

SCENES FROM THE EMPIRE, 1210

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The Castle of the Emerald Champion

If Mirumoto Tsuda had given the situation an overabundance of thought, he might have found it amusing that, after chasing vague clues and hints all over the face of the Empire, his search should finally lead him to the fortress that he once called home. In truth, he could not give it enough thought to find such humor for a number of reasons, two of the most prominent being that he had been a very hands-on Champion, preferring to leave the mundane administrative duties of the post that awaited in the walls of the Castle to his Magistrates, and he was nearly too tired for coherent thought at all, to say nothing of humour.

He had not been surprised when he had been halted on the road by the ashigaru. It was not an uncommon thing in these days to see armed heimen unaccompanied, as the armies of the Clans had more important things to worry about than the defense of every village in their provinces. It was more shocking to see that some of them bore the weapons of the samurai caste, but even then, he had heard of the actions of those Unicorn that remained in the Empire. Seeing a dirt-covered farmer brandishing a katana with his own eyes was certainly different than reading of it in a report, but even then, he had been on the road for some time since his shame upon the field of battle.

What truly put him off guard was that, upon stopping him, they neither proceeded to dissuade him from entering a village, as many of the armed peasants he had met had done, nor tried to rob him, as a few desperate souls had perished attempting. Rather, he was surrounded with militant precision, and after a cursory glance over his equipment and heraldry, they had decided to bring him to their commander. Their words gave him hope, as no suggestion of his colleague's presence had in the past, so much so that he was only mildly offended by the brusque manner of his escort.

Passing through the village that supported the Castle was another matter entirely. The bustling town that he remembered had suffered more than one attack in the days since he had ordered the Castle emptied in preparation for the disastrous battle that had ended the Legions. The headman's house was a burnt-out husk of a building. The cool stone porch of the tavern that so often eased the burdens of laborer and Legionnaire alike bore the scratch marks of many boots coming and going, without seeing either broom or cloth to polish them in many a year. All over town, the posts that often bore strings of lanterns and streamers on festival days lay barren, carved with deep rents where errant blades had found them rather than the wielder's foe.

He was drawn from his remembrance by a distant shout, consisting of many voices. He turned, thinking his escort would rush to the disturbance, but the grim ashigaru paid it no mind. The wild yell repeated itself a few minutes later, although they were closer now to the source. Eventually, as the winding streets gave way to the path up to the castle gates, he spotted the source. A large group of peasants, similarly armed and armoured, were kneeling by the side of the road. A makeshift altar had been constructed by someone with more faith than architectural skill, though the distance and questionable roofing made it impossible to tell what sort of figure or symbol the shrine bore. All of a sudden, the assembled worshipers leaped to their feet and brandished their weapons with a heartfelt battle cry. Tsuda was startled, but kept his composure.

As soon as the scream died down, the assembled Rokugani slowly lowered their weapons to their sides. Some left the group for other areas, while some stayed, falling to their knees in quiet contemplation once more. A few, lingering by the sidelines, filled the spots vacated by those who left. He noted with a further twinge of alarm, that some he had originally taken for ashigaru were in fact wave men, or even samurai scattered from their forces. A few of the blade-bearing figures had muns on their clothes, presumably either deserters or merely separated from their command during one of the many skirmishes with the darkness.

Tsuda turned his head to the leader of his guards. "What in the world was that?"

"They know that we will march soon. They pray to the Fortune of Wrath to fill them with his righteous fury."

"The Fortune of Wrath?" Tsuda asked, not quite sure that he had heard correctly.

"Hai, Samurai-sama. There are many here who count themselves devotees of Lord Chagatai."

"...I see," Tsuda stated. He was certain that, had Rokugan's structure been intact, the Jade Office would have been most interested in sending him forth to deal with such worship. However, the Jade Magistrates had returned to their Clans, the Champion, vanished. He no longer held any sort of authority, and even if he had, he would still be one man among armed hundreds. Tsuda may have been penitent, but he was no Deathseeker. As if in response to his thoughts, the mass cried out once more, their calls carrying after the group as they continued up the path.

The ashigaru who met them at the door had apparently been a courtly guard in a quieter time, for he found his blades peace-bonded quickly and proficiently. He had almost rushed past the door out of habit, for the Emerald Champion's blades were never bound. It had been years since he had stepped through the doors of any hall with tied swords, and they were both comforting, in that it felt like some touch of civility in an otherwise dangerous and militant setting, and unsettling, for he had no idea as to how he was about to be received.

His escort peeled away in twos and threes, vanishing to other parts of the castle to give reports and attend to other duties. Finally, he was left alone with the squad leader, a man who spoke respectfully to him as one of his station should, yet did not remove his hand from the shaft of his yari. They walked swiftly, passing rooms of files that once contained scrolls upon scrolls of taxes, permits, and other simple relics of the goings-on of an Empire, now carelessly tossed aside. Some of the offices had been converted into additional barracks, the shelves tossed in corners to make room for more cots. Others had become armories, the ground littered with trampled records and the walls lined with racks of polearms. In a few, wargames were actively being run, armored samurai moving figures around a Miya-written cartographer's map in an attempt to instill the peasant soldiers with the basics of battlefield tactics.

Other rooms apparently still served their intended purpose, as they passed a servant's corridor that led to the kitchens. Though the smells emanating from within were a far cry from the delicate, gourmet cuisine that Tsuda would have supped on in the days before the nightmares had begun, his stomach belied his composure by loudly making its emptiness known. He had been on the road for a long time, and what coin that he took with him did not last long as villagers demanded fortunes for what little food they could spare, if they were willing to part with it at all. Status meant little in such

a time when half the population of a farming village would sleep during the day for fear of being caught unawares by a swarm of hellspawn when the Jade Sun fled the sky.

His host was not unsympathetic, however, and they stopped by what had once been a servant's leisure room, where several of the soldiers had laid aside their weapons to take an evening meal. Instructed to wait while he was announced, Tsuda sat rigidly in his seat, eyeing the other occupants of the room warily. His caution was unwarranted, however, as the ashigaru paid him no mind once he had settled, returning to their smattered conversation. Listening in revealed that, far from being a single force, the warriors had come from all over Rokugan. Tsuda found himself paying rapt attention as the others in the room described their old trades, told tales of their homes, cursed the names of the Shadowlands that burned their homes, and, in more hushed tones, of their lords who stripped their lands before fleeing and leaving them to fend for themselves.

So caught up in the various tales was Tsuda that he did not initially notice the heimen who had just entered, bearing trays instead of swords. His attention quickly diverted, however, when he caught the scent that had been wafting from the kitchens earlier. A slat of wood was slid in front of him, and large trays bearing strips of grilled fish were placed in the center of the table, interspersed with public dishes of rice. The rice looked a bit dry, and the fish was burnt around the edges, but the ashigaru went at it as though it came from a Damiyo's table. Unsophisticated as they were, they shoveled handfuls of each onto their slats, then ate without utensils. The sake they drank was unrefined, coarse, but they seemed pleased with it. Though he drew forth a pair of chopsticks to eat his own share, Tsuda found that it may have well been royal fare for how it tasted on days of unintentional fast.

Though his gut screamed for him to put even the most gregarious of his fellow to shame, he ate slowly and carefully, wary of overeating following starvation. All the same, the food soothed his hunger, simple though it was, and he even found himself enjoying it. He would not go so far as to break eggs over his rice as some of the ashigaru did, but the hearty food quickly restored the strength that he had not realized he had lost. He was even pleasantly surprised to hear a few of the soldiers mutter prayers to Jurojin over their food.

Perhaps they have not quite lost their way.

He had not quite finished eating when his escort returned, summoning him. With the slightest, quickly quashed, twinge of regret, he cleaned and stowed his utensils, following the ashigaru. The unit commander showed him to a door, the other side of which had voices raised in contention. Tsuda's heart leapt into his throat, for he recognized at least one. He slid the paper door aside, and beheld a war room, the walls coated in charts and troop movements, as well as esoteric, possibly heretical texts on the Shadowlands. Among them, he saw such texts as the infamous Ravings of Karasau.

There were two samurai in partial battle dress facing the table, with their backs to Tsuda. Though their gear was faded from much use, Tsuda could identify them as a Unicorn and a Lion. His eyes, however, were drawn to the figure standing on the other side. The armour under his kimono was dyed a royal purple, the white fur trim clashing with shining bands of Imperial green and gold. Though the mons of his office had been roughly torn from the cloth, the former Shogun was unmistakable. Moto Taigo, slashed his hand through the air imperiously, cutting off the conversation between the other two samurai. He glared across the space dividing the two of them, the other two

samurai turning to regard Tsuda. The former Champion did not even register their faces, for he fell to a knee before the threshold of the door, bowing his head.

“Taigo-sama.”

Taigo looked at Tsuda, his eyes practically burning when they met his as Tsuda glanced up. “Tsuda-sama.”

Taking his words as acknowledgement, Tsuda rose, only to find that the former Shogun had emerged from behind the table and crossed the distance in an instance. Before he could open his mouth to speak again, he felt a sharp crack across his jaw, and saw stars as Taigo’s fist sent him falling backwards. Through the brief, blinding pain, he heard the hiss of blades being drawn from their scabbards.

“Stay your steel, Moto-san, Akodo-san,” Taigo stated, shaking his hand to disperse the force of the blow as he spiraled back into Tsuda’s vision. “Mirumoto-sama and I simply had unfinished business. It is settled now.” Taigo’s hand grasped the shoulder of Tsuda’s armor, and half-helped, half-pulled him to his feet.

“I suppose I deserved that,” Tsuda said, wincing involuntarily as speaking irritated the swiftly forming bruise on his face.

“You did,” Taigo agreed. “I could go on to berate you as to which one of us is the tactician, the commander who trained the best officers of the Legions in the ways of war, the one who has done more fighting on the battlefield than in the courts, but the time for such arguments is past.”

Taigo walked around the table once more, taking the seat at the far end of the battle-map. The other two people, still sheathing their swords, glared daggers at one another as they once more kneeled. Taigo gestured to an empty seat at his side.

“Join us. We have an Empire to save.”

Tsuda walked around to take his place at Taigo’s side and sat down, ignoring the pain in his jaw. The day was not yet finished surprising him, however, as he got his first good look at the people across from him. The Moto he did not recognize, but the new scars and hideous rents across the breastplate could not hide from him the identity of Akodo Dairuko.

Ryoko Owari Toshi

“It is as you said, Nitoshi-sama. The Crab are turning their assault towards the former Miya lands, and have crushed all that resist them. Kyuden Miya is expected to fall within the fortnight.”

“Indeed,” Bayushi Nitoshi said, not looking up from his game of *go*. He sat in the war chamber, the shadows deep from the dim, red-tinted light. The game was against no one, the stool across the board empty, and nothing but a single stone had been placed. “The Crab are making their displeasure known. They showed unusual restraint in waiting until the Oni Lords became feudal and disorganized to strike.”

“Hai,” replied Shosuro Mabu. He was careful to let no inflection into his voice, as even the most loyal vassals were sometimes subject to the murderous whims of their Champion. It was simply safer to speak quickly and be gone. “If you have no further need of this one, I must give my report to...”

“Send orders to evacuate Kinbou province. The forces of the Scorpion are to abandon all holdings and retreat to An’ei,” Nitoshi said, interrupting the shugenja. “The Crab will be turning towards Seikitsu Pass following the conquest of Kyuden Miya.”

“...Hai, Nitoshi-sama.” The Scorpion ninja, after a moment’s hesitation, extended his awareness into the Shadow Brand along his side. The whirl of Nothingness seized him, and for a brief moment, he was everywhere, and nowhere at all. He stayed in this state for some time before returning to his own body, but spiraled slowly back into being nonetheless. The room was much as he had left it, save for the fact that several more stones had been placed in the solo game his Champion played. “It is done, Nitoshi-sama. The shadows have been informed, and will begin moving at once.”

“Good. Now, leave and make your reports.”

“Hai, Nitoshi-sama,” Mabu said, glad for the mask that shielded his relief at the dismissal. He turned with a solemn dignity, and walked out of the room, his steps picking up speed ever so slightly the further he got from his dangerous Champion.

Nitoshi sat in silence, contemplating the board for a long time. Entire minutes passed before he moved with deliberate delicacy to place another stone upon the board. As he fell into contemplation once more, something seemed to shift in the deep shadows of the room, moving down the hall. Though the red lanterns that lit the city in the rain provided little light, their glow still seemed to brighten for the shadow’s absence. As soon as he took note of the increase in the ambient light, Nitoshi reached for a stone on the opposite side of the board.

“I am quite capable of placing my own stones, young man,” a voice wafted into the room. The elderly, ephemeral tones of the words were almost inaudible against the soft patter of the mild storm on the roof tiles. As the wind-borne statement died down, a white-faced stone lifted itself from the dish opposite the Scorpion Champion and set itself on the board with a soft *tek*,

“You see what they have become? Slow. Fearful. The brands make them powerful, yes, but they have lost perspective. That one did not even think to question why the Crab will turn for the Pass, and not here to destroy us,” Nitoshi said casually to the empty room.

“Have you considered, Nitoshi-sama, that it perhaps has less to do with the brands, and more with your habit of separating inquisitive souls from Ningen-do?” The voice came again, the feminine breeze carrying a flippant edge.

“Nonsense. I have never killed those that were useful. If they cannot see their own value, then it only lessens their worth.”

“Perhaps. All the same, it is good that the shadows know who their master is,” the voice replied, stronger than before. Another stone lifted itself from the bowl, and as it moved to place itself, a withered, ancient hand slowly materialized holding it. As the stone tapped into place, visibility began to creep up the arm, showing a hazy image of deep red robes.

“For the moment, at least. And all is in place at the Pass?” Nitoshi placed a stone of his own, flipping several captured pieces. He was entirely unperturbed by the phenomenon taking place before him.

“Hai, the Dark Lotus have moved to block the Pass, and have issued their challenge to the Crab. They are full of thoughts of vengeance for the fool Gunjao. I think it unlikely that Kyuden Miya will have time to stop smoldering before the Hida turn their attention to the Kokujin.” The figure continued to coalesce as the game progressed. Eventually, the image resolved itself into the transparent form of Yogo Honami. The red light filtering through the paper lanterns seemed to make the ethereal shape of the spirit glow with a ruby luminescence, but her lack of solidity did not at all affect her ability to play *Go*.

“And from there?”

“The Daigotsu supply outposts and raiding camps will likely wait for the Kokujin to fall before launching their attacks. Little love exists between Kanpeki’s family and the Monks. As it turns out, there are depths to which even some Daigotsu will not willingly sink. They will not help them, but when they have been destroyed by the Crab, then the Daigotsu will be more than happy to strike at their mutual foe.”

“Thus leading the army deeper into the Kaihi province, and away from our little city. The Crab know they cannot fight on two fronts, even against so unorganized a foe. They will reinforce behind them and keep pressing forward, for turning back for us would expose their flank to Kanpeki’s demons,” Nitoshi laid out his thoughts in concise, clipped phrases, seemingly more intent on the game in front of him than he was on the grand strategy.

“Interesting that they would not worry about being struck from behind by our forces. After all, in the days of the Alliance, they knew our methods almost as well as they thought they did,” Honami said, trapping a line of Nitoshi’s pieces.

“Perhaps, but they think our army weak. In addition, the more obviously Tainted have always been the primary target of the Crab’s fury. Taken with the fact tha...” Nitoshi stopped speaking, and looked up from the board. The space across from him was empty once more, the spirit having vanished without a word. He looked back down at the game, and, lifting a black stone from his bowl, concentrated on where he was to place it.

As he did so, a deep, vaguely humanoid shadow crossed the paper doors to the balcony. It was visible only in the way that the blackness blocked the ever-shifting shadows of the falling rain, and made no sound. The presence seemed to create a hush, deepening the silence about the room, a malevolent specter that lingered for a long time by the balcony doors. It did, however, move on eventually, and the soft patter of rain resumed its background, tapping out an irregular acknowledgement of the shadows’ absence.

“I detest this. I really do,” Honami said irritably as the elderly spirit began the slow process of materialization once more. “Bad enough that my home was burned and I was taken to this despicable city, but having the Goju about... My loyalty has not wavered for several centuries, but you, child, test me as not even your father did.”

“A temporary measure, I assure you. I enjoy their presence no more than you do, but I would not suffer them to exist were it not necessary. Now then, once the Crab begin stirring up trouble in Kaihi, they will no doubt attract the attention of the lord of Shiranai Toshi. One Bakatru-no-Oni I believe.”

“Not a Rokugani name. A relic of the Destroyer War, some gaijin general from the Ivory Kingdoms no doubt. Which will only make the Crab all the more eager to destroy it, of course,” Honami said, the old woman sighing as she laid hands on another stone.

“They are somewhat predictable, yes. Furthermore, the Oni’s forces will attract others from the ruins of Kyuden Ikoma, perhaps even enough to give the Crab army serious pause,” Nitoshi said, rolling a stone in his fingers before it found its home.

“The Crab will destroy them,” Honami stated, her old voice serious. “No matter how many the demon can muster to attack them, the Crab will not slow down. They will be crushed into the road, as were the many that came before them.”

“I think you are correct, Honami-sama,” Nitoshi agreed, placing another piece. “For all their numbers, they lack the unity of purpose that the Crab possess. And when the dust settles, there will be a range of mountains in between the Scorpion and the Crab army, and their destructive crusade will continue elsewhere.”

“Not merely elsewhere,” Honami replied, taking back control of the board with a single move. “They will be rampaging through Lion lands.”

“Indeed?” Nitoshi asked, a sadistic smile creasing the cloth portions of his mask. “I had not noticed.”

“Hmm. And that would be game,” Honami said as she placed her final piece. “Strategist you may be, but you are a poor substitute for my previous *Go* partners. Still, I appreciate that you take the time to indulge an old woman’s fancies, even during the end of the world.”

“The Scorpion have always rewarded loyalty. How could I do any less, after taking your home to spite the Lion?”

“Young man, you have always been a disrespectful, rude, and deceitful being,” Honami said, as she began to clear the board, de-materializing as she did. “That, in part, is why you make an effective Champion in these dark days. You have my loyalty, as your line always has. But you must consider the consequences of your actions. Not all are as forgiving of your faults as I.” With that, the spirit vanished entirely, leaving a small smattering of stones unsorted in the center of the board.

Nitoshi nodded to the empty stool, and stood. He considered the board, the white pieces surrounding the stylized spider in black, for a long moment. The Scorpion Champion raised his hand in a fist, as though to squash the picture of the arachnid, but hesitated. For a long moment, he simply stood, hand ready to strike.

When next the Goju passed through the room, the shadows beheld nothing. The war chamber stood empty, as did the board.