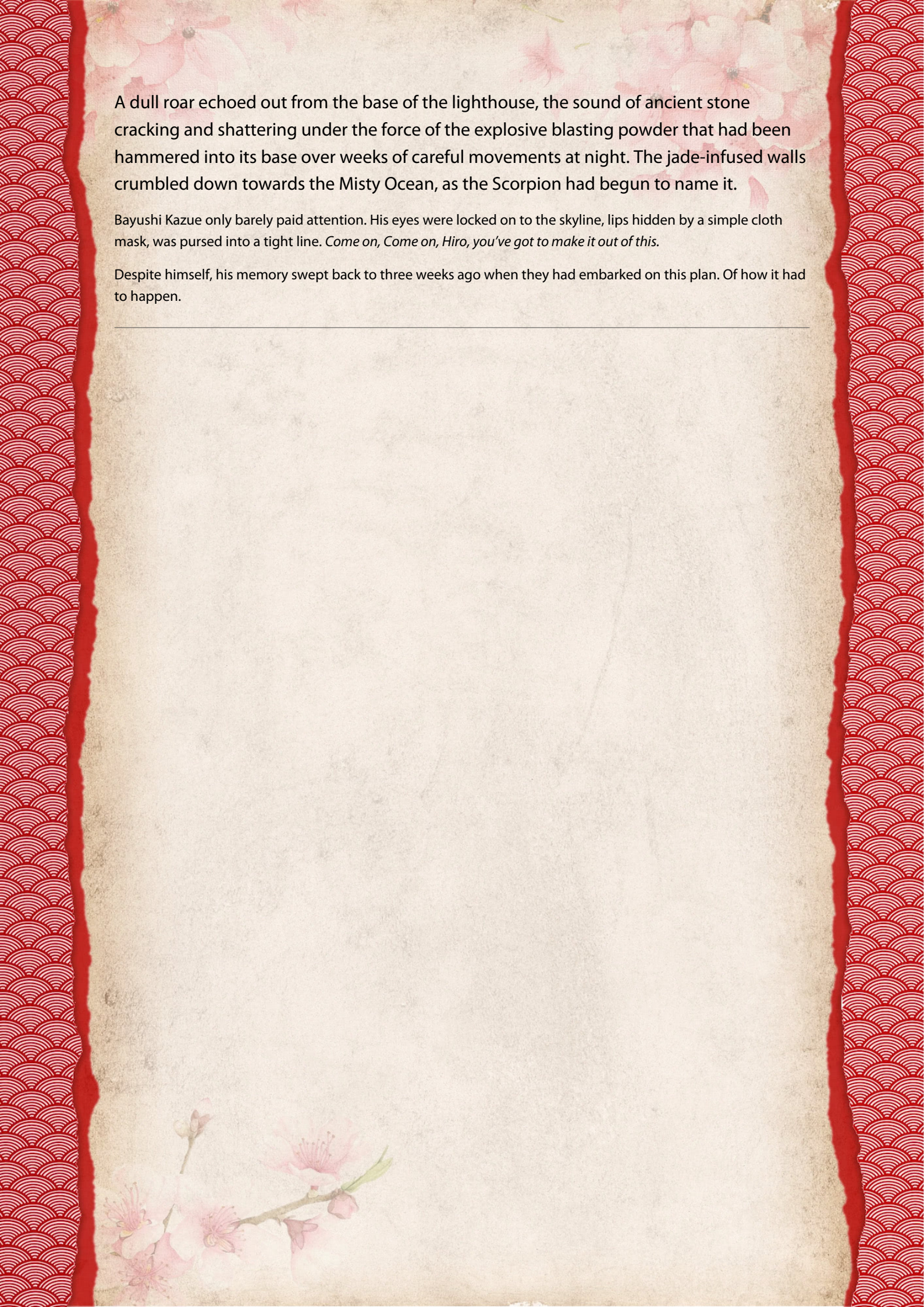




Mihai is Falling

Glen Goerwell



A dull roar echoed out from the base of the lighthouse, the sound of ancient stone cracking and shattering under the force of the explosive blasting powder that had been hammered into its base over weeks of careful movements at night. The jade-infused walls crumbled down towards the Misty Ocean, as the Scorpion had begun to name it.

Bayushi Kazue only barely paid attention. His eyes were locked on to the skyline, lips hidden by a simple cloth mask, was pursed into a tight line. *Come on, Come on, Hiro, you've got to make it out of this.*

Despite himself, his memory swept back to three weeks ago when they had embarked on this plan. Of how it had to happen.

Three weeks prior

The Silken Ghost's Captain's quarters had been converted into an office for Soshi Yuka. An enigmatic woman at the best of times, she had, like Shosuro Shiori, chosen to live on the beach with the rest of the Scorpion Exiles. It spoke well of her. But Kazue still couldn't say he knew her well. She had been the keeper of the Soshi Shrine, and then, for reasons unknown, she had been appointed to lead the "Exiles" as they were calling themselves.

It was not true of course. Every Scorpion family or samurai here came to repay a debt of honour of loyalty owed to the Throne. To serve as a last candle in this new land for the scions of Bayushi. Kazue suppressed a wry smile. Even with the mask, the other members of this impromptu war council could read him like a book if they wanted, if he wanted, but it was better to keep that particular secret for now. The quarters themselves had had a wall removed and turned into a large table that maps could be placed on, while the sides were lined with carefully-made talismans to keep out spies and eavesdroppers.

Dark eyes flickered over to the handsome Yogo Tadashi, his sculpted face barely hidden by a mask. If anything the mask was meant to draw attention to well-formed cheekbones and a handsome set of eyes that could stare into your soul. The man was coming to the end of his speech. "...We are not meant for this fight, Soshi-dono. The Phoenix would do well to take our place now that we have seen the truth of what lies inside these fortresses."

Fortunately, Kazue was spared from answering as Shosuro Shiori spoke up instead. "Meant for it or not, we were given the order by the Empress to take these fortresses, no matter the foe we will, we will find a way Yogo-san, we always find a way."

Tadashi raised a fan. "Our ways are of silk and shadow, of the subtle word and hidden steel. Our opponents in these fortresses lack these weaknesses. I am not saying to abandon duty but to be practical about it. We are to obtain these fortresses for the Empress. **How** is irrelevant, spending good Scorpion lives is foolish. Let the Phoenix be useful for once and undo whatever spells are keeping us out. Even one of our best is still feeling his wounds"

Kazue looked down to see his hand rubbing against the bandages on his chest where he had nearly been carved open.

Shiori waved a hand. "I, too, have fought the Stone Soldiers. Felt the bite of their blades. It is not something we cannot overcome. We are Samurai."

"And how many samurai must we lose in pursuit of that?" Tadashi asked acerbically.

Shiori looked prepared to speak again when a different voice chimed in, a male one. Kazue looked over at Shosuro Hiroyuki, his childhood friend. Once upon a time, he had dreamed of being with this man, before the changes of his gempukku and the realisations of who he was. Hiroyuki was to be the head of the Scorpion Explorers, before it was revealed how little the Scorpion had to explore. "The Stone Soldiers aren't that smart. Just relentless. Whenever we've tried to breach the walls, they drown us in numbers and drive us back." Hiroyuki pointed out. "But we've had limited success in using that against them. Ambushes. It never lasts because there are so many of them, but in principle if we get them all in one place..."

Kazue looks at the map on the table. The Castle that they had taken to calling Doji's Gift in a sense of bitter sarcasm was divided up into a hexagonal pattern with one tower jutting out to the sea to serve as a lighthouse. While rebuilding that lighthouse would be difficult, it was a good spot to lure all the active golems.

For the first time in the meeting, the Bayushi spoke. "The Lighthouse. We get them there, then we can destroy the bridge and just leave them there."

Hiroyuki gave a gentle smile of understanding before Shiori spoke. "We've considered it, but the bridge itself is part of the fortress. To take it down we'd need to take out the tower too. It'd almost be easier to just take the tower out. However, we lack the stones for what siege weapons we have to do that."

Kazue folded his arms. There were...other options.

Yuka looked up through her komusō at Kazue. Her voice was raspy but firm. "Do we have alternate methods to remove the tower?"

"Hai, Soshi-dono." Kazue answered. "We have enough blasting powder to do that, but I must caution my lords. We won't have any more to use for some time if we commit it."

Kazue could almost feel the smile under the komusō, but Yuka was coolly polite as she replied, "Then we will deal with it then. We will draw the golems to the Lighthouse and then destroy it. I will personally prepare the invocations to ensure it."

Shiori's mask moved in a frown. "There is a problem. Whoever draws them in is going to be overwhelmed and have to keep one step ahead for...at least an hour? While the golems are drawn out. As Bayushi-san said, we only have one chance at this.

Tadashi waved his fan. "Better one life now than the slow trickle we have."

Hiroyuki nodded. "I'll volunteer to be the bait then"

Shiori looked at Hiroyuki. "I forbid it!" she slapped her hand down on the table.

Kazue hid a wince behind a placid face. This was a familiar argument he had seen too many times. Shiori loved her son — that was never in doubt. However, Hiroyuki wanted to make a name like his father. These two things were at odds.

Showing a calmness he hadn't had when they left the Empire, Hiroyuki responded. "That isn't something you can forbid. Soshi-dono must make the decision."

Yuka shifted, and the way she gripped her own fan suggested to Kazue that she didn't appreciate being dragged into the family argument. Fortunes knew that he never did.

"It's a suicide mission," Shiori said.

Hiroyuki's green eyes focused on his mother. "And you taught me that if we aren't willing to sacrifice ourselves, we have no business sacrificing others."

The Shiori's grip tightened on the table, the only hint at how much Hiroyuki's casual use of her own lessons infuriated her.

Yuka snapped her fan closed. "Enough," she rasped before the argument could continue. Her head tilted towards Kazue. "Bayushi-san, if not Shosuro-san, can you or your agents try?"

Kazue wanted to say yes, that of course they could. But his best shinobi, the ones who survived an ill-fated attempt to map the interior of a castle, were still recovering from their wounds. While he himself could try, he couldn't make the attempt and oversee the emplacement of the blasting charges. He was unwilling to entrust those to another. Which meant...

Kazue adjusted his mask. "No, I could, but I'm the best at using the blasting powder and am needed there. Shosuro-san is one of the best scouts and samurai I know. He can do it, although I would not want him to"

Shiori glared at him, furious at Kazue for sending her son into the lion's den. Yet, lying to her superior wasn't something that the Scorpion Shinobi was willing to do, Not when Yuka had done nothing to break his trust.

The Soshi adjusted her komusō slightly. "Yogo-san, I'm charging your husband with coming up with a way for Shosuro-san to survive this 'suicide mission'. We are not so blessed with fresh bodies that I would throw any away without reason. I am told that he is particularly gifted with summoning and controlling shikigami. One of those spirits should help Bayushi-san immensely"

Shiori looked at Yuka with ill-concealed anger and worry. "Soshi-dono..." she began.

Yuka somehow managed to glare through the komusō. "Shosuro-san, while I have no child of my own, I understand the need to protect one's family. However, if Hiroyuki-kun genuinely is the best for the duty, then he

is the one we must send. We cannot afford a mistake. Not while our people eke out the barest margins of survival on the beaches. We need that castle, and we need it now. Dismissed."

Kazue shook himself as he rubbed his chest bindings slightly. Yogo Norio had come up with something, though Hlroyuki couldn't explain it that well. He did not really understand it himself. Yet as the lighthouse fell down into the sea, there was no sign of his friend.

"Come on, come on you stupid bastard," Kazue found himself muttering.

Then a hint of movement in the sky. The Shinobi blinked for a moment before he leaned forward on the outcrop of rock to see what it was. A person on some sort of...winged suit? Hiroyuki! Despite there being protocol to simply watch and wait for a shinobi extraction, Kazue found himself darting along the ground as the lighthouse crashed into the sea, running towards where his friend was ready to set down.

In the pale light of the setting sun, Kazue caught up to Hiroyuki just as the wind was about to send him out to sea, throwing his kyoketsu-shoge up towards the flying Shosuro. The iron hoop of the weapon wrapped around Hiroyuki's leg as it went tight. The wind was pulling against both of them now. Kazue planted his feet and began to pull down. The winged suit seemed to fight against him, as Hiroyuki came closer and closer.

"Nihai is falling, is falling, is falling, Nihai is falling to rise no more..." Hiroyuki was singing.

Kazue wondered why that old childhood tune was being sung but pushed it out of his mind. With one last wrench of his muscles, he pulled his friend back into contact with the earth. On top of him.

Even beneath the fox mask, Kazue could see Hlroyuki's grin. "Sorry for dropping in unannounced."

A groan from Kazue. "That was terrible Hiroyuki. Are you alright?"

Hiroyuki stood up and brushed himself off. "Fine, Yogo-san's charm worked like, well, a charm."

Kazue sat up and glared at Hiroyuki. "You get one more."

Extending a hand to help Kazue up, Hiroyuki's eyes twinkled. "You've gotten so stingy with them lately."

Kazue took the hand and pulled himself up. "Some of us like to be professional even after a duty is done. It is done right?"

"Don't turn into my mother. Of course it's done. Even got something for Soshi-dono and Yogo-san to look at." Hiroyuki took out a small bit of cloth with an ink sketching.

Kazue's eyes narrowed, that kanji no it couldn't be...no just a trick of the light, he decided.

"Got this off an altar near the throne room. I think that altar will help us understand the Stone Soldiers." Hlroyuki beamed with pride. Oblivious.

Kazue adjusted his masks and chest bindings. "Well then we better go and report in. They'll be happy that we can get inside."

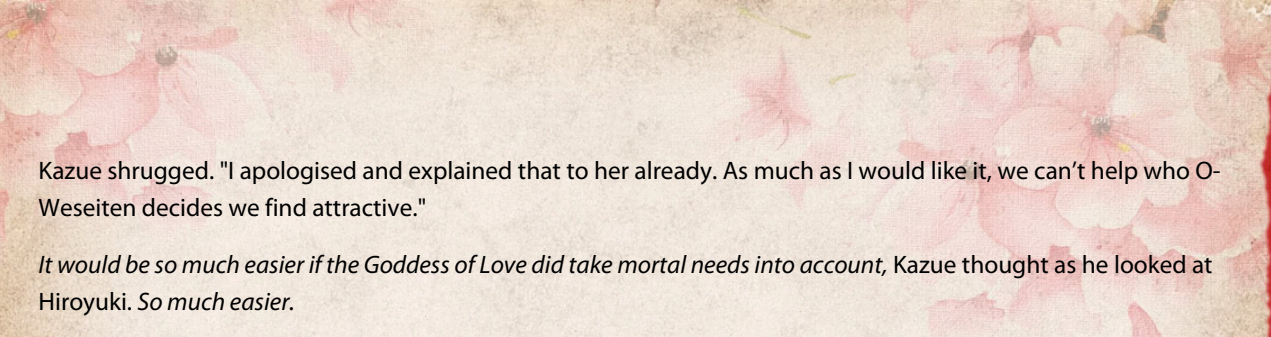
Hiroyuki shrugged as they started walking, "I think we'll all be happy. Not that I don't love camping, but I miss a roof over my head."

"Hai," Kazue agreed and his curiosity got the better of him. "Why were you singing that song though?"

Hiroyuki rubbed the back of his head. "Yogo-san said that since I can't hear the kami, for the spell to work I needed to keep the air kami entertained or they'd let me fall. He suggested music...and that was all I could think of."

Kazue let out a snort of humour. "This is why Miyuki broke up with you, you know?"

The other Scorpion laughed. "Well, that, and she was convinced I was into men because of you."



Kazue shrugged. "I apologised and explained that to her already. As much as I would like it, we can't help who O-Weseiten decides we find attractive."

It would be so much easier if the Goddess of Love did take mortal needs into account, Kazue thought as he looked at Hiroyuki. So much easier.

Hiroyuki nodded behind his mask. "I know, still...I need a nap and some sake."

Kazue smirked. "I can only help you with the first Nihai, let's get you falling down into a bed"

"Oi, why am I the tower?" Hiroyuki squawked.

The Shinobi answered, "Because you're taller than me."

Hiroyuki folded his arms with a pout. However, Kazue couldn't quite get that trick image of the kanji on the ink etching out of his head. The hidden characters for the Shadowbrands — how had Lady Doji, of all people, known about them? His master had barely trusted a Bayushi with the secret. It had to just be coincidence. There was no way that Lady Doji knew about the Shadowbrands.

The gods knew, Kazue wished he didn't.

