



Crescent Moon Strike

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Moonlight beckons us
Hide behind a serpent smile
Talk with a forked tongue

Be as a shadow
Ducking between the moonlight
To take what we need

The dry rice rattles
A lone Lion on patrol
Beneath the moonlight

The pair of Ikoma courtiers couldn't look more different: Natsuko was tall and plain with long dark hair. Her kimono flattered her complexion. Ba, on the other hand, was on the short side, his kimono stretched wide, and his beard striped with gray. The two knelt on tatami mats above an earthen floor in a tent. They were to meet with a representative from the Mantis clan about trade negotiations.

The tent flap opened and a ragged man stepped in. Salt crusted his kimono, which was open despite the late hour. His hair was in a loose bun, strands sticking out in every direction. A patchy beard clung to his long face and a bit of wood protruded from his lips.

"Aibinā-san of the *Hundred Winds*, welcome," Ikoma Natsuko said.

Aibinā flopped down onto a futon; one leg bent out before him and his arm resting on the other. *Who was this man to show such little decorum?* Natsuko fumed. From what the Lion had gathered, the Mantis had forced their way onto Sanctuary and were now trapped here, begging for scraps from the Great Clans. Back in Rokugan, the Lion had very scant interactions with the Mantis. They would be ferried on the rivers by the Otter if they had to touch water at all. This was the first Mantis samurai either Ikoma had met, and their first impression was not a good one. He reminded Natsuko of the yakuza in the City of Lies.

"We understand you have come to Sanctuary lacking equipment for making homes and harvesting food, and workers to do the labor," she continued.

"Very unfortunate," Ba added with a mirthless grin. Natsuko shot him a look that could freeze a kappa's blood. "I mean, what would the Mantis have to offer the Lion? We have already ceded land to the Otter Clan along our western shores in exchange for their assistance in ferrying us where we must go."

The question was just. *What had the Mantis to offer when the needs of a ferryman were already met?*

To Aibinā's credit, he kept an emotionless, courtly mask as he paused, as if deep in thought. "We, that is to say, the Mantis fleet, here in...Sanctuary...are under the command of Eiso-sama of The Wave's Blade. We have come into the possession of a reasonable sum of gold and jade...quite a significant amount, I assure you. We...um...offer to.... barter, as you might say, for land, and pay, at a reasonable wage of course, Lion Clan peasants to till and harvest the fields."

If there was a short way to say something, Natsuko doubted Aibinā knew how to say it. His words were long and drawn out as if he had all the time in the world. *How could a man like this command a ship?* It would take all day to just give the orders to set sail.

Akodo Anzen patrolled the rice fields that Inahou Okami had blessed them with. He doubted that any other clan had found such a boon upon landing in Sanctuary. Fresh from his gempuku, he had yet to learn the bitter sting that can come from having too much pride. He didn't understand why he patrolled. The other clans were busy in their own holdings, save for the Scorpion who were harassing them on the eastern shores. But these were the orders and he knew far too well what disobeying them would mean. He still bore the scars from when he was last

caught sleeping on patrol.

Anzen wished the rice paddies were still flooded. At least then he could catch frogs while on patrol, releasing them back into the water when he passed by on his return trip. But now the paddies were dry, the stripped rice stalks rattling against each other like a handful of arrows loose in a quiver.

Lord Moon was a thin smile of silver light shining down: mikazuki, the silver crescent. Anzen could just make out the encampment. Fires kept low as to not allow a spark to set the dried rice ablaze.

Shibun snuck through the Lion camp with five of her crewmates, each built like a sumai warrior. She herself was lean and slender, with muscular arms pronounced in the shadows of the moonlight, and dressed in sailors pants and a sleeveless top. A life at sea had hardened her body. She worked twice as hard as anyone else aboard the *Hundred Winds* and she was rewarded for it with a position as first mate. A green lacquered menpō covered her face, a gift she took from a Scorpion lover at their last meeting.

The encampment was mostly filled with tents, but a building almost a half-li long dominated the heart of it. The building held bale upon bale of rice, ready for the picking. Shibun gestured to her people with hands etched in black tattoos: crosses on the back, dots on each knuckle, and elongated triangles stretching the length of her fingers. The Mantis crewmen snuck behind a pair of Lion guards tending to a meager campfire. The glow barely illuminated and reflected off of the Lion armor. With a quick blow to the back of their necks, they were rendered unconscious. Now the path to the rice stores was open.

Ikoma Ba eyed the Mantis carefully. "There are some who would call you rogues, that you have your own agenda. Still others call you nothing more than pirates. Why should we help you?"

"Pirate is such a strong word. We are no lawless brigand of the seas. We are samurai, just as you are samurai. We have been trained and tested. We have gone through a gempuku, just as you have. Though our tests may vary, we are intact samurai." Aibinā rambled, "When another clan crosses into your territory do you not act upon it? Does not the book of *Leadership*, written by your very own Akodo, say, 'to chase out invaders early lest they dig into your lands'? What we do on the high seas is the same as you on your seas of grass and dirt."

"Would you not be the invaders into our lands?" Ba growled.

Natsuko held up a hand. "We have never had a quarrel with the Mantis, no need to start now. After all, *Leadership* also says, 'Keep your allies close.'"

"Natsuko-san, you are not calling this ruffian an ally. What have the Mantis ever done for us?"

"This is not the time Ba-san." These negotiations were dragging on far too long thanks to the long-worded Mantis. "From what I had gathered the Mantis have helped us a great number of times in our skirmishes with the Crane and Scorpion, whether they intended to or not."

"I thank you, Natsuko-san. We, the Mantis, have no ill will towards the Lion. We are just doing what we must to survive. The Fortunes have not favored us as of late. The only land we have been able to make harbor in has been barren, unfit for farming and barely habitable. The beasts of Chikushō-dō hound us both day and night. It is only by the mercy of Inahou Okami that we have survived as long as we have." Aibinā rambled on and on. Natsuko became more and more frustrated, but kept managed to keep her face. "And does not Shinsei say in his *Book of Duties*, 'Treat your neighbor as you might treat yourself, care for them as you would like to be cared for?'"

The two Ikoma showed no emotion on their faces. They did not know what exactly the Little Teacher had said in his books.

Something about the dwindling embers of the guards' fire intrigued Anzen. Shadows danced in the moonlight: one, two, three, four, five, six? Why were there six shadows when there should have been only two guards? The

young Lion samurai steeled his nerves. One hand gripped his katana in its sheath, the other a small whistle that hung about his neck. He began to walk over to the campfire.

The contingent of Mantis samurai made their way to the rice barn. Shībun hated sneaking around like a thief in the night. She was no Shosuro, or worse yet a Daidōji. But this was the task she was given; to collect as many bales of rice as she could from the Lion stores to give to the Scorpion.

The barn had no guards on the door, no alarm. This seemed almost too easy. Upon opening the barn were endless stacks of rice bales, each weighing 360 jīn.

"The Lion may never know we took the rice. They have more than enough." Shībun's voice seemed hollow within the confines of the menpō. "Grab as much as you can and let's be off."

The Mantis easily hefted one bale under each arm, Shibun wrapping her arms around one, and retreated to their tsuchi-bune, which were moored under some foliage at the water's edge. They were on their third trip when they heard the whistle.

Natsuko tried to keep her face calm but the quoting of Shinsei rhetoric irked her. Any other rhetoric was fine: poets from across the land, Akodo's Code, even Imperial edicts, but not the Little Teacher, Shinsei.

"Could we please get to the heart of this negotiation? I would like to get to bed before the Hour of the Tiger," she stated, having had quite enough of the Mantis's ramblings.

"Very well. As I had stated before, we offer you gold and jade for land and peasants. Peasants whom we would also pay a living wage. Eiso-sama of the Wave's Blade and the fleet of the Mantis here on Sanctuary is being more than generous with his offer." Aibinā drawled.

"How much do you offer?"

"This is dependent on the quality of the land and peasants. Eiso-sama will make a reasonable offer based on what is given to us, relying on Rokugani customs and the unique situation of Sanctuary."

"Do you have any gold or jade *right now*?"

"Logistics will make immediate delivery impossible, and there can always be unforeseen incidents. But once a deal is made, we will keep our word. You do not need to inquire how we keep our word. The deliveries will be proof enough."

"Our land is at quite the premium as it is fertile. We have already offered some to the Otter, and the Scorpion contests the rest. A deal may be in both our interests, but you have to prove it."

"I am certain that an arrangement to attain land and peasants for the Mantis can be found one way or another."

"Is that a threat?" blurted Ba.

The Mantis Captain raised his hands. "No, not a threat. I would not deign to threaten you in your camp with so many capable guards and soldiers about. We, the Mantis, simply need some land and workers. We are, and always have been, resourceful. We will persevere. If we cannot broker a deal with you, perhaps we can with another clan. The Crane or Scorpion, perhaps."

"The Crane harbor a grudge against the Mantis for all your piracy on the mainland and the Scorpion aren't to be trusted."

"I will tell you once more, we are not pirates. Never have been. We have only had border skirmishes with opposing clans. Just as you do." Aibinā's diatribe was cut off by the piercing sound of a whistle.

Anzen stood over the unconscious bodies of two of his clansmen, large red marks forming on their necks. He looked up to once again see six shadows darting in the darkness.

"Something is going on. Are the Scorpion attacking?" He muttered as he lifted the silver whistle to his lips, moonlight reflecting off its metal exterior. A bright note pierced the silence of the night.

Drawing his sword, he charged at the invaders. When he got close enough he could see that five were men, well built. They could have easily competed in sumai. Each of them were carrying two bales of rice. The sixth was a woman in a baggy hakama and sleeveless top which showed off sinewy arms. Her lower face was covered with a menpō and her dark hair was pulled back in a long braid.

"Definitely Scorpion," Anzen whispered.

He swung his sword down at the closest of the men but the blade was caught in mid air by two moon shaped sickles. The woman had interposed herself between Anzen and the man.

"Go," she hissed, "I'll take care of our Lion cub, here." The five men lumbered off with their ill-gotten rice.

Anzen looked into the eyes of the thief. They were endless pools of shadows, dark as the night sky save for the reflection of the crescent moon in her pupils.

The woman gave a stern kick to Anzen's abdomen, knocking the wind out of him as he stumbled back. Now, with her sickles free, she lunged at him. One blade shoved aside the Lion's katana as the other swung at his face. It was by the sheer providence of the Kami that Anzen moved back just enough that only the tip slashed his face, opening a moon-shaped cut. Hot blood ran from below his eye; he could taste iron as it flowed into the corner of his mouth.

Anzen swung his sword at a diagonal, but the woman deftly ducked to the side before twisting her blades in a vicious arc. The Lion caught the sickles with his blade and the two both took a half-leap backwards to reposition.

"The moon is beautiful, isn't it?" Anzen stammered. He had never felt like this before. She was a wild lioness and this, his first taste of battle.

Why did he make a declaration like that? We are enemies in the heat of battle! Not to mention we have been in each other's company all of one minute.

Shibun arced her crescent sickles at the hook of the young Lion's arm but he was once again too quick with his blade and parried the attack into one of his own. He made a horizontal slash. Shibun dropped to the ground but her hair, tied back in a long braid, was caught by the razor edge of the katana. A length of the braid, roughly the size of a tanto, flopped limply to the ground next to her.

The Ikoma jolted at the sound of the whistle. "Please wait here, Aibinā-san. We need to see to this disturbance. The guard at the front will ensure your safety." Natsuko said, getting to her feet.

"I shall put your fears to rest. I will be certain that I will remain safe. Your anxiety is well and truly misplaced," Aibinā prattled.

The pair of Ikoma exited the tent. It took a few moments for their eyes to adjust from the candlelight to moonlit night. They heard before they could see the disturbance coming from the rice barn. They ran towards it, past tents where Lion samurai were waking and grabbing swords and spears. A whole retinue now bore down on the barn beside them.

A young Lion and sickle-wielding woman were locked in combat. Swing, block, swing, dodge. She dropped to the ground. Her head turned to face the oncoming Lion forces, moonlight reflecting off her menpō. She rolled away before springing to her feet and sprinting into the darkness.

"Hold," commanded Natsuko. "Following her could lead to a Scorpion trap."

"Are you certain it is the Scorpion?" Ba asked. "My koku would be on those filthy Mantis behind this whole thing."

Natsuko shot a venomous glare at the other courtier, who retreated a step. She then eyed the barn. The door was ajar. "Assess how much was taken. I want an accurate count of our deficit. Before dawn."

"Yes, my lady," a Lion samurai replied.

"And you, young Lion." She left her words hanging in the air, begging for a response.

"Anzen. Akodo Anzen, Ikoma-sama," Anzen stammered, a lump forming in his throat.

"Akodo Anzen-san, I require a full record of what transpired here. We will meet at first light."

"Yes, Ikoma-sama." Anzen bowed low and retreated backwards.

"Now," Natsuko turned towards Ikoma Ba, "let us see to our guest."

The farm bustled with activity, the footsteps of many Lion samurai echoed throughout. Upon returning to their tent Natsuko looked at the guard. "Is he still in there?"

"No one has come through this door since you left, my lady," a samurai in full dress armor replied.

"Good."

After the Ikoma left and the rest of the samurai dispersed, Anzen let out a breath he didn't know he was holding. All at once, his legs went out from beneath him. The adrenaline had taken with it his remaining strength to stand. As his hand brushed the ground next to him, he felt something soft like silk beneath his fingertips. A small section of obsidian hair, braided together and held at one end by a bit of green string. The thief's hair. Anzen's heart beat a little faster and he tucked the braid into his sleeve.

Water lapped the sides of rice laden boats. Shībun made her way to the shore, sickles still in hand. There stood a disheveled man, dried salt on his kimono and a twig in his mouth.

"We get it?" Aibinā asked. His previously protracted speech was now succinct and clipped.

"Yes, sir," Shībun replied.

"Good."

Shībun lifted her hand to touch her cheek, where the clipped ends of her braid brushed softly against her skin for a moment. She glanced back over her shoulder at the lights of the Lion camp, now in turmoil, and shook her head quickly.

The crescent moon fractured on the waters as their oars cut through it, and then was still.