



Scars and Failure

Matsu "Khagdar" Kenshin and Emilio Ortiz

The setting sun's rays bathed Akodo Yoshitsune as he stood in his garden. The lines in the sand were made deliberately to calm and focus the mind, but to him they only seemed to swirl endlessly, the stones and plants among them as warriors fighting for supremacy on the battlefield. *Swords clashing, cries of death...* Footsteps behind him.

"Akodo-sama. I hope this evening finds you in good health."

Yoshitsune tried not to let his inner turmoil show, but his Karo, Ikoma Natsuko, seemed to always sense his mood with uncanny accuracy.

"It finds me well, Natsuko-san. Is there something you need?", he answered curtly.

The moment the words left his mouth, Yoshitsune regretted their harshness. He knew he should not be so blunt with his subordinates; he knew that the woman beside him deserved better, but all he could feel inside was indifference and apathy.

"My Lord, Tsubakihime-sama has asked me to find you, apparently your son has something to show you outside the dojo."

Yoshitsune tried to make his body move, his legs to start walking, but they would not listen.

"I will be there shortly."

With a deep bow, Ikoma Natsuko left, leaving Yoshitsune staring once again at the garden, at the lines in the sand. *Swords clashing, cries of death...* Then, suddenly, he was back in hell.

A battlefield with purple and golden uniforms, hundreds dead and more soon to join them. Fighting for a cause he knew was lost, ordered by the malevolent snake that was the Lion ambassador to the capital. He was exhausted, burdened by failure and regret. A huge glaive pointed at his heart, stopped only by...

A boisterous voice brought him back to the present. How long had he been standing there?

"Yoshitsune-kun! I knew I was bound to find you here. The Fortune of Rice has not blessed me yet today and I would love to share some onigiri with a dear friend!"

Musashibo was a large man, Yoshitsune's former hatamoto and comrade in arms. His large stature should have alerted the Akodo lord to his presence, but once again Yoshitsune was caught unaware.

"One would think that a monk of the brotherhood would be more prudent with his eating habits. You could have asked my cook to prepare something for you."

"Ah, but then what excuse would I have to take you away from your sulking? One could pierce stone with the glare you had!" Musashibo could always make Yoshitsune feel... better. They had weathered so many storms together, overcome every obstacle in their way. Except for one last battle, one that made Musashibo retire to the brotherhood and turned Yoshitsune into a shell of the man he once was. Still, the monk's presence kept the darkness at bay, even if only for a little while.

"Please wait for me here then Musashibo; I am supposed to be at the dojo right now. I will be back shortly to share a meal and some stories. It's been too long."

"As you say old friend. I will be waiting."

Yoshitsune's legs finally seemed to obey him as he made his way to the dojo, the sun's last rays and Musashibo's gaze fading behind him.

The dojo was well-kept, as were most of the Akodo lord's estates. His wife and children were there. Akodo Tsubakihime, formerly of the Otomo, was flanked by their two youngest, Rokuta, a one-year-old boy, and Kanao a three-year-old girl. Nezuko and Takeo, seven and nine respectively, were sitting politely to the side. Finally, Kouji, twelve and their firstborn, was in the center of the dojo's yard, playing with his little war cat cub.

"Father! Thank you so much for coming. I hope the Fortunes have blessed your day."

Kouji was the first to see Yoshitsune approach. Lit by the lanterns all around them, one could see the youth's eyes shine with respect and admiration. There was a time when Yoshitsune may have even deserved those eyes. Now they only served to remind him of how far he had fallen.

"I was told you had something to show me."

Something in his response made every member of his family tense, as if the words would be followed by a blade cutting flesh. There was a time when Yoshitsune could interact with them normally, but now he just felt... empty.

"Yes Father, I do. Please watch me and Kinki. This is what Benika-sensei taught us this month."

Kouji started performing a series of kata in the middle of the yard in tandem with Kinki, his lion cub, who followed the kata's movements like commands on the battlefield and pounced on invisible enemies. Both were still quite young and small in stature, making the display cute rather than impressive or intimidating. It culminated with Kouji trying to simulate a lion's roar and Kinki following suit, although it ended up sounding more like a growl. Even so, both cub and master seemed proud that they pulled it off. *Swords clashing, deathly howls.*

"That was acceptable, Kouji. I imagine Matsu Benika-sensei should be content."

Yoshitsune tried to force a smile, but it would not form on his face. His family seemed to expect something more from him, but he did not feel as he should. Every moment with them was an exercise in futility. He should care; he should congratulate his son and stay with his family, but instead all he wanted was to get away from them.

"Akodo-sama, I apologize for the interruption, but there is an urgent matter that requires your attention."

Yoshitsune's Karo came into view, her nervous face lit by the lanterns. Her words were uncharacteristically forward. Normally that would have made the Akodo lord worry, but now he was just relieved he could get away. He followed Ikoma Natsuko to the study, where a small letter lay with a white chrysanthemum to its side.

"The letter is from... the empress, Akodo-sama. The flower symbolizes truth, but is also associated with grief."

Yoshitsune opened the letter and started reading it in the candlelight, the color draining slowly from his face. An ancient debt of his ancestor compelled Yoshitsune and a retinue of his choosing to travel far away from Rokugan, to escort the empress to a faraway land. All the flowery words on the page could only cast a thin veil over what was essentially exile. The darkness started creeping near again. Everything he had endured, all he had lost because of the incompetent and the malicious would be for nothing.

"I need to think. Please leave me. I am not to be disturbed, Karo."

Ikoma Natsuko seemed to want to protest. The worry was apparent in her eyes. After what seemed like an eternity, however, she bowed and left silently. Yoshitsune was once again alone. *Swords clashing, screams of pain... Back in hell.*

"There you are! You should not keep an old monk waiting!"

Musashibo had entered the room and Yoshitsune never even heard the door slide open. How long had he been standing there?

"I am sorry, old friend. There was an urgent matter I had to see to."

"There is always something with you. The troops are not disciplined enough. The battle plan needs more refinement; the sword needs more polish, it is not like a mirror yet! Stop worrying about once and live a little! What is wrong this time?"

Yoshitsune hesitated. There was no one he trusted more than the man standing before him, but he felt the contents of the letter were too sensitive. Hesitation, thinking, inhibitions. Once, he could be thoughtful and decisive. He could do his duty and still feel like a real person afterwards. His interactions with his family and friends were nourishing, not torturous. Yoshitsune longed to be that man again.

"I am supposed to take a retinue and relocate to an unknown land outside Rokugan. Permanently. Apparently, my great-great-great-great grandfather's father, Akodo Tanosuke, had sworn that his family would answer the empress' call when it came in return for a claim on land. And now... it has come."

"And this does not appeal to you, I suppose. But you should not forget: 'True Change comes from within, but it can be aided from without'."

"And what do you mean with this new sophistry?"

"You have told me that you want to change yourself. So look at this 'relocation' as a way to be in a new environment to help you overcome your difficulties. Away from *them*."

Yoshitsune did not remember sharing his troubles with Musashibo to that extent, but his words made a kind of sense. The Akodo lord would do his duty and maybe, just maybe, he could find himself again in that new land. Away from the incompetent and the malicious, he could help the Lion flourish, purge them from the sickness that enveloped them.

Akodo Yoshitsune did not sleep that night. He had to think of logistics, of people to choose to bring with him. Another of Musashibo's sophistries sprang to mind: "If something is worth doing, it is worth doing right".

And this time Yoshitsune would not let anyone stop him from doing it right.

Ryoko Owari could be an amusing distraction to some and an exhilarating experience for others. To Ikoma Yumiko, emerald magistrate, it was only a cesspool of crime and sin. For five long years she had been investigating a crime syndicate that spanned multiple cities in the empire. She was certain that their base was right there in the City of Lies, but her initial zeal had gradually turned to healthy pessimism and after three years she usually found her answers in the bottom of a sake bottle. Just the way she liked it.

So when she started sobering up, amidst a small sea of empty sake bottles in her office, Yumiko was not pleased. Not with herself or with anyone. It had been another day and night of red herrings and leads that went nowhere, with an added bonus: harassment from the governor's cronies. She felt like her investigation was going nowhere and she was at exactly the same spot as four years ago, minus some bad habits. The City of Lies was a maze of intrigue, criminals that knew they could not get caught and the damned government that protected them. It was no place for any self-respecting Lion to be in, although Yumiko was definitely not the self-respecting kind.

Just as she had started to get up, with only a little difficulty this time, her door slid open. Ichiro, her burakumin assistant, entered and started picking up bottles.

"Good morning, Ikoma-dono. Should I let some sun in or is it "too early"?"

"Spare me the lip, Ichiro. I am definitely not in the mood. Just clean this up and leave me be."

"The investigation did not go well, I take it?"

"When has it ever gone well? No, Ichiro, once again I have nothing to show for my efforts and it is infuriating. But I am used to it. After you are done, please leave me; I just need a quiet morning."

"That will be hard. You have a guest."

"WHAT?"

Yumiko regretted her shout instantly, as her head was ringing with pain. She had built quite a tolerance for alcohol in the past few years, but she could not always avoid the consequences.

"I asked her to wait outside. I suppose you would not want her to see this office Ikoma-dono. She wears Lion colors and claims that she is your friend. I don't think it has anything to do with the syndicate this time."

Yumiko gave Ichiro a pointed look and did her best to make herself presentable, with varying degrees of success. Her hair was all completely uncombed, but thankfully her kimono was clean enough. Ichiro finished tidying up, bowed to her and brought in a woman that Yumiko had thought she would never see again.

"Natsuko... Ikoma Natsuko-san? What are you doing here?"

"It is good to see you, Yumiko. I wondered where your road had taken you, but I see you still have an abhorrent relationship with sleep."

Ichiro left the room discreetly, closing the door behind him. Yumiko felt astounded; she had not seen her friend in years. Not since the day of Natsuko's wedding.

"It is... good to see you too. But you did not answer my question. What brings an Ikoma aide to this damnation of a city?"

"Necessity and change. How goes your hunt for the scum of the empire?"

Yumiko hesitated. Should she explain how she felt she had wasted five years of her life on an impossible task? That she just wanted to sit in a hole and drink herself into such a stupor that she could no longer remember it all?

"Not well."

Natsuko nodded. "I won't waste any more of your time. I am leaving Rokugan, together with Akodo Yoshitsune-sama. I... would like to ask you to come with us. This is a task given to us by the Empress herself. I will not let my lord go alone. He needs me and I think he will need you."

Yumiko felt a boulder crushing her heart. How could Natsuko ask this of her? "What about your husband?"

"His path is no longer my own."

"When will we be back?"

"This looks to be more of a permanent arrangement. I understand that I am asking a lot of you, Yumiko. I am still asking. We need people we can trust and I trust no one more than you."

They stood in silence for a while. Natsuko seemed embarrassed, like she just realised the gravity of what she was asking, the length of time they had been apart. With a subtle blush she broke the silence.

"You obviously need time to process this, so I will leave you to decide. We are leaving in a month, so if you are to accompany us, please inform me as soon as possible. I have prepared a letter to explain the situation to the Emerald Champion's office if you require it. I... Carry the fortunes, Yumiko-san."

With that she left. Like a storm, Natsuko entered into the magistrate's life again and left her in tatters. Yumiko remembered the days when they were together; nothing could stand in their way. As young yoriki, they travelled the empire righting wrongs and helping people. That had been the best part of her life. She looked around her office, the scattered scrolls filled with her notes, her failures and letters from her superiors asking her politely to stop her investigation. Was she fulfilling her Duty by staying here? A wise warrior knew when he was outclassed. And there was no Honor in stirring the dirt in the pit that was Ryoko Owari. Maybe in burning it down, but she would leave that to someone else.

"Ichiro! Come in, we need to pack for a journey. Hopefully we will end up in a better place than here."

