



Song of the World - Part 1

Utaku Yamada

In the Unicorn Clan camp, Iuchi Tadamatsu sat by the fire. Steadily, he moved his bow across the strings of his morin khur. His instrument provided a deep, comforting drone. The ancestors had lit fires to ward off the perils that lay in the darkness. Now Tadamatsu played music to soothe the troubled dreams of his clan.

His eyes grew heavy, his arms were tiring but he would not sleep. Must not sleep. It was the only thing that he could do to drive away the nightmares they had all suffered from since landing on this island.

And it had all started so well...

After reaching their landing site, it had not taken long for Unicorn scouts to find both fresh water and suitable grazing land. Unloading and making camp then followed. By nightfall, there was a celebration around their fires. They danced wildly, their shadows playing on the yurt walls. It was almost like home.

But after the fires had been banked and the revelers had retired, screams and shouts filled the night. Nightmares. No one was spared and no one could remember anything aside from the feeling of sheer terror upon waking.

And it had continued night after night.

At the urging of Shinjo Takame, the expedition head, Tadamatsu had thrown himself into discovering the origin of these night terrors. But all his efforts had so far been in vain. His meishōdō were of little help in this land and the research he could do was limited to the scrolls and books that he had brought with him.

Tadamatsu had even asked to visit the Crab Clan and request help from the Kuni family, but he had been refused this. There was unusual tension between the Crab and Unicorn at the moment. Unicorn horses had been wandering over the border into Crab lands and this had been happening a bit too often.

Music, however, had helped somewhat. The familiar, steady sound was enough to lull those who had been woken by the nightmares back to sleep. But they didn't eliminate them entirely and it also required someone staying up all night playing. This was not exactly easy when the entire camp had disturbed sleep, but Tadamatsu kept vigil through the night. He remained playing by the fire until he was relieved just before dawn.

Tadamatsu's aching bones were grateful for his bed, but who knew how long it would be until the nightmares woke him again.

He turned to look at where his apprentice Hatsue was sleeping. She was not just his apprentice, but his granddaughter. He was also her guardian as her parents died when she was young.

Hatsue's bed was empty.

At first it seemed as if it was a trick of the light or his failing eyesight. He sat back up and lit the lamp, a cold feeling washed over him.

He bolted out of bed and left the yurt, walking around the camp looking for her. Nothing.

He poked his head into other yurts. Nothing.

Soon the entire camp had been awakened and was searching for the young girl. But she was nowhere to be found. Scouts rode out in search for her. Tadamatsu accompanied one, ignoring the complaints his old body made whenever he got into the saddle.

Dawn had broken. They were riding through a rocky grey landscape, and Tadamatsu's mind was on the search when he thought he could hear something, voices just at the edge of his attention.

And there she was. A figure in white at the entrance to a dark cave. She sat on a lump of black rock and turned just as they rode up.

"Grandfather!" Hatsue ran up to them as Tadamatsu dismounted. "I'm sorry, but I had to go with him."

"You had us worried, Hatsue-chan," Tadamatsu gently chided. "We will...wait. What are you talking about? Who did you follow?"

"Moto Oktai," said Hatsue. "I was going back to the tent, but he found me. He told me he knew what was causing the nightmares and that I had to go with him right away."

Tadamatsu frowned. He was wary of Oktai. That Moto had been a bit peculiar ever since he had taken a hit to the head from the rigging on the voyage over. Oktai had kept to himself since the landing and had seldom been seen around camp. "Madder than most Moto" was the by-word about him. Wandering around by himself at all odd hours was perfectly fine but wandering around with a small child in tow was something else entirely.

"Where is he?" Tadamatsu asked.

Hatsue nodded to the mouth of the cave.

Tadamatsu stepped closer to the cave entrance. It was formed entirely of obsidian. Light seemed to vanish within it. And there again was that sound, a rustling, a whispering that felt cold and deep. He wasn't quite sure what to make of it.

He turned back to Hatsue. "Let's get back to camp." Whatever was here could wait until the girl was safe.

"But Oktai..."

"He can find his own way back to camp," Tadamatsu said gruffly.

"But look!" she pointed. Tadamatsu turned around. Moto Oktai was emerging from the cave, his eyes large and dark. He seemed to stare straight through Tadamatsu.

"Moto-san?" Tadamatsu approached him. "Care to explain yourself?"

Oktai continued to stare through Tadamatsu for what seemed the longest time. Then he blinked.

"The gods of our fathers," said Oktai. "They are here."