Fear

Tariq Ali

Shiba Kei walked confidently into my personal library, looking forward to the next mission. I put down the book that I was reading and turned my attention to Asako Kousuke's notes. After exchanging the routine pleasantries, I immediately began the briefing. There was no point wasting any time.

Asako Kousuke had been monitoring the Aimi, a secretive moon cult located within Shiro Shiba. The cult had some eccentric beliefs, but was otherwise orthodox.

Recently though, the cult crossed an invisible line. They denounced the Celestial Order, thereby turning into a heretical force. Kousuke could directly purge the heretics, but doing so would alienate the other moon cults operating within Shiro Shiba. Therefore, it is up to Kei to *quietly* take down the Aimi.

Kei looked at me quizzically. She had eccentric beliefs too, yet she had not yet fallen into heresy. Therefore, she asked me to explain why the Aimi took the path they had.

I quickly scanned Kousuke's notes and, without emotion, began reading:

"The Elemental Council is unable to solve the Elemental Imbalance. They have proven themselves incompetent and must be destroyed. A new Council should be created – one that draws its legitimacy from Lord Moon himself."

I tossed the notes aside and sighed. "You know how it is; humans justifying their greed on the basis of high-minded morals. We've seen this type of nonsense before, and we'll see it again and again."

Kei smiled. "At least it's good job security." She laughed at an implied joke. I didn't find it funny. "How many cultists?"

"Uh…" I looked back at the notes and furiously flipped pages back and forth. Kei quietly observed my panic. "Approximately two hundred courtiers, and seventy shugenja. They plan to use political intrigue to take down the Elemental Council, so they don't have anyone specialized in violence."

Kei stared at me in bemusement, listening to me rattle off meaningless facts. "So Kousuke expects me to murder nearly three hundred samurai. While not making a bloody mess in the process." Kei shook her head in disgust. "Isawa Hifumi…there's an easier way to get rid of this cult."

"Which is?"

"Fixing the Elemental Imbalance."

I glared at Kei. "There are limits to what we can do. I hate these limits just as much as you do, but we have to do our duty and pray that other people do *their* duty."

We continued our discussion. I focused on Kousuke's limited intelligence regarding the cult, and Kei just shook her head in disbelief. Kei's brute force techniques aren't well-suited to fighting the Aimi. She is used to fighting more militant movements, especially those that recruit from the peasantry.

Still, I know Kei won't abandon her duty. She knew a skilled Emerald Magistrate named Shiba Yohana. Kei promised to recruit her, on the condition that I did not inform Kousuke of this arrangement.

I did not like it. Kousuke's inspections guarantee orthodoxy within our ranks. To skip them is to invite danger. If Yohana was to join Kousuke's operation, she must be inspected first.

Kei shrugged. "Oh well. Do you have anyone else who could take down the Aimi instead?" She smiled.

It was clever. Kei knows full well that I have no one else. All of my manpower is stuck fighting other heretical organizations throughout the empire. The Summoners, The Gatherers, Shun's Infiltrators. I can rattle off twenty names, but all that does is just prove how impotent I am against the tide of heresy.

"You will work with Yohana on a strictly unofficial basis. Monitor Yohana's actions carefully. You're responsible for anything that goes wrong."

Kei nodded, as if she expected my answer. After some parting words, Kei bowed and left my presence.

A new day arrived, the same as every other day. I made it to my personal library, where three unopened letters awaited me. I sat down, making sure I was not being observed, and slowly opened each scroll.

The first letter was from Shiba Kei. She had successfully briefed Yohana about the current situation. Yohana, in response, suggested infiltration and subversion of the Aimi. Kei has approved this arrangement, and we should be able to see results soon.

The second letter was from Asako Kousuke. He asked for help against a peasant- based Bloodspeaker cult that has been conducting blood sacrifices near Shiro Shiba. So far, all victims are members of the Aimi. There's probably some feud between the two heretical factions. If the two sides weaken each other severely, perhaps we can then move in for the killing blow.

I forwarded Kousuke's letter to Kei.

The third letter…

The third letter was from Empress Hochiahime herself.

An ancestor of mine, whose name I do not wish to recall, served Hantei the 16th, the Steel Chrysanthemum. After Hantei the 16th died, the ancestor begged for forgiveness, and wanted to make amends. The new Empress of Rokugan, the honored wife of Hantei the 17th, spared my ancestor, and thus saved my lineage from probable extermination.

In return, my lineage owed the Imperials a life debt. Empress Hochiahime has called in that life debt.

Hochiahime has instructed me and the rest of my lineage to discreetly prepare an expedition to travel to a new land. This expedition is essential to the preservation of the Empire, and so we would have to uproot our samurai, our servants, our peasants, our aides, our goods…

The Empress's letter ended with these words:

"Finish all affairs you have in Rokugan, because I do not know when you will be coming back."

Questions circled around me, but no easy answers presented themselves.

Why do we need to explore a new land, when we're not even able to handle our own affairs on this land? We can't even handle the Elemental Imbalance…does she think we can handle re-establishing a new society from scratch, shorn of our traditional foundations?

Then my mind wandered to another thought…

This is a chance to start anew.

People turn to heresy because they are not satisfied with the status quo and they look for alternative approaches. Shiba Kei is right - if you want to stop heresy, you fix the social problems that cause heresy. Yet, we lack the authority and the resources to fix these social problems. All we can do is fight the symptoms, but we can never deal with the root causes.

This new land. It gives me something that I thought died in my youth. **Hope**. We might actually build a new society free from heresy, a land where the Celestial Order is kept intact, a land where we might lose our old duties and find new, more fulfilling ones.

That is something worth fighting for.

My lineage, however, is very weak. It may be well-respected within the Isawa family, for their tireless defense of orthodoxy. But it will always be marginalized in the affairs that matter.

If I am to build a society free from heresy, I will need to invite people outside my lineage. People who I can trust… like Shiba Kei and Asako Kousuke.

In my personal library, Kei politely brought me good news. Yohana has successfully dismantled the Aimi.

Shiba Yohana conducted her own inspections in Shiro Shiba, though they are less professional than Asako Kousuke's. These inspections were not long interrogational sessions; they were more akin to casual conversations. These conversations would be about unrelated topics, like the weather or architecture, but they delved into the secrets of the spirit nonetheless.

Her tactics worked. Yohana was able to quickly identify a few high-ranking Aimi contacts and gain their trust.

Yohana then "converted" to the moon cult, promising to aid the heretics in battle against the peasant Bloodspeakers. Once inside the cult, she quickly discovered a power struggle between two of the cult leaders. Yohana then magnified this power struggle, turning it into a full-blown civil war. The Aimi imploded in just a few weeks.

None of the other moon cults suspect a thing. To them, it is simply "natural" for power-hungry individuals to turn on each other.

Unfortunately, the peasant Bloodspeakers are left unharmed. They are still out there, without the Aimi to keep them in check. That is a problem for others to address, I suppose. My concerns lie elsewhere.

"If a person needs to embrace heresy to stop heresy…" There was no need for me to complete that sentence. When one elaborates on the nature of a victory, one begins to find minor imperfections and faults. Enough imperfections and faults, and the "victory" becomes indistinguishable from a defeat.

"It was necessary," Shiba Kei told me, firmly. "But I will promise you this. I will not utilize her tactics excessively. Overuse can lead to negative consequences, such as unwanted attention from Kousuke…or from the kami."

I nodded. Such a promise would have to do. For now.

The time had come to inform Kei, to give her a new mission objective. I told Kei about Empress Hochiahime's letter.

I have already convinced Asako Kousuke to assist me. Kousuke has, therefore, dissolved his operation. Most of his people were reassigned to the Empress' expedition, while the remainder would be transferred to other inquisitors' operations. This was a hard decision for Kousuke to make. But the Empress willed it so. To denounce her decision to denounce the Celestial Order itself.

I will naturally serve as the Expedition Head. Kousuke, meanwhile, will serve as our High Inquisitor and handle the expedition's internal affairs. I invited Kei to serve as our General, to protect the expedition from any external threats.

Kei eagerly accepted her new duty. She jumped excitedly at the opportunity to face a new challenge. But she also seemed worried about our lack of experience in facing said challenge.

"Did the Empress explain to you why we're leaving Rokugan?" Shiba Kei asked directly.

I did not reply. I do not know.

Kei offered me an answer… found, where all answers may be found, at Starry Heaven Sanctuary, home of the ishiken, masters of the Void.

When we made it to the Starry Haven Sanctuary, we requested an audience with a Void shugenja. Most ignored us, coming up with feeble excuses, unwilling to meet my eyes.

But one of the holy masters, Isawa Atsuko, was willing to talk to me. She requested a private audience, away from the ears of Shiba Kei.

As instructed, I met her in a private room. She made me swear an oath of secrecy. Most humans lose hope when they are exposed to the truth. Then she told me everything.

I disbelieved, at first. Visions can be misinterpreted, after all. But when I raised that valid point, she only asked me "Why do you disbelieve?"

"Because, if what you say is true, then that would mean the Rokugani Empire would die. And…" I could say nothing more.

Moments passed.

She offered comfort, and told me to face adversity with dignity. I smiled, and said I understood. But I do not accept this. I cannot accept this is the end of the Empire.

Shiba Kei and I left Starry Heaven Sanctuary without speaking a word to each other.

Before I received this accursed letter from the Empress, I was a famous teacher. And yet, all my teachings rested on a fundamental principle, one never articulated, but also never questioned.

I thought the Empire was immortal.

Mere mortals could die. Even kami could die. But the Empire itself would still stand. No matter how much we as individuals suffer, no matter what sacrifices we make, the Empire will maintain the Celestial Order perpetually, backed by the favor of the Celestial Heavens.

The Empire **had** to be immortal. To claim otherwise is to claim that the Celestial Heavens' favor is weak and impermanent. To claim otherwise is to claim that everything that we have fought for would eventually fade away into nothingness.

The truth hurts.

The Empire *will* fall.

When is irrelevant. How is irrelevant. Those are just meaningless details, details that distract from the horror of oblivion.

What matters is that the Heavens have offered a plan that will keep the core, what is essential about our Empire alive…even as everything else collapses. This new land is a part of that plan.

No ishiken is ever going to join this expedition. They need to use their talents to protect Rokugan and delay its inevitable fall. This can only buy us time, time to establish ourselves.

Perhaps, there may come a time when the expedition will return and restore the Empire.

Hah! There is no solace in *that*. If an empire can die once, then it can die again, and again, and again.

Are we Rokugani going to keep funding new expeditions and finding new lands… forever? Is the empire trapped in an endless cycle of death and rebirth?

No. I refuse to lose hope.

I prayed to the kami to guide me through these difficult times, and protect me from heresy.

But now. Now, I have my purpose.

I summoned Shiba Kei, and tried to explain. But I will not violate the oath that I swore to the ishiken.

Instead, I gave a parable.

Each day, we fight a battle against heresy, like a sailor gambling on Fortunes and Winds. We succeed, but there is always another fight. One day, no matter how many successes we have, we will lose the toss of the dice. We will be defeated.

It is not enough to keep gambling. If we want to end heresy forever… if we really want to protect the Empire… then we have to stop playing. We have to **end** the game. No matter what methods we consider. No matter the cost.

Kei was wary. "So what's your plan?" Kei asked hesitatingly, as if she already knew what I would do.

I stayed silent for a few moments, before I made my confession to Kei. I have no plans. Only determination.

> To Isawa Hifumi, Phoenix Clan's Expedition Head,
>
> Shiba Yohana has just given me the good news. She has passed Asako Kousuke's inspection, meaning that she can now officially join the expedition. Kousuke is assured of her orthodoxy. If anything, she seems more orthodox than Kousuke.
>
> I'm not sure what you said to her, but I think she's devoted to your vision now. I thought Yohana was irredeemable…that her beliefs would never gain Kousuke's approval. You have proven me wrong. For that, I am grateful.
>
> You took a great deal of interest in Shiba Yohana after that incident at the Starry Heaven Sanctuary. You needed an asset who could do the dishonorable thing. I understand completely.
>
> — Shiba Kei, General of the Phoenix Clan's Expedition Militia

> To Isawa Hifumi, Phoenix Clan's Expedition Head,
>
> Asako Kousuke has vetted all the candidates thoroughly, screening out those who he found to harbor blasphemous or heretical thoughts.
>
> As per your instructions, Shiba Yohana has also vetted the candidates for their competence and survival skills. Kousuke greatly appreciated her valuable assistance during the vetting process, but has kept Yohana's role to a minimum.
>
> Yohana has also established a preparation camp and is training our volunteers. You should see some of her lectures; they're…interesting.
>
> By the end of this month, we will travel to Jukami Mura and begin our journey. May the kami bless our voyage.
>
> — Shiba Kei, General of the Phoenix Clan's Expedition Militia

To Isawa Hifumi, Phoenix Clan's Expedition Head,

Shiba Yohana has successfully acquired a stockpile of supplies, which will enable us to build a decent settlement. The supplies are currently being transported to the preparation camp.

Yohana, however, is exceeding the limits imposed on her by Kousuke. She has gone so far as to recommend removing certain individuals from the expedition for having "insufficient zeal".

Monomaniacal dedication is not good for morale; I recommend you intervene to stop Yohana's radicalism.

— Shiba Kei, General of the Phoenix Clan's Expedition Militia

To Isawa Hifumi, Phoenix Clan's Expedition Head,

I visited the preparation camp today and saw Shiba Yohana training peasants, creating what seems to me to be a private army. When I questioned her, she claimed it was under your orders. They were to infiltrate the other clans to spy on them and gather information on their beliefs.

Asako Kousuke's customary inspections, but on a mass scale.

Is this true? Do you plan on using these techniques on every Rokugani? If so, please reconsider.

No matter the reduction in heresy, no matter how much it ward off the enemies of the Empire, the drawbacks are extreme.

We are meant to be the moral guardians of Rokugan. To ensure that we do not abuse our position for selfish ends, we have placed restrictions upon ourselves. Do not violate our traditions, simply because you consider them inconvenient.

— Shiba Kei, General of the Phoenix Clan's Expedition Militia

To Shiba Kei, my friend,

Kei, you're a bastion of traditionalism. It was why I brought you into the expedition. But it turns out that traditionalism is not going to work when fighting against heresy.

Tradition may help us live for a few centuries, maybe even a millennia or two.

But…that's not enough. Tradition can postpone heresy. Tradition can delay its awakening. Yet tradition will not stop heretical movements. If we allow heresy to fester, then the expedition will eventually fail. And I won't let it fail.

So I've taken a risk. Due to circumstances outside of my control, I am revoking your title of General. Shiba Yohana will take over the expedition militia. You will serve under her for the time being.

I am sorry. I don't want to do this to a good friend of mine. But when you are fighting a war, you must be willing to do whatever it takes.

— Isawa Hifumi, Phoenix Clan's Expedition Head, Protector of Tomorrow

> To Isawa Hifumi, Phoenix Clan's Expedition Head,
>
> Heretics do not scare me. Heretics can never take away the accomplishments of our ancestors, and will never demean our own personal struggles. If we can make the heretics' lives more difficult, even just for one more day, then there is nothing for us to fear.
>
> You scare me.
>
> I do not think highly of the choices of heretics. But I once thought highly of you. That perception has now been corrected.
>
> If you suggest abandoning the traditions of the past, then I must reluctantly oppose you, and your puppet, Shiba Yohana.
>
> I won't disobey your orders, but I will not let you corrupt the expedition.
>
> — Shiba Kei, General of the Phoenix Clan's Expedition Militia

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I silently archived Kei's letter. She may rage on paper. But she will not stop me.