



In the midst of a Civil War, the youth called to fight will rise to the challenge. Weighed by their hopes, their dreams, their pride and love; they will decide the future of the world.

Baeorillia: Beyond the Flames

By Derrick Sasuman

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BAEORILLIA



— BEYOND THE FLAMES —

DERRICK SASUMAN

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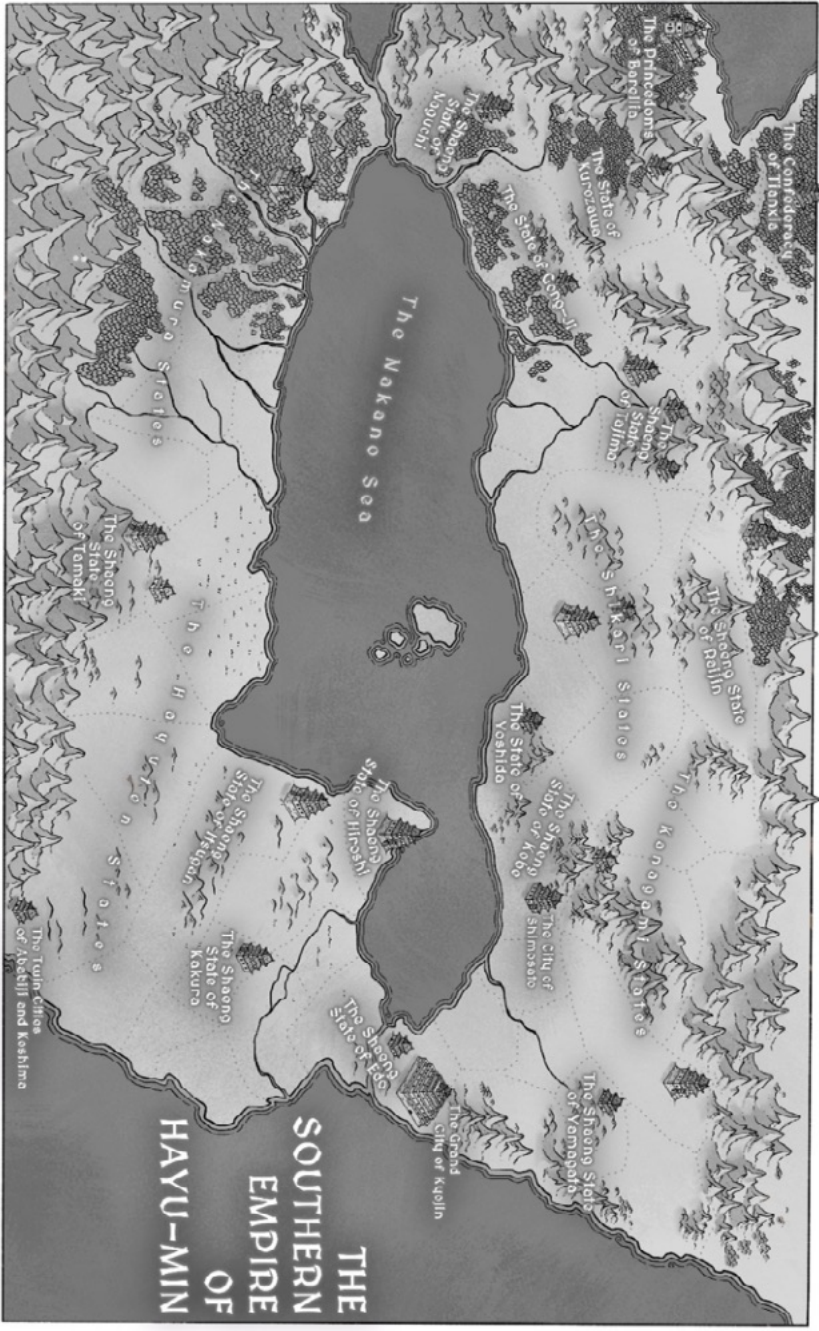
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The Confederacy of Hanxi

The Provinces of Borella

The State of Uro-awu

The State of Koshuchi

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THE SOUTHERN EMPIRE OF HAYU-MIN

Prologue

Once there was a Queen, beautiful and blessed with honor and grace of legend. She was a beauty to rival the angels of the heavens above, radiant as the sun itself. Loved and revered as a proponent of peace, the horror of war was always the afterthought, but when need be, she was as ruthless as she was merciful. Wise in her actions, she alone, ruled Tianxia with a graceful, yet iron fist. To the world, she was virtuous in all she did – to the Tianxia, she was a gift beyond gifts – a messiah.

Beyond the politics, like her many loyal subjects, magick and even the forces of nature itself bowed before her fingertips, with both adoration and fear. It was said, where she walked, life bloomed. Where she looked, beauty was birthed. Gifted with the power of Jaeor, the heavenly realm, all things good were created for the sheer sake of being good.

Unfounded for her time, she brought peace between the several human kingdoms and the Shaeng; who are *Fire given Flesh*, and the Caeradins, the horned half-elves of the far North. The anger and hatred between Shaeng and Caeradins if left unchecked, would have torn Baeorillia in half, but it was through her righteous might and just morality that calmed the raging storms along the horizon.

The endless slaughter had found a moment of reprieve, even the Shaeng Civil War had calmed to a long-awaited armistice. The

breath that men and women across the world held for eternity past, had been finally been released.

While her power and wisdom were undeniable, her beauty was unmatched. It was said the Queen's skin was pale and mark-less, almost like polished porcelain pottery. Her eyes shimmered with a soft hazel after-glow, belying the breathtaking power radiating within. Flowing like a waterfall, hair as dark as the night itself, she was as majestic as her title entailed. As beautiful as she was, humility was not lost.

Even so, men from across Maedos, and even past the Sapphire Sea in Myracina to the west, have tried for her hand in marriage. Entranced by her legendary beguiling beauty, every possible match and bachelor had returned to their keeps and castles empty handed and broken hearted. She was as pure as her birth, a maiden of maidens.

As the years continued, the people of Tianxia and the world hailed her as a goddess, a heavenly being descended from Jaeor itself. Her power, unrelenting and awe-inspiring captivated and enthralled all who came across her path. With the Shaeng Wars raging across Hayu-Min once more – the Barellian City States warring with themselves across the Amone Plains of Western Maedos, her strength alone, ceased the conflicts.

Through the northern slopes of the Mountains of Junyeon, the Daeyumi bowed in fear. Upon the Antyrian Serengeti the tribes and empires submitted to her grace. In fear of what would become of their power and Kingdoms, the Myracinish and Caeradins showered her with gifts and praise.

But one day, everything changed.

Suddenly, the golden wheat fields of Gong-Ji had wilted and her realm separated from the continent, walled off by the titanic Shan Jae-Jin. Storms spread across the world, destroying what work and

beauty she had created. Millions perished from nature's agony. The skies darkened for a hundred years, bellowing to all the people of the world – the end had come.

With magick screaming and writhing within her vicious grasp, nature answered her call, barring her realm from entrance. Even the unholy horde of malcontent had crawled from the underwork, oozing upon the Shan Jae-Jin and the troughs between. But never once did the creatures pass beyond the mountainous slopes.

They always watched, their glowing orange eyes of evil and darkness, boring into the strongest of hearts, weakening even the most powerful of men. Born of death and suffering, some believed these creatures were her children, created to protect her realm from all who wish her harm.

When the continents stopped moving; when the races of Baeorillia closed upon extinction, she was left wounded, beaten and marred. As the fires of Jaeor ceased to fall from the heavens, it was all said and done. The great image, the beauty and honor and grace had lost meaning. The prestige of Tianxia was lost, the kingdom she forged fell and everything she worked to achieve was for nothing.

In the wake of the final battle, when the dust had settled, the Good Queen Zheng Qi Xiao-Li had disappeared.

Chapter I

Until Dawn

*When the flameless one rises with the monarch dishonored;
the envious will tremble as judgement will burn righteously.
Only then, can Hayu-Min find true peace.*

- An Ancient Shaeng Prophecy

Date: June 9, 1017 5th Age

Location: The State of Gong-Ji, the Southern Empire of Hayu-Min

With every candle there is light, but where there is light, there, lurking in the depths was the growing shadow. Shaeng Min-Yun knew this better than anyone. But even the greatest candle, the sun itself, couldn't wash the terrible darkness completely.

Night had gone just as swiftly as it had come, and in its place, the light, overbearing, crept ever so slightly over the bronze and mountainous horizon. Grey orbs watched the sky paint with a myriad of colors ranging from royal purples to a burning pink.

Like all days, the young Prince, Shaeng Min-Yun watched haphazardly, knowing well enough that the demons and the grotesque dark-spawn would not dare to escape the shadows of the mountains.

Fearful of day and the light it brings the demons fled into the shadows and caverns as they always did. For a simple moment, the boy didn't know whether he should be thankful or disappointed. The grass lying at the base of the mountains seemed to wither and writhe beneath the encroaching monsters and their black ilk.

Even at the great distance he watched, the creatures were visible with incredible clarity, revealing their slicked teeth and razor claws. Turning his eyes away to the great Kamado River that cut through the Jae-Jin Mountains, a small regiment of men patrolled.

It couldn't have been more than two hundred men marching against the river bank, careful to not cross. Unlike the cuirass of steel and bamboo of his samurai allies – these men wore lamellar armor over silk tunics of green and black. Min-Yun clenched his spear, ready to ring any bells and alarms the instant one of those men stepped over the river.

At the head of the regiment, a quartet of flag bearers, holding the banner of Chang'an, the Capital of the State of Han. It was a beautiful waving thing with whipping strands that seemed to be dipped in gold. Colors of the Marquee of the State of Han were vivid even in the early morning, almost saturated against the wheat fields surrounding the river.

Sweat built on his brow, carefully watching the soldiers of the Chayumi Marquee. There was something about it, their stance and their march – it was almost goading, taunting. The Sarujin heir had not been in Gong-Ji for years. With no one to lead the armies of the Sarujin, it was left to himself to defend the great and ancient Castle-Town.

Min-Yun could feel his heart beating into his chest, nearly punching at his cuirass. He had never fought in a real battle before, only watching from the sidelines and the safety of battlements and the walls of the castle.

A scowl found its way to his face; the Marquee swore loyalty and fealty to the Imperial Senate, and despite those promises, his troops were too close to Gong-Ji and the Sarujin. He moved for the first time in hours. Grabbing his spear, he followed after the regiment, silver eyes glued to their formations. As he neared the bells and horns resting in the battlement beside him, something changed in their demeanor.

Suddenly, as if the gods were watching, the infantry turned on their heels and began to march back towards the mountains. He hoped they were heading home to Chang'an, but knowing his luck in life, that probably wasn't so. In the silence, beads of sweat dropped finally, splashing and popping against his steel and bamboo armor. His hand released his grip, and his lungs released the breath he didn't even know he was holding. But as soon as the Chayumi soldiers disappeared, he straightened, standing upright and steady, as if nothing happened.

Across the fields, the Jae-Jin Mountains and all of their majesty glimmered in the early morning haze, almost reminiscent to slopes of silver. While the mountains were the gem, the sprawling fields of Gong-Ji were the mine. To the fourth-born son of the Emperor, Shaeng Kojuro, there was nothing in Maedos that could match the grandeur of the fields of Gong-Ji.

From Sarujin Castle to the borders of the Shaeng State of Tajima to the northeast and to the shores of the Nakano Sea to the southeast, there were hundreds of miles of fertile plains and roving hills dedicated to wheat and rice along the equally large Jae-Jin Mountain range. To him, despite how close he was to the Chayumi Rebellion and their so-called Tianxia, Gong-Ji was a paradise compared to the vagueness of his birthplace.

Shimmering silver eyes watched the world unbiased, unabated. As colorful as every dawn in Southern Hayu-Min came to be, the sky on this morning was painted with a misplaced dash of red and crimson. The clouds bowed in reverence to the sun as she spread her rays in every direction. But the clouds gave him more than just the cool shade and beauty to witness; the story of the future was written by the heavens. The great clouds writhed and twisted, leaving a deep foreboding in his stomach.

He frowned, staring off to where the last of the Chayumi infantry marched. It was far from the first time the Marquee pushed toward Gong-Ji, despite the many warnings and threats made by the Lord Sarujin's heir, Sarujin Gendo. It was tense situation, one that seemed it was ready to blow any moment. Thankfully, Min-Yun pleaded, the Shaeng of Tajima or Naguchi were not interested in Imperial Politics. For that, at the very least, he could thank the gods.

While he didn't believe in the gods the way his people did, there was one being that he truly believed in. Eyeing the mountains once again, he could see the creatures of Queen Zheng Qi Xiao-Li's final act, roaming at the edges of shadow and light. Their teeth, as far as they were, glimmered in the rising dawn, like carved ivory works of art. Hunched backs for some, spiked spines for others – the creatures came in all shapes and sizes, some distinguishable akin to creatures of common knowledge, others as vague as wild dreams.

He remembered her story as a child. A scary story told by parents to force their children to sleep, for some. For the Shaeng, she was their worst nightmare, the one being who could destroy everything they built and created. For a while, she almost succeeded in eradicating the Shaeng from the world. Her demons, her *children* as the stories called them, were the last of her tools, one that seems to never dull.

Shutting his eyes and sighing his despair away; despite the demons snarling and waiting at the fringe between night and day, farmers had awoken and the cry of roosters had sung with the rising

sun. Men and women in the small villages surrounding the castle-town sauntered into the fields with plows and pitchforks. While the serfs and smallfolk awoke to toil in the fields, within the city, the bells and gongs of the great Fire Temple had rumbled, exploded behind him waking its residents for the day's Morning Prayer.

It was a city-wide gathering; every shop, stand and home was emptied. Riches and valuables were left unattended while the pious knelt in reverence. Despite all the Fire Priests had done to him and their zealot followers, the cries and calls of divine providence, he was accepting of their faith. They could throw all the oils at him they wanted; they could have religious soirees to one of the many active volcanoes in the Jae-Jin Mountains; it wouldn't change his opinion of his dear people.

To say that he was a non-believer was not entirely true. After all, only the Jaeori could explain his unfortunate fate of being the black sheep of his Clan, the first since the Third Age. Flameless, frail and weak in the eyes of his Clan, only the will of the gods would be so cruel. Regardless, even if he wouldn't pray, kneel and *love* the gods, he watched the city as the people flooded the streets and alleyways and rooftops. In the distance, at the steps of the Fire Temple, Lord Sarujin Hiroshi, Daimyo of the Sarujin Clan and warden of Gong-Ji, knelt first, his grand robes of orange and black, visible from the distant walls of the castle-town.

Pyres were set against the streets, large and wide, encompassing the city. From the crowds, men dressed in the common monk robes lifted torches, blazing with great orange flame. People parted, creating large openings in the crowds gathered. Flames danced, igniting each pyre, the braziers and hanging sconces waiting for that venerated flame. It was beautiful while terrifying at the same time for the young Prince.

He could hear in the distance, the howls of demons and the screams of men. He could feel the ripple of nature; the breath of the winds. The greatest of the gods; Jaehi, the mother sun; the greatest

fire; released her rays upon the city. The colors lost in the dull darkness of night were awakened, vibrant and alive. It was as if the spirit of the town had found reason once again. Warmth fell upon them, the same summer heat that she gifted.

Flames grew in size, screaming and flapping about, rising to the great Fire Temple. Lord Hiroshi knelt before the great statues of the gods of Fire, praying, whispering and begging for strength as he always did. The fire reached the temple, bursting through pipes and magick binds, careful to not burn the structure itself.

It was then that the final gong was rung, silencing the men and women kneeling. Their faces were pale, ashen and devoid of emotion. That moment of silence, the Prince could feel their emotions and fears; almost amplifying his own. Shaking in his seat, the fires danced and disappeared into the winds, stray blades of grass. Warmth danced around him, tickling his bare, smooth cheeks.

His heart raced seeing the fires; every morning; he hated the rituals of the pious. His body grew cold against the blazing warmth – he could feel *his* grip. He could feel *his* flame. The crimson eyes, the black hair in the distance, to see fire in magnitude filled his body with fear. Limbs were numb; thoughts fleeting. He lost control.

“Min-Yun!!”

Fighting for control, his breath began to hitch. However, before anything could happen, he was grabbed and his hands clasped, fingers interlocking. Watering silver eyes planted with the pyres, the ashen pits and the charred remains of embers and blackened wood. The smell of maple and oak wafting into his nostrils so powerfully, it was suffocating.

“Min-Yun, look at me...look away from the fire.” The woman’s voice entered his ears once again. “Look at me.”

He struggled in her vice-like grip. “T-Tomoko?”

“Gods...” The woman sighed in relief. Pressing her forehead against his shoulder, she released him, letting him fall back into the stone merlon waiting behind. “You haven’t panicked like this for a long time...what happened? We convinced my father that you could handle the pyre ceremony.”

“I...I don’t know what happened, Tomoko...one moment I’m thinking of the Black Queen...then the next...I could feel *him*.” The boy’s eyes watered. “What is happening to me?”

“I don’t have an answer for that, Min-Yun.” The woman pulled a seat of her own. “Here...I figured I should have brought you food and water. Good thing too, or else you’d have lost your breath. You have enough issues with confidence to begin with.”

“I know.” The Prince took the onigiri and jug of water. “I just...I thought I could do it. It has been six months since I last...”

“Now we start counting all over again.” Tomoko frowned. “We need to get your mind healed. It’s nothing the Sons and Daughters can’t fix.”

“No...that might bring *him* here.” Min-Yun scowled. “That’s the last thing any of us want. Samurai, chosen warriors of the Empire, cannot stand against the Inquisition and the Shaeng who command it. It will bring nothing but the destruction of Gong-Ji and the Sarujin. I’ve already begged your father not to bring her here!”

“I understand that, but you need your mind fixed.” The woman spoke sadly. “Gendo is off somewhere – I could lose one brother to the war. I’m not going to lose another because he loses his grip on his mind. Do you understand me?”

“Of course.” Min-Yun responded weakly. “I don’t know why this is happening to me.”

“I think it would be best to not think about it.” Tomoko sighed. “Hey, stop looking at the pyres. Cover your eyes; I’ll let you know when the flames are gone.”

“It sounds like you’re trying to mess with me,” the Prince said, bringing his gloved hands to his silver eyes, “but thank you, sister.”

“I’m always here for you, brother,” The girl smirked.

It was a near unbearable silence. He could hear nothing but the surreal hum of the titanic Jae-Jin Mountains, the soft howl of the winds and the crackling of flame eating away at the wooden fuel stuck in their braziers. It crawled against his skin, like cockroaches. However, a soothing but encouraging hand rested against his shoulder, reminding him he wasn’t alone.

“They’re done. There are no more flames in the city. The people are going about their day now,” Tomoko smiled, “look for yourself, Min-Yun.”

Cracking his eyes open for only a few moments, the warmth, the searing heat, the terror that the flames brought cascaded over him like a torrential downpour. Leaning into the seat, his eyes snapped shut, trying to drown the sneers and those hateful, spiteful, wrathful crimson eyes gazing upon his shivering form. From the glares, whispers hovered over him, weighing upon his shoulders.

Make it stop! The boy pleaded.

The voices, the heat and the glaring crimson orbs disappeared into the recesses of his mind. Almost sucked out of reality, the fears he had were lifted, evaporating like steam.

Cracking his eyes wide, his silver eyes took in the sight of the city. From the piles of ash, the smoldering embers eating softly at the logs. The fires were indeed gone. Men and women rose together in

unison – Shiyumi and Chayumi of Tianxia moved through the streets, opening stores and shops, market stalls and street vendors.

The smell of burnt wood wafted over the city, wallowing like a low hanging haze. Intoxicating and unforgettable. The first smile formed on his face, taking in the new scents of roasting beef and already cooking rice. There was the aroma of bread rising in clay ovens, the burning of loaves and the soft crackle of baking flames across the city hearths and shops.

He could taste it, the mouthwatering foods, the slight sting of mead, the soothing taste of oolong teas. The city had awoken completely.

“Min-Yun...are you alright now?” Tomoko asked. “You’re not short of breath and you’re not shaking.”

“I...I think I’m fine.” The boy wiped the sweat that had formed on the corner of his brows. “The fire...one can only enjoy it for so long.”

“It’s nothing...don’t even think about it, Min-Yun. For your own good...we need to talk to my father about the pyres. We’ll have to stop them for a while once more.”

“No. The people were in uproar for weeks the last time we did that.” Min-Yun had the decency to look away from the harsh chocolate brown eyes of Tomoko. “I’m the only one bothered by the fires...why should they be denied their worship?”

“Damn the gods and their praise – they’re receiving their honor at the expense of your sanity. I refuse to let them get what they want while degrading you.”

“It’s not that simple, Tomoko. Bringing the Sons and Daughters to heal my mind would be the best decision, but right now...it’s too

risky. He could be waiting with his agents for the perfect moment to strike. We know how he works, especially after the last time...”

“Be careful, Min-Yun. Since he is as bad as the stories tell – watch what you say. Gendo isn’t here to protect us. Not even the other Shaeng can protect us from him...”

Min-Yun fell silent, his silver eyes trailing away from the woman beside him. The words alone made his shoulders feel heavy. The scent of fire and ash in the air did wonders, absolute wonders, to help his growing anxiety. He was terrified. There were words he wanted to share, a plea, a half-baked plan, something to bring his foster brother home, but alas, he knew better. The heir of the Sarujin Clan was gone fighting in a war no one wanted.

Their mutual silence returned, not a word shared, nor thought spoken into existence. Staring at the fields of Gong-Ji or within the Castle-Town itself, it was simple. Suddenly, horns blared in the distance, sounding with the tune of the Sarujin Legion.

The pair sprang to their feet, sweat already trickling down their brows and backs. Spinning on their heels, the Shaeng squinted, taking in the powerful light of Jaehi. In the distance, struggling through the barely paved highways of the great state, hundreds of men and women dressed in orange and black armor of samurai and ashigaru, were nothing more than barely colored silhouettes.

“O-Open the gates!!” Min-Yun roared. “Open the gates!!”

Springing into action, the two raced down the winding steps of their stone walls, nearly trampling over speeding ashigaru and samurai. Reaching the stone pavement of the courtyard below, the Shaeng Prince pushed men and women out of his way, twisting the great winch himself. With each grunt the portcullis was raised and the great studded gates of the city swung open, engulfing the main strip with the light of the morning sun.

He waited patiently, watching the men and women, wounded beyond recognition, limp into the city. Some were missing limbs; others had their entire faces bandaged. The smell they carried was powerful, a stench like rotting flesh. It didn't matter how damaged they were, they continued marching into the city. The Prince waited patiently, hoping his foster brother would arrive.

Instead of a heroic return, the Prince bore witness to a caravan of wagons, five in total, filled with the fallen. Color drained from his face, seeing the limp arms, bloodied and pale, bounce with the jumping wagons scratching along. It was a horrible scene, one that made his stomach twist and wrench in ways unnatural.

“My lord.” A voice caught his attention.

Bringing his eyes to the source, a young man, no older than twenty-six, bowed before him. His armor was broken, dented in certain places and there seemed to be broken arrow shafts embedded in his back and chest. Min-Yun couldn't believe the willpower this man had to keep moving. Looking at the man's pauldrons, the metal plates were knotted with silver lace and rope, denoting his rank.

“Lieutenant...what's your name; what happened?” Min-Yun asked a young officer. “How could this happen?”

“My lord...I am Lieutenant Seika; we were sent as reinforcements for General Sarujin Gendo in Chīsai; however, we were ambushed by the feared General Sun Xi of Tianxia and the famed General Song Fei of the Beiren Yeunsoo. We were surrounded and...”

“How many casualties?”

“Three quarters of our force, my lord. We left Gong-Ji with Sections Eight and Nine of the Sarujin Legion. All that remains of our force is what you see before you...”

Before any more questions could be asked, Tomoko quickly interjected. “Get rest, Lieutenant. There is hot food in the barracks and there are more than enough beds for you and your men. You’ve done enough for the Empire.”

Min-Yun couldn’t find the words to say. The officer stumbled along, using a broken spear shaft as a crutch. As more soldiers of the Empire filed into the city, the gates finally closed, prompted by the demonic roars of the Jae-Jin mountains. The Prince wanted to say something, command, lead, but the words froze in his mouth, slimed and slicked like mud, unable to escape his throat. Before he knew it, he was frozen in the street, eyes wide, skin pale and cold – colder than the harsh winters of Baekguryeo to the North.

“Min-Yun...there was nothing we could have done to prevent this.” Tomoko tried to console him.

“Look at them, Tomoko.” The Prince murmured. “Young men and women, brothers and sisters our age...dying in a war no one wanted – dying for *them*.”

“Min-Yun–”

The Prince whipped his head to face her, silver locks snapping in the winds. “This war...it’s so stupid and has done nothing but destroy our Empire, rather than save it! Who’s to say that we aren’t going to be the next in line to be butchered?”

“It’s our duty to the Empire, Min-Yun.”

His face glowered. “No. It’s a falsehood – a lie – made to keep Imperials under Shaeng heels. We aren’t their playthings – we aren’t their pieces to throw about! I am not...I...”

Men and women limped by, their eyes as bruised and bloodied as they were, watched him and the Sarujin Heiress with content. There was no hatred, no jealousy – nor a hint of adoration. There was

nothing in their brown and black eyes, an empty slate, like broken glass. It was then the silver eyed Prince realized their will to keep fighting had diminished. Their will to keep moving wavered with each passing step. What made it hurt – he was afraid there was nothing he could do to help them.

I can't even help myself.

He watched them, men and women, soldiers of the Empire, great and renowned, mere shadows, and hollow shells, of what the songs glorified. But there was something that bounced in his chest, beating like another heartbeat – they were braver than he ever could be. They faced the enemy; they faced the Shaeng; they faced Shaeng Fire.

I cower at pyres.

Clenching his fists, he fought the twitching sensations. He ignored the glances of his friends and the civilians watching.

Make it stop.

Chapter II

Among the Sheep

Of the greatest in the Third Age, there was one who shaped the world for the millennia to come. Her beauty was as indescribable as her near limitless power. Beguiling with only sight and thought, the world was entranced.

She was Zheng Qi Xiao-Li. Queen of Tianxia.

- Of Queens and Empresses, Vol. III

Date: June 9, 1017 5th Age

Location: The State of Wu, the Confederacy of Tianxia

Beyond the Shan Jae-Jin, weaving through troughs and deep valleys of luscious green, an ancient city stood the test of time. Locked behind peaks born of her final act, Wuxi, the legendary capital of Tianxia, resided. Resting upon the banks of the Zhengyi river, it maintained its longevity. The walls of stone and steel shown grey, towering above the stone laid streets. Tucked away, rising tall cutting through the low-hanging misty haze, the centerpiece of Tianxia and her former glory remained.

As majestic as the city always was – it had seen better days. Ever since the fall of Tianxia, Wuxi never recovered. Holes in the once sturdy walls, slums replacing the residential districts – the castle that Xiao-Li herself resided in was never renovated. But through ruined streets and shattered cobblestone pathways, all roads and avenues led to that marvelous keep.

In the keep, a woman stood wearing steel armor. Her hair was tied into a strong ponytail, letting her thick light brown locks descend like an unabated waterfall. Framing her face, her bangs had fallen as well, decorated with ornaments and held together with tightened tubes of woven thread. Her light hazel eyes glowed like polished gemstones. Leaning against the palace veranda, she stared into the courtyard with disappointed disgust.

“One day, they’ll see...” A gruff voice brought her from her thoughts. “The ninja clans will come to realize that any attempt they make on our father will fail...”

“I wouldn’t be so crass as to blame the Shiyumi themselves...” She frowned. “Blame the Shaeng.”

Two pairs of hazel eyes met for a moment – one with pride, the other with disappointment. In the center of the courtyard, away from the veranda, there was a man dressed in black. His face bruised with gashes against his temples still bleeding fresh. At his wrists and ankles, ropes tied like a noose, latched him to the saddles of restless horses. Her teeth clenched, brows furrowing. He killed several of their palace guards and nearly succeeded in assassinating their father.

Her father was Zheng Qi Hongxi and she herself was Zheng Qi Lin. She and her brother, Guanyi, had woken early to train and practice their magick abilities, but managed to catch wind of the ninja sneaking into the palace. A fight ensued and several lie dead. Of the ninja that invaded their palace, the man lying in the center of the courtyard remained. He was a Shiyumi Ninja, most likely from

one of the many Imperial States that her father had liberated from the Shaeng.

Her eyes trailed from the prisoner, gazing upon the noble refuse of the Chayumi courts. Noblemen with their fancy robes and clothing sat with their wives and consorts, sipping away at their saucers and jugs of wine. Umbrellas and fans eased their boredom waiting for the eventual execution. They talked and whispered among each other, pointing, gawking at the would-be assassin of their dear lord Hongxi. She couldn't stand their pompous image and inconsiderate attitudes.

“Look at them.” She nearly hissed. “Always feasting, always laughing...it's insulting.”

A strong hand rested on her shoulder. “Sister...for once, ignore the politicians and let things be...”

“How can I?” She whispered. “We've been at this for over a decade, Guanyi. How much longer do we have to fight? How much longer do we have to go through this endless monotony? Find a Shaeng, kill him; run into an Imperial patrol, kill them; have one of our own die in battle; restart the cycle. When will we say we've had enough?”

“One day, Lin.” Guanyi lowered his head, walking away from the woman. “For now, at least find some solace in this...”

Her hazel eyes trailed away, gazing at the man slowly rising above the tiled courtyard. Yeunsoo lords of her father's court sat at the observation dais with the revered man. Each one wore ornate robes and clothing, embroidered with gold and oriental designs of dragons and curls. Unlike the chatting lords in the courtyard, the Yeunsoo and Hongxi's personal retinue of lords, were silent as they always were. Executions were becoming too common for comfort it seemed.

Clenching her fists, her knuckles paled white as the man clenched his teeth. The execution had begun. It started with a few claps and slaps from Yeunsoo guards, exciting the horses, then the horses began to pull. Through it all, tightening ropes and chaffing binds, she admitted to herself, Shiyumi were tough. Even when his world was ending and his life fleeting, the ninja didn't croak, he didn't beg for mercy.

He accepted his fate with stride – that was something she wasn't sure to forget. As much as she wanted to hate him, despise him for the men he had slain, for the attempt he made on her father – she couldn't bring herself to. His determination and tolerance for pain was worth praising.

A cry from noblemen across the courtyard echoed in her ears, demanding his death. Lin and her brother had faced the Empire many times in battle – ambushes, breaking their siege lines – she knew these lords and ladies had never seen the battlefield before and the horrific things they have witnessed. To these highborn fools, life was cheap, entertainment. Tightening her grip, she was certain, her strength alone could powder the veranda's stone railings if she wanted to.

An earsplitting crack of a whip was heard, bringing her eyes back to the imprisoned ninja. The horses jumped at the sound, moving forward, pulling the ropes with all their might. Lin felt her heart stop for a few moments, hazel eyes meeting dark brown for the first time. He tried his best to hide his pain, but his eyes would not betray the intense agony he was suffering. The connection was made and it filled her with dread. Magick rippled throughout her core making her feel weightless. As the ropes continued to pull the man's suspended limbs, her sight was awash in a pitch darkness.

Palpable to only herself, the stone railings she was beginning to crush was the only anchor she had. Sounds and winds rushed against her from the sudden night. Voices, cries and whispers never-ending – but through the dark, came light, shifting into a new image. Colors

became visible, twisting and writhing into what she could only assume was a visual memoir of his life.

A child born; a child growing; a man toiling fields of rice and grain. She caught the faint glimpse of black haired, red-eyed Shaeng speaking to him, thrusting him into ninja training. As the memories blended into one, feeding away at what little life force he had – she saw in vivid clarity, his attempt on her father’s life.

Before she could venture further, to learn more of this would-be assassin, the darkness vanished. Sounds and memories disappeared completely. Lin’s eyes cleared to the sight of large voluminous clouds, floating upon a deep cerulean canvas. Rising from the depths of dirt and stone, gabled rooftops adorned with dark blue tiles cut through the endless sea of azure. Each edge and curling eave were decorated with a twisting golden dragon, clasping upon the woodwork.

As pillars and cobblestone rose to fill their place, people did as well. Nobles, men and women, were seen cheering and sharing drinks. On the observation dais, reserved for the Lords of the Chayumi people and the Yeunsoo court, those deemed too important to the cause, ate and drank to the travesty in the courtyard.

She tried but couldn’t bear to turn her eyes away. The ninja, once formidable and dangerous, laid on the white cobblestone tiles, limbless and dead. Blood as crimson as Shaeng eyes, pooled around what remained of his torso. While he did his best to conceal what agony he may have felt before, his face retained his last moments, eternally screaming in his final seconds of anguish. Within, ignoring the cheers and laughter; ignoring his twisted final expression, her eyes watered at the sight she had witnessed.

He had a family, a farm, a life. It changed when those red-eyed bastard Shaeng came. Barring her teeth, she hissed softly, shutting her eyes from the world she saw. His life, his home; he didn’t care for banners or borders – he didn’t care for sovereignty or the Empire;

he wanted to be home again. Feeling a hint of a smile begin to crack across her pale face, the anger and pain she felt within was replaced with a wistful, reminiscent kind of joy. He wasn't the enemy they were led to believe existed. He was a man forced to fight, forced to die.

As nobles rose from their seats to congratulate each other for victories not their own, laughter grasped her, dragging her from her musings. Whipping her head around, she gazed upon her retinue, enjoying themselves with drink and laughter. Her brother had slung his arm over the neck of her friend and sword-brother, Xu Fang. The smile she wore dropped immediately. Her brother, Zheng Qi Guanyi, suddenly released Fang upon realizing his mistake. Trailing his own hazel eyes, a near mirror image of her own, he didn't dare meet her level stare.

“What do you idiots think you're doing, laughing after an execution?!” Lin nearly roared. “This is not a time for fun and games.”

“My lady...” Xu Fang flinched at her tone. “We had an altercation that was amusing at the time...we meant no disrespect—”

“Whether you meant to or not, means nothing. The fact you disrespected the dead anyway, is the problem.” Lin snarled. “As *joyous* as this day is supposed to be, I am beginning to find joy *lacking*. The five of you are supposed to be my sword brothers and sisters, yet all of you are acting like children. Where is your honor?!”

“Lin...” Guanyi sighed. “Please, calm down...”

“I will not.” She clenched her fists. “Look at them, brother. They feast and cheer as if it is their victory – their fight. They stomp on the fallen as if their lives are worth nothing. I will not calm down, Guanyi. When a man, who had a farm, a family to raise, somehow manages to sneak into *our* home and kill seven of our guards and nearly succeed in killing father – we don't have the luxury of calm.

This should be a lesson – let it open your eyes to the lengths our enemy will go and let it be a sign to ourselves that we are slacking...”

Guanyi’s eyes planted with the hardwood flooring, much like Xu Fang. Xiao Bo Fu, a fellow sword-brother and former refugee, took a deep breath, finding the clouds far less hostile than the irate war-maiden in front of him. His light brown eyes avoiding Lin’s enraged expression. On either side of him, the Shào sisters who hailed from Chang’an, were the nieces of a famous General of the Rebellion; Jia and Suyin had their hands at their skirts and dresses, gripping at the fabrics with their heads hung low.

“Look around you...” Lin began. “We could have lost our lord – my father – last night. But we were lucky this time. I can assure you, there won’t be a next time. We have to be ready; we have to be prepared for anything.”

“Lin, Guanyi.” A deep voice echoed in their ears. “I must speak with the two of you.”

“Father!” The twins bellowed.

“We apologize, my lord! We did not see you!” The remaining retinue bowed quickly.

Zheng Qi Hongxi, the father of the Zheng Qi twins, simply nodded his head. “Arise and disperse. I must speak with my children in privacy.”

“As you wish.”

The four sword brothers and sisters turned on their heels, scurrying away. Hongxi motioned for his children to follow. Guanyi, the ever virtuous and studious soldier, looked to his father without question, entranced with whatever the lord had to say.

He was always like that, always so loyal. But there were so few like him. Not many could juggle loyalties as masterfully as he could. He was a follower, loyal to a fault; to the cause; to his people; to their father and most importantly, to her. To him, she was his reason why he continued fighting and he always made sure to remind her of it.

Ever since the loss of their mother, Guanyi, despite being the younger of the two, showered her with attention and care. Always doing what he can for her, always trying to help. Lin appreciated everything he had done in the last ten years, but there were times that she worried he'd given up his free will to think and grow for the sake of avoiding failure and disappointment. He was her dear brother and she would never want to see him harmed.

Once more, lost in her thoughts, her hazel eyes straggled behind, no longer paying attention to her father's words. The corpse of the ninja laid untouched. Lords of the Chayumi and Yeunsoo were still cheering and enjoying the festivities of such a successful execution. The Beiren at the dais sat comfortably now that her father was not there to rein them in. One of those wrinkled old men whipped his hand up, signaling something to come.

Lin couldn't help herself and stopped mid-step. Across the courtyard, a small line of almost twenty Shiyumi prisoners of war were dragged violently into the area. At the head of the line, a skinny, emaciated woman was yanked by the chain bound to a collar around her neck. She was unique, given her long, wild thick black hair seemed more like a lion's mane, rather than curls. Within seconds, she was thrown to the ground, kissing the blood-stained tiles, tasting the iron and the filthy sole of the Yeunsoo footman's boot.

Behind her, the rest of the prisoners collapsed, chains and collars rattling and singing with a deathly tune. All of them, no matter how strong they might have looked, were sickly, skinny, malnourished and emaciated.

The dirty, tattered rags they were given as meager clothing barely did what it was made to do. The vicious whip marks and signs of torture were visible, even from her distance. The men and women behind the lead, cried out and begged for mercy but heavy thuds and cracks of batons silenced them.

Something turned in Lin's stomach. "What is this?!"

"It seems the Yeunsoo lords have called for more entertainment."

"Entertainment?!" Guanyi hissed. "This isn't right!!"

"The two of you have been away, fighting in the front lines for the last year and a half...many things have changed since the last time you have been in Wuxi." Hongxi sighed. "Imperials are surrendering more often now and while I'd rather not let the Yeunsoo do this, it's keeping their bloodlust sated."

"Their bloodlust is worth our honor?" Lin frowned. "When was anything ever equal to our honor? We Zheng Qi have lost our prestige, our kingdom – all we had left was our honor, father. I will not stand idly by and let the Yeunsoo muck our heritage with their senseless hate."

"Lin..." Guanyi reached out, grabbing her hand. "Whatever it is that you're intending to do; please, reconsider."

"Look at them, Guanyi." Her lips creased into a straight line. "They're suffering, even though they surrendered in good faith. How can we let this savagery continue?"

The man responded with a frown. "I don't like it either but what choice do we have?"

"We have to make the right choice."

Turning her eyes back to the farce in the courtyard, the lead Yeunsoo serjeant shot his hand down, grabbing the lead woman by her thick black hair. Lifting her into the air, hoping to elicit a squeal or a cry of pain, he shook her about, tearing some of the follicles from her agitated scalp. The chains danced and creaked with each ferocious jolt. Lifting her to stand on her dirty, bleeding, weakening feet, the serjeant took a deep breath, spitting upon her face. Chayumi lords and Yeunsoo court, laughed and praised the man's dishonorable actions.

Using the strength, he had, he shoved the woman to the tiled floor once again, digging his boot sole into her cheek. Blood from the ninja's corpse painted her face crimson with flakes of dried blood cracking and falling from her bruising skin. The man pressed his foot into her face, imprinting the design of his sole into her flesh, ripping the skin where he can, drawing blood.

She kept her head down, letting her hair fall to cover her face. Lin could sense the woman's anger rising. She clenched her fists against the irons wrapped and bound around her wrists. In defiance, she coughed, trying to push herself off the tiles. As she began to rise, the same steel soled boot smashed against her back, forcing her face down into the crimson liquid, tasting the iron in her mouth.

“Wash it clean, Shiyumi scum!!” One of the footmen roared, swinging his baton down upon her back. “Or you will join him!!”

The woman didn't move, keeping her face hidden by her grime slick hair. Her back was hunched and arms clenched tight. Just as the man was preparing to strike her once again, she shot to her feet, bashing her head against his chin, breaking his stance. Whipping back, the chains grew long in her grasp. Lords and ladies gasped, screaming for help and protection. Lin, knew better. The woman didn't make any move to attack the pompous nobles sitting pretty in the courtyard – she had her sights burning at the serjeant who had struck her to the floor.

“How dare you!!” The serjeant threw his baton to the tiled floors. Drawing his sword, the blade glowed in the morning sun. “No one will miss you, Shiyumi!”

He charged forward, swinging his blade down. The woman, as exhausted and emaciated she seemed, dodged the attack with professional skill. Wrapping the chains around her fist, she punched his unprotected back, bending the steel plates of his lamellar armor. Some of the mail links even snapped under her strength. Unlatching her weapon, she quickly slung the binds around the man’s neck, holding him hostage.

Her jet-black hair waved in the wind, revealing pale skin – almost porcelain. For a moment, Lin swore the woman’s eyes burned like rubies. All eyes landed on her, guards, Yeunsoo soldiers, lords and ladies and even Hongxi and Guanyi. Such courage and strength were both incredible and stupid.

Before the woman could snap the serjeant’s neck, several men jumped onto her, breaking her hold on the man. They punched and kicked her, stomping her head whenever they got the chance. Raising their batons, they beat the woman as hard they could, snapping bones and cracking ribs. They pulled her hair, raising her to face them.

With each hit, Lin flinched and felt her heart race. Flashes of memories entered her mind, echoing with each painful thud. She took slow heaving breaths, shaking as she did so. Snapping her eyes open, she looked at her father and brother; both watched with apprehension.

Zheng Qi Hongxi was uncomfortable, judging by his paling knuckles. Guanyi was more reserved in his reaction, resigning to glares and tightened jaw. His hand had found itself wrapped around the sword hilt at his hip. But sadly, like everyone else, deigned from making any moves.

This is wrong. Lin glared. *This is wrong.*

Unable to watch the farce any longer, Lin turned her eyes to the Yeunsoo lords getting comfortable on the dais without her father sitting with them. They messed with their over exaggerated sleeves and drank more wine to what she could only assume, what they hoped would be another execution. Fools of fools, she hissed. Seeing their sneering grins and joy aggravated her. Jumping over the railing, a few of the Yeunsoo lords rose from their seats; even her own brother reached out to stop her. A Chayumi woman on a mission, can never be stopped.

Her boots slammed against the ornate cobblestone, kicking dust and dirt into the air. Her brigandine skirting waved in the winds, studded and thick with leather. Radiating from her flesh, energy and magick rolled off of her body, slowly loosening tiles and drawing rocks and stones towards her like a magnet. She stormed forward with a furious aura coalescing around her body, shaking a few tables and drinks. Even the dragon cub statues cracked beneath her menacing glower.

“That’s enough!!”

Silence fell upon the gathered audience. The footmen froze in their actions, batons held still in mid-swing. Slowly, they turned to the source of the intruding voice, finding it to be none other than Zheng Qi Lin, herself. Surrounded in a near visible dome of translucent blue energy, she glared at the Yeunsoo savages with clenched fists. Shutting her eyes for a moment, she did her best to relieve the raging headache she was suffering from. They each gave her confused expressions, one by one, lowering their batons and weapons.

“What?” The captured serjeant gave her a glare.

“I said you’ve beaten her enough.” Lin responded with heat. “Don’t you see that you’ve already won?!”

“Where is the victory when she held me hostage?!”

“You shouldn’t have brought them out in the first place!!” Lin shouted. “You Yeunsoo don’t know when to quit!”

“Serjeant!” A bellowing voice came from the dais. Lord Wang Bo Jian of the Yeunsoo, had risen from his seat with a seething rage burning in those dark, soulless eyes of his. “Strike that Shiyumi down, now!”

“Serjeant!” Lin roared over him. “If you raise your sword, I won’t hesitate to kill you.”

“You don’t command me, my lady!!”

Suddenly, almost like lightning, her hands shot up igniting the magick she had built within her body, sending the footmen surrounding the serjeant, flying back almost twenty feet. They smashed into pillars, statues and stone stairs. Bones shattered as stone constructs crushed in their heavy weight. Gasps and roars of protest sang together from every man and woman present. Prisoners even cried out for mercy. Their impacts send ripples throughout the audience, Guanyi himself, jumped over the railing and charged for his sister.

“Lin, please, calm down.” He pleaded. “If you wanted the Yeunsoo attention, you have it now. Please, don’t do this.”

Throwing her arm out, her brother flew back, stumbling over his feet. She didn’t even flinch to look at him. “What is your name, serjeant?”

“Zhao Han.” He responded.

“Then, *Zhao Han*,” Lin snarled, “make your decision; your life depends on it.”

“Why are you defending this Shiyumi, Lin?!” Guanyi grabbed her arm. “Stop this!!”

“Lin!” Hongxi shouted. “Stop it!”

“Han, do the right thing.” Lin said with an even tone. “She doesn’t deserve this.”

“I...” His eyes trailed from the lords at the dais and back to her. “I-I can’t...she...she’s the enemy.”

“Wrong answer.”

Pulling her arm back, his sword flew from his hands and into her own. Twirling the blade around, she jammed the length into the tiles, letting it ring and shake. At the dais, she could hear the shattering of saucers and jugs of wine. At the head of the table, Jian roared at the top of his lungs, pointing accusingly, spouting curses and threats. It was when he accused her father of treason and betrayal to the cause; that she finally turned to face the man.

Keeping her hands open and loose at her hips, pendants, belts and even the scabbard against her side began to shake from the magick she held within. Staring at the man, Lin could feel his spit and misplaced judgement. It only served to anger her more. Without enough willpower to withstand his continuous tirade of loyalty and respect, she quickly cut him off.

“There is no honor in beating a broken enemy!!” Lin said with an even tone. Jian stood shocked and speechless that she’d even interrupt him. But as his mouth opened, she beat him to it. “You Yeunsoo should act better than the Shaeng; not act as cruel as they would! Ten years we have bled, for what? This insanity?!”

“Cruel?!” A lord rose from his pillow. “H-How dare you compare us to the *Shaeng*?!”

“You will be silent.” She glared. Around her, small stones and loose tiles began to rise, slowly surrounding her. “The Beiren

Yeunsoo do not control Tianxia. You are here merely to advise and supply; do not overstep your bounds – my lords.”

“Curse me, insult me, but it is you who called me the incarnation of the Good Queen Zheng Qi Xiao-Li. I will be damned before the Zheng Qi Bloodline gives up our Tianxia – our legacy – to fearful, craven bastards like you! Do what you must, Beiren, I will send you back to your frozen wastes.”

Shutting her eyes, the great blue energy dispersed into thin air. Stones and tiles fell, crashing and shattering against the courtyard floor. Everyone stood silent, watching the winds calm. Dresses and cloaks ceased in the calming winds.

Her eyes still shut, magick and energy disappeared completely, sending one final gust of wind. Opening her eyes, the lords were red faced, almost like tomatoes. Their brows furrowed and angled, almost coming off their faces.

“I believe it would be best that you retire to your chambers, my lords.” Hongxi advised. “It has been an eventful day; I can assure you. Come, we have strategies to go over.”

“Good job, Lin.” Guanyi elbowed her side. “You managed to piss everyone off.”

Wincing, she held her side. “Well, someone had to do something.”

“It wasn’t your place to step in, you know.”

As the lords and her family left the courtyard, Lin turned to the remaining men and women. Shaking her head, she kicked at a few stones and tiles still remaining in her path. The Yeunsoo footmen still standing, backed away, releasing the chain links from their hands.

The heavy steel clashed with the tile, rattling with a hair-raising tune. The woman whose defiance started the entire debacle, remained in a fetal position, hands covering what her jet-black hair couldn't. Slowly but surely, Lin witnessed the wounds fade, catching her undivided attention.

If she didn't know any better, she could have sworn that she saw steam rising from the bruises as they began to vanish. Sighing to herself, she ran a hand through her light brown hair. Eyes trailing from nobles to the Shiyumi imprisoned before her, to the dais and down to witness the now sea of blood that had seeped into the ornate designs of dragons and demons etched into the stone tiles. Shutting her eyes once again, all sounds and voices disappeared into nothingness.

Calmly throwing up another hand, a rag was slipped from a table, spilling a noble's wine. Ignoring their cries of discomfort, the rag floated swiftly across the courtyard and into the war-maiden's open palm.

Once secured in her grasp, she fell to her knees, immediately scrubbing away at the stone tiles. Shiyumi prisoners watched her with both fear and respect boiling in their eyes. Even with the weight of what she'd done and the insult she had leveled upon her Yeunsoo allies, she found solace in the silence that had fallen upon the palace grounds.

Several pairs of eyes watched her, almost glued to her image – entranced and confused all the same. Their judgements and seething words were felt beyond the ruminations of magick.

Hoping to enjoy the silence for as long as possible, she refrained from responding. She simply scrubbed and washed the pools of blood from existence. The mistakes and foolish actions the Yeunsoo did throughout the last decade rung as fresh as if they were done the day before.

From terrible oversights in battle to outright surrendering entire states that were rightfully Tianxia, the Yeunsoo had few uses that truly helped the Chayumi found Tianxia once again. Executions and the like were sparse before she and her brother had left to fight in the front lines.

Bringing her consciousness from the recesses of her mind, she realized her rag had soaked all it could take. Every scrub and splash rushed between the masterful etchings, painting the once pristine white tiles an ominous crimson. Even though she reserved herself to silence, her knees began to burn against the stones. Wincing at the marks that were sure to form on her kneecaps, she stopped for a few moments, wiping the beads of sweat from her brow.

A soft, yet course, hand rested on her own. Almost jumping in surprise, Lin's hazel eyes locked with the courageous – but stupid – prisoner. Her hair hung down, disheveled and thick with sweat and grime. Behind the dancing locks, her eyes were barely visible. She nearly gasped at the sight; the woman's eyes were almost like diamonds; a pale blue. Unable to control her body, the grip she had on the rag relinquished. No words were shared as the prisoner took the rag herself.

Lin couldn't help herself – she was as tough as the ninja. The prisoner ignored the chaffing collar and the pained weight of her chains. Even though her wrists were bound together, she used the rag and pressed her weight. Scrubbing and washing the blood from the varying crevices, the woman looked at ease surprising the young Chayumi.

“Who are you?” Lin asked, placing a caring hand on the Shiyumi's shoulder.

The woman flinched almost instinctually. “M-My name...”

“If you don't mind me asking, of course.” The war-maiden pressed. “You have a courage I've never seen. Attacking a Chayumi

in the capital of our Tianxia, is usually punished with a painful death. You knew what was going to happen, yet you did it anyway...well...either you're the most courageous person to ever exist, or you're the stupidest."

"Stupidity it is." The woman spoke tiredly. "I didn't know why I did what I did..."

"Oh please." Lin giggled. "I would have done it for you."

"Excuse me?" The woman stopped for a moment.

Reaching out, another rag flew out into her open palms. "You know what I said."

"Why would you stand for a Shiyumi?" She asked.

Lin paused for a moment. "Shaeng murdered my mother. Shaeng tortured her, beat her, paraded her around and set her on fire. I don't hate Shiyumi – far from it...I hate the Shaeng for what they had done to me; to all of us. It's because of them that we're even at war. Did you have a choice to fight or did the Emperor force you to fight?"

The woman remained silent and continued to scrub away. Instead of responding, the woman was dead set on keeping to herself. She turned her back to Lin, mouth sewn shut and eyes planted to the blood staining the courtyard. A soft ripple was felt, shuddering against the Chayumi's aura. With a frown, she could see that the woman had nothing else she wanted to say. Rising to her feet, stretching and groaning out to find her lost comfort, she exhaled softly, blowing dust and small pieces of debris into the air. She bent forward, feeling the vertebrae pop with every rising degree in her angle.

"Serjeant." She called.

A man dressed in a steel brigandine and a bright orange sash around his waist hobbled forward. His head bowed low. “My lady?”

“Have ten men watch the prisoners and keep a close eye on those Yeunsoo soldiers.” Lin ordered, wiping her hands. “If any of those brutes plan on having entertainment or even so much as lift a finger to hurt these prisoners, direct them to the most dangerous rapids of the Zhengyi and tell them to swim. Do you understand me? We’ve had enough Yeunsoo bureaucracy for the day.”

“Y-Yes, my lady!” The serjeant bowed deeper, his topknot bouncing as he dipped.

A rattle of chains shivered and sung, garnering the war-maiden’s attention. Hazel eyes trailed back to the train of prisoners. At the head, the black-haired, blue-eyed Shiyumi was on her knees with her wrists held out and palms open, almost in a pleading motion. The woman’s hair had parted revealing cut cheeks and a dark broken nose. Despite the damage and the markings inflicted, her skin was pale like porcelain and dark great rings had colored her eye bags.

“Prisoner, what is it?” Lin dropped to a knee, taking her course hands into her own.

Pale blue eyes gazed upon the brunette, meeting hazel eyes with a fierce stare. In those cobalt orbs, Lin could see the internal struggle she must have been feeling. Gripping at the binds of her wrists, she began to shake, gritting her teeth as she did. Taking deep breaths, trying to ignore the soldiers with hands around their sword hilts, she finally managed to croak. “You asked for my name, my lady...”

“I did.”

“My name...is Koyuki.”



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