

Scenes From the Empire, 1206

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A Palace in a Far-Away Land

"Ah, to be sure, this humble servant of the Jewel is honored to have such distinguished guests in my home," the corpulent, greasy man said with a smile that could have curdled milk at half a hundred paces. "But, you must admit, your story is not quite believable, my friends."

"Have we given any cause for you to doubt our sincerity, noble Asim?" The diplomat replied, bowing her head. She spoke the flowing tongue of the Sands with only the barest hint of an accent, and conveyed every impression of unobtrusive servility.

"Yes indeed, friend Scorpion, if Scorpion you are. You claim you come as emissaries from the East, yet you carry with you little goods and fewer servants. When the purple-clad ones come, they know the proper way to bow before their host, and never darken my door without lavish gifts to win my favor."

"Ah, noble lord, but those you speak of are of the Unicorn Clan. We of the Scorpion bear no such wealth, especially not on such a perilous journey."

"Unicorn, Scorpion, pah!" exclaimed the lord, tossing his hand dismissively, the many rings upon his fingers sparkling in the sunlight filtering in from the glass ceiling. "One visitor from the East is like any other, and all know the riches that your lands produce," he said, lifting the corner of his robe to rub between his fingers. "Why, even now I wear such a gift, silk so fine as to be like feathers upon the skin. If you are of noble lineage, then why do you come to me in garments stained by the sun and sand, your guards looking as though they have been set out to dry in the heat? No, I think it more likely you are peasants and thieves, wearing stolen vestments and selling false promises."

"I assure you, noble Asim, that is not the case. Prudence, rather than destitution, is the cause of our clothes poor conditions. It simply would not do to ride the dunes in silks. They might become damaged, and such finery would be a shame to lose to the elements."

"Hah!" roared the man, slapping his knee so hard that the ornate crystal wine glass next to his throne of cushions jumped, rattling against the marble floor. "Brigands, I still say, but brigands with taste! So, tell me then, Calipha of Robbers, what is it you hope to find here? You have eaten of my bread and salt, drunk of my wine, and your mounts feast in my stables. By all rights I should have the clothes off your backs as payment for my hospitality."

"That will not be necessary, oh wise Asim. Though we carry little with us, the Scorpion Clan has many resources to draw upon. We will gladly repay the kindness we have been given," the diplomat pleasantly responded, her eyes unreadable behind the semi-opaque veil of shimmering fabric that served as her mask. Her mouth, however, quirked in a small smile, full of pique and some inscrutable sharp edge.

"Still you persist with this charade? I see no noble before me, simply the pleasant face of a group too cowardly to show their visages unadorned. The act of a common bandit, not a noble," The large man drowned the last of his words with a long draught of wine, then wiped the corner of his mouth with the fine silk that he was so proud of. The dark stains along the corners indicated that it was not the first time the opulent garment had seen such a use. "But, it seems now that I recall some tales of the Scorpion... would you like to know how I know that you are not they?"

“Please, enlighten us,” the diplomat responded, her small smile growing more amused.

“Your use of masks was most clever. Most people don’t know about the Scorpion Clan’s customs in this land. But, had you truly wished to fool the lord of a Merchant House, you might have wished to do better research,” he said grinning, and fumbled around in a case beside his cushions. “You are missing an essential part of their dress. Ah!” He crowed triumphantly, finding what he had sought. “Here, let me help you with that.”

A small metal object flew through the air, generating a metallic ring as it bounced across the marble floor to come to a rest at the diplomat’s feet. Her jaunty smile vanished, replaced by a thin line as she beheld the simple copper collar emblazoned with the scarab symbol of the lost Senpet Empire. A slave’s collar.

“How about we dispense with masks, Scorpion. I know why your band comes to my city. You are disgraced, and your Clan sides with dark powers in its lust for control of the Empire,” the slimy man stated, his smile banished as well. What was perhaps more shocking, he spoke the words in accurate, if thickly accented, High Rokugani. “You have nothing to offer me and mine, and your survival depends on being in our good graces. So, roll over, show throat, and perhaps the Houses of Dahab will see fit to grant you some hovel to hide in.”

“Yes, let us be done with pretense,” the diplomat replied icily. “I think it best we simply pay for your hospitality and quit your hall.”

“My eyes reach far, little samurai,” the merchant said, leaning forward. “I know that your supposed riches are either dust or sickness, for that is all you bring with you. Your magics are weak, your swords of inferior steel, and your people are hungry. So, how do you plan to pay me?”

“Simple,” replied the diplomat. “With coin from your own vault. From the moment you invited the Scorpion into your home, everything you thought you own was ours.”

The merchant’s face darkened. “I tire of this foolishness. Guard, do away with the insect,” he said, waving the masked warrior at his side forward.”

“You heard him, Kasab. Do as you are instructed,” she said, her voice finally showing the distaste she had held back since she first laid eyes upon the man.

Asim Al-Querad, Merchant-Prince of the Houses of Dahab, hardly had time to utter “Wha?” before the heavy blade of his guard-captain’s falchion rent his great belly with the sickening sound of tearing flesh. He tumbled forward off his cushions to lie bleeding on the marble floor, gasping as he vainly attempted to hold his intestines inside him.

“Kasab. Report,” came another voice, speaking the Mekhen tongue with a much heavier Rokugani accent than did the diplomat. The merchant could not raise his head far enough to see the face of the man who had entered the room, nor would the searing pain allow him to focus on where he was.

“All who would not turn have been dealt with, noble Karyudo,” the sibilant tones of his guard-captain replied. “The guard has been lessened by one third, the servants by one tenth, but the palace is yours, as promised.”

“Fools...” wheezed the dying merchant, coughing the words through the blood that seeped into his mouth. “They... will not... allow... the Houses... vendetta...”

“As a matter of fact,” the diplomat’s voice came, sweet in its mockery. “We are counting on it. You Quolat have caused enough innocents to suffer by your machinations. I think it best the Houses

come under new management, no?" The merchant tried to protest, wondering how she even knew the word Quolat, but nothing would emerge from his throat but guttural coughs.

"Well said my love," the voice that Kasab had called Karyudo said. "If there is one thing that the Scorpion learned while under the collar you so brazenly threw, it is the value of a well-planned revenge."

"Bayushi Karyudo-sama, Bayushi Miaka-sama, we must go. Some of the other heads of the Houses did not fall so easily. There will be fighting in the streets soon," came a new voice.

As the last edges of the merchant's perception faded to a dull black, he heard his treacherous captain saying "It is well. We will show our worth to the Scorpion with steel. My soldiers know the streets of this city better than all others."

Right before oblivion claimed him, the merchant heard the diplomat reminding the captain of his promise that no innocent blood would be shed, and that the peasant servants would be spared. At last, the darkness muted everything, and on the floor of his own reception chamber, Asim died.

Bayushi Karyudo made to leave, gesturing for the Mekhen guard and the Rokugani warrior to follow, when a sudden admonishment from his bride stopped him.

"Karyudo-san, you forget yourself. We cannot leave before we pay our debts," Miaka said, her sardonic smile returning from beneath her mask.

Shaking his head with a grin, Karyudo turned back, and held out his hand to Kasab, who rummaged around in his belt pouch for a second. "You are of course correct, Miaka-san. How rude of me," he said, accepting a small coin from the guard. He considered it for a moment, then flicked the single denari to land with a wet splash in the growing pool of blood around the merchant's body. "For the meal, with our compliments, noble Asim." He then whirled back around, and followed the soldiers out of the room.

Miaka lingered for a moment, considering the fallen merchant through her mask with a touch of queasy disgust. "You call for a vendetta, Quolat?" she whispered to herself. "This is merely the beginning. You were ours the moment you invited the Scorpion into your home."

She too turned and left, not sparing a glance behind her.

Crane Lands

Asahina Hirakane was almost out of practice with performing the tea ceremony, times being as trying as they were. However, he held strong to the belief that a Crane should be prepared to receive an honored guest regardless of circumstance, and indeed, his belief had kept him just practiced enough to give a ceremony worthy of praise from a daimyo. He smiled to himself as he offered the steaming cup to his companion.

"My thanks for your hospitality, Asahina-san," said Shiba Eraki as he accepted the cup, smoothly setting it down and transitioning to pouring for his host. "I was uncertain that I would be able to speak with any of your kin, what with the Daidoji preparing for war. I was met with much suspicion when I ventured here. The roads were well guarded indeed." His own form flawless, the ritual master completed the ceremony by offering a warm cup of his own to the Crane.

"The atmosphere of our lands may be tense, Shiba-sama, but the Crane are always ready to receive, regardless of circumstance. I trust your accommodations are acceptable?"

"They are quite to my liking, your household does honor to the fabled hospitality of your Clan," Eraki replied with a short bow. "I am doubly pleased that I was able to be received on such short notice. I admit a certain amount of trepidation that I would have made the journey only to be given a cup of tea and an apology."

Hirakane laughed lightly, a small titter that was well within the bounds of propriety. "Surely you did not expect us to turn away the former companion of the Emperor himself?"

Eraki did not return the laughter, but rather concealed his expression by taking a slow sip of his tea. He set the cup down lightly, making almost no noise as the fine porcelain contacted the surface of the table, and looked up with a very slight, strained smile. "These are trying times."

"Indeed, indeed," Hirakane said, nodding his head sympathetically. "Speaking of our Emperor, may he reign a thousand years, how is it that you came to leave his company? Last I had heard, you and he were reunited after the Court in which he was chosen as the Imperial Heir."

"Important business of the Clan called me from the Imperial City," Eraki replied somewhat shortly, his smile growing even more strained. "It is actually just such business that brings me to your hall in these dangerous days."

"Of course," Hirakane said, suddenly very formal and restrained in his mannerism, the earlier frivolity shed so quickly that a casual observer might have guessed that he had been so sober from the start of the conversation. "To business then. What service can this humble representative of the Clan of Doji do for the Clan of Shiba?"

"The Clan of Shiba," Eraki muttered, slight hesitation in his voice. "You have, perhaps, touched on the core reason of my visit."

"Do tell."

"You are quite familiar with the doings of the Elemental Council of late, yes?"

"The unpleasantness with the Moto, hai. I am quite aware, and the Crane have made their disapproval known on this subject. Many times, often in the heart of the public eye," the Asahina said, a hint of challenge coming into his voice, as if daring Eraki to defend the actions of the Jade Champion.

"I come not to scratch old wounds, Asahina-san. I apologize if I have given offense by bringing up the subject," backpedaled Eraki. He was older, more experienced, and his name bore far more prestige as former yojimbo to Iweko Seiken than the shugenja before him, but it was the self-same experience that made the hair on the back of his neck stand up. He was not about to risk insulting a samurai of another Clan, especially in the heart of their base of power, regardless of how much he theoretically outranked him. The cold stares of the Iron Warriors that escorted him along the roads had stuck with him, and in particular the image of one of them bearing a strange device that he later realized could only be a gaijin pepper weapon had burned itself into his memory. "Indeed, the events you speak of are part of it, but they are only symptomatic of the larger issue at hand."

"Larger issue?" the Asahina inquired, the threat dropping from his tone.

"Indeed. The Council has been moving in certain directions of late, taking certain actions that, were the Empire in a better state, would be considered most unseemly," Eraki stated, even-toned. "It has

not gone unnoticed by certain factions amongst the Phoenix, but neither have their objections gone unnoticed by those loyal to the Council. Such protesters, peaceful to a samurai of course, have been given posts far from their fellows, some of which were married off to other clans before things went bad. There are yet uglier rumors that certain loud members of the groups were even... silenced."

"Curious indeed," the Asahina said casually, taking a sip of his tea. "But as you describe it, there is little that we can do for your... problem. This is an internal matter, and, Shiba-sama, are you entirely certain that you should be speaking of it with an outsider?"

"No, I should not," Eraki replied, equally casual.

"So long as we are clear," Hirakane said with a smile. "Now please, continue."

"The Council has been quick to remind those who still objected that Shiba bent the knee to Isawa, and that so they should to the Council. They are not wrong, but..." Eraki hesitated for but a moment before speaking with resolve. "Mine is hardly the Clan of Shiba, Asahina-san. These days, Shiba's ways of peace are far from our actions. We are now more than ever the Clan of Isawa."

"Interesting, to be sure, but I still do not see how I can..."

"The Fire Dragon once more fights at the side of the Phoenix," Eraki interrupted, drawing his hand from the handle of the teacup in front of him.

Hirakane was momentarily speechless. He gathered himself, then nodded. "Surely this is cause for celebration, Shiba-sama. The aid of an Elemental Dragon is most assuredly as sign of Tengoku's favor..."

Shiba Eraki's derisive snort cut off the Crane's words, and shocked the shugenja. Though he had known the ritual master only a short while, everything about the samurai's reputation suggested that he was a cultured and refined warrior. In that instant, he could have been wearing the mon of the Hida, and it would not have looked out of place.

"A sign of Heaven's favor. That is exactly what the Elemental Council told us. But, Ashahina-san," Eraki said, leaning forward, hands on the table. "Kyuden Isawa has burned, as it always seems to in times of war. They do not speak of it, but I have seen the wreckage. One need not be a loremaster to recognize the mark of a Dragon's talons and flame. No mortal creature sieged that castle."

"But... but..." stuttered Hirakane, absolutely dumbstruck, both by the Shiba's manner and the revelation. "What does it mean then?"

"I come, not as an emissary of the Council, but as a bearer of the Shiba name. I am asking the Crane for aid in a most disturbing act, because honor can have me do no less in the face of such blasphemy. I come, Asahina-san," Eraki stated, pressing down with his hands as he lifted himself from his seat, his aging muscles stretching against his bones with a slight aching creak of protest. "Because I have been to the front. I beheld the Dragon with my own eyes, blinded and awestruck by its majesty. I would have done it much reverence for its aid. I would have made sacrifice to it, and meditated on the sights I had seen. But then it moved its great neck, glowing with the heat of a volcano, and I beheld the carved collar that bound it."

A long, pregnant silence followed the pronouncement. Out of the corner of his peripheral vision, Eraki noted one of the hidden watchers had vanished from his post.

Asahina Hirakane shut his jaw with a slight click. He closed his eyes, and rose from his seat, his face giving no indication of the outrage and fear warring inside him. Opening his eyes, he regarded his

guest with an even gaze. "Forgive me, Shiba-sama, but I fear I am tired. I must retire, as I am sure that you must as well. I will... consult with my Champion about what you have said here."

"I understand, Asahina-san," Eraki said, bowing to his host. "I shall retire to my chambers."

"If you want for anything, please let a servant know."

"Of course. The hospitality of the Crane is legendary, as is their generosity."

"For good reason, Shiba-sama. Now, I must go. Please, enjoy your stay in our lands," said the shugenja with a florid bow. Without waiting for a response, the Asahina spun on his heel, his kimono whirling about him as the kami of Air fed off his agitation. As he left, he beckoned for a Daidoji guard, and quickly conversed with him.

More than that, Eraki did not see, as the screen door clicked shut. He followed the servant back to the opulent suite that served as his chambers, and closed his own screen door as soon as his guide had left.

"More than this, I cannot do to save my Clan," he muttered to himself. "If I had done any less, then it would have already been doomed."

Without another word he placed his swords upon the stand and let his outer kimono slough off his form. He then centered himself, took a long breath as he widened his stance, and fell into the steps of a kata.