

SCENES FROM THE EMPIRE, 1203

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Journey's End Keep

Ide Kosaka found her Khan pacing about the chambers provided to her, her feet beating a muffled rhythm on the floor covered by thick and luxurious rugs. To see the tension in her frame, one would have trouble distinguishing the master bedroom of the finest house in Journey's End Keep from the war-table of a tent in the field. *Her mannerisms*, Kosaka mused, *are certainly more suited to the field than this suite*. Mentally sweeping the inconsequential thoughts aside, Kosaka stepped fully into the room, announcing her presence with a less than subtle closing of the heavy door.

"My Khan, the banishment of the Spider from the city is nearing its completion."

Shinjo Min-hee simply nodded, not looking up from her measured footsteps. Kosaka, quite aware of the atmosphere, chose her next words carefully.

"By your command, they are being tested with jade prior to eviction. While surprisingly few have turned up Tainted, they have been instantly put to the sword."

"Good. And the pure among them?" Min-hee did not even turn to meet the eyes of the courtier, speaking instead to the wall she was currently facing.

"Turned out with minimal provisions, for the most part. However, there have been... incidents."

"Define 'incidents'."

"Well..." Kosaka hesitated for a moment, guessing that she now spoke of sensitive topics. "Some have refused to go. Others fought back. And some..."

"Out with it."

"It is Moto Nergui-sama. She and the other Priests have declared that some bear crimes of the flesh rather than the soul, but that they must be answered for as well. The White Guard has put those accused to death."

"Good." A dry chuckle issued from the armored Unicorn, one that sent an unpleasant shiver down the courtier's spine, and she turned to face Kosaka at last. "If there is one thing that saves me from Regret, it is appointing that woman my second."

Kosaka held back her biting retort, seeing as there were few in the Clan with more authority than her Khan. All the same, the distaste on her face did not go unnoticed, and Min-hee lowered her gaze to meet the shorter woman eye-to-eye.

"Speak your mind, Kosaka-san. We have had too much deception these days."

"I do not wish to offend, Min-hee-dono. However..." Kosaka struggled to form words appropriately diplomatic. "It does not seem right. She does not have the authority..."

“She does.” Min-hee cut her off sharply. “She speaks with my voice, and with the will of the Ten Gods. If she has found these samurai to be guilty, then I condemn them to death. I trust her word, and you should too.”

“Forgive me, Min-hee-dono. I merely feel that such scorn should be directed at the corrupt alone.”

“If she has chosen them to die, then you can be sure that they are corrupt. Whether with the Taint or simply the foul stain of deceit, they are guilty. Her word is all that saves those she finds innocent. Were it I, I would simply have them all cut down.”

The cold tone that Min-hee adopted shocked Kosaka. Her *On* failing completely, she stammered her next words through clenched teeth.

“S...Surely you don’t mean tha...”

“DON’T MEAN WHAT?” Min-hee roared, backhanding a pile of scrolls from the small table in the center of the room. “Don’t mean that I warned her against associating with such creatures? Such demons wearing the skin of honest samurai? I did warn her! A hundred times! It did not matter!”

Kosaka did not speak, allowing the Khan’s fury to wash over her. She herself had been the architect of several treaties with the Spider in the early days of Colonial expansion, and was one of the Unicorn’s main liaisons to them in Jouney’s End Keep. She had lived among them and understood their ways, going so far as to have one of the more famous courtly trysts of the Colonies with a member of the at the time miniscule Susumu family. Yet she was also an Ide, so she allowed her Khan to fume, knowing that now was not the time to speak.

“Do you know, Ide-san, that when Kanpeki was first introduced to the Imperial Court, all the other Champions wanted nothing to do with him? Only Lady Naleesh-dono would even deign to speak with him, and she treated him as an equal. As human! As a noble samurai of equivalent stature! And this is how that... that... worm repays her? No, I will not weep for a few untainted Spider. If they will not flee before me, then my Guard will put them down like the dogs they are.”

Kosaka decided to risk getting a word in edgewise, playing her hand somewhat recklessly due to her personal connection to the issue at hand.

“And Naleesh-dono? What would she think of this?”

“She does not approve,” Min-hee retorted sharply. “She is Shinjo in truth. Compassion has blinded her, when sometimes justice must be carried out. It is just as it was with the Phoenix,” Min-hee continued, though her fists began to unclench, her rage losing steam. “She wished only for peace with them, even when they were dragging the name of her family through the mud. It was my will that sent me from her side, my samurai who died for our honor. Up until the day the Spider betrayed us.”

“And then?” hazarded Kosaka. She was fairly certain she knew the answer, but leading the conversation to calm resolution seemed possible by interjecting.

“And then she had her peace,” Min-hee said, with a bitter, humorless laugh that bordered on tears. “If only because we no longer had the strength to continue fighting. I’m sure that the Isawa were

celebrating in their mountain castles, laughing to see us bitten by the rabid dog we thought to befriend.”

“All the same, Min-hee-dono, do you not think that Naleesh-dono would speak for forgiveness?”

“Do not presume to lecture me on what Naleesh-dono would speak for,” the Khan fired back, a bit of her anger returning for but a moment. “My Lady may be overly Compassionate, but she knows when an action cannot be forgiven. She knows when it must be punished,” As she spoke the words, the last of her anger’s fire died, and it seemed to Kosaka that she merely looked tired, the bone-deep exhaustion of the march along the Ki-Rin’s Path setting in. “All the same, as you will. Tell the Guard that the Khan requests they exercise restraint.”

“Thank you, Min-hee-dono,” Kosaka said with a deep bow, though she winced internally. Restraint, along with subtlety and mercy, was not a trait that the White Guard were particularly known for. Still, it was something. “I’m sure Naleesh-dono would appreciate your wisdom in this.”

“Would this, would that, why do you speak of our Lady in this way?” Min-hee looked up, the dark bags under her eyes a testament to her recent trials. “She is still among us. In body as well as spirit.”

“Apologies, Min-hee-dono,” stuttered Kosaka. “But with her being wounded years ago, and having no word from the Empire here, it was generally assumed that...”

“Well she is not. She lives on, though her wound is... Well, better you see for yourself. She should be arriving today. She and her escort never ride more than a day behind me. I have made sure of it. I foolishly allowed one war to come between us. I will not allow this one to do the same,” She said softly, even more of her fatigue creeping into her voice. “Can you believe that some actually thought that we would split the Unicorn over the Phoenix? To be sure, we had our disagreements, but my love for our Champion runs far deeper than any hate ever could. I believe her for me is the same. I was not at her side when she needed me once. That will not happen again.”

Kosaka remained silent. She, like many, had been among those who feared a schism, and so thought it best not to air those fears.

“All the same, I am glad Chinua-san was there for her. If it had been one of my less skilled samurai... But it was not, so she lives. And,” She said, cocking an ear at the sound of a signal horn that echoed from the main gate. “Her caravan is just arriving. Come.”

Kosaka followed Min-hee out the ornate doors to the balcony, shielding her eyes from the momentary blindness brought on by walking out into the Colonial sun. When her vision returned, she saw that Min-hee was offering her a spyglass, the outer casing of the gaijin tool detailed with a herd of running horses. She took it, and looking through the device, was briefly stunned into silence at what she saw. After a few seconds, she spoke.

“What does this mean? How did... What did...”

“The arrow that came for her was not merely a chance shaft,” Min-hee said, supporting herself on the balcony rail, “It was a cruel barb meant specifically for her. The arrowhead was coated with something, not herbal, not natural, but something Evil. But there is something many forget about our Lady. Even we are guilty of forgetting it sometimes. Her innocence, her purity, that indescribable quality that makes us want to protect her and kill those who would insult her, can also blind us to

the fact that she is, herself, a warrior. A proud samurai, child of two of the finest we have ever been blessed to be led by, and she bears Shinjo's soul."

Kosaka, still not understanding, closed the spyglass and handed it back.

"But what about..." She gestured vaguely at her left arm.

"When it first started, I too was surprised. However, I consulted the Marta, and they had the answer for me. You see, the arrow was meant to corrupt our Lady, break us as we watched her fall. History tells us, however, that Shinjo cannot fall to Darkness or Shadow. And Naleesh-dono is more Shinjo than the fools who attacked her could ever have known. See for yourself," Min-hee said, pointing as the front gates opened to admit them. "Our Lady still rides."

Kosaka watched as the caravan poured into the city. It took her a moment to spot her among the hundreds of faces, but sure enough, Naleesh rode among them, balanced somewhat awkwardly in the saddle for the fact that her entire left arm was encased in crystal.

A shadowed balcony

The cool air of the Spring night whistled through the bannister rails and paper walls of the castle, carrying with it an entirely unseasonable chill. The man waiting on the small balcony shivered, pulling his thick outer kimono tighter around his shoulders. The climate towards the Northern side of the Empire was yet unfamiliar to him, and even those with more experience living in these conditions spoke of how the days seemed to grow ever colder, the nights longer than in years past. Some pointed out that it all seemed to happen after the day of the eclipse, but such rumors were quickly quashed by the others. It was not the Rokugani way to speak outright of such things, no matter how true they may be.

"I am here, as requested."

The voice came from the deepest shadows of the darkness, from a figure as of yet unseen. The first man started internally, but kept his calm demeanor. Though he was caught off guard, lost as he was in his own thoughts, he gave no outward sign of having been startled in the slightest. Not bothering to unfix his gaze from the distant horizon, he simply returned the greeting.

"Thank you for coming. I was not sure you would."

"As I was unsure that I would come," replied the voice.

"Come down, will you? Let us speak face-to-face."

"As you wish," the voice coolly responded. One of the long shadows cast by the lanterns shifted, the movement briefly revealing a strong silhouette, sitting gargoyle-like on the edge of the roof. The wooden slats of the balcony made only the slightest creak in protest as the figure slid fluidly down to land softly next to the first man. As he unfolded from his landing crouch, the differences between the two become more apparent. Though they are of equal height, the first man is slight of build and wears fancifully designed clothes that would not look out of place in an Imperial court. The other wears only tight-fitting cloth beneath banded armor, the muscles in his exposed forearms wiry but

apparent, as are the scars that cross his skin wherever the cloth does not cover. Though the wind carved a path of goosebumps across his flesh, he made no protest, physical or verbal, of the cold.

“Your messenger failed to tell me why you called,” the second man said, the hood and half-mask somehow not muffling his speech in the slightest. “He was foolish enough to challenge my disrespect when I demanded to know the purpose. He will not be returning.”

“Indeed,” sighed the first. “I had hoped for some measure of trust, but if he was fool enough to challenge you outright...”

“Trust,” the second said, “Is in short supply these days. So speak plainly, and swiftly. I have little time for foolishness, and less for games.”

“Of course,” the first responded. He turned from the horizon to face the second man, resisting the muscle memory to go for his fan as he did so. “I will be brief then. I have a favor to ask of you and yours.”

“Hrrm,” the sound rumbled up from the second man’s chest, the sub vocalization carrying a heavy note of disdain. “No time for games. Tell me what you want.”

“Fine. You know what I have done?”

“All with half a mind and the ability to read what is plainly in front of them know what you have done. What do you expect us to do?”

“It is not safe with me. I want you to take her in.”

“No.”

The first man almost reeled back, for a number of reasons. He had expected that his proposal might be rejected, but he had imagined that it might be given some thought at least first. The sudden and sure answer caught him off guard. And, of course, he was not accustomed to being rejected.

“Will you not even consider it?”

“We are neither guardians nor babysitters.”

“Not even for the trust your founder gave?”

“That trust has been betrayed. We owe the betrayer nothing, just as we owe you nothing. You know what we are. You will have to try harder than that to convince us.”

“I don’t need to convince the others,” the first man stated coldly. “I need only convince you. I know your philosophy, but the others are but students. You are still their sensei; they will follow if you lead. So, name your price.”

“I will not insult your intelligence by suggesting that you meant a cost in meaningless gold. But I am somewhat insulted that you think we can be bought at all. You earned my respect some time ago, which is why I choose not to strike your head from your shoulders for such an implication,” the second man said casually, as though discussing the weather. “All the same, respect has its limits, so I think it best that I retire. Goodnight.” With that, the second man turned, and made ready to leap for the roof once more.

“I give her to you, freely and of my own will,” the first blurted out.

The second man paused, turning back to regard the first man with a questioning look in his eyes.

“She will be yours to dispose of or keep as you wish. I am not strong enough to protect the child, and any other who would take her in would simply take the sin of killing her upon themselves. You are the child’s best and only hope for survival. There is no room for hostages in the Empire any more, and even if there were, there has been more than enough provocation for any to demand her death.”

“Survival?” the second man said, rolling the word around his mouth as though getting a taste for it. He turned, lowered his mask, and spit over the rail. “Let us say, for argument’s sake, that you have managed to interest me. What then? She will have no birthright, no place in society, no home. She will not look kindly on you for the sentence you have served her.”

“She will live long enough to ask such questions, and that will be enough.”

“Hnn,” the second man grumbled, actually considering this time. He mulled it over for a few seconds, before nodding to himself. “Very well. But we take no wards. She will begin the training as soon as she is old enough,” the second man said, his mask creasing with a hideous smile. “I make no promises whether or not she will live, but if her blood proves true, then she should be a most promising student.”

“That is all I ask.”

The second man turned once more, and kicked off the boards of the balcony to land silently on the edge of the roof. He looked back to the first man, and crouched on the edge.

“You said before that we were her best and only hope for survival. Banish those thoughts from your mind. They will not serve you. No one survives our training. She, like all the others, will perish or thrive on her own merits. But no one simply survives.”

With that final word, the monk turned, vanishing once more into the deep shadows. Susumu ne-Iweko Shibatsu went back to the rail to consider the horizon once more.