

EMERALD LEGACY



Onibaba

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Early morning. An uneasy darkness shrouded the firmament as the world, still slumbering, awaited dawn's arrival. Within the port town of Jukami Mura, along its various docks and piers, paying respect to the sanctity of night was ill regarded. Life upon the docks never resigned itself to rest. The clamor of labored work resonated throughout the day and night.

The cold waters of the harbor were increasingly disturbed by the passing of ships and other sailing vessels. As they arrived, Jukami Mura strove to provide accommodations: amenities of sake houses and gambling dens to loosen the coins of disembarking sailors. Crews of peasant laborers who managed the unloading and loading of exchanged goods. All the while the current governor made certain that magistrates were at hand, regardless of hour, readily available to collect taxes and fees. It was of little surprise that this port city within the heart of Crane's territories had earned the moniker, "The Port that never Sleeps."

Far from the stirrings of the docks, on an outlier pier, a lone figure stood. Still and unmoving, the figure, a young woman, appeared transfixed, gazing intently at the tranquil waters of the bay. As the waters ebbed, the crests of the waves caught the light of nearby lanterns and shone with a dull glow. In these early hours, few were ever wise to this mundane display. Yet, having unwittingly stumbled upon it, she became its audience.

In due time daybreak would arrive and all the realms would bask in the brilliance of Lady Sun.. In the presence of the heavenly mother, the darkness would be forced to retreat and it meant that this humble and modest display would cease. Or at the very least, be halted until the evening fell upon the world once again. As Hida Honoka stood, admiring this spectacle, she did not know whether she would ever find herself out upon this pier again. She found a simple pleasure in witnessing the sight; and for her that was enough.

Honoka was tired. She was burdened by her recently appointed responsibilities and felt hopeless and lost. A ship set adrift with neither sails nor rudder.

Hours earlier Honoka had stumbled into her quarters, exhausted and beseeching the stillness of the night to engulf her. But, as she waited for the surrender of sleep to claim her, a restlessness and apprehension befell her. She felt herself drowning, drowning beneath the torrents of surmounting doubts which crashed upon her, attempting to drag her to unfathomable depths.

In a fit of cold sweat she arose in the darkness. Anxiety ridden and uneasy, she frantically looked about the stillness which had befallen the room. Nothing was out of the ordinary, but there was something oppressive about it nevertheless. It was stifling. Desperate, she hurriedly made to exit the room. She paused only momentarily to fetch her daisho, which she tucked away within her obi, and grasp at a haori, which she covered herself with as she stepped away into the night's embrace.

A soft voice, warbling in song, subdued the murmurs which arose from the docks within the early morning. A musician, hired by the local geisha house. The vessel which carried the singer was a flat-bottomed boat, with a makeshift shelter, composed of silkened canvas, erected within the center of the craft. An aged and weary man guided the vessel, standing upon the aft of the craft, clinging to a lengthened pole which he periodically plunged into the depths to propel and guide the boat. As the musician sang, attempting to draw the attention of a suitable clientele, the older man would every so often join in the musician's song, providing harmony or singing a counter melody when the song required it.

"I rest on the shore,
Awaiting Spring's gaiety,
Till my love returns.
Till my love returns.
Winters pass, my heart withers.
I rest in the sea.
Till my love returns.
Till my love returns."

"Hmm... She sings an old song. A song from my mother's time. You'd think, considering who she is advertising for, she'd sing something more youthful and engaging." A voice behind Honoka spoke, shattering the serenity of the moment. Honoka didn't need to see the owner of the voice. She recognized it all too well.

"Okaasama," Honoka began.

She slowly turned to her mother, Yua. Her mother wore a faded kimono of a paltry grey, with the only notable decoration being the Hida family mon which was embroidered on the attire, just over her heart. The kimono, a simple and practical affair, did little to hide the myriad scars that marred her mother's ebony skin. The most imposing of these scars cut across the left side of her head, extending over the bridge of her nose, ending just beneath her right eye. It was due to this scar that she shaved the left side of her head, leaving her with only a length of silvered hair which fell over the right. Due to the scars and wounds, or perhaps her stern and humorless stare, few could match Yua's gaze. She had, over the years, accrued several monikers, the most common being that of "onibaba" – though in her time none had dared to utter that one (or any other) directly to her face.

"I couldn't sleep." Honoka continued, her voice flat.

"I know. You were careless as you left. I was reminded of an encounter with a roving band of goblins which came upon me once. My patrol had been attacked and I was the sole survivor. Tired and wounded, I sought momentary rest. They too were careless and disturbed me from my sleep..." Yua said.

"Yes." Honoka interrupted. Her voice was strained, an irritable child berating their parent for repeating themselves once again. "So you have told me! I have heard this story, and a million other tales of your exploits throughout all of my life! I am well versed in your glorious deeds! But... Okaasan, Now it is my story! Now I have to... I... have... to..." Honoka fell quiet as her words found no further perch and her thought was left unfinished. The heated passion which had begun to stir within her was subdued and quickly dissipated.

This was not her.
She was not herself.

She felt like crying.

The fluttering of a lantern upon the musician's boat caught Honoka's sight, looking for any excuse to turn away from her mother, she turned her attention to the vessel. Yua took the cue and followed suit. Mother and daughter stood in awkward silence, their gaze tracing the passing of the floating craft.

It was Yua who was the first to speak...

"My daughter, what troubles you?" Yua asked, disturbing the quietness between them.

"I am..." Honoka replied, her thoughts lingering. She wanted to add more, to provide more context, but she couldn't. She did not know what else to say.

"You are afraid." Yua stated. Her mother's words stung, but Honoka showed no reaction. Had anyone else been so bold to speak to Honoka in such a flagrant manner, the individual would have been met with severe consequences - the edge of steel wouldn't have been unimaginable. Yet, it was her mother and at this moment she was lost.

"I am." Honoka responded. Stating the words she'd had difficulty uttering just moments prior, but now with the utmost conviction. "Within these last few months," Honoka continued, "I have been thrust into a destiny I never expected. With the arrival of one Miya courier, my life went from being a lowly lieutenant upon the Tenth Tower, to overseeing an expedition to an unknown realm. I am... Frustrated. Scared. Overwhelmed."

"Tsk..." Yua grunted in disagreement. "Don't trouble yourself with the burden of doubts. Of all our kin, you were meant for this task; the fates would have not deemed it otherwise. Would you question the wisdom of the kami? After all, when Empress Hochiahime-dono beckoned, it was you who convinced the Great Bear of the urgency of this matter. It was you to whom Hida-ue gave his favor and chose to lead this expedition on behalf of our family. And the Crab, now gathered within this pisspot city, now wait upon you for guidance." She responded. She

turned her head slightly, cleared her throat and spat into the waters beneath the pier. "Damn it all, it was you who aroused this old woman from her third life only to have her committed to one more duty for our clan." She added, her voice agitated and loud.

Honoka stood by quietly listening, but as her mother's lecture concluded, Honoka allowed a smile to momentarily break her stoicism. "Of all of these 'accomplishments', Okaasama, I can earnestly say that, in regards to your being a part of all of this, I had no influence upon the matter. Honestly, I don't even know how word reached you. I did not want to involve you. You have served our clan for so long. No samurai, save perhaps Hidaue himself, is more deserving of a respite than you." Yua cocked an eyebrow, but otherwise remained quiet to her daughter's response.

"I don't question the will of the kami, but I am doubtful. I don't know if I have the wherewithal to succeed upon this task." Honoka stated, allowing her gaze to fall upon her own warm chestnut-colored hand.

Yua turned to Honoka and grasped at her daughter's shoulder. "You are the descendant of Hondo-sama, honored as such by the Empress Meyohime- dono herself. Is that not what led us here? He demonstrated his worth to the empire. Consider his plight, my daughter. He was not born into the Empire, nor was he the child of the kami. He was alone. A foreigner within foreign lands. Yet, he was willing to fight and die for the people of this empire, who were as strange to him as he himself was strange to them. Others are born samurai. But he claimed the right to be acknowledged as samurai with his own two hands. I am certain he was as you in his day: overwhelmed with hesitation and doubts. But, like him you too shall overcome your uncertainties."

In the moments before dawn, as the pair quietly stood upon the pier, Honoka contemplated her mother's words. In them, a certain conviction resonated which Honoka had overlooked. A truth which had diminished beneath her surmounting misgivings, yet was always apparent: she was samurai, but not Rokugani.

Unlike most other samurai, her family had not acquired this distinction of being samurai simply by right of birth, but rather by right of deed. It was an honor which had been bestowed upon her through the sacrifices of her ancestor. An honor which all of her family was expected to uphold. An honor which now fell upon her to safeguard.

The path before her was fraught with untold dangers. Yet, she, as well as those under her command, would not be deterred in facing these obstacles. Regardless of the perils and risks, they would overcome the challenges set against them. For she was Crab. As were all those who followed her.

They would endure.

They would persevere.

For it was their way.

As the waters below ebbed once more, Honoka felt her anxieties subside. It was as though within this moment some of her insecurities were pulled along with the outgoing tide.

"I know this to be true daughter." Yua finished.

"Arigato," Honoka responded softly. It was all that she could offer to her mother.

Yua removed her hand from her daughter's shoulder. Honoka then turned and glanced at the eastern horizon, catching a sliver of brilliance, for the dawn was soon to break. In her peripheral she noted Yua strolling away.

"Okaasama?" Honoka questioned.

Yua halted in her pacing and offered a glance to Honoka. "I am simply going to learn what other songs that musician may know. If all goes well, perhaps..." She paused with a devilish grin playing upon her scarred face, "I might be of inspiration for future songs. I'll not tarry for long." Yua responded.

Annoyed, and slightly disturbed by Yua's insinuation, Honoka pinches the bridge of her nose. She is embarrassed by her mother's antics, but, truth be told, she wasn't upset. This was Yua after all. This was par the course for the older woman. With a motion of her hand Honoka dismisses Yua, who nods in understanding, shrugs her

shoulders and thereafter takes her leave.

Honoka was alone once more.

Wrapping her arms across her chest she returns her attention to the east, towards the rising sun and the seemingly endless ocean which cradles it. Gazing upon the horizon, she contemplates upon the fate which awaits them all beyond.

