

## WHERE ONLY VULTURES FEAST

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“KANPEKI!” Daigotsu Zenshi roared, throwing open the doors of the audience chamber. He marched up to the dias, practically charging the throne on which his lord casually reclined. The court of the Spider was not generally one for convention, but his brash action still drew stares and mutters from the assembled guests. To approach one’s lord in such a manner was unthinkable. To approach Daigotsu Kanpeki, the Dark Scion, as such was suicidal.

Yet, Kanpeki did not strike the undead samurai down. Ever since he had emerged from his father’s realm, he seemed calmer, more calculating. The ardor of his fury was not cooled, to be sure, but rather tempered, so much molten iron exchanged for true steel. The old Kanpeki would not have let his arrogant vassal make it halfway across the floor before shattering his withered body. As it was, Kanpeki merely regarded the approaching warrior with an imperious gaze.

“You have grievances you wish to express, Zenshi?” the enthroned Kanpeki inquired, managing to sound at once regal and vaguely bored.

“My soldiers have pressed the samurai on all sides. We have set their castles ablaze and shrunk their borders. We have done everything you ask, brought the Empire to its knees. So tell me, my Lord, why in Jigoku’s steaming pits have you asked us to stop?” Zenshi’s rapid speech was spat like so much venom from an angry serpent. The rotting soldier bristled with seething fury, practically steaming in his weathered armor.

“You speak as though you have lost faith, Zenshi,” Kanpeki intoned, folding his hands underneath his chin. He leaned forward, a malevolent gargoyle in dark robes upon the Emerald Throne. “You have done everything I have commanded,” he emphasized. “It is true. Now, I have commanded you to cease your advance. You will obey, or suffer the consequences.”

“You... you really think...” Zenshi choked on his bile, biting back the vile words he was about to spout. The assembled members of the Spider court did not remove their own hands from their blades, but noted that at least some semblance of self-preservation remained to the horrid general. For Zenshi’s part, he breathed heavily, his torso swelling and falling with rage, the fact that his lungs had ceased functioning decades ago notwithstanding. After several seconds, he was able to articulate his anger.

“We rejoiced when you returned from the Pit. To hear of your coming, a rabid tide of monsters at your heel, it was as though our Dark Lord, your father, had come among us once more. We thought that your advance was herald to our grand victory at last,” Zenshi muttered loudly. “I do not know what happened to you in your father’s realm, how long you wandered Jigoku, but for us? For the faithful, loyal servants that you left behind? It was five. Long. Years. Five years, and a few months. Five years in which the Oni would not obey our commands. Five years, in which Kokujin’s order reborn was nearly wiped out once more. Five years of loss! We had the Empire by its throat, then you left us, and they grew bold once more! Every turn we were fought by would-be heroes, foolish martyrs, and we had what we had taken snatched from our hands once more!”

"Yet I returned." Kanpeki interrupted, his tone carrying a note of warning obvious enough to make the guards by his feet take an involuntary step back.

"Hai, you returned," Zenshi said, lowering the arms he had been wildly gesticulating with. "You returned, with a force great enough to crush even the most remote, well-defended fortresses of the Empire. So why have you not commanded us to do just that?"

"You would not understand, were I to deign to tell you," Kanpeki said, his tone glacial. "What I have gained in my sojourn to Jigoku would be wasted on such as you. You are too impulsive, too short-sighted. Inquire if you must, but the knowledge will be the death of you."

"Try me," Zenshi responded, the ice in his voice a match for that of his Lord. His eyes narrowed, and his hand came to rest none too subtly on the hilt of his sword.

"Very well," Kanpeki said. He pressed his hands down, slowly lifting his considerable mass off the seat of the Empire. As he rose to his prodigious height, the arrogant dead man on the court floor quickly thought better of the placement of his hands, letting go of the weapon as the massive form of Daigotsu Kanpeki towered over the Imperial Court. The dias seemed much higher in that moment, and the intimidating effect was not lost as the giant in the form of a man stalked down the steps one by one, tossing up a hand to prevent the advance of his guards. Daigotsu Zenshi was not a small man, but when Kanpeki reached the floor and started walking towards him, he felt as though he were a cub in the face of a grown tiger.

"I was like you, not long ago," Kanpeki enunciated in a calm, collected voice. He knew full well the effect his stature had on people, and wielded it as surely as a master painter might wield a brush. "Stupid. Brash. Furious at a world that I thought had cheated me of what was mine. I was correct, of course, but blind fury serves only so well. When the rage failed me, when I failed to conquer the Empire on righteous anger alone, I walked into Jigoku," he practically shouted, turning to address the entirety of his court. Zenshi briefly considered his back, but knew that Kanpeki would snap him like a twig before the tip of his sword cleared its sheath.

"I thought to go to my father's realm, and claim the power to enact my will. I thought to enter the bleak realm of Jigoku, and emerge a conqueror of unforetold might. I thought many things! Instead, I wandered the wastes, forsaken. I did not eat. I did not drink. I tore apart Oni with my bare hands just to survive another night. I screamed out into the formless realm, scaring the Yokai from their torments, yet still my father would not hear me," Kanpeki whirled around as he spoke, addressing all those who did not simply flee as he descended from the dias. "I carried on, and as I survived. I knew not why my father would not see his son, why he would not turn his attention to the child he begat and aid him in achieving his dream. Yet I pressed on. There was no going back. There could be no failure. So I walked, I fought, I killed, I know not for how long. You say it has been little more than five years, but time has no meaning in Jigoku. I did not sleep, for the demons would tear me apart. I did not rest, for to stop would be to show weakness. I did not even sit down, for the realm itself might rise and claim my wretched carcass if I lingered too long."

Murmurs rose in strength as Kanpeki described his ordeal, and Zenshi felt less and less assured of his position. When first he had entered the room, he had thought to raise the ardor in the gathered Spiders' blood, gather enough support that his fury might sway Kanpeki. Looking around the room

at the rapt expressions following his lord, Zenshi grew cold as he realized just how far out of his depth he was.

“I do not know when I realized it, but I was struck by an epiphany in the howling nightmare. Jigoku cares not one whit for us. Not for me, not for the Emperor, not for the smallest hinin or the mightiest warlord. It is indifferent to what we want, our dreams and goals. It cares only that we belong to it. That is when I resolved to leave. Though the plane itself tried to stop me, stubbornly refusing to let me go, the shrieking stopped and the land quieted as I approached the Festering Pit. For you see, while Jigoku may not care about our dreams, its Champion is of a different opinion. It could have been weeks that I talked to Daigotsu, or months, years. There is no sun in Jigoku by which to mark the fleeting passage of hours, our conversation might have lasted no more than moments, or it might have lasted an eternity. We spoke, there at the point between worlds, and my eyes were opened for the first time.”

As the frenzy grew in the room, the audience sensing the story coming to a climax, Zenshi began rapidly sorting through his options, mocked by the kansen animating his dry corpse all the while. He could not run, for the guards would bar his way. Besides, Kanpeki would simply run him down, as the malevolent spirits were quick to remind him. Talking his way out of the situation seemed increasingly unlikely, and a coward's path at that. He would not grovel, show throat like a beaten dog, and hope to be spared by one utterly without mercy. His only hope lay in the fact that he had possessed the Taint far longer than Daigotsu's whelp. Perhaps if he struck first, the voices whispered, their gifts might carry the day before Kanpeki could tear him asunder. He started to inch forward, hand once more on his sword.

“Jigoku cares only that more souls come to it. To be certain, many might become Tainted if the Oni were set loose, sent to rampage. I say, it is not enough!” Kanpeki roared, throwing his arms wide. “I was promised an Empire, not a sea of corpses. Once, I thought that it would suffice to kill all of the Rokugani who would not bow to me. Now, I want more! I want it all! Our forces will go no further, for they are now establishing a border. The border of the Onyx Empire. I do not care to simply slaughter the samurai. It is not enough to see them conquered. I want them utterly defeated! I want them to live with the knowledge of what they have done, accept the Taint, and bow before me. I want to see them utterly broken, watch their pathetic structures crumble as the lie of Bushido is laid bare before them. I want them to crawl to my throne, begging at my feet, and laugh as they know shame!”

Zenshi saw his chance as the audience roared their approval. Hoping against hope that the noise would distract Kanpeki from the attack, he braced himself briefly, then sprang forward, uncoiling like some hideous viper. Following the urging of the evil in his blood, his sword hissed out of the scabbard, the serpent's fangs lancing for Kanpeki's heart.

And then he was holding a much lighter hilt, the blade cleanly snapped at the *tsuba*. He did not even see Kanpeki move, yet his blade now lay in pieces along the floor, and he gasped with shock as pain that he should not have been able to feel lanced through every fibre of his being. The defanged viper screamed, a rough counterpart to the cheering court, panicking as strength leeches from his fingers and toes. He looked down, watching his veins with horror as the stain of the Taint rushed rapidly up them towards his chest. Strength bled itself out of his extremities, following the corrupt excuse for blood as the heart that once pumped the sluggish fluid now called it home, leaving nothing but

decaying flesh in its wake. He continued to scream the whole time as consciousness fled, true death coming for him at last as the malevolent force that animated him was ripped from his body.

Kanpeki withdrew his hand from the corpse, holding aloft the black, undulating mass of corruption with Zenshi's heart at the center. "And with the gifts my father gave me, I shall do just that."

He threw the stinking tissue to the floor of the court. It made a wet splash as it struck, the gelatinous ball splattering effluvia of an unmentionable sort along the polished wooden slats. Within moments of touching the concentrated corruption, the floor lost its sheen, and began taking on the appearance of rot. With a careless wave, he summoned the guards to his side, and gestured at the seething mass.

"Take that to the Unicorn lands. Follow the river, and throw it in as far upstream as you can. May the fish eat heartily on it."

One of the few courtiers among the cheering crowd stepped forward, a frail looking fellow with the mon of the Susumu. At first, the jeering and yells drowned out the fragile looking courtier, who practically cowered amongst the other Spider. With his slim frame and lack of all and any weapons, he looked entirely out of place compared to the massive warriors that made up most of the audience. However, his difference made him stand out, and that difference was what allowed him to catch the eye of his lord. The din quieted as Kanpeki acknowledged the man, one of the few of his family to stay by the side of the darkness.

"Forgive this one his misgivings, dark lord, but how are we to accomplish this? The samurai will likely kill themselves before agreeing to bow, or simply set out against our forces in suicidal madness. They are unbending as they are foolish."

"Simple," Kanpeki replied, indicating the rotting pile of goo. "The coastline is devastated, the fishing routes destroyed. Many fields lay barren, their crops gone to rot, waste, or flame. The heavens leave, and take the blessings of Inari with them. Zenshi will see to the river fisheries, a last service for the traitor."

"I... do not understand. Forgive this one his failings."

"Hunger," Kanpeki said, his eyes blazing as he smiled cruelly, all pretense of courtly indifference vanishing from him. "Will do for them what armies will not. They will prosper initially of course. They will raise their banners and proclaim that we have been stopped. They will cheer, hold festivities, make plans to push us back in the spring. Then, come midwinter, when their stores run thin, they will cheerfully send their servants to the markets for their meal. When the first few die, when their lauded chefs split a trout to find the aching tumours and whispering dark, they will start to suspect. The wiser among them will start eating from dry stores, before they empty them. The more foolish will simply attempt to subsist on rice alone, and will suffer the results of their purity as their bodies waste away."

The court was silent, save for a few appreciative murmurs from the more sadistic members of the audience. While none would openly admit it, there were more than one of the gathered Spider who were hiding queasy looks or uncomfortable shifting. While supreme victory called for many tactics that would be considered unsavory, the paths to the Spider Clan were many and varied. Some

among them still held some notion of honor, and to Taint the food supply of the entire Empire was no small thing. To be sure, their own people would have nothing to fear, but for the rest of the populace? Some had once been landed gentry, and in bad years had seen the effects of famine before their seneschals had beggared their coffers to feed their people.

“Eventually, they might crack, start eating eggs and meat, millet and barley, lowering themselves to the levels of the heimen in order to quiet the gnawing in their bellies. Others will go to war with their fellows, specter of the looming dark be damned, simply because they believe them to be hoarding food,” Kanpeki continued, either not noticing or simply uncaring of the discomfort he generated among some of his followers. He spoke with an edge of sadistic joy that bordered on mania, clearly drawing from his years of starvation on his extraplanar trek. “They will take what food they can from the lower classes, claiming that it is more important that the samurai be fed first. Their farmers will weaken, be able to pull even less succor from the failing soil, and with hunger will grow resent. When their people rise up, bringing torches and farm tools against their castles, only then will they truly understand the depth of their folly,” the Spider Champion said, sounding inordinately pleased with himself. “Done is the era of feasts. Now come the lean times, when hunger will make beasts of them all. And all the while, we will be here, the Onyx Empire, holding out a helping hand to our neighbors in the style of their vaunted Compassion. They need simply accept the Taint, offer fealty, and the food will be safe for them once more. They need not even fear corruption of the mind, as my father has shown me how to suppress the Taint as he once did. And for those foolish enough to starve rather than bend the knee? Their slow death will serve only to convince others to bow.”

The court broke into cheers cut by the sickened expressions of those who had seen such deaths firsthand. They no longer tried to hide their unease, but were far outnumbered by the howling sycophants that gathered around Kanpeki so often, and so they simply faded backwards into the crowd as the Tainted held their revel around them. One who stayed, however, was the slim Susumu, who took the first opportunity he could find to cut through the noise with the ease of one used to speaking over an accusing Lion. His quavering voice slipped into the trained courtier’s tones that instantly drew attention back to him.

“What you propose is... monstrous. Appropriate for our coming Empire, I think. But there was something else you said that interests me more. Can you truly heal a Tainted mind? Forgive me, my lord, but... the nightmares... I can no longer sleep... Which is, of course, to say, that free of Jigoku’s influence, I and many others could serve you all the better.”

“You are weak,” Kanpeki snorted, reaching out a hand to place on the courtier’s chest. The Susumu almost recoiled instinctively, but accepted the touch with only the slightest shudder. “Despicable. But yet you are loyal, when all of your kin have turned from the true way, which is commendable in and of itself. So, you shall have my blessing.”

There was a flash of light, and the courtier fell back, clutching the front of his robes. He let out a shriek of pain, twisting the cloth in his hands. A brief moment later, he stood straight once more, hands falling to his side as he examined the small spider branded above his heart where the cloth had burned away. Kanpeki turned from the fallen courtier to regard his followers.

“Know this! All who accept my blessing shall be free of the Dark Realm’s influence,” he shouted. “Whatever physical gifts Jigoku has granted will remain to you, but you need no longer fear the

madness! That which others call a curse will be our strength! This was my father's gift to me, and so in turn I shall grant it to the faithful!"

The courtier, skin still slightly sizzling from the burn, let out a wracking sob, drawing the attention of the court and cutting off the beginning of another round of cheers.

"The whispers..." He sobbed, half from pain and half from relief. The trained facade fell from his face as he regarded the brand, tears welling in the corners of his eyes. He looked up, exaltation in his eyes "They're gone! Blessed be our lord! Hail, Kanpeki!"

The cry of "Hail Kanpeki" quickly spread through the excitable court, and the subject of their adoration turned, ascending the steps to the throne once more. Behind him, the guards scrambled to bring in a large iron pot, into which they scooped the putrid remains of the undead samurai with spades held at arm's length. When the pot was full, they sealed and lifted it, carrying it out to the courtyard, leaving the rotting stain on the floor as the only evidence of the brutal execution that had taken place. When Kanpeki reached the throne once more, he sat upon it, the gargoyle returning to his perch. As the hubbub died down, he spoke simply, evenly.

"They say that the honor of a samurai is stronger than steel. That may be, though I have my misgivings. Hunger will drive a samurai to do things they never thought themselves capable of. And when they finally have nothing to eat but their precious honor, steel-like or no, I think they shall find that their teeth will break upon it."