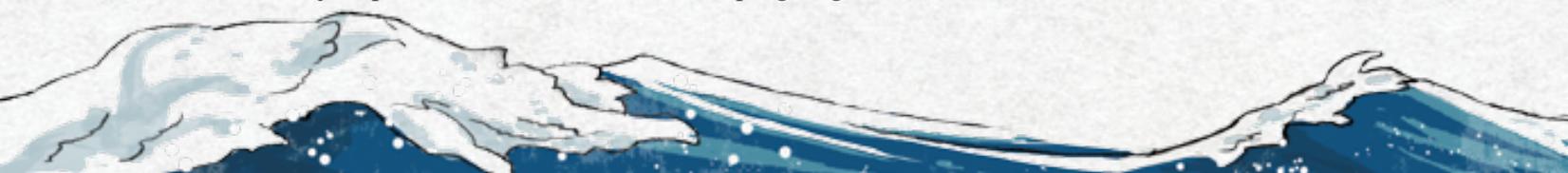
Then something else caught his eye. A gossamer thread, sparkling just slightly, dangled from one end of the pearl. He followed the string with his vision until he lost sight of where it went into the ocean.

The next thought to enter his mind was that of a caught fish dangling from a hook.

The string yanked. Kaito fell headfirst into the sand, the pearl firmly attached to the skin of his palm.

At once Kaito felt the sensation of being dragged. He craned his neck up and received a face full of ocean water. Coughing and sputtering as the wave withdrew again, he realized that he was being pulled into the sea. Panic began to drum on the surface of his mind, but he fought against the emotion. He knew to panic now was the same as to die.

His free hand seized his wakizashi and drew. He plunged the blade into the sand to give himself a handhold to fight. It only slowed his inexorable progress towards the sea. He maneuvered his body to put his feet in front of him, hoping to give more resistance. He knew he could not match



the strength of whatever dragged him down, whatever thing was pulling him into Suitengu's embrace. He clenched his teeth as another wave of ocean drenched him. When it pulled back he gasped, desperate for air. He knew the next wave would be the final one.

Time seemed to slow as he looked one last time at his sword. A thought entered his mind, one that chilled his blood and made his heart go still.

He knew his blade was sharp. He'd just honed it that very morning. It could never reach the string from this vantage. The angle was all wrong; no matter how he tried, he would only flail it uselessly and the tide would overtake him. The blade would never touch the line.

But it would cut through the sinew of his wrist without much effort. It might catch on the bone, but a good twisting yank would take care of that. It would save his life.

Kaito grimaced as he freed his sword from the sand. His progress along the beach quickened as he raised it above his head, gritting his teeth, the horrible anticipation thundering against his heart. The uncountable hours he'd spent mastering his archery rushed through his mind as he tightened his grip around the sword's handle.

He hesitated. He couldn't do it. In spite of all his will, there were some things he could not let go.

And then the ocean washed over him.

That was the moment he felt a hand grip his shoulder.

Sharp pain snapped at the socket of his arm. He felt pulled in both directions. Slowly his head pulled out of the sea, and he gasped hot lungfuls of precious air. It gave him renewed strength to resist. He pushed away from the ocean with his legs.

A glance over his shoulder revealed his savior. Moshi Madohime stood up to her waist in the ocean water, the moon glowing in her eyes. Her prayer beads surrounded her free hand, a hand that clutched a weathered scroll she suspended above the waves. Her willowy body could not possibly possess the strength required to resist the tug of the tine, and yet her grip on Kaito's kimono anchored him to the beach and life itself.

Kaito watched as the glow in her eyes spilled out into crackles of lightning. Words tumbled from her lips. He didn't understand the dialect. Only a few words were recognizable: "Strength," "Offering," and "Osano-wo."

Madohime's hands glowed. She leapt forward, clapping her flat hands over the silk-thread line. The abandoned scroll erupted into flame before it could touch the water's surface. She rose, clutching the taut line in her palms. Her cheeks puffed and her face reddened. Above her, lightning danced in the sky.

The line holding Kaito was loose now. He rose up from the ocean and summoning his strength, he severed the thread connecting to the pearl. Splashing away, clothing heavy with ocean, he fell onto the beach and felt the ache and fire in all of his limbs. He had barely the strength to draw breath.

Madohime inched backwards. The taut line resisted between her flat palms, jerking mindlessly, again and again. She dragged herself and whatever held to the other end towards the beach. When the waters were just at her ankles, she stopped. With a deep breath and all of her might, she twisted her torso and jerked the line. It immediately slacked.

A massive wave drenched the beach as something leapt from the water. Kaito felt the sand shake when it landed. It was dark, massive, and moved mechanically with a speed that defied its size.

Whatever blessing Madohime invoked left her as she turned to face the thing she'd wrenched from the sea. Her calm expression shattered, her eyes widening. Kaito followed her gaze. At first, he didn't know what he was looking at. Not until the thing moved again, inching into the moonlight. Something clicked in the back of Kaito's mind. It was his animal brain, his instincts that recognized the segmented legs, the bulbous and hairy body, and the many grassy orbs that were its eyes. He'd seen spiders before. Just never one as large as an oxen.

It darted. One leap, faster than Kaito could follow, and it towered over the Moshi. She drew something from her obi, new words spilling from her lips. But the creature lashed out with two barbed legs. The object, an envelope, fell to the sand, spilling its contents of prayer-inscribed scraps of paper to the beach. The water claimed these ofuda in instants.

The spider's inhuman maw spread open, unfurling two prehensile fangs. Madohime tried to pull away. It was too big, too fast. Kaito watched in horror as the thing toppled over her with its bulk, its black hairy legs wrapping around her kimono, pulling open the collar and exposing her bare shoulders. The segmented appendages flanking its head brushed across Madohime's face. She screamed as it sunk its fangs into her exposed flesh. The moon reflected off its mindless pearl eyes.

Kaito felt his limbs fill with new strength. His fingers curled around his wakizashi's handle. Clawing to his feet, swallowing his fear, he charged, aiming for the thin fleshy break between the two chitinous plates protecting the spider's bulbous abdomen.

The creature's shriek pierced the night. It spun, wrenching the sword from Kaito's hands. The spider tossed the limp Madohime aside. Its massive orb-eyes glistened above its quivering mandible. It dwarfed the Tsuruchi as it splayed wide its segmented arms and unleashed a vile hiss.

Kaito's hands went for the han-kyu strapped to his back. But he knew it would be useless. Bows were fragile weapons that broke if mistreated; if the seawater hadn't ruined the bamboo of his small bow, then surely the tumble had. He then saw his arrows floating on the waves, as if he were being taunted by the Fortunes.

That left only his katana. Kaito drew it with a sharp ring and slashed at the air. The spider darted back. It stared at him for a long moment, then ran its limbs across its chitinous body. The resulting rattle sound shook Kaito's bones.

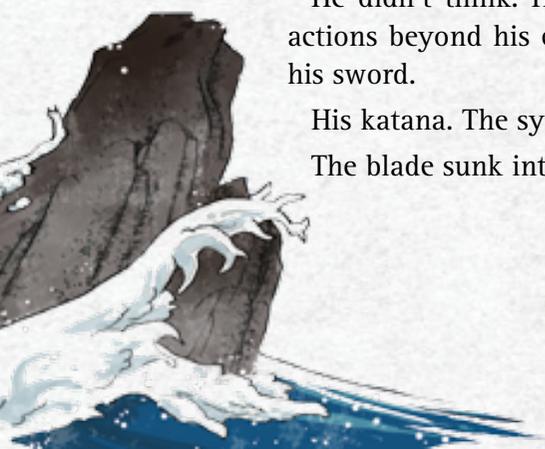
He made to adjust his grip on the sword, only to re-discover the pearl stuck to his palm. It would be impossible to hold the sword properly with only one hand. He cursed as he extended the katana, pointing the tip at the massive beast. The heavy weight of the blade, meant for two hands and not one, dragged the point down and slowed his movements. He knew he could never fight the creature this way.

It was as if the spider could read his mind. It shed any hesitation and leapt forward. Kaito saw the mandibles extend, a glittering maw behind two jabbing fangs. It was on him before he could exhale a breath.

He didn't think. How could he? There was no time for thoughts. Only instinct spurred his actions beyond his empty mind. He fell backwards from the creature's bulk and blindly threw his sword.

His katana. The symbol of a samurai's station. The sword of his father. He threw it away.

The blade sunk into the open maw and pierced the spider's brain.



The creature jerked once and topped. Its fang sunk into the sand, inches from Kaito's foot. He crawled backwards from the spider, hyperventilating, only just realizing what he'd done. It gave no death cry. It only spasmed, its legs jerking uncontrollably, then finally curling into the creature's midsection, as if embracing death.

He stared at the massive thing for long moments. His reflection stared back at him from eight polished eyes.

At last he pushed himself to a kneeling position. He no longer cared about pride or dignity. He brought his forehead to the sand and thanked all of the Fortunes for sparing his life. Surely their attention was the only reason he'd survived.

As he lifted his head, the Fortunes revealed yet something else. He finally noticed the many pale, silken cocoons on the dead spider's back. They were stacked in rows and held in place by sticky strands. He idly wondered why he hadn't seen the cocoons before, but he supposed the night and the panic of battle had caused him to overlook them.

His gaze focused on one in particular. A human arm protruded from the cocoon. Pale, splotched, and mottled by the sea, it was long dead. Attached to the hand of his arm was a massive pearl.

Kaito knew then the fates of the vanished students. Only a week into his investigation and he'd already found them.

Kaito pushed this from his mind as he rose. Every movement felt futile and weak. Yet he pushed forward, coming to the side of Moshi Madohime. The ocean waves cradled her still body as he knelt beside her.

She blinked. Her arm twitched. She looked up and met his eyes.

"Fortunes," Kaito swore. "You live."

She shook gently in the fetal position. Sand grains speckled her rapidly-bluing lips. The gruesome wounds in her shoulder did not bleed, but they glistened sickly around darkening flesh. Beneath his hand, Kaito found her completely tense like a tightened knot. Paralyzed. Her breaths came shallow and labored. She was cold. She didn't have much time.

"I owe you my life," he said. "How do I save yours?"

"T-Temple," she managed between clenched teeth.

He lifted her. His arms burned in protest, but he ignored the sensation. He cradled her with difficulty, unable to use his pearl-stuck hand. He looked towards the town. The temple district was at the outer ring. If he ran, he might make it in time.

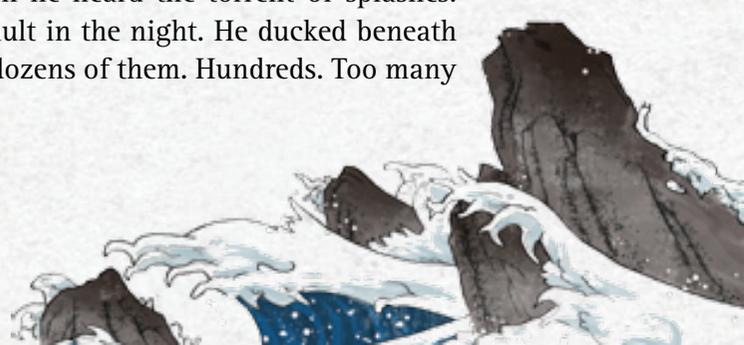
As he rose, he spotted his wakizashi laying on the beach, broken in two. The Tsuruchi stared at his shattered blade for what felt like an eternity.

His reverie broke with a dull thud; something solid landing on the beach. With widening eyes he spotted the source of the sound. A fist-sized pearl tossed from the water, coming to rest on the sand. He could even see the glint of the silken thread leading into the water.

A splash. He looked up. Another pearl tossed from the ocean depths. This one landed only a short distance away.

And then another. And another. And then dozens.

Kaito shouldered Madohime and ran. All along the beach he heard the torrent of splashes. Pearls hurled from the water in graceful arcs, a battery assault in the night. He ducked beneath and sidestepped them as they littered the beach. There were dozens of them. Hundreds. Too many to count.



Three Weeks Ago

The Emperor and the Mantis Champion stood in the garden, caught between autumn and winter. From above, oak leaves were falling.

Seiken spoke plainly. "An evacuation such as this is impossible unless our enemy is harried. The Mantis must marshal their fleet and attack the coastline of the lost Crane provinces."

Hiromi's expression remained unchanged. "Kanpeki betrayed my clan. He killed my sister. Since the First Seal was broken, I have systematically recalled virtually every Mantis from the Colonies to oppose him. Our colonial holdings are being looked after by hirelings, allies, and even enemies."

"I know," Seiken said.

"Doing as you ask all but guarantees that we will never return to reclaim them. Are you commanding me to sacrifice my clan, my lord?"

"Yes," the Emperor answered. "I am."

A long moment passed. The wind loosed another leaf. It fell between them.

Yoritomo Hiromi's expression was steel. "So be it. The Mantis have lived as a Great Clan. We will die as the greatest." He bowed deeply. "We are your Storm, my Emperor. It will be done."

Now

Two blades crossed in Kaito's path. "Lord Hiromi is not granting audiences at this time," one of the guards spoke. He had the look of a man with no patience.

The same could be said of Kaito. His kimono still bore the salty water-stains of the ocean. "He will grant one for me," he said. "I work by his directive!" He thrust the paper order towards the guard who spoke. "Let me past! My news cannot wait for formality!"

"Impossible," the guard replied. "Come back tomorrow."

Kaito clenched his fist. "If you will not let me through, then at least tell your champion that his islands are under invasion, and his palace will be overrun within hours."

The guards gave no reaction, their faces remaining as stern as sentinel statues. But Kaito sensed their pause. He could feel their eyes sizing him up, determining how seriously to regard his words. He straightened his back and hardened his gaze. But his aching muscles and disheveled appearance undermined his confidence. His shoulders and arms still burned from his struggle on the beach.

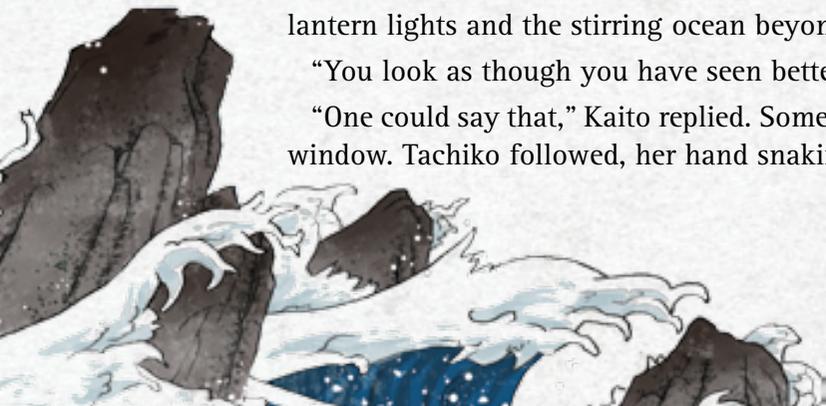
"You can tell Hiromi-sama yourself," came a voice down the hall.

Kaito looked beyond the guards and brightened with recognition. It was the young guard Tachiko approaching from the courtroom down the hall, blades swinging from her hips. He called out to the guards. "Let him through. Lord Hiromi will hear him."

The blades withdrew. Kaito pushed past the guards without another word. Tachiko fell into step beside him, every bit as pleasant as weeks prior. They passed a series of open windows, where the island breeze carried the scents and sounds of the city at night and revealed their twinkling lantern lights and the stirring ocean beyond. The sky was a gray curtain.

"You look as though you have seen better weeks, Kaito-san."

"One could say that," Kaito replied. Something caught his eye and he paused in front of a broad window. Tachiko followed, her hand snaking to her blade as she realized what he saw.



The bells at the docks rang an urgent song into the night. Beyond them, a mountain broke the surface of the water, sending crashing waves into the docks ships. It was too far to see details, but Kaito saw glowing orb eyes and a blubbery body that shambled like a man. It dwarfed the ships of the Mantis, which bobbed like toys from its movements. It seemed to look directly at the palace. Directly at him.

Behind it, three more rose from the ocean depths.

Cold realization washed over Kaito. Once more, he felt as though he were drowning.

“By the Fortunes,” he swore. “They’ve been gathering here for weeks.”

And then the ocean lit up from below, as if by a hundred-thousand red lanterns. The shattering sound raked through Kaito’s mind as the light seemed to burn his shadow into the wall.

The faces of Hiromi’s retinue turned when Kaito entered the courtroom. These were the leaders of the Yoritomo family. Yoritomo Harumi sat with her arm still in a sling, fulfilling her duties in spite of her recent injuries sustained in battles against the Spider. Beside her was her younger brother, Yoritomo Dairu, face hidden behind a grimacing mempo. He did not know the others, but they were armored and armed.

Kaito bowed to Yoritomo Harumi, who sat between them all. He glanced at the map of the Islands of Silk and Spice before them.

“You’ve come to report your findings,” Hiromi remarked.

Kaito looked up. “I have, my lord. I suspect you already know what I have to say.”

“I suspect I do.” Hiromi sat back. “Do so anyway.”

Kaito told him everything. As he spoke, the distant sounds of battle steadily reached the chamber. When he finished, Hiromi scratched his chin, then made a gesture to a nearby servant. The peasant delivered a scroll to Kaito, one bearing the Mons of the Bat, the Mantis, and the Phoenix. As he read, Hiromi spoke.

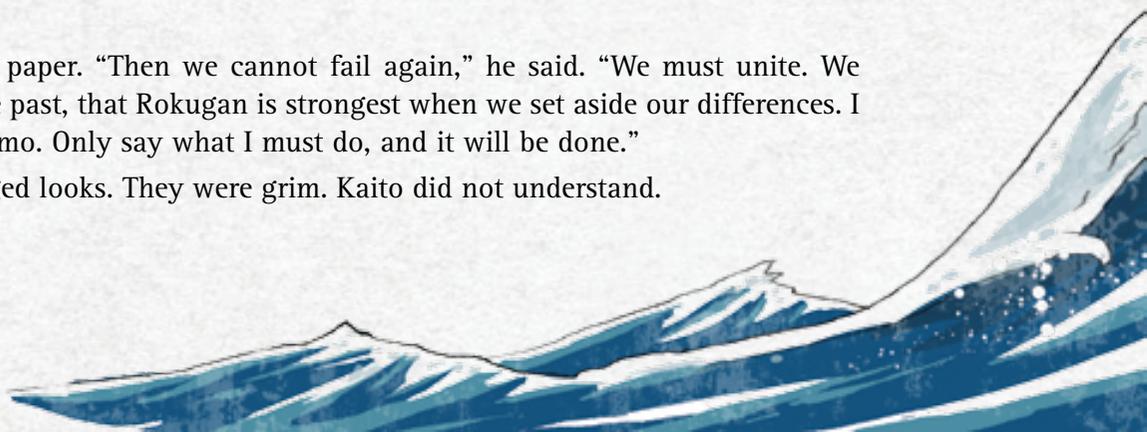
“The Phoenix have learned the true nature of the so-called ‘seals.’ They predate the Empire and were created by the five races that dwelled here before us. They serve to push our world away from the Realm of Evil and to limit its influence. But in so doing, they created an imbalance between the realms that results in our spiritual struggles, even today. This is why the influence of the realms waxes and wanes. That stone, thrown into the pond, is still rippling the waters.

“We cannot say how Kanpeki came to learn of these seals. But we now know that the presence of these seals were known by the Kami. We now know that these were targets of the Ninth Kami’s armies at the Dawn of the Empire. We know that those families in the Empire devoted to the protection of these seals allowed them to be forgotten in an attempt to keep them secret forever.

“There are only three. The Great Clans failed to protect the first two... if the third should break, it would create an overlap between the Realm of Evil and our own world. It would create a Shadowlands within the Empire.” He closed his eyes. “We failed to protect the first seal because we underestimated our enemies. We failed to protect the second because we would not work together.”

Kaito looked up from the paper. “Then we cannot fail again,” he said. “We must unite. We must learn the lessons of the past, that Rokugan is strongest when we set aside our differences. I understand now, lord Yoritomo. Only say what I must do, and it will be done.”

Those on the dais exchanged looks. They were grim. Kaito did not understand.



Hiromi continued. "Hours ago, the Isawa discovered the location of the third seal. This, they sent by spirits to the Komori, knowing only they were prepared to receive it. The Komori, in turn, contacted my sister across great distances. The scroll you hold is the message she transcribed." He paused. "Finish it."

Kaito looked back to the paper, reading with greater urgency. By the end, his face was pale. Now he understood.

"The final seal is at the bottom of the Bay of Dark Water," Hiromi said. "Impossible to defend."

His sister met Kaito's eyes. "They broke it only minutes ago."

The sounds of clashing steel echoed from the bottom floor of the palace. Guards moved in the hallway. Tachiko left without another word, joining them in-step. Kaito swallowed around a lump forming in his throat.

The last chance of the Empire held of defeating the Spider was lost when the second seal broke. It had been too late for weeks now.

Hiromi rose from the dais and walked to the window. A fire burned among the docks of the city. Many more burned beyond it, mere dots on the horizon.

"From a distance, nothing seemed connected," he said. "The fish is blind in the river. It does not know where the current will take it, nor where the obstacles in its path will lay. It cannot see beyond its own role in the river. The current carries it too fast for thought. It can only act on instinct. Without any knowledge of the bigger picture, trapped with its limited perspective, it has no choice but to guess at what it should do and hope that its choices will lead it to the bay. It cannot see when the world is in ruins around it."

Kaito pushed against the twisting of his stomach. "My lord, this world was always in ruins. But still there are mountains and rivers."

Hiromi looked at Kaito for a long time. At last, he smirked. "It is as the Thunder Dragon foretold. The Mantis are being tested. Perhaps this is our final test. We have arrived in the bay at last." The Mantis Champion gestured to Kaito, and another servant brought him a large scroll case. It felt heavy and old in Kaito's hands.

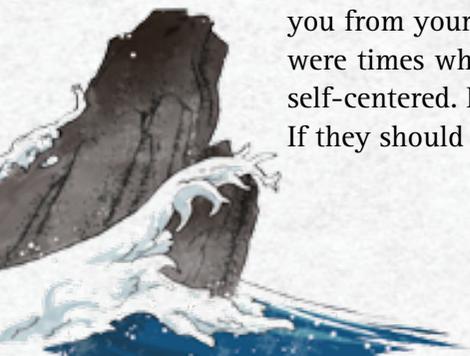
"I am ordering an evacuation," Hiromi spoke. "I have planned for this. Already the Yoritomo have begun to follow my orders to this end. We haven't the ships to evacuate everyone... I could have ensured we did, but instead I have honored by word to the Son of Heaven."

Kaito did not know what Hiromi meant by this, but did not interrupt.

"It will not be an evacuation of people so much as an evacuation of our identity. We must preserve the Mantis ways so that, if we fall here, not all is lost. If the Yoritomo family should be sundered, let at least our ways be remembered. Let at least the traditions and identity of the Mantis be preserved." He gestured to the scroll. "That is our copy of the Mantis Clan Charter. Ensure it reaches the mainland."

Kaito nodded. "My lord, if you only order it, the other families will muster and join you. The Tsuruchi, the Moshi, and the Kitsune—"

"I forbid this," Hiromi said. "You have served me well, but this is a test of the Yoritomo. I will not allow the other families who served mine to be sundered with us." He turned away. "I release you from your fealty to the Yoritomo. It was always our role to protect the other families. There were times when our orders were unconventional. Perhaps there were times when they seemed self-centered. But it was always to strengthen the clan. It was always to protect and serve us all. If they should then choose to stand with us, let it be by their own choice. Let it be as equals."



The Champion's words gripped Kaito's heart. His face burned with shame. *I have misjudged the Yoritomo*, he thought.

"Go now," Hiromi said, drawing his blades. "We will buy you and the others as much time as we can. Tell the Empire that the Yoritomo died as samurai." He glanced over his shoulder. Never before had Kaito seen a more peaceful smile. Not even on the faces of the dying. "Live and remember."

The amassing of shadowlands beasts in the Bay of Dark Water had gone unnoticed for months. Since the breaking of the first seal, they'd come from the Sea of Shadows or crawled from oceanic volcanic faults, gathered beneath the waves, and waited.

The people of the Isles of Silk and Spice had no way to know that demons congregated beneath their shores. They had no way to know that the Great Sea Spider held its court in Dark Water Bay. They could not know that the attacks on their temples and the attacks on the shorelines of the Crane and Phoenix were connected. They could not see the tides turning beneath their feet.

When the seal broke, all islands were attacked at once. Creatures the size of castles rose from the seas and assaulted the Mantis provinces. Kaimetsu-uo Seido fell beneath the feet of monstrous kaiju and was lost to flames. Koutetsukan fared better, holding out against monstrous oni unaccustomed to land battles for some time, but even for them retreat was inevitable. Rising waters consumed Toshi no Inazuma and dragged it into open maws beneath the sea. Haiyama's eruption released personified flames that raked the island with demon glee. The students of Dojo Raiden fought valiantly, but could not defeat them. The people of Distant Turtle city could only watch as the entire island became a conflagration.

Contact with Kyuden Komori was lost within minutes of the first battle. No spirit-borne messages came from that silent jungle. No lights came from the cliffside palace of Kyuden Komori. No ships left its meager harbors. None dared to reach for them.

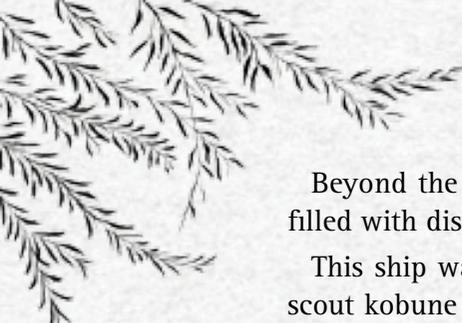
Only Thunder Dragon Bay remained untouched by demonic invasion. None could say why. After the attacks broke, a handful of samurai from nearby Tokigogochu and monks from Maigosera Seido fled the relentless slaughter, fell into the bay and awoke on the shore of Chrysanthemum Petal Lake, keep in the lands of the Unicorn. They could not say how they'd been transported there, or why. Only that a Unicorn shugenja, and an image of the Thunder Dragon, had led them. Curiously, the Ide family was ready to receive them.

To those in the mainland Empire, the Isles of Silk and Space became a landscape of dotted flames and pillars of smoke. The stars above the islands darkened behind a veil of black. Barely visible were the tall shifting forms that wandered the lands like walking mountains. Those who stared too long felt as though a gash in their heart was slowly widening.

Peasant sailors rose the ribbed sampan sails as Kaito boarded the ship. His keen eyes immediately noticed the presence of fore-and-aft sails. He knew this type of rig was forbidden by Imperial law, permitted only for transport ships to the Colonies, an exception granted only recently by the Iweko family as a favor to the Clan. Sailing this boat to a Rokugani dock would be a direct violation of Imperial decree.

But then, what choice did they have? Kaito said nothing as the sailors pulled the halyard line for the center mast, watching as the painted mon of the Mantis revealed itself in the sailcloth panels.





Beyond the sails, Kaito saw a steel curtain of smoke rising from within Gotei Toshi. The air filled with distant sounds of battle, the clashing of blades and cries of the dying.

This ship was but one of dozens lined across the docks. Merchant junks, pleasure ships, and scout kobune alike now all brimmed with survivors attempting to flee the doomed islands. The crowd on the dock grew with every passing moment. Kaito shook his head at the sheer number of desperate people begging to evacuate. There were more on these docks than he knew the city could hold.

The ship's deck overflowed with bodies. Injured men and women piled on the deck as priests tended to their wounds. Samurai lucky enough to reach the docks rubbed shoulders with peasants fortunate enough to do the same. Sailors struggled around the refugees to fulfill their tasks.

There were still people piling on to the ship. Armored guards of the Yoritomo held back the massive crowd on the pier with their spears. They let only samurai through, now. The fear peasants felt for the samurai slowly eroded with each man they let pass.

"There's not enough room for everyone!" one of the guards shouted and sent a peasant reeling with a kick to the face. "Get back, heimin!"

Several peasants in the crowd attempted to rush the guards. They were beaten back. One was skewered on a spear-tip, his limp body tossed into the bay. Kaito frowned. The crowd was getting ugly.

Kaito overheard the closest sailors speaking to one-another. "The palace is overrun," the first said. "I heard it from one of the injured. The Storm Guard has fallen."

"The Yoritomo Elite?" the other sailor asked. "How is that possible?"

"They say bakemono attacked from inside the palace at the same time as the kaiju attacked from without. There were too many to fight."

The second sailor shook his head. "How would they infiltrate the city so quickly?"

"They used the tunnels beneath the island," the first replied. "Why else do you think we didn't use them to evacuate the castle? Those creatures could have been waiting there beneath the waters for weeks and we would have never known."

"So this is how the Spider repay their allies," the second sailor spoke.

Kaito looked back to the docks. A Yoritomo in flowing silks and wearing extravagant jewels forced his way through the crowd, aided by two armed ronin. The man had a sick look about him, with long hair and a drooping mustache on his gaunt features. "Let me pass!" he shouted, clutching a swollen silk bag to his chest. "Let me pass!"

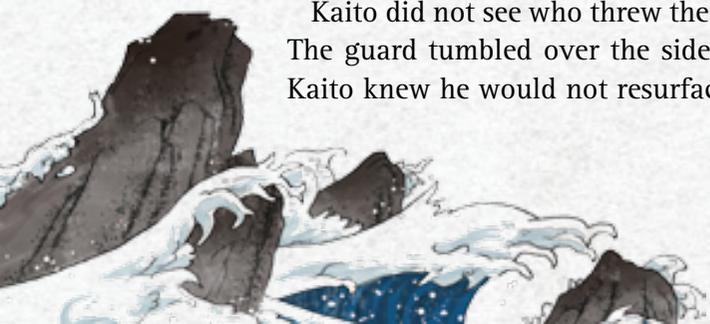
The peasants parted for him, forced aside by the ronin, some even pushed screaming into the darkening bay.

The guard held out his hand. "There's no more room!"

The Yoritomo reached into his bag and dug out a handful of coins. These he offered to the guard. "I'm an important man," he said. "I must escape the island."

Kaito watched as the guard lowered his spear, accepting the coins and then waving the man aboard. An outraged cry rose from the gathered peasants. The guards raised their spears and prepared to push the commoners away.

Kaito did not see who threw the first stone, but it struck a guard in the temple with a solid thud. The guard tumbled over the side of the docks and was swallowed by the ocean. In his armor, Kaito knew he would not resurface.



A hail of stones and heavy shells flung from the crowd. They rushed forward as one, clawing and biting like animals. Some impaled themselves on spears and then flung themselves into the bay, disarming the guards at the cost of their lives. Within moments the guards vanished beneath the cloud of peasants, clawing hands and clubbing fists gradually turning wet and red.

“Push off!” came the order from the deck. As one, sailors cut the ropes affixing the ship to the docks. The final sails deployed and filled with air. Kaito saw dozens of peasants make desperate jumps from the pier. Some made the leap, landing on the deck of the ship. More missed and fell into the cold, unfeeling sea.

A man nearby landed on the ship and experienced a brief moment of victory before a sailor drew his sword and cleaved the man’s skull. Kaito watched in horror as the sailor kicked the body overboard.

The wind pulled them from the pier, revealing the full scope of the devastation to Kaito’s eyes. Kyuden Gotei’s towers were split and fallen. Only a shell of the extravagant palace remained, a burning husk that turned the sky black. The devastation spread to the city beyond. Among the empty shells of smoldering buildings, Kaito saw massive shifting forms and glowing eyes. The shadows themselves seemed to engulf the island. Even the mountains were burning.

The last rays of the sun were lost beneath the black smoke of the burning island. The other ships became mere lantern-light specks in a starless void. All light other than the ship’s swinging lanterns seemed to come only from the conflagration of the dying island. Giant inhuman shadows danced on the shore, their shadows reaching out into the sea.

A human hand appeared over the lip of the deck. His reverie broken, Kaito rushed to the side. A woman clung to the ship, soaked and desperate, her plain clothes and simple features revealing her to be a commoner. Her grip slipping, she met his gaze in one last look of pleading.

He made a snap decision. Kaito gripped her wrist and pulled her aboard.

She sputtered on the deck on her hands and knees, soaked and shaking. “My... brother...” she managed in her uncultured rural dialect.

Kaito returned to the edge and looked overboard. After a moment, he pulled away, softly shaking his head. There was no one else there.

A wave of sorrow overtook the woman’s face. She sobbed openly in a wet heap. She could not have been older than fifteen. Kaito looked away.

An armed sailor descended upon the girl suddenly, his open blade in his hands. “No stowaways!” he shouted.

Kaito moved fast, catching the sailor’s blade with his own. The girl stumbled back, stunned. The sailor met Kaito’s eyes with open confusion.

“She’s my doshin,” he said. “Property of the Tsuruchi. She comes back with me.”

The sailor’s eyes narrowed with doubt.

Kaito nodded beyond the shoreline, towards the burning ruins of the city. “The paperwork is in the Magistrate station. You are welcome to go and check.”

Hesitantly, the Yoritomo withdrew. “My apologies,” he said. “Just following orders. You understand.”

“I believe I do,” Kaito grimly replied.

The sailor left. The girl immediately bowed. “Thank you,” she whispered. “My... my name is Noa. I will serve you until my last days.”

A scream arose from the opposite side of the deck. Kaito spun. Before his widening eyes, a wave of creatures scuttled aboard the ship, climbing up from the sea on massive spindly legs. Their spherical bodies were suspended on eight thin, segmented legs, standing up to a man's torso. Two long arms protruded from the front of their bodies, capped with razor-sharp pincers. Crablike, with glistening spines and snapping obsidian claws, they poured from the churning sea in a shimmering black wave. Another scream arose from the refugees as the creatures stormed the deck. Weapons flashed in the dim light as the Mantis samurai readied their defense.

He brandished his blade and pushed the girl behind him. "That day is today."

The sailors fought with desperation, their blades crashing against the thick chitinous armor of the massive arthropods. But for every creature that fell to the slashing blades of the Mantis samurai, three men collapsed beneath the bulk of the shrieking monsters or pulled screaming into the rolling sea. Kaito watched as the ship's captain was torn in two by merciless claws.

A massive wave crashed onto the ship, carrying more of the creatures and scattering them across the ship. Lightning tore the sky, unleashing heavy sheets of rain. Kaito caught the claw of an inhuman attacker with the flat of his sword and felt his feet slip on the wet deck. The inhuman thing pressed forward with a blood-curdling shriek. Kaito felt himself buckle beneath the collective strength of four legs.

He wasn't sure what happened next. He felt sharp hooks drag across his chest and something forceful strike him flat in the gut. His sword wrenched from his grasp and he spun. The ship rocked and he tumbled into the wooden railing. He looked into the stormy sea, the flimsy railing all that separated him from the siren call of the ocean depths.

He glimpsed the mast of a nearby ship sinking into those layered waters. The Mon of the Mantis Clan painted on the surface of the canvas slowly faded from view, as if swallowed by the churning dark.

Kaito heard the raking insectoid claws on the wooden deck behind him. His back was exposed to his enemy. He knew that if he did not move now, the creature would be upon him. He knew he had only moments before those claws would tear through his back and burst out from his chest. He had seconds to spring away or these breaths would be his last.

And yet he felt no desire to avoid the creature's attack. He no longer cared if he lived or died. What was the point? On the horizon, the shoreline of Gusai Toshi blazed like the setting of the sun. Beyond, the other islands were burning pyres of Mantis holdings. The city of lightning. Dojo Raiden. Countless fishing villages and minor temples. Each one, a fiery blot on the horizon.

Even the next beat of his heart seemed like too much effort. There was no reason to continue. With funeral songs on all sides, he would die a dog's death without having accomplished anything. He and the Mantis both would fade into nothing.

It was as if a voice whispered in his ear. It told him to give up. To let go. The universe outside was slowly dying, and if he would only join it, if he would release himself, a greater peace would be his reward. The sweet song of death reached his ears. He rose his head to meet it.

Let go, it said.

So be it, came his reply.

Lightning lit the sky. For only a moment, light flooded the world before Kaito's eyes.

In that broken fragment of time, Kaito saw dozens of Mantis ships scattered throughout the sea, all surrounding him. He saw the creatures scrambling over their decks. He saw the locked battles taking place on each and every one. Sails with the Mantis mon torn apart. Inhuman waves without number crawling up from the seas. Every boat was a new nightmare.



Above them all, he saw Aramasu's Legacy.

The ship's center mast was gone, torn from the deck by the creature that dominated the ship. The largest sea spider Kaito had ever beheld, the thing was covered in dark chitinous plates, with a bulbous spiked body and massive hooked arms. Glowing pale orbs floated around the creature, casting flickering shadows across the fragmenting deck. Where its inhuman face should be instead was a pale porcelain mask with rows of empty sockets for eyes. Painted on the mask was a single kanji. Shi, the kanji for death.

Standing on it's head was Yoritomo Hiromi.

The Growing Storm clung to the creature's back by the handle of his hooked *kama*, the weapon of Yoritomo himself. The blade embedded in the spider's armor, it frantically tried to swat the Mantis Clan Champion from its back with its legs. Kaito could see that Hiromi was gravely injured. His clothes were soaked in blood and rain, a torrent washing from his abdomen down to his knees. Yet he refused to let go. He held his other *kama* high above the creature's head, catching the lightning with his flawless blade. His eyes were fearless, the battle-cry of his ancestors ringing on his tongue. He stared his own death in its porcelain face and spat upon it.

It seemed to Kaito that he fought like twenty men.

At the spider's feet was his sister, Yoritomo Harumi. Fighting arced from between her fingers, lancing the monster and feeding her brother's embedded blade. Blood ran freely down half of her face, but she did not falter, not even as the ship's deck tore in two. By her side was the youngest brother, Yoritomo Dairu, a whirling dervish of death with his arcing *kama*, fighting in full armor in spite of the risk at sea. Even his last step would be a step forward. The creature's claws would dig into his chest and tear out his heart. But never his back.

And there was Moshi Madohime. Pale from poison and soaked to the bone. Yet unwilling to fall, calling the thunder down from the heavens, lightning spilling from her eyes and mouth. The very thing she detested, using the kami's gifts for violence, she now did without hesitation. The fiery pain of the poison that burned her veins did not matter. Her final act in this life would be to fill the very maw of hell with her own righteous fire.

A man is nothing more than a bolt of lightning. He is here for only a brief moment, nothing more than an eye's blink. Yet in that moment he fills the world with light, and the sky echoes with thunder long after he is gone. The Mantis did not know how to die quietly. In that single moment, Kaito heard the Mantis Clan Champion and lord of all Yoritomo. He was laughing. His final breath, a challenge.

And then the lightning faded and the dark consumed them again.

A wave of shame fell over Kaito. His hands gripped the railing. His teeth clenched.

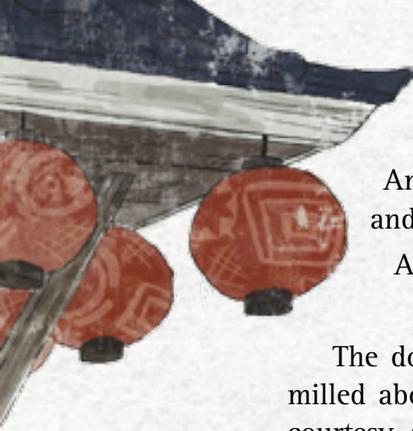
Let go, the voice said.

Kaito spun. *Never*.

The speed of his kick exceeded anything he believed his limbs were capable. It broke the face of his attacker, caving in the human maw and spilling ichor to the deck. The gurgled shriek of his enemy broke as Noa, the peasant girl, crashed into it. The creature reeled into the railing and fell overboard. The sea claimed its screaming form.

Kaito scooped up his lost blade and held it high. "I am Tsuruchi Kaito!" he shouted. "Take my head and join me in hell!"

He threw himself into the churning mass, screaming, hungry blade arching. Noa tore the closest lantern from its hinges and fought inexpertly beside him. There was no thought, no strategy. They struck anything that didn't seem human. Every breath was an assault on the enemy.



And the others saw them. And defeated men stood up again. And fleeing sailors turned and faced their enemies. And the disheartened raised their weapons once more.

And the skies filled with the echoes of thunder.

The docks of Cold Wind City swarmed with exhausted bodies. Peasant and samurai alike milled about, pressing through the crowd and sorting themselves beneath a thin veil of tired courtesy. Accidental contact that bushi would have taken as slights were excused and immediately forgotten. Refugees poured from arriving ships as others pulled away. It was more activity than could normally be accommodated, even for a city port in Crane provinces.

Tsuruchi Kaito stood still as the crowd moved around him. He wasn't sure how he got here. The last hours were a blur. His bones ached with an inner fire but he ignored them. His hair stuck to his salty skin and bandages. The peasant girl Noa sat at his feet, absently watching as others passed by. They were in the corner of a pier with a few other survivors of the assault. A stunned silence hung thickly between them.

An armed woman in Daidoji armor appeared in front of Kaito and met his gaze. "You! Are you with the refugees or the evacuation?"

Kaito blinked absently. His brows pinched.

She nodded. "Refugee, then." She pointed farther down the docks. "The Tsuruchi are gathering at the Coiled Octopus. You will find others." Then she was gone, vanishing into the crowd in search of another.

Kaito mouthed the word that caught his attention. Evacuation?

"Maybe it will be nice in the colonies," a battered Kitsune spoke beside him to no one in particular.

Kaito clenched his jaw. So, they were evacuating to the colonies. How bad were things in the Empire right now?

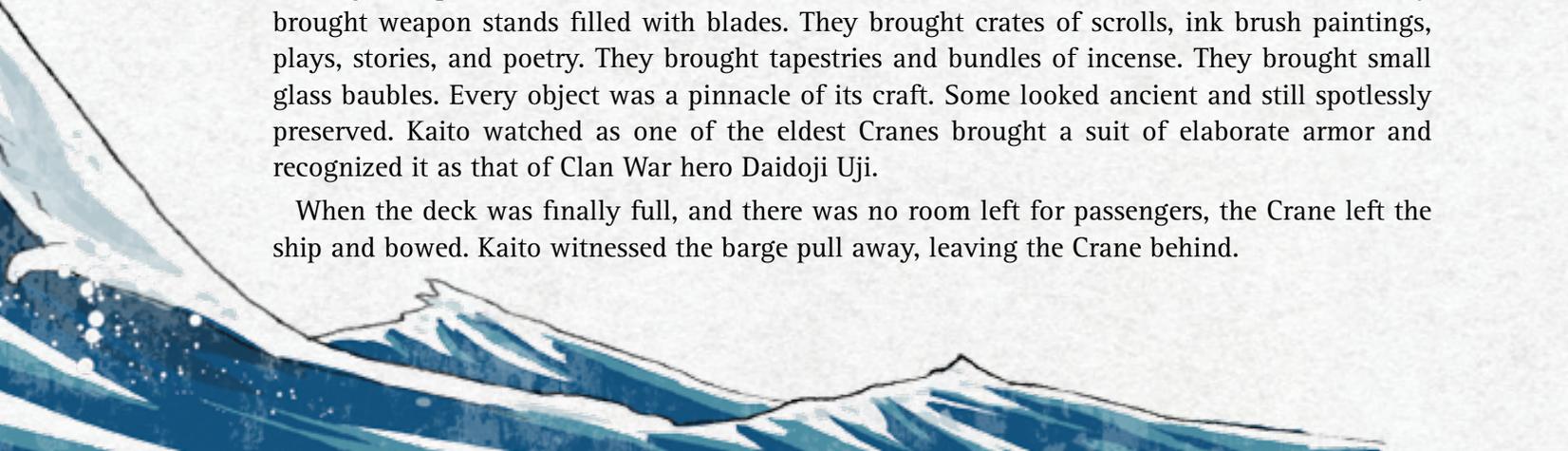
As he turned his head, a scene unfolded before his eyes. On an empty pier, a Crab barge docked before a group of Crane aristocrats. The Crane were dressed in elegant silks, their hair combed and perfumed, elegant fans tucked into their elaborate obis. They were courtiers, artisans, diplomats. Pampered children of the silver platter. The disdain was clear on the faces of the Crab sailors aboard the ship. These Crane had known no hardships. Yet they were afforded a place on an evacuation vessel, and a private one at that. They didn't deserve it.

Kaito watched as one of the courtiers stepped onto the ship. He carried an elaborate vase decorated with fighting herons, one of the most beautiful pieces the Tsuruchi had ever seen. The Crane placed it on the deck with great reverence. Then, he turned and stepped back off the ship.

And didn't return.

One by one, the Crane filled the deck with artifacts of Rokugani culture. Paintings, woodblock carvings, sculptures, lanterns, swords, furniture, even chests of elaborate silks and kimonos. They brought weapon stands filled with blades. They brought crates of scrolls, ink brush paintings, plays, stories, and poetry. They brought tapestries and bundles of incense. They brought small glass baubles. Every object was a pinnacle of its craft. Some looked ancient and still spotlessly preserved. Kaito watched as one of the eldest Cranes brought a suit of elaborate armor and recognized it as that of Clan War hero Daidoji Uji.

When the deck was finally full, and there was no room left for passengers, the Crane left the ship and bowed. Kaito witnessed the barge pull away, leaving the Crane behind.



The courtiers watched the ship sail away from the docks and begin its voyage to the colonies. Their faces were stoic and resolute. They had no regrets. They had saved something worth much more than their own lives. They were prepared now to face death.

Hot shame burned on Kaito's face. He turned away, immediately looking into the eyes of the peasant girl who stared up at him from the surface of the docks. After a long moment, he grunted. "What did you do before this?"

"Basket-weaver," she replied.

"Then go weave a basket," he said, gesturing away. "Find a village somewhere and live. Try to make it one belonging to a clan that can protect its peasants." With that he stepped away, seeking whatever building constituted the Coiled Octopus in Cold Wind City.

It did not take long for him to realize Noa followed him. He stopped abruptly and felt her crash into his back. Spinning, he grimaced into her face. "You must be deaf," he growled.

She surprised him with her determined look. "I am your doshin," she replied. "You said so yourself." She threw her arms aside. "Kill me if I am of no use to use. My life is yours anyway."

They stared at one-another for a long time, the crowded docks passing around them.

At last, Kaito smirked. "Stubbornness and defiance are bad traits for a heimin. I can see there is no reasoning with you. You may stay, then. But don't expect an easy life."

She lowered her arms and bowed. "I would not know how to live one, my lord."

Kaito supposed that there was more to the peasantry than he'd originally believed.

"...Kaito?" came a rough female voice.

Turning, Kaito spotted another Tsuruchi. She had short-cropped hair like a black dandelion, one of her eyes completely covered by a green bandana. She bore small cuts across her round face and had a thickly bandaged hand. Her lone eye blinked at him.

He blinked back. "Kinuyo?"

She smiled softly. "It is you, Kaito. I almost didn't recognize you. It's been years." She looked him over. "You look like hell."

"I could say the same," he replied with a chuckle. "You look like you've been chewed up by an oni!"

No expression. She stared at him with a tired chestnut eye.

"You... were chewed up by an oni?"

"Close enough," she said. She looked beyond him to the sea's horizon. "You were in the Mantis Isles?"

Kaito took a step and seized her by the shoulders. "It's gone," he whispered. "It's... it's all gone, Kinuyo. I saw it. Everything is gone."

"I know." She pulled away. "We saw the fires from here." She shook her head. "A lot has happened since you left, Kaito. We'll have to catch up. For now, Fusako-sama has called us together. I'm... looking for any others." She cast beyond him. "Was there a Yoritomo Rumi with you?"

"I didn't meet anyone with that name." He paused. "The Empire. How bad is it?"

She avoided his gaze. "I... don't know. I haven't been home since the second seal broke. I've been... preoccupied." She managed a weak smile. "But there are still mountains and rivers, so how bad can it be?"

Kaito chuckled at the remark, but then paused. "Wait. The seals? You... know about the seals? How? I only just discovered..."



His voice trailed away. At last she looked him in the face. She was cold as a dead man's mempo. "I know more than you think, Kaito-san. I know more than I'd rather know." She darkened. "And still no one will listen to me. The Yoritomo now kill us all for one last chance at hollow victory. They would gamble as the dice fall."

Her words took him aback. He opened his mouth to ask something more.

"That's enough, Kinuyo."

Reflex straightened Kaito's back. He knew the voice of his Daimyo when he heard it.

Tsuruchi Fusako appeared from around the corner of the pier. She was dressed for war in her black kimono and muneate, her green *hakama* matching the headband that held back her gray topknot. Her wrinkled face was disapproving. Kinuyo froze, looking every bit like the child caught practicing with the family ancestral sword.

Fusako shook her head. "Don't you think you are in enough trouble, Kinuyo-chan?"

Kinuyo's shoulders sunk with defeat. She bowed to her Daimyo, cast Kaito one last look, and then proceeded further down the dock.

Kaito bowed respectfully as the daimyo approached. Wisely, Noa followed suit. The Lady of the Wasp ignored the peasant and stood before her vassal. "I am glad to see one more Tsuruchi made it alive, Kaito-san."

"Against all odds, my lady." He thought for a moment. "I did not expect you to be here. Has something happened?"

"I was summoned," she replied.

He didn't understand. He looked up at her. "Summoned? I... I don't follow."

Fusako looked grim. "The Capital is under siege. The Son of Heaven will soon cross swords with Daigotsu Kanpeki... or the thing that is left of him." Her nose wrinkled in disgust. "The Imperial Families are overseeing an evacuation of the Empire, in case of the worst. It seems this is why Iweko the First established the colonies. She foresaw that this could happen and created a safe haven for our way to continue."

"She knew the Spider would betray us," Kaito surmised.

"She knew the Daigotsu would," Fusako corrected. A smile came to her features. "She thought maybe the other families would as well. But she was willing to bet that with time, if they came to see themselves as Rokugani, if they came to identify themselves as one of her Great Clans, the other Spider families would not follow suit. They would instead side with Rokugan. That is why she separated those who could not be saved from those who might." Fusako's smile turned wistful. "It is a strange time indeed, Kaito-san. The monks once known as the Order of the Spider now fight alongside the Crab. The Susumu family assist the Imperials in the evacuation efforts and sabotage the Spider's intelligence networks. Even the Gyushi thwarted a major Spider attack... although nothing has been heard from them since."

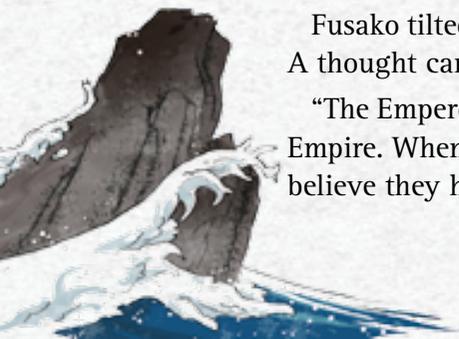
"Will it be enough?" Kaito asked.

Fusako's smile faded. "I hear there is war in the lands of the Sparrow. The Spider seem particularly interested in wiping them out."

Kaito closed his eyes. "When elephants fight, is the grass that suffers."

Fusako tilted her head, a silent question. Kaito shrugged. "A saying from the colonies, my lady." A thought came to him. "What about the Yoritomo? Kinuyo mentioned them..."

"The Emperor himself requested Yoritomo Hiromi to provide the vessels needed to evacuate the Empire. When they learned of this, the other Clans began to follow suit. Thus, the Yoritomo now believe they have a few ships left to their own devices."



When she didn't continue, Kaito spoke, "I still don't understand. You said you were summoned. What for?"

"All of us were summoned by the Yoritomo," she replied. "Moshi, Kitsune, and Tsuruchi. As many as are available. We have our orders. We are to take back the Mantis Isles."

Kaito's knees weakened, his jaw coming slack. His eyes widened as his head swam. He wasn't sure he'd heard correctly. But the serious look on Fusako's face dispelled any notion otherwise. He rose to his feet.

"It is suicide," he said.

Fusako did not correct him.

Kaito's fists tightened. "Kinuyo is right," he dared. "The islands are lost. We should be reconsolidating. This will kill us. This will doom the Tsuruchi."

"Our purpose is to serve," Fusako said.

"Who made this asinine decision!?" he demanded.

"Yoritomo Yashinko-sama," came an answer. The two Tsuruchi turned; A woman in exquisite kimonos cradled a brass kiseru pipe as she approached. She walked with the confidence of authority, the Mon of the Mantis bright on her shoulder. She was accompanied by three armed men.

"This is Yoritomo Fuyumi," Fusako introduced. "She speaks with the authority of the temporary Clan Champion in the stead of Yoritomo Haruna."

Kaito shook his head. "Temporary Champion?"

"Yashinko-sama hesitantly assumed the leadership of the clan until a proper bloodline can be established," Fuyumi explained. She crossed her arms and looked down her nose at Kaito. "It is under her authority that the counter-attack is formed. All families of the Mantis will unite to take back our homelands from the scourge that seized them."

"You are moving in the path of an arrow," he replied.

Fuyumi looked to the Tsuruchi Daimyo. "The Tsuruchi are still Yoritomo vassals, are they not? Samurai do not question orders, they obey. That the minions of the traitorous Spider occupy our isles is an insult to the Mantis! We cannot endure it! We will take back the islands or we will die in the attempt!"

"They are Yoritomo homelands alone," Kaito said. "This is not what Hiromi would have ordered! Hiromi wanted to spare his vassals! To save—"

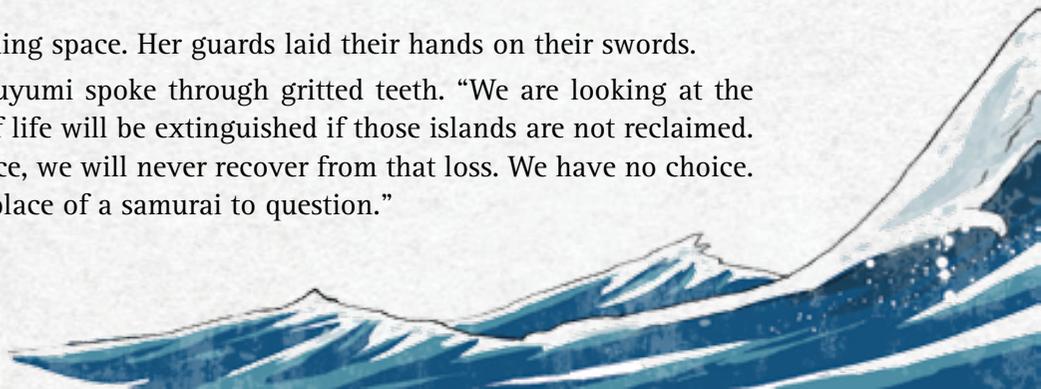
"Hiromi isn't here," Fuyumi said.

Fusako closed her eyes. "Stand down, Kaito."

Fury boiled up from Kaito's belly. He'd come too close to death and seen too much lost to remain silent now, even before those who could offer him seppuku. "I knew a vassal could betray his lord, but before now I did not fathom how a lord could betray their vassals." He burned an angry glare at the Yoritomo. "Yashinko is not Mantis Champion. We swore no fealty to her. By her order, she will kill the Tsuruchi, the Moshi, and the Kitsune. You would sacrifice our families to achieve absolutely nothing."

Fuyumi stepped into Kaito's breathing space. Her guards laid their hands on their swords.

"I don't think you understand," Fuyumi spoke through gritted teeth. "We are looking at the death of our clan. The Mantis way of life will be extinguished if those islands are not reclaimed. If we lose the Islands of Silk and Spice, we will never recover from that loss. We have no choice. And more importantly, it is not the place of a samurai to question."



The words of Moshi Madohime echoed in Kaito's head. *Now the Wasp consider themselves samurai. I wonder what Tsuruchi would have said about this.*

He turned his back to the woman and looked directly into his daimyo's eyes. "This is a fool's errand," he said. He did not falter, not even as the nearest guard put a blade to his throat.

"If this is where we die, then so be it," Fuyumi said. "It is better to die a warrior's death than to live a coward's life. Perhaps the rest of the Empire will flee. Perhaps our allies will turn away. But the thunder will not be silenced!" She rose her head with defiance in her eyes. "We will show the Empire the mettle of the children of thunder! The Yoritomo name will live on forever!"



Many Decades Later...

Yoritomo Yoshitsune stood in the morning shadow of the last Mantis Atakebune. Its remains protruded from the sea like the skeleton of a beached whale, hollow, bleached, and picked clean. He marveled at its size; even as a hollow, shattered version of its former glory, stripped of precious iron and sails, rotting for all these years, it still dwarfed the largest tower of the Yoritomo settlement. It was bigger than anything on the island.

In his many years, Yoshitsune had never seen another ship of this size. There wasn't a single ship in the lands of the Empire In Exile that could match the size of these remains. Perhaps there would never be.

The sun broke the horizon and painted crimson seas. The dawn's light revealed a small fishing vessel beyond the border of the reef. Yoshitsune watched the Mantis fishermen on their tiny kobune dragging their nets up from the sea. Absently, his wrinkled hand lingered over the space on his obi where a sword would normally be.

"Grandfather."

Yoshitsune looked over his shoulder. A young man in brown kimono bowed from a short distance away. He was indistinguishable from ronin but for the green Mantis Mon on his kimono's shoulder.

The boy spoke again. "Scouts spotted the boat. They are early today."

Yoshitsune nodded, bobbing his gray topknot. He lingered only a moment longer on the husk of the dead Atakebune. Then he turned, leaning on his warped cane, and followed his grandson.

They walked wordless through the village. The meager rice fields began just beyond the edge of the beach, the farmers already tending to their work. The crop would be limited this year. Beyond this, the village itself stirred to tired life. Men and women in simple happi went about their morning tasks. Some would head to the docks to harvest kelp and fish from the sea. Fewer would attend the dojo or the administrative tasks of the town. Peasant and bushi alike mingled in the island village's streets. One could not tell them apart.

They passed the village square, where a single tattered flag waved in the morning breeze. The golden sheen of the flag had long worn away, but the symbol of the Mantis was still there. Beside it stood the lone shrine of the island. A young woman swept beneath the Torii archway entrance as Yoshitsune walked by, a task normally reserved for lowly miko. He met her eyes. Garbed in brilliant orange and yellow, brilliant jade prayer beads swinging from her neck, the Phoenix nodded respectfully to the village elder as he passed. Then the shugenja quietly resumed her sweeping.

He felt sorry for her. Tending to this shine, a small pity the Phoenix extended for his shugenja-less clan, she would never be recognized.

He paused for only a moment by the lone statue on the outskirts of the shrine. It was a simple monument, sandstone statues on a granite base. It was not completely intact due to the storms and unforgiving nature of the sea air, but even as the details wore away, one could still make out the warrior posture of the man wielding two *kama* to his sides, its shadow in the afternoon light seeming like that of a great mantis.

The only part of the statue untouched by time was that of a plated oni, and the single *kama* embedded into its hide.

Five others gathered around the statue. They bowed together when Yoshitsune approached. They had all of the appearance of a ronin brotherhood, brown outfits with spears and peasant weapons, recently-cleaned faces, bronzed sun-kissed flesh, stiff short-cut hair, and bare feet with no sandals. There were perhaps three swords between them all. Their uniting mon of the Mantis was all that suggested samurai birth.

A woman with a broad face who stood a shoulder-and-head taller than the others, rose first. "They will dock within the hour," she said with a gravel voice. "They're very early. I don't think they were this early last time."

"It's a diplomatic tactic," Yoshitsune explained. "They want us to feel rushed and off-guard. On the mainland, the host would simply make them wait in the visitors chambers."

The group collectively frowned. Such a luxury was not possible for the Mantis.

The old man watched as the woman lowered her eyes. She avoided his gaze. Rather than address her, he turned to his grandson. "Do you wish to take the lead this time, Okiteru?"

Hope flashed in the young man's eyes. "Do you think I am ready?"

"Honored elder," the woman interjected, "Doji Hanjiro is among the envoy."

Okiteru deflated, but immediately recovered, bowing to his grandfather. "Perhaps I should follow, Grandfather."

Yoshitsune nodded and thought for a while. He could not shake the notion that his old mind was overlooking something. It was a distressing thought, all things considered.

"Grandfather?"

He waved Okiteru back. "It is nothing. I am just preoccupied." He looked to the others. "We go now."

Doji Hanjiro smiled as the group of Mantis approached. His brilliant navy and white silks were immaculate, a skillful combination of traditional Rokugani garments and the lighter fashions prevalent in the Second City. His white hair nearly glowed in the morning sun's light.

Six samurai accompanied him. Two waited on the illustrious kobune tied to the broad dock. The other four stood by his side. One of them was very young, no older than thirteen by Yoshitsune's estimation. She was blue-eyed with black hair in a top-knot, her utilitarian *hakama* and short-sleeved kimono setting her apart from the others. The girl stood no taller than his chest. The old Mantis recognized the Kakita family mon on her shoulder; perhaps a *yojimbo*-in-training, or some other youth sent to observe and learn from the Crane's dealings with the Mantis. The impressive shoreline of the New Imperial Territories glimmered beyond the channel's waters behind them.

It was only upon seeing the girl that Yoshitsune realized what he'd forgotten. He cursed beneath his breath.

Okiteru turned. "What is it?"

"Nothing," Yoshitsune spat with irritation. "Mind yourself." He recovered his face, maintaining a flat look as the Crane came within earshot, and eventually just a few steps away.

After a moment, Yoshitsune bowed, hiding the discomfort from his protesting bones. "Blessings of the morning, honored visitors."

"Yoritomo-san," replied Hanjiro, affording a very slight bow. The others followed suit. "My apologies for our early arrival. The ferryman is new and I suspect he misjudged the distance of your island from the Aerie's harbor. I hope we have not inconvenienced you too much."



Yoshitsune shrugged as he rose. "Even monkeys fall from trees. Do not concern yourself."

Hanjiro nodded, smiling. He gestured to the girl. "This one is Kakita Maiko. She wished to observe these proceedings. I thought it would be no trouble."

A few of the Mantis exchanged quiet looks. The girl took a single step forward and bowed at her hip, maintaining her gaze as she did so. It was the bow of dueling opponents.

Yoshitsune returned the gesture as best he could, attempting to bring his head equal to that of the much shorter girl. His struggling attempt seemed to bring the slightest smile to her face.

He rose from his bow at the same time as the girl. He looked down at her and spoke. "It is never any trouble to receive the beloved daughter of Kakita Ikaru-sama."

The girl never took her eyes off him. Not even as business began.

Three peasants from the kobune lugged a wooden crate to the dock. They lowered it between Hanjiro and Yoshitsune, then backed away. Neither side moved until Hanjiro gestured to the crate with an idle hand. One of the peasants immediately set to prying the lid off the crate with a bar of iron.

"It is unnecessary," Hanjiro spoke. "However, in the interest of accuracy, you may count if you wish."

The lid came off and hit the dock with a thud. The stacked gold plates within the crate caught the morning light and burned like flat bars of solid flame.

"The Crane express their condolences," Hanjiro continued as more peasants brought a second, smaller crate to rest on the dock. "Due to unforeseen circumstances, the entire squad was lost. A deeply regrettable outcome."

Hearing whispers from the men and women behind him, Yoshitsune did not flinch. "The squad was lost, you say?"

Nodding, Hanjiro gestured to the smaller crate. "To express our condolences and compensate for the inconvenience."

There would be ten gold plates in that smaller crate. Ten plates in exchange for eight lives.

Yoshitsune bowed his head. "The Mantis thank the Crane for this compensation."

He rose as his accompanying men and women retrieved the crates. He did not even glance at them, nor at the constant stare of the young Kakita child on his weathered face.

"Any news from the mainland?" he asked.

Hanjiro shrugged. "Not much has changed in one month. Prince Ryokichi presides now as Chancellor, and his sister has settled into her duties as Second City Governor."

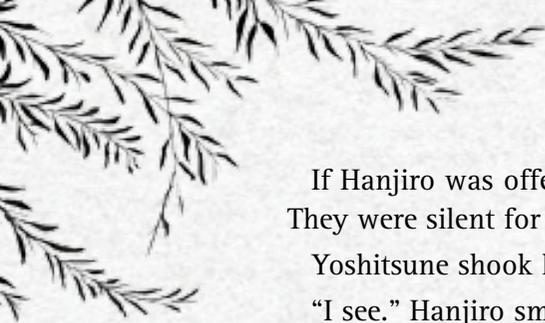
"I see." Yoshitsune frowned. "So not much improvement for Seiken-sama's condition?"

"He focuses on other things." The Crane looked away, apparently studying a tropical bird nesting on the half-submerged torii arch just beyond the pier. "Rumor says he commissioned a new suit of armor, although the Shiba will not confirm this. The Lion continue to make preparations."

Preparations for the homeland recovery effort. A coalition of all clans, united and led by the Son of Heaven. How many years had passed since such a thing was first mentioned? How long had he and the rest of the Yoritomo been waiting for the call of their Emperor?

It felt like ages.

"He hasn't much time left," Yoshitsune spoke. He instantly regretted it; in his age, speaking of mortality was coming too easily.



If Hanjiro was offended, he made no sign. "Even the grass must bend when the wind blows." They were silent for a while. "Any signs from the south?" the Crane finally asked.

Yoshitsune shook his head.

"I see." Hanjiro smiled. "Lady Akeha prefers that I ask of the Yoritomo's duty whenever I can. I mean no offense, you understand."

The Yoritomo's duty. The pity of an Emperor upon a broken clan.

The old man managed a smile. "Please give the Falcon of Kirin Path my kind regards." He paused. "If the Lion still prepare, then perhaps the coalition is still possible?"

"It has been many years."

"The Yoritomo still stand by the words of our champion--"

"We will let you know," came Hanjiro's flat reply.

Yoshitsune ate his next words. "Of course."

The Crane glanced at his companions. "We're done. Carry the Fortunes, Yoritomo-sama."

They turned away. The last to show her back was the Kakita girl. She lingered her gaze until the last possible moment. She seemed dissatisfied as she turned to show the new mon of the Feathered Claw dojo.

Yoshitsune felt a stirring in his belly at the gesture. He stepped forward. "Wait," he said with a confidence that surprised him.

Doji Hanjiro alone paused, looking over his shoulder, as one might look at an abandoned dog expecting to be let in.

"Last month's payment was short," Yoshitsune said. "My men provided double the quota for oysters and met your quota for haddock and mackerel. Yet the payment was only adequate for half of what was provided."

The surrounding Yoritomo all looked as one to the Crane. Okiteru offered them his gravest face.

One by one the Crane samurai turned. They made no sudden motions, but a few of them casually stepped into ready stances. The girl, one foot already on the boat, didn't even bother.

"The market changed," Hanjiro said. And not a word more.

Hands hovered over weapons. The tense air hung between the two parties for a very long time.

At last, Yoshitsune's shoulders sunk. "I see," he said.

The Crane relaxed. They boarded their ship. Grim faces watched from the cluster of Mantis. The last to board was Doji Hanjiro, in vibrant silks like those the Yoritomo used to make. Silks untouched by any stain, not even that of a bead of sweat.

"We were a Great Clan," Yoshitsune said from the dock.

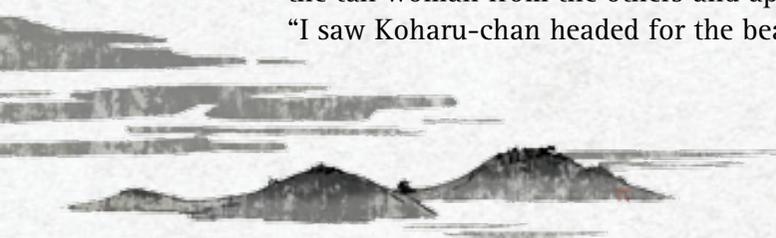
The ferryman pushed the boat away as Hanjiro replied. "Not anymore."

When the boat was finally gone, Yoshitsune turned to those gathered behind him. They blanched at his displeased expression. "Where is Koharu?" he asked.

They grimaced.

"She was supposed to be here. Her absence was a distraction."

None moved. After a moment, remembering her hesitance to meet his eyes, the old man picked the tall woman from the others and approached. Moon-eyed, losing her composure, she blurted, "I saw Koharu-chan headed for the beach! I think she means to practice her *kata*."



He nodded at his confirmed suspicions. "That defiant girl," he growled. "Someday this will be her job! How does she expect to learn it if she is not here to observe?"

Okiteru stepped forward and slapped the taller woman behind her head. He had to make a small hop in order to do so. "You are a fool, Usako! If you were really her friend, you would have talked her out of it!"

"She doesn't listen to me!" the woman protested, rubbing the back of her head with a large hand. The faint hint of a tear formed in the corner of one eye.

"Leave Usako alone," the old man said. "Koharu's actions are her own fault. Her fault and mine. I have been far too lenient."

"I will discipline her, Grandfather," Okiteru said. "I will drag her to the dojo myself! She will taste the shinai for her defiance!"

Yoshitsune looked up at the giant Usako, who recovered her face with great effort. "Which beach? The one behind the dojo?"

The woman nodded. "Please be lenient, honored elder. She thought it might please you to learn she had mastered the Strike of the Cliff's Edge before her *gempukku*."

The old man looked to his grandson. "Save your strength, Okiteru. I will deal with her myself."

The tidewater rushed over Koharu's bare legs as she stood on the beach. The morning sun painted her short happi a fiery orange and gilded her dark olive flesh. Facing the sun, she scratched at her rough mop of black hair, stiff and salty from the sea breeze. Somewhere in that direction, beyond this beach, beyond whatever nightmare her grandfather's Empire had become, was her home. A place she had never seen except in her dreams. A thing she had never known except by the ache in her chest.

She closed her black eyes and inhaled the salt of the sea. Her *gempukku* was coming. After that, she would have no time for such indulgences. She would serve on a meager fishing vessel. She would escort the merchants to the lone marketplace where Yoritomo goods, such as they were, could be sold. She would be purchased, for a time, by Crane or Lion lords to serve in the front lines of their impatient skirmishes. Or she would waste her youth in practice at the dojo, her art forever untested.

She considered herself lucky. Were she born in a different age, the Nakodo would have already swarmed over her. They would have already chosen her future. For a clan as desperate as hers, any such offer would be deemed acceptable.

Koharu opened her eyes. "That is not my future," she whispered.

A glint on the serene beach caught her attention. At first, she thought the light played tricks, but in the passing moments she realized there was something embedded in the sands. She walked barefoot over the hot beach. In the distance behind her, she heard the voice of her grandfather calling out. She knew immediately that she would be punished for impudence, but she pretended not to hear him for now. She stopped with the object at her feet and knelt to grasp it.

Her hand closed around a smooth handle. She lifted the object and sand cascaded from its metallic, hooked form.

It was a *kama*. Plain and unembellished. No different than a farmer's hand-sickle, no different than the practice *kama* she'd trained with in the island's lone dojo. Pale green silk loosely wrapped the ocean-weathered wood of the handle, silk that had faded and frayed beneath the ocean's currents. There might have once been a Mon on the silk, but that had once since washed away. Yet unlike the handle, the blade itself was immaculate. There was no sign that the sea had ever touched it. She could see her face in the steel's reflection.

Koharu stood and stared at the weapon resting in her palm. Her fingers tightened around the weathered handle. It felt natural in her grasp, a mere extension of her arm. The way the metal blade caught the morning light reminded her of a stormy sky.

A gasp came from behind her. Koharu turned with a plain face, expecting her grandfather's reprimand and the order to surrender her treasure. His face was pale, his mouth agape above his beard. He fell to his knees, heedless of the sand's effects on his fine kimono. Koharu froze as tears appeared in her grandfather's widening eyes. They were looking at the *kama*.

The others appeared behind him. They rushed to his side, mistaking him for having fallen, trying to help him up. He batted their arms away and pointed at Koharu's find. He had no words at first. His tears were unbridled rivers flowing down his ancient face. They looked to Koharu, the wiry girl with the bronze skin and coarse the black mop. The twelve year old girl. Illiterate. Dyscalculic. Impatient. The one with no interest in diplomacy, commerce, or her grandfather's wishes. Koharu. "Little Spring."

Her brother advanced with fire in his accusing eyes. "See what have you done? Your open defiance has undone our honored grandfather! You are a shame to this family! I ought to throw you into the ocean!"

Koharu watched her brother absently. She made no move to defend herself as he advanced.

Their grandfather found his voice. "Stop Okiteru!"

The young man froze, then spun. Frustration tore at his features. "You never punish her!" he shouted. "How long will you tolerate-"

Okiteru lost track of his own words in the intensity of his grandfather's expression. The old man pointed to the farmer's tool in Koharu's hands. "You fool!" he cried. "Don't you see what she has found? That is Yoritomo's *Kama*!"

The collective gasps of his peers turned Okiteru's limbs into stiff wood. He felt his jaw loosen. His gaze swung to his sister. Koharu held the *kama* at length and eyed it like an oddity.

He'd never seen her so confident. So sure. So strong.

Or perhaps it was that he wouldn't see it.

"It has chosen her," Yoshitsune whispered, and pressed his forehead into the sand.

One by one they folded before her. The youngest among them leapt up and ran to the village, crying out Koharu's name. Before long the village houses emptied. A semicircle of bowing Yoritomo formed around her, growing. Men and women in their prime, old withered veterans of mercenary work, and the young full of promise. They all bowed.

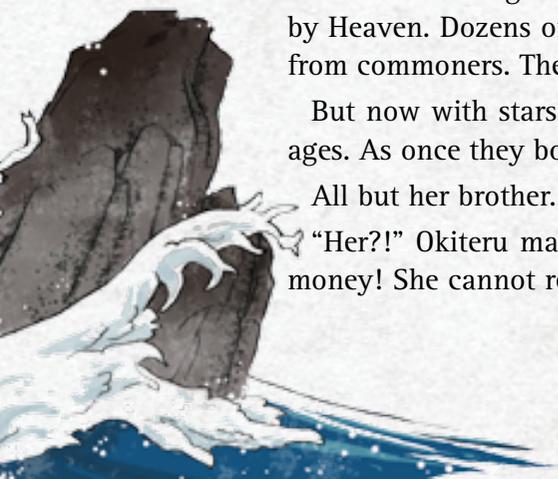
The old man lifted his gaze to his granddaughter. Framed in the light of the sun, she cast him in her shadow. He spoke, "When I took the name Yoshitsune, I had hoped to gain our ancestor's blessing. I had hoped to inspire others to make the name Yoritomo great again. Now I see that this was never meant for me. My role was only this: to teach you how to grasp that weapon."

The entire village was here. Every remaining Yoritomo, ravaged by unyielding fate, punished by Heaven. Dozens of merchants. Dozens of fishermen. A handful of warriors indistinguishable from commoners. They were ragtag, beaten, and fallen.

But now with stars in their eyes. They knew they looked upon the first Mantis Champion in ages. As once they bowed to Koharu, one and all.

All but her brother.

"Her?!" Okiteru made no effort to hide his incredulity. "Grandfather, she cannot even count money! She cannot read! She cannot conduct diplomacy! She made no effort to learn how you





helped our clan to survive in an Empire that has cast us aside! She even dared to defy your wishes, and now you make her leader?!" He shook his head. "I do not understand!"

The old man felt the wincing of the crowd. He waited until his grandson's breath was once more slow and calm, returning none of the young man's emotion. At last, he spoke.

"Our family were not always mere merchants. We were once feared warriors. I founded the dojo not only to train mercenaries for hire, but to preserve what little remained of our techniques. But I could not recall enough to completely replicate the Gusai style. With my failing skills, I could not match the diagrams outlined in our few surviving martial texts. This is why we focused instead on commerce, Okiteru. Chase two hares, you won't catch either.

"However..." He gestured to Koharu. "Your sister excels in spite of my failings. The way she fights is greater than what I have taught. She made connections I believed were lost. She has deciphered the texts when I could not." His eyes steeled. "Koharu can defeat all of you in the dojo. She has no match on this island. Even if you all attacked at once, none of you could so much as touch her. She fights like-

He paused, a thought coming at once. A slow smile spread across his face. "She fights like twenty men."

Wordless Koharu met the wondering eyes of her brother.

Yoshitsune lowered his head, touching it to the sand before his granddaughter. "Better a warrior in a garden than a gardener in a war. The *kama* has chosen. I bow my head to fate."

Okiteru stared into his sister's eyes. A girl he had never understood or respected, a sibling many years his younger. He watched his future die in the light of her eyes. For a moment, it seemed that he would challenge her then. That he would be the lone defiant man on the beach. That he would face his own sister for the leadership of his clan.

But then his face softened. He fell to his knees and lowered his head. "So be it," he said. "Then you are my Champion. I would willingly follow you to my own death. My sword is yours."

Dozens of cries rose from the crowd. Oaths of fealty. Offerings of swords. Demonstrations of sincerity. They all swore allegiance to the girl who was not yet a samurai. The final cry was that of her brother.

When they died down, Koharu again stared at the *kama*.

"Grandfather," she spoke in her rough voice, "This is Yoritomo's *Kama*, you say?"

"Absolutely," he replied. "I am perhaps the last alive that could recognize it."

Her eyes narrowed. "Shouldn't there be two?"

Murmurs sifted through the crowd. Glances exchanged.

The old man looked grim. "The second is still embedded in the shell of the Oni that slew Hiromi-sama. It would be among our conquerors."

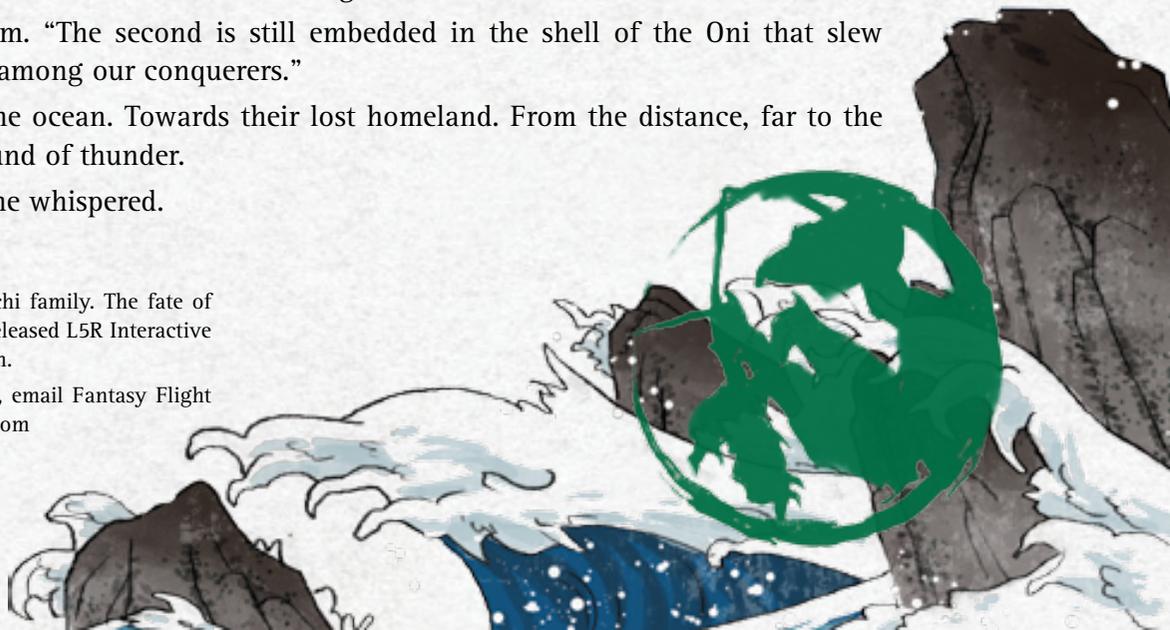
Koharu turned to face the ocean. Towards their lost homeland. From the distance, far to the east, came the echoing sound of thunder.

"Then I will go get it," she whispered.

Author's Note:

This is not the final story of the Tsuruchi family. The fate of the Tsuruchi was to be revealed in the unreleased L5R Interactive Novel: *Sting of the Wasp*, by Robert Denton.

To inquire as to the status of this book, email Fantasy Flight Games at chornbeck@fantasyflightgames.com



THE DANDELION
DOES NOT RESENT THE EAST WIND
FOR TAKING HER SEEDS

THANK YOU ALL FOR FOUR
WONDERFUL YEARS.

ROBERT DENTON III
AUGUST 1, 2016