



Field of the Fallen

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The first sight of land had taken her breath away. Matsu Sakura had loved her homeland out of duty and enjoyed the vision of its farms and valleys out of familiarity, but as soon as she had seen the land to be known as "Sanctuary" she had known this was a land she truly loved.

Gently rolling hills with blue streams streaking through it formed natural eddies and pools. From the pools tall stalks of rice grew, seemingly wild but as tightly packed and neatly arranged as if planted by an expert hand. Her first assignment had been to scout the land; surely some farmer - an army of farmers - had tended these fields. But she had found nothing.

Atop the mounds dividing the paddies flagstones seemed to have fallen into a path. To either side blossomed flowers in vibrant yellows and golds, as if already pledging themselves to the Lion. At the border of the fields rose tall trees, a natural barrier to protect this beautiful place. And it was beautiful, the young Matsu had told herself. Never one to shy away from joy, Sakura had always found it in the fulfillment of her duty, not in the beauty of her surroundings.

Well, she had thought, looking over at a pair shining golden eyes set in a handsome face, bolstered by a neatly trimmed goatee, *almost never*.

"The land seems safe enough for you to come ashore," she had said, escorting Kitsu Kouta off the ship. The beach was a narrow affair, the fertile fields extending almost to the water's edge. "Have you ever seen its like?"

Kouta had moved slowly but steadily, his right leg hobbled but aided by a cane that neither he nor Sakura nor any others commented on. "Radiant," he'd replied. Sakura had been staring at the fields again and so missed that Kouta had been looking at her as he'd answered.

They'd spent the rest of the day together. As his yojimbo, Sakura had been tasked with standing watch over Kouta while he had blessed the fields. No, not blessed. Clearly they were already blessed. Rather, he had explained, thanking whatever spirits watched over this field and asked them to share its bounty.

Then it was evening. Inland, past the fields yet not yet to the woods, the Lion had begun digging trenches and laying wooden stakes and erecting palisades, a temporary fortress that would in time become a permanent stronghold. Sakura and Kouta had sat by a fire, turning over the day's events.

"Can we truly be so fortunate?" Sakura had asked. "How can this land just be waiting for us?"

Kouta had thought long before he answered. "There is a presence here. Clearly the Fortune of Rice has blessed it, though she doesn't dwell here herself. I called out to her by name but something was wrong."

"Something wrong with the Fortune?" Sakura had shuddered at the prospect.

"No," Kouta had replied. "Something wrong with the name."

Steel clashed and bodies fell. A squad of ashigaru marched forward in a line while behind them a trio of Koritome archers loosed their arrows downfield. One fell shy of its target while a second hit at an angle and was deflected by the black and red lacquered armor of its bearer, but the third found its target, a gap between the great helm and breastplate, severing a major artery in the neck. Blood flowed along the armor's red trim as the Scorpion who wore it stumbled to the earth, twitching and unable to rise. His death would not be long, as he bled out, but Sakura suspected it would be far from painless.

As the Koritome began their next draw, a squad of Scorpion samurai charged, seeking to cross the field before the Lion could repeat their volley. Encased as they were in their full *ō-yoroi*, Sakura suspected they might break the ashigaru, lightly armed as they were with simple spears and only light armor to protect them from the Scorpion. She motioned to Kouta but he'd noticed already.

Kouta chanted, calling the spirits of the field to his aid. Surrounded as they were by flooded rice paddies, the spirits of earth and water were both present. Strong yet adaptable. Resilient yet flexible.

And then the Scorpion were upon the peasant soldiers, a hurricane of steel yet one that broke as winds upon a mountain, a storm above the sea where no matter how the waves roiled on the surface, the depths remained calm. They didn't break.

Nor would the Lion, Sakura thought. This was their land. They had claimed it. Had not the yellow flowers themselves promised it to the Lion? Yet the Scorpion had the temerity to establish their own settlement on its borders, seeking to claim its bounty for themselves, no doubt. Scarcely ensconced upon their own beachhead, and yet they already looked to expand their territory. It was greedy. It was prideful.

It was, she thought, a surprisingly great error for a clan renowned for its cleverness.

Well that was a matter for Akodo Yoshitsune to deal with. For now, her duty was to drive them back.

Seeing the ashigaru holding, Sakura unleashed her own war cry. Her squad answered, and they charged forward, meeting the Scorpion in a frenzy of swords and spears. The line broke down, as it always did when forces met. The ashigaru pulled back as the samurai took to the front, the battle now almost a series of duels.

Sakura faced a man whose face was covered by an iron mask stylized to look like an ogre. He forbore the use of the sword, though his katana remained sheathed at his belt, and instead wielded a spear, a bit of red silk at the end behind the blade. Unlike the cheap spears of the ashigaru, his would have been treated and lacquered to stand up to blades such as her katana. If she laid it flat and prepared her strike, no doubt she could cut through, but anything less, and it might as well be iron-clad for all the good her sword would do. No, she couldn't try and defeat the weapon; she would have to defeat the man who wielded it.

"I am Matsu Sakura," she bellowed. "Daughter of Matsu Emiko who was daughter of Matsu Mariko who was daughter of Matsu Sakura, commander of the Second Imperial Legion and hero of the Second Battle of Osari Mori where she slew Bayushi Umeko in single combat. I honor her name, and today I will honor her victory with your death!"

The Scorpion inclined his head slightly. "I am Bayushi Keiji. Fortunes favor your blade, Matsu Sakura," he replied, and with that they were on each other.

The Bayushi thrust forward with his spear, moving it in seemingly impossible directions. The bit of red silk at the tip, far from identifying his movements, proved instead a distraction. It flew in seemingly random places suggesting a strike that was merely a feint, or a block that instead came perilously close to slicing the back of her knee. Sakura struck back with her sword, each time meeting air as Keiji leapt back, all while his spear came around for another strike.

She forced herself to ignore the silk. "The eyes," her senseis had taught her. "A warrior's hands may move anywhere, but their eyes must always see the target."

His eyes were on Kouta.

No!

The spear jumped again. How had Kouta gotten so close to the skirmish? It didn't matter now. Her blade was behind her. Not enough time to bring it up, to block. She leapt!

Fire ran through her left arm. The armor had deflected the blow down, but the Scorpion had found a gap between her shoulder plates, his blade slicing through her deltoid muscles. Ignoring the pain in her arm she grabbed the spear shaft in her left hand before he could complete his return. With her injured arm she couldn't hope to restrain him, but she didn't need to. Instead, she rolled into her own arm, towards the spear, getting into his personal space. Wrapped up in her own arms she couldn't maneuver her sword but neither could he bring his spear to bear.

Her neck flexed, and she hit him with a headbutt.

With both of them wearing great helms the blow had little chance of doing damage, but she knew right now his head would be ringing like a bell. A bit of a push and he stumbled to the earth, dropping his spear. She went with him, dropping her own sword - she'd cleanse it after the battle anyway - and drawing a knife. Sakura held him

down as her right hand worked the short blade, finding the gaps in his armor and plunging the knife into him again and again and again and again and then he was still.

And then it was quiet.

She looked up. A few of the Lion and Scorpion were still struggling with each other, but the Lion had held. Most of the Scorpion were moving past their settlement, back towards the forest.

Sakura stood, retrieving her katana. "Are you alright, Kitsune-san?" she asked.

"You're hurt," he replied. "Allow me..."

His voice trailed off, as he stared at the ground around the fallen Scorpion Sakura had just slain. The pulse of the Scorpion's blood had slowed to a trickle, slowly spreading out across the ground in a dark pool. And everywhere the blood touched, the ground was slowly turning black.

"Poisoned?"

"Yes, Akodo-sama," Kouta answers. "Spiritually. The land touched by the blood of the Scorpion has been abandoned by the kami. Blighted."

"And your recommendation?" Akodo Yoshitsune's brows furrow as he contemplates the situation.

"Wait. Do not engage the Scorpion until we determine the source of the poison. There is rice to spare, and that seems to be what they want."

Akodo Yoshitsune frowns, flipping a piece of parchment in his hands with text Sakura could not see. Kouta says nothing, while Sakura stands mute. Her freshly-bandaged arm itches like a horde of ants, but she is far too disciplined to give in to anything so banal as itching. At last Yoshitsune sets down the paper before him. "What is your council, lady Matsu? And don't tell me you're not educated in these matters. You were in the battle. Your thoughts hold as much weight here as your charge," he says, nodding at Kouta.

Sakura keeps her face steady, though she wants to blush. The truth is she doesn't know anything of spiritual matters, but she trusts Kouta. "When we arrived, my lord, I thought these lands were a gift from the Fortunes to the Lion. I fought to protect them. I shed blood for them as my ancestors shed their blood for our lands back home. It goes against everything I have trained for to leave them undefended." She hesitates, lifting her eyes towards Kouta Hoping he could see. Hoping he could not. "But I trust Kouta-san. He would not make this recommendation if he did not see it as the best option. My Lord." She adds the title at the end, a little hastily. Well, she's not a courtier.

The Lion governor picks up the piece of parchment again, opening it. "This is a report from Akodo Cho. Two warehouses were looted last night. The guards were found dead at their posts, never even raising the alarms." His hands tighten around the paper. "And a message from our spies that the Scorpion are preparing an embassy to go to the Empress, to declare that Kingfisher Bay and the surrounding area is rightfully theirs, that the previous borders were defined without sufficient survey. A hundred li of land they seek to claim from us. They respect neither our stake nor our sovereignty. They respect only our steel. And none will respect that if we sit, toothless, and allow it to happen."

Kouta bows his head. "I will need time to determine the source of the contagion, and how the kami wish us to proceed. But I truly believe if more Scorpion blood is shed on our land, more of the land will die."

Yoshitsune stiffens his spine and lifts his chin. "Then the blood the Scorpion demand to be shed to respect our rule will not be shed on our lands. It will be shed on theirs. We will send our strength to the border, and, any step they take over will be reciprocated in kind, and more. They will not dare to cross onto our soil. Their fear can protect our lands."

Sakura can see as resignation slumps Kouta's shoulders. "As you will it, my Lord. Until such time as I can

determine the fortunes' will."

With a bow, Sakura and Kouta leave the command tent. Kouta has to make a votive offering and Sakura accompanies him. They're quiet as they make their way through the Lion encampment, Sakura in thoughts of what it means for the Lion to become peace brokers and distributors of a bounty, Kouta in thoughts of his own. Thoughts he now shares.

"Sakura," he begins. They stop walking and turn towards each other. "You saved my life, jumping in front of that spear. Thank you. But why? It could have just as easily gone up, taking your head, as it went down and 'merely' injuring your arm. Why risk your life for mine?"

She keeps her face still. "It is a yojimbo's duty to protect their charge, is it not? Even at the cost of their own life." It's an answer. The truth even.

"Oh," Kouta answers. "Of course. Please, forgive me for doubting your devotion to your duty, Matsu-san."

Sakura feels a tinge of pain hearing him calling her by her family name. She takes the pain and locks it away. Sakura's voice is carefully neutral as she replies. "There is nothing to be forgiven, Kitsu-san. If that is all?"

He nods, and they continue to the shrine, so he can make his offering. Sakura walks beside him. She'd given him the truth. Most of it, anyway. A thought echoes in her mind, a line from a kabuki play she heard long ago.

"A yojimbo should not love her charge."