Night Raid

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Waves lapped upon the shore of the Cliffs of the Sea Dragon. Mirumoto Rei sat and methodically ran a stone along the edge of each of her katana. When one practices niten one has twice as much maintenance to do. Twice the diligence. Where was that diligence when Seiji disappeared? Perhaps Masunori and Yohana were right and she hadn't done enough to find him. If anything, she started the conflict between the Dragon and the Phoenix. From time to time her eyes drifted to the book she got in the Phoenix lands, "The Cost of Grace."

The book was heretical, chastising Lady Doji. So far, Rei had only skimmed the book but found no answer to why Shiba's name was on a stone in Sanctuary nor what had happened to Seiji. Perhaps she should give the book to Agasha Jianyu, though she might never get it back given his proclivity towards books and learning. No, this was her responsibility. Her duty.

A candle in Rei's room, along with similar candles throughout the Dragon encampment, burst into flame. The wards on the shore had been broken. Someone or something was coming.

Stepping into the brisk night air, Rei clenched her swords, one in each hand. Other Mirumoto stepped out into the darkness wielding their twin blades along with several Togashi monks, bare fisted but no less deadly. Next to arrive were the ashigaru, spears in hand. They would have to be drilled on battle readiness so that they were more punctual next time.

"There, at the shoreline," yelled a bearded monk, Togashi Naname. His heavily muscled arm pointed at four tsuchibune boats unladen of bushi and shugenja.

Rei couldn't make out what clan they served, the full moon could only illuminate so much. What were they after? The beach was not of strategic value and they had little rice or jade to speak of. If rumors were true the Lion would be a far more fitting target of any raider and they were already embroiled with the Scorpion on their eastern front. Whoever they were and whatever they wanted they would not have it. She would not let them. She led the charge. Mirumoto, Togashi, and ashigaru fell in close behind.

Rei came crashing into the closest of the raiders, the leader, perhaps. She wore lacquered armor that seemed oddly fashionable, at least so much as armored plates can be said to look fashionable. The armor was in the fashion of the Crane but lacquered with a teal color. The woman herself was striking with a mole located on her left cheek. A green silk sash with Unicorn style tassels at the end. This incongruity of clan motifs made Rei believe she was dealing with a Mantis. The only pause with this assertion was that this raider carried a katana.

Rei's twin katana were stopped by the Mantis's single sword. Rei twisted into Dragon's Whirlwind and her blades spun around her. The Mantis was not intimidated and caught the swords, glancing them off with their blade. The Mantis shifted her weight and leveled a strong kick into the side of Mirumoto Rei. Years at sea had strengthened the Mantis's legs to iron.

The kick stung Rei's side and knocked the wind out of her. This was not like the duel with Shiba Yohana. It wasn't a duel for honor, it was a battle. Honor, deceit, these were just words here.

As Rei caught her breath she appraised the raiders. Many of them carried scythe shaped kama, confirming Rei's suspicions that these were Mantis. But why would they be targeting the Dragon? Was this revenge for withholding aid to them? It was no secret that the Mantis were not invited to Sanctuary and when they found themselves trapped they groveled at the feet of the Great Clans. But the Dragon were not in a position to help them. Not being without compassion they offered the Mantis a deal: swear off all raiding, live a life of peace, only then would the Dragon help.

Rei went into action and dealt a flurry of blows but the Mantis rocked back and forth, as if she were swaying on a ship, deflecting the strikes from side to side. It was infuriating.

"Why are you here? What do you want?" Rei bellowed, swinging her swords.

"Only that which we have been tasked with retrieving. We tried to do this the easy way but you had to come out and fight us," The Mantis said coldly before placing two fingers into her mouth and emitting a loud whistle. "What happens next is your fault."

Almost instantly the thumping of a tailor drum echoed over the water. It was oppressive and all consuming. A weight fell over the beach. The din of combat was entirely replaced with the rhythmic beating of the drum until it wasn't. As suddenly as it started, it stopped and silence monopolized the area. Then a sound like a great and terrible erhu fiddle echoed through the night. Many of the samurai on both sides, including Rei, had to cover their ears.

A leviathan rose from the water. Decaying flesh hung from exposed bones.

"What in the Kami's name is that thing?" an ashigaru shouted.

"A bake-kujiri," Togashi Naname replied. "A whale yokai born from the greed of man."

It charged towards the Dragon encampment.

Dread rolled over Rei like the waves upon the beach. Could one stop such a thing as this? Was there even a way to kill the dead? Rei didn't know but she had to try. She spared a glance back at the Mantis who flashed her a beautiful, malevolent smile. Rei sprinted towards the giant yokai.

The smell of the bake-kujira was that of the ocean and of death, like fish rotting on the pier but for months instead of hours Rei hacked and slashed at the beast but it paid little attention as its viscous ichor dripped from the cuts. Other Dragon broke off from their entanglement with the Mantis and joined Rei. Death by a thousand cuts was their only hope.

The undead whale plowed into one home. Turning it into kindling. Rei hoped that its occupant was already on the battlefield. No one deserved to be crushed this way.

Togashi Naname charged at the head of the creature. Rei wondered what a monk could do when their blades did little to slow the beast.

As Naname reached the skeletal whale he planted his left foot, swung his right hand over and behind his head. On its up swing, Naname pushed off with his foot, lifting the right knee, and slammed his palm into the beast. Sky Dragon's Palm Strike. The move was rarely used, more of a training exercise than a combat maneuver, but that didn't make it any less effective in this situation. Baleen from the bake-kujira shattered and fell like pieces of hail. The whale reared-up and fell limply onto its back in the water. A great wave pushed in either direction.

Naname collapsed, gripping his arm, now red and blistered as if burned or struck by lightning. He had put everything had had into that palm strike but now he was feeling the repercussions of his actions. His arm was a bloody mess. Rei was exhausted as well, along with the rest of the defenders, but there was still the Mantis to contend with and she wasn't enough. Not enough to handle the bake-kujira. Not enough to ever find Seiji. Not enough.

"What in the names of the Fortunes are those things?" A man exclaimed, his voice heavily accented with the dialect of the Isles of Silk and Spice.

Rei lifted her head and looked towards the water. Figures were walking out of the stygian depths. The moon shimmered off their scaly skin. Their oversized hands were tipped with vicious claws and their mouths filled with needle-like teeth. Rei had heard stories of kappa and suiko but these were larger than either of those. What new horror had been set upon them that night?

The creatures set in on the startled Mantis. Their sharp claws rending through the cloth and flesh of the lower ranking samurai. Only the one Rei had fought wore armor. Rei looked around but could not find her.

A chirping whistle cut through the air. The Mantis broke off their combat with the scaled creatures and scrambled aboard their tsuchibune boats. As the first boat set out, it was quickly overturned. The water churned and bubbled red. The Mantis in the remaining boats slashed at the water as they made their retreat. Their leader with the spot on her face held a stack of something in her arms, Rei could not make out exactly what it was. The Mantis woman gave another smile as they disappeared into the night.

Rei hefted her swords, preparing to battle the creatures, but they turned and walked back towards the water save one who stood in the shallows. He was unlike the others. His skin was tan and had dark hair atop his head.

Seiji?

"They took it." A voice called out. "They took some of my books and the etchings from the cliffs." Rei looked towards the voice. Jianyu stumbled towards Rei, his head bleeding from above his right eye.

Rei ignored him, pointing where she'd seen… but now there was nothing to see, save an empty bit of sand with gentle waves lapping over.

Aja walked into Eiso's cabin aboard *The Wave's Blade*. She still wore her armor from the night's raid. Her eyes darted towards the large bake-kujira bone against the back wall. It reminded her that not all things are as invincible as they seem.

"Was it a success?" inquired Eiso, the leader of the Mantis fleet.

"We took what the Dragon coveted the most, their knowledge." Aja set down a pile of books and a stack of loose papers.

"Excellent. Something in here might give us a clue as to how to return to Rokugan. If not, I'm sure the Phoenix or Scorpion will pay handsomely for what we have collected."

"Return…to Rokugan?" Aja shook her head. "The Empress admires us. The Great Clans respect us. We have everything we ever desire."

"And we are trapped inside a prison, treated as mere children who cannot handle their affairs, who must be contained in their cribs." Eiso sighed. "The Dark Brother is a threat. I fear him. But we are samurai. We are supposed to face our fears. We cannot stay here." Eiso looked through the books, searching for any clues, before giving up. "These books can't help us. They only tell you how to live forever. And the rubbings are pictographs. Someone more learned than I will have to decipher these."

Aja glanced again at the bake-kujira bone.

Eiso glared at Aja. "You also have to look at the costs. If we follow these documents, we will live forever, by sacrificing our logic, our reason, everything that defines us as humans. We would pursue growth at all costs, monsters who will consume for the sake of consumption. Only fools pursue immortality for its own sake, thinking that a long life is valuable simply because it is long. People should instead strive for something greater. Glory. Wealth. Contentment."

Aja did not know whether Eiso was speaking for himself, or on behalf of the Daughter of Webisu. Yuta had briefed certain captains of the fleet on the cursed lily of the valley that had, at one time, possessed Eiso. She set such concerns aside and focused on a different topic. "You said that we could sell this to either the Phoenix or the Scorpion. I have many Scorpion contacts. But the only contact within the Phoenix I have is Asako Kousuke and he loathes us."

Eiso smiled.

Another samurai walked into a cabin from the darkness of a corner, but this samurai wasn't human. She was closer to a vengeful ghost, a yurei. Her orange clothes were tattered, with the Phoenix mon barely visible. Her body contained a notable scar on the abdomen. The yurei politely bowed and introduced herself. "I am Shiba Yohana." She dropped a bag of koku onto the table, picked up the documents, and walked out. Neither Aja nor Eiso said a word.