



Feast of Flames

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The Imperial Palace

Five days. It had been five days since the Utaku scout, Naoko Emi, had arrived at the Imperial palace and told the court of the impending doom of the reavers from Toshigoku. Yesterday, the forces of Sanctuary gathered, just a paltry number of samurai and ashigaru. Today, the horde arrived. They were a plague ravaging the land. Stone axes and obsidian spears were held in their calloused hands. The reavers arrived from the northeast, a most inauspicious direction.

The battlefield was littered with dismembered bodies, charred trees, and boulders the earth shugenja had hurled. To think only a few days ago the Empress walked these woods with her guards planning a garden. It would take a great ordeal to get the grounds of the Imperial Palace back to a presentable state. But that would be for after the battle had been won and after the Empress had returned from safety.

The Pearl Champion, Yasuki Yoshi, took the forces of Sanctuary and arranged them with what skill he had. Shugenja and monks were teamed up so that their partner would complement their abilities and so that there would be someone to watch the other's back. Bushi, on the other hand, led the ashigaru foot soldiers. Many questioned the courtier's orders for battle, just not to his face.

"Watch where you are attacking, Hinotama-san! That last one almost got me," snapped Isawa Jimu, a fire shugenja tensai. He knew nothing but fire, from his temperament to his food he brought heat. He claimed that his robes were made of houshu, fire rat. The houshu's pelt was said to be immune to flames. Jimu said that anything else would burn up once it came into contact with his skin though conveniently the jinbei he wore to sleep in appeared to be made of cotton and survived his infamously combustible skin.

"If it had hit you, that houshu robe you brag about would have just absorbed the flames, and you would have been alright," replied Togashi Hinotama. She had a tattoo of a dragon snaking up from between her breasts, up the exposed shoulder, and to the side of her mouth, its open jaws holding the corner of her lips. This was not the only ise zumi tattoo she had; the other was a firework mandala wreathed in flames on her back, though she had yet to discover its purpose. "And if you weren't, then we wouldn't have to hear you complain anymore."

A reaver came running at the monk, his spear laid low to gore her. His hairy face was covered and caked in blood. But the blood did not spare it as a dozen amber onibi fireballs burst into existence across its body, lighting its untamed hair ablaze. The creature dropped to the ground trying to put the fire out, but it was too late.

"I didn't need your help," Hinotama barked back at Jimu.

"Could have fooled me." Jimu gave a half smile, his hand still in the karana position.

"Enough flirting, you two," a Seppun gunsou said. "We are in the middle of a battle if you haven't noticed."

This was coming easily to the tensai and monk. Fire was bringing down reavers with ease. The bushi, however, struggled. The reavers seemed immune to pain and fatigue. Arrows appeared utterly useless as they advanced with shafts sticking out of them like quills upon a hedgehog. Katana and yumi would dig deep into them, but they just kept going until they were beheaded, and even then they lingered on. But fire, fire consumed them like so much tinder. They were a feast for the flames.

Obsidian tipped arrows rained down. The reavers weren't stupid, they knew the flames only stretched so far and the arrows, even fired from the primitive self-bows, far exceeded the fire's range. Hinotama opened her mouth and a gout of fire erupted catching the arrows mid-flight, immolating their hafts and leaving only the stone heads to fall harmlessly down. Jimu thought he could see her dragon tattoo move with approval.

As great as their flames were at routing the enemy, this was a battle of attrition. Which would give out first: the sheer numbers of the reavers or the fire that burned within Hinotama and Jimu? It seemed hopeless. Surely the reavers would overtake them. Then the palace. Then Sanctuary.

"There is no end to these things," Jimu said between ragged breaths. "Even if we survive, will the land? Will the kami? If it weren't for having shugenja of every element here, I fear we would have caused an imbalance by now."

"None of that matters if we fall. Fight!" Hinotama said. She was unconcerned about a spiritual imbalance in the land. She believed her power came from within and from her tattoos, gifted to her by the Kami Togashi; not from the kami of the fire.

"I have an idea, I need you to keep them occupied for a little bit. And I will need you to use your flame breath again for me when the time comes."

Hinotama gave a nod, hoping that Jimu was not just blowing hot air but had a true spark to ignite. She picked up a spear from a fallen reaver. It was primitive when compared to the yumi, not much more than a straightened wooden shaft with a razor sharp piece of obsidian fixed to one end. But it would have to do; Hinotama would save her gift from Togashi until Jimu was ready.

Jimu began to pray while his hands shifted through mudras, his hands contortions from one position to another. He repeated the pattern several times until his sweat began to steam from his skin.

"Now, Hinotama-san. Breath in an arc as long as you can!" Jimu shouted, his voice strained from concentration.

Hinotama kicked the reaver in front of her to the ground and hopped back a few steps before expanding her lungs. As she let it out, her dragon tattoo sparked it into flames. Every torch within twenty bu flickered and went out as their kami rushed into Hinotama's fire. As it expanded more lights extinguished until the wall of fire stretched wide and separated the majority of the attackers from the defenders of Sanctuary.

The reaver fled from the flames. The slow ones got caught in its expansion. The fast killed others under foot as they ran.

"You did it, Jimu-san. At the very least this will give us some reprie-" Hinotama's words were cut off by a peal of thunder and a crack of lightning before the deluge began. "What did we do to offend you, Osano-wo no Mikoto!"

Just as air feeds fire, water tempers it. The flames of the battlefield including Jimu's wall died down. The reavers stopped their retreat and resumed their attack with renewed fervor. The Empress's warriors barely had a moment to breathe. They were spent. Only divine intervention from the kami could save them now.

The reavers began their renewed assault with a volley of arrows as their footsoldiers prepared to charge. The obsidian points of the arrows blended in with the heavy rain making it hard to time defense.

Hinotama tried to use her fire breath again but the downpour extinguished much of the umbrella of flames, allowing some of the arrows past. There was a scream and a thud behind her. When she turned she saw Jimu, an arrow embedded in his right shoulder. Not a fatal wound. Given time and care he would heal. It would be like nothing had happened save for the scar.

"Don't worry about me. I'll be fine." He said, pulling out the arrow. Blood soaked into his treasured robes. With his left hand he pulled the robes down exposing his shoulder and the wound, then summoned a single onibi to cauterize the gap in his flesh. He stood up. "I will not fall this night."

An ember lit within Hinotama's mind. A thought she had never had before took form from seeing Jimu's sacrifice. She uncoiled a set of prayer beads from her arm and shoved them into Jimu's hand before kissing him. "I will find you in my next cycle."

She turned and began to run at the charging horde, their spear in her hands. As she met the enemy, Hinotama planted the spearhead into the ground and vaulted into the air, leaping deeper into the enemy ranks. Whether by surprise, luck, or the will of the Fortunes, she was not cut down as they swarmed around her. She removed her top and Jimu could see the large mandala firework tattoo on her back, the Kanji for fire blazing in the center. It seemed to swirl and move, getting brighter. The light shone through the darkness before the tattoo and Hinotama erupted into an inferno, consuming and feasting upon the reavers. Where once were enemies, there were now flowers of flame.

Years later, the Empress's flower garden sits at the spot where Hinotama fell to save them all. Blue kosenjōbi flames light the paths, memories of the fighting that has long since ended. They produce no heat and no smoke, just a serene blue glow.

Years later, a fire tensai comes to the garden, clutching prayer beads in his hand. A tattoo of the symbol for fire covers a burn scar on his right shoulder. He wraps the beads around a branch of a maple tree and sheds a solitary tear.

