



Fresh Water

Glen Goerwell

Shiori had always loved the water. The older woman could feel herself grow nostalgic as she jumped off the small skiff that had set sail from the Scorpion flagship, Silken Ghost. Underneath her mask, she smirked. A ghost should not be that size to be silken, but then she wasn't in charge of naming things.

Her tabi-clad feet hit the lush dark sand as her eyes swept around the harbor. The rolling beach gave way to a gentle green slope that climbed up and up towards the castle. A river of water passed out from under it and into the sea.

Shiori knelt down and cupped her hands in the water, bringing it up to taste. The cool refreshment energized her bones, letting her forget for even a few moments a lifetime of scars built up in service of the Scorpion.

One of her subordinates asked from behind her, "Well, Shosuro-sama?" Tanjiro, that was his name.

"It's fresh," Shiori said. "Fresher than we have any right to expect. Must be a natural spring of some sort under the fortress."

All eyes swept northward towards the large fortress that stood at the top of the green hill, flanked by great stone cliffs on all sides.

It was a strange thing to see a castle that the Kaiu would be proud to have built silently waiting. The jade-coloured stone walls seemed to faintly glow in the early afternoon light. Great towers swept up on the four corners around the central tenshaku, the keep which towered over the watchtowers in turn. The only other structure on the island was a great lighthouse built out to one cliff towards the ocean. Its fire somehow burned even now during the day.

It was that fire that had drawn them there. The small skiffs that had once sat on the Silken Ghost had swept out along the islands after they had finally reached landfall. The great fortresses had proven too tempting, and as the Crab had had the misfortune of going north instead of south, Soshi Yuka had struck and claimed the Nine Fortresses as the new Scorpion homeland.

The Crab would get over it...eventually, probably. *Well they are closer to the Crane so it doesn't matter*, Shiori decided.

Landing had led into the question of which fortress to claim first. The isles all had excellent harbors, some natural, others carved, possibly even by Lady Dōji. However, not all harbors were equal. They had to find an island that had a good source of freshwater that they could use to begin farming. The Scorpion had missed the first planting season, they could not afford to miss a second.

Tanjiro spoke again. "Then we go back to the ship?"

Shiori gave a low hum as she thought. "No, I want to see the fortress up close. So far this is the only landing site with fresh water, so we will settle here. But I want to see what's inside it."

"Hai," the other samurai of her scouting party agreed.

The older bushi gave a fond smile. They are good kids. Shiori would do her best to keep them safe. Which is why even though so far the islands have been deserted from landing parties reports and reports from the main island, Shiori's head moved from side to side like an owl's watching for any predator.

They came closer to the castle, the sweeping walls were not entirely made of jade. Instead, veins of the sacred substance were woven into the granite, like a tapestry making the walls strong and sacred. Still, how would they get the jade without destroying the castle? *Questions for Soshi-dono*, Shiori supposed.

The Shosuro woman paused. *Where are the birds?* "Stop," she called.

All the other Scorpion stopped in place to look at her, a little confused.

"Yes, Shosuro-sama?" Tanjiro asked.

Shiori frowned under her mask, and knelt down, picking up a rock and throwing it as hard as she could towards the fortress.

An arrow came screaming down from the parapet through the stone.

"What in the name of Lord Soshi's Riddle?" Tanjiro asked.

"The birds," Bayushi Hinata, another member of the scouting group, said.

Shiori nodded.

"Right. I didn't hear anything, and gulls love high castles like this because it's safe from predators."

"I think I see the attacker," Hinata said as she strung her bow. "Should I shoot to bait them out?"

The older woman drew her own preferred weapon, the long-hafted but surprisingly versatile nagamaki.

"Everyone speaks when they're ready, and then you shoot, Hinata," she ordered.

The party gave a slow chime of voices as they drew their weapons, katana for some, kusari-gama for others. Tanjiro readied his own nagamaki like her.

Hinata drew back the bow and muttered, "Release."

The white-feathered arrow flew true, up past where Shiori herself could see. There was a loud thud as if Hinata had hit stone rather than flesh.

Tanjiro nervously asked, "Did you miss?"

Hinata glared.

"No, I hit him, it's just...it's sticking out of his face?" she finished, confused.

"What do you mean?" Shiori asked. "How can an arrow just stick out of the face?"

The younger woman gave an elaborate shrug. "I don't know what to tell you, Shosuro-sama. I can see the arrow in his face."

"We should go," Tanjiro said.

Shiori frowned, about to reprimand him for being a coward when the gates to the fortress swung open. Out through the gates, a squadron of about five men No, not men. They looked like men from afar but as they marched in an eerie silent lockstep precision, Shiori could see they were not. Carved limestone men, wearing armor that belonged in some antique collection, carrying heavy tsurugi made of marble. Not a cutting weapon, but one meant to bash away at the target until they were a paste.

"Hinata," Shiori barked.

"Hai," the Bayushi archer said. Her arms moved as she drew and released arrows in quick succession.

Each feathered shaft hit its mark, armpits, groins, heads, any weak point that Hinata could think of, she hit. Yet the stone soldiers just kept coming. Not even the most terrible blows would slow them.

Shiori suppressed a curse. "Fall back"

"But Shosuro-sama?" Tanjiro said.

Shiori glared. "I gave an order! Our style is no good here. We need tetsubo or kanabō to properly beat these things. We're not stupid Lion to stand around and wait to die."

Reluctantly, the Scorpion began to retreat. Shiori could see the frustration burning in Hinata's eyes. Archery was an art of war well respected by the samurai, but always seen as lesser than that of the naginata or the sword,

especially the sword. Lord Kakita had much to answer for. To see her art so dismissed by these foes...Shiori did not envy her that.

Shiori looked back at the stone soldiers, who now appeared to be running after them. This time she did swear.

"RUN, YOU DAMN FOOLS!" She barked.

They fled down the hill, down the green grass, and back to the boat, the faint scraping of stone on stone echoing louder and louder for each breath they took. The boats were just in sight, they were almost there. Shiori could taste freedom even as unseen instinct made her throw herself to the side.

Countless battles taught the onna-musha to roll with her leap, somersaulting back to her feet and twirling around just in time to block another strike of the stone sword. Shiori tried not to wince as her muscles screamed in protest, the oak haft of the nagamaki just barely holding under the strain.

There was no time to consider what was going on around her as Shiori danced around a strike, an overhand slash that crashed into the grass sending a shower of dirt. The nagamaki in her hand moved like quicksilver as she slashed across the stone soldier's wrists. The painful screech of metal on stone echoed as Shiori's heart gave out.

The stone soldier's hands were gone, but the nagamaki, an ancient companion from before...before her son was born. It was warped beyond uselessness. Shiori stared down at the heavy granite sword in the dirt. She ducked under the handleless swipe of the stone soldier.

The marble sword was heavy, too heavy to be a weapon in any save, perhaps, a giant Hida's hands. Yet, Shiori would not quit. Her people needed her, her clan needed her. So, with a desperate strength, she put her whole body into her lunge forward with the stone weapon, slamming it into the chest of the soldier.

Stone on stone cracked the air as the earth kami gave a rumbling cry. The sword broke, but so did the stone soldier. The limestone body collapsed into a dozen pieces. Shiori lowered the half broken marble sword, arms trembling, finally able to survey the rest of the battlefield.

It was not going well for the Scorpion. Tadaji was desperately trying to fight off two of the stone soldiers as Hinata cradled a broken leg behind him. The others each were desperately dodging the remaining soldiers.

The bone-deep exhaustion that threatens to undo any soldier pressed against Shiori, but she pushed it aside with a familiar grunt of will. Her grip tightened on the broken marble sword as she came up behind Tadaji's opponents. Again she lunged, again stone cracked and the soldier crashed to the ground. The remaining soldier turned and swung the back of his hand against Shiori hard, hitting her in the chest. She flew backwards.

But the mystique was broken now. Tadaji picked up the dropped marble sword and plunged it into the back of his own opponent. Shiori gingerly picked herself up, and shared a look with Tadaji as they went to rescue the rest of the party.

It was only after the last of the golems was shattered under the attack that Shiori allowed herself to collapse to the ground, breathing hard as she gazed up at the sky.

"This castle is going to be harder to take than we thought, huh, Taisa?" Hinata asked.

Shiori took out a flask of water and drank. "Yes, yes it will, Hinata."