



Pendant

Glen Goerwell

The greatest enemy of all is yourself.

The greatest ally of all is yourself.

These two lines juxtaposed between themselves the Scorpion; that was what her father had told her all those years ago, before the incident.

Yuka took a deep breath. The kumosou covering her head sat awkwardly, masking everything from view except the fog flowing off the river bank. It was late spring, the moon was full, but the fog rendered any sign of the blooming branches on the shore invisible, and the thin silvery light did not penetrate the mist.

The long journey down the River of Gold was one that every Scorpion would eventually make. The river connected too much of the Scorpion land to be anything other than the lifeline of the Scorpion people. Yet, these were no mere river barges sent down on the current and then dragged back up through the toil of oxen and men. These were great kobune, ships meant to sail the open ocean towards a fool's errand. Large hulls so deep in their draft that only the middle of the river could even begin to handle them, large enough to carry a whole village inside...or so it seemed to her.

Soshi Yuka could admit that the life of a sailor had never called to her the way it had her younger cousins or elder sibling. No, she was the Third Daughter, to be raised and then quickly removed from the family if at all possible. After all, the number three was cursed.

A small bitter laugh escaped her lips.

The number three was cursed, and no one in the Scorpion had questioned it. It was natural. After all that had happened to their founder, all that befallen the Yogo (the third family to join the Scorpion) the inauspicious nature of the number three was just accepted. No one had thought to question. The Scorpion were so sure of their information they accepted the surface of the water instead of what lay beneath. It was ironic for a clan obsessed with secrets to ignore that one. Well, Yuka thought it was irony. Let some other snide courtier or scholar explain otherwise. They were just wrong.

The mist continued to roll around her and the ships as they sailed. Yuka's mind went back to a mere year ago. A lifetime ago.

Shiro Soshi had never been a castle meant to be a home. Filled with twisting halls, hidden passages, dark rooms and confusing paintings, it was meant to showcase the power of the Soshi family, the skill with which they could manipulate the senses. No magic was needed to make one lost in Shiro Soshi; all that was needed was to set the board.

Soshi Yuka navigated her childhood home with long-suffering apathy. There were only so many times you could rearrange the rooms on a whim before it all became tiresome. Why was she even here? She had been content to spend the rest of her days tending to the Soshi family shrine, making sure their ancestors all had due reverence. The travel here through the heavy snows from the foot of the Spine had not been pleasant, and all she really wanted was an onsen.

Yet when her sister Soshi Shiori commanded, there was little that Yuka could do but come. Thus she found herself stepping into the small family room that their father had used to welcome the family back to the castle. Soshi Shiori sat there, amidst the willow leaf paintings and crimson writing on the wall scrolls, beautiful as always, immaculate. A wave of envy, of anger, rolled over Yuka who fought it down as quickly as it came.

It wasn't Shiori's fault what happened; it was her own. Shiori never sent the...the foul...the creature that had consumed the Summer Hall and taken so much. No, that was her fault, and Yuka would bear the blame.

So one sister bowed to the other, but the slight twitch of Shiori's mouth let Yuka know that she had guessed what Yuka was thinking. The younger girl cursed mentally. I rely on my mask too much to protect me. It was useless against those who knew her well.

"Sister, I'm so glad you could come and join me," Shiori greeted her in a flawless, melodic tone.

"Of course. I would never defy your command, dear sister." Yuka's own voice was raspy, dry, but strong in its own way.

"I wish we had more time to catch up," Shiori said, and it almost appeared that she did.

"However, you have need of my services," Yuka said. It was a statement filled with cold logic. There was no other reason that would have caused her sister to summon her.

"No, someone far above us both has a need of your services." Shiori reached into her luxurious red kimono and revealed a small koi pendant.

Yuka felt her breath hitch. No...it couldn't be. Her mother had told her...no...

"The Empress sent this pendant to Shiro Soshi about a week ago. The Miya told me that it was to be delivered to you and you would know what it means." Shiori offered, faintly bemused.

"Hai...I know what it means." Yuka replied and picked up the pendant.

"Can you tell me?" Shiori asked.

"I...the pendant goes to a certain hidden panel in Mother's room, the one we found as children." Yuka answered.

Shiori's emotional mask of control faded as her eyes widened.

"Really? What's inside?"

"My banishment," Yuka said, without thought.

"I will not have my own sister banished, not while I rule in Shiro Soshi." Shiori declared, narrowing her eyes again.

"It is not our decision, Onee-sama." Yuka said. "Mother told me that this pendant would mean that a debt that Lord Soshi made with the Second Empress was finally being called on to answer...and that it would mean I would have to leave the Empire."

"Why?" Shiori asked, already beginning to scheme.

"That I don't know. All Mother told me is that when the time came, and I opened that panel it would explain everything, but that I should never want that panel opened because it would mean I had to leave the Empire." Yuka answered

A distant part of Yuka wondered how she could sound so calm about her effective exile, so blasé about it all. Shock, maybe? Or maybe this had always been her future, not exiled by her family, but by the founder of the family. She had been waiting for this all her life. Now it had happened. That was all.

"I suppose we should open that panel and find out..." Shiori said softly.

"Soshi-dono" A female voice cut through the memories, a sword through the mist.

Yuka inclined her head towards the woman named Shosuro Shiori. A small part of her found it ironic that no matter where she went, there was still a Shiori that she envied. This Shiori was an older woman, a bushi by trade, but one of the rare few to come out of that profession with nothing more than scars and grey hair. A testament to her ability.

"Yes Shosuro-san?" Yuka asks.

"We're about to round the bend to Jukami Mura. If we wish to stop for supplies, now would be the time to do so," Shosuro Shiori said with a low tenor voice more suited to battle than court.

"No, I think not. Our lord has commanded this to be secret, no one will know that we have left the Empire until

after it has long ceased to matter," Yuka commanded with more confidence than she felt.

"Hai, the ship stores are enough for several months at least. But the sailors and passengers...they would feel easier. Fortunes, I would feel easier if we stopped for a resupply and to make offerings before going into the Sea Lord's realm. I'm too stringy to be eaten but the rest of your followers..."

A slight frown appeared behind her mask as Yuka took in the warning. To ignore the Kami of the sea would indeed be unwise, but duty came first. She cast her mind back to what she had learned of appeasing the notoriously fickle kami of water and fish. What had Takahashi said? Right...the Phoenix would offer pickled daikon radishes to the Fortune of the Sea to appease him. If it was good enough for the Phoenix, it should be enough for them.

"Take the pickled daikon radishes we have, one for every family and offer them to the Fortune when we come into Lady Sun's's Heart. Tell the crews that it's a Phoenix tradition that has stood the test of time," Yuka said firmly.

Soshuro Shiori bowed. "Hai Soshi-dono, by your will."

Yuka took another breath and began to speak as the kami of air and water came to her aid. She would not stand by and let others take the task of keeping the ships safe... not when she could act. A thick fog rolled off the water concealing the ships from the outside, but letting the sailors within see out as they sailed past the Crane Port and out into the ocean. The Empress awaited..

"The so-called ghost ships of the Scorpion are mere fables brought on by overactive imaginations of the dock folk of Jukami Mura. If it were possible to hide these unique ships from us, the Scorpion would never try to waste their time and ours by going into the Bay undetected."

— Report by the Crane Magistrate in Jukami Mura.

