



Song of the World - Part 2

Chris Garvey

"How many horses went missing?" Ide Nobutada asked.

"Five, Ide-sama," The Shinjo boy reporting to him didn't look like he had seen many summers since his gempukku. "Three geldings, a mare, and her foal."

The area immediately around the Obsidian Caves had little in the way of grazing for their herd. The Shinjo watching over the horses had their work cut out for them. The horses would come back eventually, but what dangers lurked in the forests? If the horses traveled south they would go into the lands that the Dragon had settled. To the east, the contested lands between the Unicorn and the Crab. Empress Botan had settled in those woods as well. Nobutada would likely need to see her for negotiations before fighting broke out.

"Send a few scouts out to look for the lost horses. Only what we can spare." Nobutada dismissed the boy with a shake of his hand. It had been a long day, and this was just the last straw. He picked up a paper and reread it. Iuchi Tadamatsu had written to him about a discovery in one of the caves that he and Moto Otkai had found, along with an unusual book. The information was both intriguing and disturbing.

Otkai led Tadamatsu into one of the Obsidian Caves; Tadamatsu was glad that it was not narrow. Someone of his girth would have a tough time squeezing through some of the black stone passages, but not this one. Their torch reflected and danced upon the glass-like surface of the walls and its smoke pooled across the ceiling.

"How much further?" inquired Tadamatsu, hiding his nervousness but feeling the weight of the earth loom over him.

"Not long, not long," replied the strange Death Priest. His voice was like the tumbling of broken stones, echoing in the dark space. They rounded a corner and before them, crudely painted on the wall, were two oni, one with the head of a horse, the other with the head of an ox.

"What are those?" Tadamatsu's mouth hung agape.

"Mezu and Gozu. Guards of the underworld. The Shi-Tien Yen-Wang use them to ensure none escape from punishment." The way Otkai spoke was almost in reverence. It unnerved Tadamatsu. "There is more, come, see. We will have to change our light to a lantern for the next part, else we might not leave the chamber."

Otkai lit an ornate metal lantern and went between the two oni into a chamber. There on either side of the wall were five paintings. One for each of the ten gods of death now relegated to being minor Fortunes. The room was low and oppressive; the air itself felt dead. Had they brought the torch in here, the chamber would have filled with smoke and they would have found themselves before the Lords of Death in the flesh.

"By the ancestors," Tadamatsu breathed.

"Yes! By the ancestors! Our forefathers' gods are here. I know not how, but the Lords of Death, the gods of the Moto are here." The death priest began a chant, a prayer that Tadamatsu could not understand. Something in old Ujik.

Tadamatsu only knew a little about the Death Gods. Few Iuchi were versed in such things. He knew that they were terrifying deities of the Ujik and now served with Yenma Okami to judge the dead and enact punishment. He also knew that they once rent open a passage to Toshigoku, the realm of slaughter. But it was the kami to whom the Iuchi owed their devotion.

Otkai ceased his chanting and the chamber was silent, save for the crackle of the torch just outside.

"What do you intend with this find, Moto-san?"

Otkai took a moment before he answered. The lantern-light made his hollow eyes all the more haunting. "A place for worship, I suppose. This is a sign that our ancestors were here. That we were destined to come to these obsidian caves."

Tadamatsu stared at him with incredulity. "These are the Moto's ancestral gods. Gods of punishment. Not the

gods of the luchì, not the gods of the Unicorn. Not the gods of Rokugan."

"But they are. They are now Fortunes. Gods in their own right." Light flickered, reflected in Otkai's eyes and giving him a demonic visage. Tadamatsu flinched and turned aside. His eyes darted away from the brutal, possessed stare.

Between the five gods to the left and the five gods to the right, there was a dark fissure in the wall, a flaw in the smooth surface. *What was in there?* Tadamatsu couldn't help but investigate. Drawn to the break in the wall, he plunged his hand into the stygian dark.

"My fingers touched something hard, something cold." Tadamatsu blurted out his surprise. "If only I could reach it."

He pressed deeper into the fissure. The sharp edges of obsidian cut into his exposed skin like a knife. Hot blood ran down his arm. Suddenly, his face lit up as his hand closed around the metal shape, prying free from the wall something that looked like a metal box. A book. Three iron rings held sheets of metal together. In the dim lamplight, Tadamatsu began to turn the pages, but he couldn't make out a word of what was written. It was filled with the indecipherable pictograms of an ancient dialect.

"Please, allow me," Otkai offered. He took the iron book out of the hands of Tadamatsu and read from its pages in the same voice as his earlier chanting, then spoke in Rokugani. **"Here is presented the law of the Shi-Tien Yen-Wang, the ten Lords of Death. For every offense there is an equal and just repercussion."**

Tadamatsu wondered how ancient the Lords of Death were, to be able to have a shrine here in Sanctuary — a place Lady Dōji had cultivated for the Rokugani in their time of need. Had she known this was here, or was this place made some time after?

"luchi-san, we must bring this law to the people. It is part of our heritage, our inheritance." Otkai clutched the book to his chest, white knuckles showing in the dim light.

"We must bring this to Ide Nobutada-sama, he will know what to do with it."

Ide Nobutada did not know what to do with the book made of iron. His duty seemed clear. These were teachings from their ancestors, and wisdom granted to them by destiny. He should honor the ancestors. Bring such teachings to the scholars to study, to go their own path, not forced into conformity with the rest of the Empire. If such teachings lead the Unicorn to incorporate the laws of the book into Unicorn culture, to guide their own laws? The Unicorn walked their own path. Honor and veneration for the Lords of Death was only right: they were fortunes, after all, and if they left teachings to future generations on the best ways to honor them, was it not right to follow, using this book and its teachings. But Nobutada was hesitant. But if he did what the Fortunes recommended, then he and his sister would have to abdicate leadership over the Unicorn, and let the Lords of Death rule. And their Priests. In fact, even if his sister held the Championship in name only. More of their people each day listened to Otkai and his teachings. More each day yearned for the wild steppes, hot roasted flesh over a campfire when the wind was high. More sung the ancient songs and told stories of home, and a freedom that these far shores did not offer. More rooted their faith in those memories and in Otkai's promise that they could have those freedoms again.

Sometimes, he felt the draw of those memories himself. Perhaps it was that yearning that made him try to read this new tome himself.

Nobutada had never seen a book like this before, and the writing inside was difficult to read. He had to trust Moto Otkai on what it had said. Moto Otkai knew old Ujik; Nobutada did not, though he was versed in seven languages from foreign lands. He opened the book on his desk once again. It gave a hearty thunk as it hit the wood. The old Ujik writing looked like squiggles a child might make. Frustrated, he tried again to unlock the ancient secrets.

"Honor...light...sword..." Nobutada said the words he thought he could make out. Something was familiar, but not right about the writing. He took a sheet of paper, laid it over the iron page, and rubbed it with a piece of

charcoal. This made it easier to read, but still no less unintelligible.

"What in Shinjo's name did you bring me, Oktai?" He lamented. He stood up and walked over to the mirror in his office, lifting it to peer inside. His eyes had bags under them. *Have I been getting enough sleep?* Nobutada and his sister Shinjo Takame had delegated what they could, but there was only so much others could do. *Wait, the mirror.* Nobutada fetched the paper and brought it over to the mirror. *There it is.* The words were still confusing but he could read it. Read one way, it was a series of laws in old Ujik as the Death Priest described, but in the mirror it told a story.

"Here lies the history of the journey to the Obsidian Caves..." Nobutada read aloud.

The pages described an ornate metal lantern, not unlike that which Moto Oktai had used to investigate the cavern. Nobutada had been told that the lantern had once contained a djinn, but, if this book were to be believed, it housed the essence of the Lords of Death, allowing them to leave the Burning Sands, traverse the waves and come here to this sanctuary where they forged the caves from the volcanic glass. This would be a home for them while they waited for the Dark Brother to either reap his revenge or be vanquished. Until then they would wait. They melted down parts of their lantern and crafted the metal into a book of laws so that any who would discover them could venerate them properly.

Lady Dōji, upon arrival at this island, discovered the caves and the book. She etched the secret message into the pages to give people a choice. Now that choice was Nobutada's to make. Ignore the book, suffer the wrath of the Lords of Death and create a schism in the Unicorn as Oktai and his followers called he and his sister heretics when the Champion ordered them to silence their teachings; give over power of the Unicorn to the Lords of Death and their Death Priests, potentially extracting a cruel price from both the Empire and for those who did not wish to follow; or find some middle ground: incorporate enough laws to appease the Death Priests under the lenses of the Kami, maintain a face for the Empire, and use the power you win to protect those who did not follow. Try to make everyone happy... Lady Dōji explained how this could be done.

Was this not the way everything works? He could risk blood for power, power for beliefs, or beliefs for trust. A compromise must be made. This is the song of the world.