

HEAVEN, EARTH, AND THE OCEAN BETWEEN

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The Palace of the Emerald Champion

The Thunder Dragon had no name that could be pronounced by mortal tongues. She had never needed such a thing, and had never wanted one either. Now, at a time where all things were either ending or beginning anew, she felt its absence. “Thunder” was what she was, but it felt like a title. Dragon of Thunder was the same, whether in the tongue of the Rokugani or that of the Kami. She knew in her heart that her goodbye letter needed no signature, no identifying mark, for Arashi would know who it was from even were it dictated by a scribe. Yet still, she felt incomplete.

She shook her head, trying to banish the thoughts from her mind. Names were things for mortals, Dragons had no use for such things. Tengoku’s blessed parentage was worth far more than any simple label ever could be. But then... She hadn’t been fully a denizen of Tengoku for some time. Ordinarily, among her beloved Mantis, she could hardly tell the difference. Their adoration and protection buoyed the Dragon’s spirits to great heights, and Heaven did not seem so distant at all. These days, however, with Tengoku having left and her children scattered, killed, or led astray, she felt... not mortal persay, for she was a Dragon still, a sacred creature of divine power, an aspect of the universe given form. She had no use for simple pleasures, luxuries afforded to the lesser species in exchange for lives like a bolt of lightning. At least, she told herself she did not.

Mortality was addicting. She breathed in the fresh mountain air from the palace balcony, feeling the kiss of light rain upon her skin. Her skin! Such a different feeling, the caress of the sky upon flesh. The heaviest of storms might be as a light breeze to a massive being of scales and divinity, but to the softness of humanity, the gentle rain brought a thousand nameless sensations, and those with names did not do them justice. What was “Cold” but the chasing of goosebumps across exposed skin, the crisp bite to the air, the shiver that ran through her entire form. What was “Wet” but the slickness of the sky’s tears on the stone, the breathless feeling of being able to drink the air, the wildness of hair that refused to be tamed. These names failed in so many ways to describe the utter joy that it was to behold the world with mortal eyes. To be sure, Tengoku was sweet, but the constant taste of sweetness left a yearning for tartness that was never known until she had experienced what she was missing.

And there was also the fear, fear of pain, fear of loss. Pain did not simply stop here, it was lasting, aching. It bit ferociously, and once it had its fangs in you, it did not simply let go. It had to be teased out, winnowed with offerings of joy and understanding, lest pain’s wounds open once more to bleed one dry. It HURT being mortal, seeing so many of her children die, by age if not more suddenly by blade or claw, feeling the creeping death in her bones, knowing that time might one day come for her as well. Never before had a Dragon given up their place in Heaven, certainly not for a mortal, and no one truly understood what the cost was in full.

She loved it. She hated it. It confused her more than anything she had ever experienced. She wanted a name to call her own. She was starting to think like one of them. That is why she had to leave.

It had been her Oracle that had struck upon the idea, that the Celestial realm might yet be reached with the help of the Heavenly Kobune. With her Unicorn magics, and helmed by the Thunder

Dragon, they might be able to reach Tengoku's shores without Suitengu's permission. There, the Dragon might return home and once again know the blissful numbness of Heavenly certainty. There, Iuchi Namida might stay and plead the case of the shunned realm of Ningen-do. Where her Oracle went, Thunder must follow.

She swept back into the humble chamber that she had shared with the one who now called himself Arashi, the raindrops shedding from her garments. Though the floor was damp from her passage, her elaborate kimono shone from where the water had refused to sully the fabric. She crossed the room, placing the letter explaining her absence on the simple writing desk, and experienced a fresh wave of annoyance over her lack of a signature. The gentle breathing of her lover drew her attention to the bed, where Arashi lay. For a moment, she simply stared, marvelling at how every line of tension and worry that creased the Warlord's face seemed to smooth over in slumber. Her lips tingled with the momentary memory of the night of passion the two had shared. Spurred on by the remembrance, she knelt by his sleeping form and kissed him upon the forehead, a last goodbye to her Champion of Champions.

"So, that's it? You were not even going to wait for me to wake?" came the gentle rumble of Arashi's voice. Whether from her moving about the room, or the faint touch of a few wet strands of her hair as she knelt over him, he had awoken, and smiled sadly up at her.

"That's it," agreed the Thunder Dragon, mirroring his sad grin. She stood, running fingers over the immaculate cloth of her robe, smoothing non-existent wrinkles.

"What a tale to be told," Arashi sighed, propping himself up on his crippled arm. "A sacrifice undone, and now you must go to reclaim your place in Heaven. I wish only that I were strong enough to go with you."

"It is not to be, my Warlord," Thunder whispered softly. "We were never meant to trade places, you and I. We were simply allowed to play at being something we were not. For a time at least. But you have always been needed here."

"I will treasure the time that you have given me," Arashi said with a slight edge of bitterness, rising from the bed and wrapping the sheets about himself. "Would that I were able to steal any more, but it seems I must make do."

"You never were one for accepting fate," conceded the Dragon. "But I cannot give you any more divinity. I need what potency I have left to even attempt to return home. Nor can I stay."

"Is it so bad, being mortal?" Arashi asked, tying off the sheets in a sailor's knot.

"Yes. And no," the Dragon answered, toying with a stray braid absentmindedly. "In truth, I fear I would become addicted to it. It is not the place of an Elemental Dragon to be mortal. I understand now why my siblings prefer to act through their Oracles."

"Speaking of which," Arashi said, crossing the room to retrieve a real robe. "I suppose you will be taking my second in command when you leave?"

“She is essential to my journey, yes,” agreed Thunder. “But you have been too long a hero. A hero can stand alone, mighty against any storm. Now is the time to be a leader, not by example, but by loyalty. Look to those by your side, and you will find that your Mantis have only grown in loyalty, even if they have shrunk in number.”

“A leader...” Arashi mused as he sat by the writing desk, idly brushing Thunder’s letter aside. “I am uncertain that I even know how to lead. Before, it was enough to simply charge blindly forward, and trust that you would be followed. But now... What is a warrior when his strength has failed him? What is a conqueror whose conquests have been seized?” He flexed his bad arm, wincing at the pain it caused him.

“I do not have your answers. Seek them among your people rather than with your patron,” Thunder said, turning as the door to the chamber opened.

“My lady, it is time,” came the echoing tones of Iuchi Namida, the ambient light increasing as the Oracle of Thunder stepped into the room. She gave a bow to Arashi when she noticed he had risen, but paid him no more mind. Like all Oracles, she had gradually shed her empathy and understanding, and it had been a long series of years since she had taken up the mantle.

“I will see you off,” Arashi said, attempting to rise from his seat, but he was stopped by a firm hand on his shoulder.

“There would be no point,” Thunder said. “There is nothing that could be said to stop my leaving, or to allow you to return to me. All words that can be said have been. Better instead that you should rest. The Clan needs you to be strong, in mind if not in body.”

“Very well,” Arashi sighed, slouching in the chair. “I suppose that all that is left to me is to wish you a safe journey. Fortune go with you.”

“We will meet again, some day. These days are the long night, but every night must break. I will see you again with the dawn of the new Age, my Champion,” Thunder said, face again bearing a sad smile. She followed Namida out the door, shutting it behind her.

Arashi did not rest. He instead sat at the desk, buried in his own thoughts as the rain worsened outside. He contemplated reading the letter that the Dragon had left him for hours as the downpour became a full fledged storm, but did not pick it up. Finally, he simply turned the chair to face the balcony, rubbing his injured arm as he watched the storm. The thunder crashed, shaking the mountain palace, and he stood suddenly, shedding the night robe. He worked his way across the room as he struggled to undo the knot in his bed-sheets one-handed, the storm raging all the while. As he got himself free, a flash of lightning split the sky, immediately followed by a massive rumble of thunder, and he knew that she was gone. Half-rushing, half-stumbling, he emerged naked onto the balcony, and opened his arms to the raging sky. His body was battered by the wind, skin soaked to the bone by freezing rain that mingled indeterminately with the tears flowing from his eyes. He looked out upon the Empire of Rokugan, covered by rolling storm clouds, and roared his pain and catharsis to the uncaring heavens.

Eventually, the storm passed, but Arashi did not leave the balcony that night. He simply slumped into a sloppy seiza, hands wrapped around his shivering form, and waited for dawn.

The Shattered Archipelago

“It’s not enough,” Yoritomo Ichido growled, sweeping the figures of the map with the back of his hand. “It’s never enough! Try again! I want you to deploy and re-deploy until you find a solution!”

As the various advisors and servants scrambled to reclaim the tactical pieces, Moshi Kyan shook her head. The action did not go unnoticed by her Champion, who pointed at her.

“You. Shugenja. If you have something to say, then say it. I have no patience for deceit.”

“Forgive me, my Champion,” Kyan began. “But I think you are looking at this the wrong way.”

Ichido looked at her pointedly. It took her a brief moment to realize that she was to continue, put off by the direct scrutiny as she was.

“The forces of Rokugan that still fight have reclaimed most of the coastline already. There is no place where we can effectively strike at Kanpeki that plays to our forces’ strengths,” she said, placing a set of stylized ships out on the map. “While he does have holdings along the rivers, it would be madness to attack with so few as we have in the heart of his territory.”

“Yes, yes, we know all of that,” Ichido grumped, waving his hand. “So what solution do you propose?”

“That we stop trying to fight a war,” replied Kyan.

“Speak your next words very carefully, Moshi,” Ichido said, narrowing his eyes.

“If we attack head-on, we will lose,” Kyan said, internally balking.

“You think I don’t know that?” Ichido practically spat. “I would dearly love to have the kind of force necessary to challenge his so-called Onyx Empire. But I do not wish to fight a war. I want to make him hurt. I want to see him bleed. I want revenge, for what that monster has done to the once-great home of the once-great Mantis. I want to feel my blades bite into his hide, and for that sting to gnaw at him for the rest of his days.”

“Then let us do it. But in the Mantis way. We have ships enough that we can strike along the rivers, but merely skirmish and move on. We need never see direct confrontation if we are swift,” Kyan said, moving the ships along the blue veins of the Empire.

“If we can convince the other Clans to let our ships through their lands,” piped Yoritomo Juriken, placing fingers along the map. “In order to go upstream and hit the Spider, we would need to seek passage through the lands of the Crane... Maybe even those of the... Blast it, why couldn’t Shibatsu have taken a different name for his Clan? It just makes things all the more confusing,” he said, crossing his arms with a frown.

“That, I am unsure of,” Kyan said, bearing a frown of her own. “I would think the other Clans would be overjoyed to allow us passage to strike at Kanpeki in their stead.”

“The more foolish, sure,” Juriken said, moving a few pieces to indicate the Onyx Empire’s border. “But our plan hinges on escaping before Kanpeki’s forces can retaliate. If we pull it off, he will instead punish the Clan that let us through their lands.”

“Hmmm,” Kyan mused, pursing her lips. “I hadn’t thought of that. So we will either need to bribe them, or trick them. What do we have that they could want?”

“Fish,” a voice piped up, breaking the short silence that had followed the shugenja’s thought. Yoritomo Minoro stepped out from behind the other advisors. “We have access to deep waters that remain uncorrupted, distant fishing grounds that are still edible.”

“You really think that they will let us through their lands for fish?” Kyan inquired incredulously.

“You misunderstand, Moshi-san,” Minoro said, grinning evilly. “I suggest that we sell them the fish. They will need to allow us access to their markets in order to do so, and with the coin that they pay we will buy blades, sails. We will not only gain access to their lands, but they themselves will finance our strikes”

A low chuckle drew the arguing samurai’s attention back to their Champion. He had picked up a figurine whose base was carved into a koku, and was regarding it with amusement.

“There. I think we’ve got it,” he said, throwing the piece onto the board. It rattled onto the map, disrupting several of Kanpeki’s troops. “We will get our revenge by going back in time. The Mantis will once again be merchants, pirates, and thieves. There is a kind of poetry in that, don’t you think?”

The other Mantis eyed each other, uncertain how they felt about such labels. Finally, Minoro shrugged. “If the coin rings true, who are we to deny it?”

“I suppose I have no objections,” Juriken added. “It is as good a plan as any others we have.”

“Well then,” sighed Kyan, leaning over the map. “Where do we start?”

“Where we always have,” Ichido said. “At the start. Ready the fleet. We’ve enough fish to at least try the plan once, as proof-of-concept let’s say. Come. You three will sail with me.”

“Hai, my Champion,” the call rang out, and the three followed Ichido out of the room. Before she left, Kyan took a long look at the map over her shoulder. The piece that stood in Moshi lands was painted in bright Centipede colors rather than the Mantis green, and Kyan winced momentarily remembering her family’s distaste for her choice to become a navigator rather than a priestess. Ultimately, it was the Amaterasu-worshippers’ loss.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way,” she muttered, and followed her colleagues to the harbor.