



Faith and Pain

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The evening sun cast long shadows across a grassy field. Moto Oktai saw the deer grazing. It had white spots along its flanks and an eight pointed set of antlers, one for each of the great Kami. The velvet had long since shed from the antlers and they stood, a boney crown. Oktai pulled back the string on his bow, feeling the weight of the draw increase, bit by bit until he released all that built-up energy and let the arrow fly. The deer must have heard him, sensed him, because at the same time it began to run. Too late. The arrow struck the deer's thigh, not an immediately fatal wound. The deer bound into the nearby woods, limping as it went.

I cannot let it suffer. I must follow it.

The deer led Oktai into the woods. The trees were twisted and gnarled in unnatural ways, almost representing letters. Amongst the shapes there were ones that looked like Shi, N, No, Ya, and Mi. The alien woods were unnerving but Oktai followed the signs the deer had left behind.

The sun dipped lower in the sky and the trees gave way. A clearing with white flowers and an aged torii gate. Crimson stained the white flowers up to the deer, now laying on its side. Its labored breathing was finally coming to an end.

"May the Lords of Death see you to your rightful place." Oktai prayed, and the deer was still.

Despite the silence, Oktai felt a presence, watching him, and his gaze went from the deer to the torii gate. It was old, ancient perhaps. How any item like this could remain after so many centuries was a great mystery the island had not yet revealed, but here the age at least showed. The paint had all but flaked away. Lichen had grown in the crevices of the wood. "What is that doing here?"

Passing through the gate, under the rotten shimenawa rope, the Unicorn followed an overgrown trail to a modest shrine. A small curved offering table begged for use; at one point it must have held persimmons, koku, or incense. But now it was barren save for the moss that encroached upon the stone.

"Who are you?" He asked himself as much as the worn stone effigy silently observing him. The features were lost to time but the form seemed masculine and foreign. "I heard this place was set aside by Lady Dōji. Perhaps one of the Kami? Not Dōji or her sister, our lady Shinjo."

Resting between the 'knees' of the gray stone station, there seemed to be something like a box of polished jasper, though the face of it was pitted with the action of raindrops dripping from its forehead. But Oktai could make out, in the pitted edge, the thin line of a seam. *It can be opened then.*

Oktai knelt down, curiosity easily getting the better of him, and pushed the worn lid aside. Inside was a letter, impossibly intact despite the centuries, though time had worn the ink and it seemed as though droplets of water had marred some of the letters. The contents were difficult to read, the characters were more pictographic than the modern Rokugani. Still, taking it into the light, with some time and effort, Oktai could get the gist. It was from Lady Dōji, lamenting over the loss of her siblings; they were all mentioned by name, including Ryoshin, a legend Oktai had heard of as only a child, of one of the kami who died before his feet could touch Ningen-do. But there was one who she referred to, mourned for, who she named only "brother". A brother that could not have been any of the others.

Oktai shook his head thoughtfully. This "brother" — it could only be one Kami, the one lost to the Shadowlands. As Oktai made to put back the letter, he pushed against the cool stone of the bottom, and something clicked, revealing a thin layer of gemstone that served as a false bottom. *Strange.* It took some prying with the tip of a small knife before he could pull the false bottom free, but, when he did, he found two gomagi prayer sticks, ancient and perfectly preserved. The first read, "To you, our children, safety and strength." The other simply said, "Come back to us, dear Akugawa."

Akugawa. That sounded... right. The name of a lost brother. But could this truly be the true name of the Dark Kami? Could this be a shrine to him? To his memory, or at least the memory of who he once was and might be again? It had to be.

But what was he, Oktai, to do with such a thing? Possibilities opened before him. It would be no trouble to raze

the shrine to the ground. None would even know it was there. Refurbishment: that too was an option. It would take time and materials, but the ancient shrine could be made new again. The problem was who the shrine honored. Who he was and could be were noble, divine, in an unholy way, but he was tainted. Whoever he had been, as he was now, this 'Akugawa' must be contained. Perhaps Oktai was destined to find this shrine. The deer destined to lead him here. He was a priest to the Lords of Death.

They rivaled the legendary Ryoshin; they rivaled all the kami. They could contain this vestige of the Lord of the Shadowlands. They could keep this memory trapped in the Halls of the Dead, where it would never escape to trouble this land. But he was one man, only. He could not move the shrine itself. He would have to beseech the Lords in the caves to come to his aid.

Convincing Shinjo Takame and Ide Nobutada to allow Oktai custodial rights to the shrine and the prayers to the Lords of Death to contain Akugawa was surprisingly easy. He had only to make concessions to allow the meishodo priests of the luchi leeway to study the true name of the ninth Kami and leave the first gomagi with Shinjo Takame.

Convincing the Lords of Death? That is where the difficulty lay.

Oktai knelt in the chamber of the Lords of Death. His gods. They glared down at him from their paintings on the obsidian walls. The light from his iron lantern danced across the glassy surface bringing the paintings to life.

"I call out to you, Lords of Death, in your shrine amongst the caves. Please hear me, Shi-Tien Yen-Wang, gods of the Ujik-hai, now the Moto. We have come from Rokugan and with your providence found this place. Through fate I was then guided to a shrine belonging to the ninth Kami of the Rokugani, who is now to be known as Akugawa, lord of the Shadowlands. Through prayer and meditation I have come to understand that only you can contain this vestige of him upon Sanctuary. I beseech you. With all your power take on this task and I shall ensure you are venerated."

Then Oktai placed the gomagi containing Akugawa's name into the flame of the iron lantern, catching it ablaze. The new source of light bent the images on the walls, twisting them, making them even more inhuman. Then the fire went out and Oktai was plunged into darkness. It was complete and all consuming. There wasn't even the glow of embers from the gomagi ashes or the lantern.

"Prostrate yourself," a cacophony of voices boomed.

A weight came over Oktai, pushing him deeper into a position of supplication. The single horn on his skull mask crashed into the smooth floor. He was frozen in place.

For three days Oktai was pinned there as every manner of pain was inflicted upon his prone body. The Lords of Death would not be as easily convinced as the expedition leaders had. But Oktai held his screams, held his tears, and held his pleas.

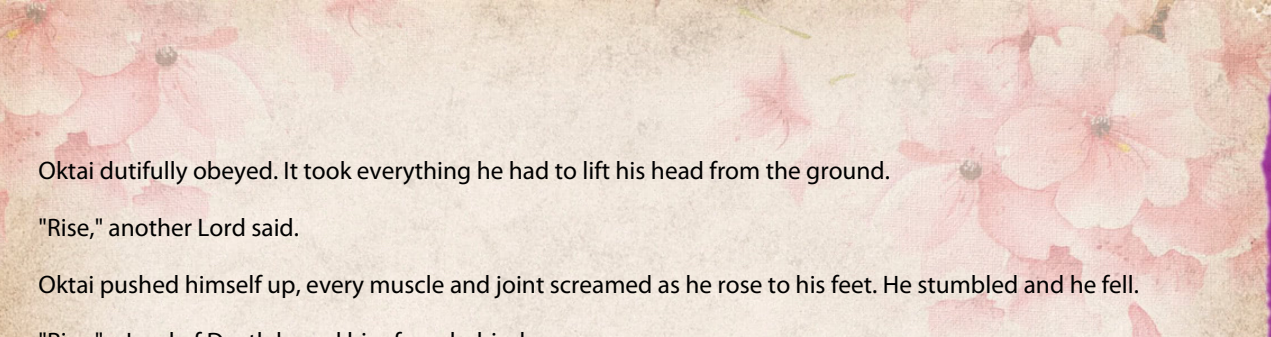
The ghostly skeletal face of one of the Lords loomed over him. "Give up. Surrender."

If trust hadn't been put on him, if the burden of Akugawa hadn't been put on him, he would have. But he could not give in to the Lords. They must contain Akugawa. "I cannot. I will not. I am your priest and this is a duty I must endure if I am to gain your favor. I ask again: contain Akugawa and his shrine."

"I tell you again: you will suffer for your request as proof of your faith. The Shi-Tien Yen-Wang do not bow to the whims of mortals." The face scowled, flying towards him, through him, through his body. It was so cold that it burned and the Death Priest was once again wracked with pain.

Oktai had lost track of all time in the blackness of the Obsidian Caves. It was meaningless. All there was was his faith, the Lords of Death, and pain. On dawn of the fourth day the visages of the eight Lords of Death looked down upon the Death Priest. He had been without food, water, or sleep for four days while they tortured him.

"Rise," one of the Lords commanded.



Oktai dutifully obeyed. It took everything he had to lift his head from the ground.

"Rise," another Lord said.

Oktai pushed himself up, every muscle and joint screamed as he rose to his feet. He stumbled and he fell.

"Rise," a Lord of Death bayed him from behind.

With the last bit of energy in him, Oktai stood erect and held his head high.

"You have proven your faith," the Lords spoke in unison, "We will watch over the shrine so long as you follow our teachings in the iron book you took from this chamber."

The light from the Lords of Death faded and Oktai was once again in the stygian dark of the caves. He groped around for the lantern until his hand found purchase and he dragged himself out of the obsidian labyrinth. The sun burned his eyes and he had to close them.

"Moto Oktai-sama, we were just preparing to go into the caves to see what became of you," a Death Acolyte said, hooking a hand under Oktai's arm and helping him to his feet.

"I...was...successful," Oktai stammered, "The Lords of Death did not realize one truth that I did. They were trapped in there with me, not the other way around. I can handle pain. I cannot handle failure. Send word to Shinjo Takame-dono. Let her know the Lords will watch over Akugawa. But now she must allow us to enforce the teachings of the iron book. Their will be done."

