



*After the events of Yeonju Province, the heroes have gone their separate ways. As the Black Queen's magick continues to rise, Baeorillia does not wait. With the conflicts unending, and death reclaiming; all that remains is the Storm of War.*

## **Baeorillia: The Storm of War**

By Derrick Sasuman

**Order the book from the publisher [BookLocker.com](http://BookLocker.com)**

**<https://www.booklocker.com/p/books/12156.html?s=pdf>**

**or from your favorite neighborhood  
or online bookstore.**

# BAEORILLIA

— THE STORM OF WAR —



DERRICK SASUMAN

Copyright © 2022 Derrick Sasuman

Paperback ISBN: 978-1-64719-873-2

Hardcover ISBN: 978-1-64719-874-9

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia.

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Sasuman, Derrick

Baeorillia: Beyond the Flames by Derrick Sasuman

Library of Congress Control Number: 2021902665

Printed on acid-free paper.

BookLocker.com, Inc.

2022

# Prologue

“How dare you?!”

An ash wood staff beat against the side of his head, throwing him to the tiled floors. Drums in the deep, a heartbeat and warmth, colors of purple and black spun wildly. Drunk on his own blood, the boy swayed with every thwack of the steel batons. Glyphs appeared on his arms and back, pulling him straight, lifting his bruised, blackening face to heel. In the moments finding reprieve in the whirling world, words formed in his mind, incomprehensible.

“You thought we wouldn’t find out, *Rai-Min?*” The man’s voice echoed with a harsh, poisonous fury, “You thought you could hide this from us?!”

“Father, please!!” The boy shouted, fighting against the magick binds, “Don’t do this!!”

Crimson eyes glimmered in the shrouded throne room. The great seat of Raijin had been reforged, bearing the silhouette of a Black Tsubaki and the flame of the Shaeng surrounding it. Upon the seat a man dressed in armor befitting a lord of heroic deeds – draped in a purple cloak, studded with amethysts, the man was a sight to behold. Against the grand chair, the man watched, seething at the boy chained and struggling.

“I was told you were with a squire...doing unspeakable things.”

Sweat prickled against his skin, as sharp as knives, “I did no such thing!!”

The man flicked a wrist. Rai-Min screamed, howling like a beaten animal, as a burning whip struck his bare back. Heat, warmth, it had returned, searing into his flesh like lava. He tried to twist and scrunch into a ball, but the glyphs only grew stronger, sparking with the crimson energy of Jae-Suk herself. There was a hiss, a humming roar that forced him upright once again. A hand ran through his black hair, holding his head straight to face his father.

Black marks marring his once pale flesh, spurted with crimson liquid. He could not focus, the swelling of his eye blackening into eternal night; the boy hissed with frustration. His blood be damned, healing from what they had done to him was an impossible task. If only Shaeng blood made pain nonexistent, the young boy scowled, fighting the hand gripping his hair. He was shaken, chains and magic glyphs shaking and rattling with him.

“I told you this before, Rai-Min. You have to hide your...*conquests*...or else the Council will know. They made their rules clear.” The man’s voice echoed through the throne room, “You should have known better. Training for the Emperor’s strange organization doesn’t give you the permission to act so foolishly. Now instead of just your honor and name scandalized, but mine as well!!”

“Father...”

“Silence!!”

Glyphs tightened, cracking bones and shattering his wrists. “I did not give you permission to speak! Right now, I’ve lost allies between the Shaeng Families, with others mocking us and you. Raijin has been weak since our fall from grace; we were weakened further by Junichi and Kushina’s nonsense. Everything we fought for has been for naught

and now, we must deal with the heel and boot of the Edo once again. Scandals, slander and facts to back them, only serve to continuing our decline, Rai-Min!”

“I expected better of you. Since your older sister, curse her name, decided to run to the gods...everything falls on your shoulders. You are my son – you have the power of Raijin flowing through your veins and it is your duty to father sons to continue our bloodline – but with your...*preferences* in mind...you will have to make a choice.”

Rai-Min gasped for air, clutching the fabrics of his pants, “Choose the Clan or your own happiness. If you choose the Clan, I won’t push for you to be married – but you will dedicate yourself to destroying the Edo Rule no matter the cost. However, if not, I will allow you to go where you please, *love* whom you please...but know this, my foolish Son. I will find you, there will be no crevice, no hole, no void, you can hide. And when I do find you – you will wish you were never born.”

Before the young Shaeng could speak, doors burst open, falling from their hinges, steaming with dust and magick flowing off the great boards. There were shouts, as Honor Guards of Raijin drew their long-handle nagamaki swords, swinging and moving to protect the boy in the Throne Room but their screams were the answers to his unravelling questions. Feeling warmth, he could see tendrils of fire dancing across the Throne Room, feeding on banners, unlit braziers and fueling the torches hanging from sconces.

The magick glyphs that held him hostage were undone, shattering like glass. Before he could hit the ground, a pair of gloved hands grabbed him, carefully imbuing magick into the still bleeding wounds and the melted flesh, healing what the person could. As the last wound was sealed shut, leaving nothing but the smooth cool of night winds, the boy moaned with relief, turning his eyes to his savior.

Almost choking, his crimson eyes met the enraged crimson of Shaeng Koyuki, his dearest little sister. The girl was no more than

seven years old, having only just returned from Kyojin. Her gloved hands glowed, rippling with magick and fire. Her eyes danced in their sockets, staring at his wounded form, holding him tight. His fire was weak, a mere shadow, a spark compared to what it used to be; what it should be. Lowering him against the tile floor, the girl stood straight, holding her words and tongue, trying to breathe.

“My daughter...” Hikouji hissed. “I see your journey was far too short.”

“What is this?!” The girl shouted. “What have you monsters done to *my* brother?!”

An appalled gasp sounded from the seat beside Hikouji. The woman sitting in it wore her hair high, bound to ornaments and wooden supports. Her crimson eyes narrowed with a vile scowl. It was her mother, Shaeng Tsuta. “Watch your mouth, *child*.”

“What have you done?!” Koyuki asked once more, taking a threatening step. “You said it was fine if Rai-Min loved who he wanted—”

“The Council found out and demanded the choice to be made. The Clan or his *vices*. You know their rules as well as I, Koyuki.”

“I know well enough that those rules are wrong,” The girl pointed to her shirtless brother, still trying to heal, “what are you going to do? Kill him? Imprison him?!”

“We are making sure that he knows the true gravity of the situation,” Hikouji rose from his seat. The great purple cape whipped and danced. His silhouette looked like a moving shadow, even in the light of the wild, dancing flames. The contours of his facial features, the deep cheeks and the sharp jaw covered by a black beard. Every step was a threat echoing through the throne room; the personification of a menacing nightmare simply waiting to lash out.

“You have been gone from Raijin for far too long, my daughter,” Hikouji said. Opening his hand, magick was born, glyphs spun and sparked, revealing a ten-foot-long whip, barbed and lined with the bones of fish, protruding from its length. Letting it drag against the tile floors, spreading blood and creasing the drag marks, “it seems that in your time away, you’ve forgotten respect!!”

Throwing his arm around, the whip snapped forward, full intent on striking her. However, she side-stepped, dodging it at the last second. Covering her arm with a rudimentary Aetherian Shroud, she grabbed the whip, letting it wrap around her arm. Pulling with glyphs holding her steady, she ripped the whip from the man’s gloved hands, surprising the Shaeng gathered and the Honor Guards who barely managed to survive her. Sparks danced off her body, hissing and screaming as the whip left her cracking shroud.

Tossing the weapon away, her crimson eyes narrowed at her father and mother, “You swine. You hateful, spiteful, craven swine!! You who cries for Raijin behind closed doors, but bows to the Council at the most minor of inconveniences! Have you no shame?”

“K-Koyuki...” Rai-Min reached out, his hand shaking as he did, “please...s-stop! Don’t do this! Don’t make this worse for you!!”

“Listen to your brother, Koyuki,” Tsuta warned. Letting her feet levitate off the dais, the woman hovered toward the pair, crimson magick steaming off her terrifying visage, “if you anger us enough, when we’re done with your worthless brother, we’ll give you the same treatment.”

Hikouji threw his hand forward, a ball of fire the size of a small child was born. Koyuki moved quick, creating her own, letting it dance between her palms. Releasing it, the two beastly spheres of flame met, exploding, blasting warm gusts of wind, cutting hanging drapes and unsecured silken cloths. From the chaos, a crimson, magick chain appeared, wrapping around the girl’s throat, tightening to submission.



She choked, pulling at the chains, but the pressure was too great. She fell to her knees, suffocating on her own transgressions.

“We understand your anger, Koyuki, but my, you are a troublesome child,” Tsuta slapped the child, loosening the golden five-pointed flame ornament from her thick mane of black hair. Grabbing the girl’s head, the matriarch of Raijin began to beat her, punching, scratching and slapping, shaking the child about like a ragdoll. Letting her onslaught cease, she sighed in relief, hearing Koyuki’s soft whimpers, throwing the girl to the floor. Even as her head beat and bounced against the tiles, her parents did nothing, showing no signs of sympathy, “learn to respect your parents, demoness.”

“You monster...” Rai-Min whispered.

Glyphs appeared over his hands, wrapping around his arms, pulling. Their mother glared, narrowing her crimson eyes, “what did you just say?”

“You are both...monsters!!” The boy shouted.

Before he knew it, a great shadow fell over him. Wrapping around his own throat, his mother’s thin, lithe fingers, slowly beginning to glow, “You who would embarrass our State and family. You have no right to speak so lowly of us! One more disrespectful word and Koyuki will receive another beating!”

“Touch my sister again...” Rai-Min spat. A defiant glint flashed in his bruised eyes, “I will kill you both.”

He was suddenly released, head bowed before the woman. Before he could speak, he tasted the sole of her sandals, pressing against his face, “You *dare*, to threaten us?! Your parents?! How disrespectful must our children be?!”

A foot, a boot, she stomped, cracking what bones weren’t; bruising his flesh until it was as purple as the banners of Raijin. Kicking him

over, the woman grabbed his left hand, forcing crimson magick and fire into the palm, singeing the appendage black and charcoal, letting it crumble to dust. She ignored his horrified screams, his shouts and violent curses – he deserved it. As he wailed in agony rolling on the ground like a beaten animal, not once did she turn to face him.

“As for this *failed child*,” Tsuta marched to Koyuki, who was still laying on the floor holding her head. Wiping the blood from her hands and the sweat from her brow, the woman stood over the girl, smiling, “I believe a few days in the dungeons without food or water will suffice for punishment. Maybe a burning to remind her of her *place*.”

“Banishment,” Hikouji glared at the young girl, “Tsuta, our children failed us. I can’t believe the bloodline of Raijin will end because of our foolish spawn. I refuse to let them die; however, it is too much of a mercy to let their suffering end.”

“Get up, child,” The woman said, turning her eyes to Koyuki. Reaching down, putting her hands onto her trembling shoulders, she pushed the girl into the tiles, “I said, get up!!”

However, Koyuki remained, keeping her head shielded by her arms and eyes sealed shut. Not a word was whispered, nor thought. The girl wanted to disappear, she wanted to run. Where was Min-Yun? Where did the Emperor banish him? The girl fought the tears building at the corner of her eyes. Where was the Prince and the promises they made? She couldn’t hold back. Before she knew it, she was sobbing, holding her head for dear life.

“You stupid child!!” Tsuta rushed for the girl, kicking her, pulling her hair, lifting her to her feet.

“Let her go!!”

The woman turned, still gripping the girl, only to be met by a flurry of black fire. She slid against the tiles, only stopping when her back smashed against the stone steps of the throne. Hikouji drew his blade

drawing upon his orange-colored flame, as did the rest of the Raijin Shaeng gathered.

In the center of the Throne Room, Rai-Min stood, thick tears cascaded down his healing, but bruised, cheeks. A wash in darkness the shadow of his new and sudden flame loomed. Fury, rage and hatred coming to life, his face glowered in night. Suddenly, the raging flame vanished, warping and coalescing into a single space, fusing into a volatile ball above his head. His father watched with awe as it seeped into the boy's pores and armor. A deep breath; a moment passed; his body glowed.

“Touch my sister again...and all of us will die...I won't say it again; let her go!!”

\*\*\*

Rai-Min looked up from the throne he sat. The distant hammering of workers in the great multi-walled city became nothing more than a lullaby. The Grand Bazaar was in action, thousands came and went, throwing coins and product in mechanical action. Even from the Palace, he could hear the exotic animals of Antyria roaring, beating and thrashing in their cages. However, there was something dark gathering beyond the inner walls the Shaeng were safe behind.

Alone in the massive, polished, leveled Throne Room of the Palace of Kyojin, he stared aimlessly at the banners of Raijin and Edo. He could hear the debates his parents had over what to do with Edo; he could hear his uncle, the Emperor, argue with advisors and the council over what to do with Raijin. It was a vicious cycle that brought the life and death of thousands of innocent men and women; children included.

Staring at his gloved hand, the magick and fire of his mother a whimpering reminder. It was harsh, a sharp stinging revenant pain. Crimson eyes slowly glanced toward the windows, half expecting to

find large towers piercing the sky in the Second Ring. He half expected to find the banners of the Sons and Daughters waving as proudly as those of the Amaryllis. There was nothing but the soft white smoke of the Bazaar in the Fifth Ring; black smoke of the Outer Rings and dust. He wondered for a moment, how different things could have been if the Sons and Daughters didn't attack his forces that night.

*It was the one thing that mother and father wanted. Somehow, it all fell into place for them to stake their claims and force a purge.* He wanted to say something, anything, to anyone hoping to listen. Those thoughts however, were stamped out as quickly as they formed. His *wonderful* parents would target his sisters immediately. As much as he and Setsuki fought, he still loved his eldest sister. The woman was strong, a shining example of what Raijin could be. Steadfast, confident and respected by all, no matter the affiliation – he could only dream of being like her.

*And then, there's Koyuki.* Fighting the rare smile threatening to spread across his face, the thought of Koyuki made his heart jump. His dear little sister, never judged him, never hated him – it was surprising, but even in darkness, the smallest of candles can light the void. Leaning into his seat, he let the smile split his face. Koyuki was everything the Shaeng should have been. Loving, when there is no love, kind when there is no kindness; doing good without seeking reward – admirable qualities.

Holding the golden armrests of the Throne, his crimson eyes glanced at the chandeliers and the windows above the terraced verandas. Ignoring the servants sweeping and cleaning the tile floorings, ignoring the chirping of birds and the thunderous protests in the distant city – something was wrong. He could feel it in his tethers, his fire; his soul.

Without warning, the great doors of the Throne Room burst open, revealing a lone Archon with several Palace Guards on the ground

behind him, writhing in pain. Confused, the former Grand Inquisitor let the man limp along, out of breath and panting. Soldiers rushed into the Throne Room, spears and swords drawn, ready to apprehend the man. He was unfazed however, quickly falling to a knee before the Protector of the Realm. The man lowered his head, still trying to breathe. Rai-Min said nothing, knowing a lone Archon meant terrible news.

“You Grace...” The man said, revealing a purple urn in his hands, “I am Archon Ariatsu of Hirashi, my Inquisitor was Inquisitor Masahiro of Kakura. I’ve come from Yeonju with grave—”

“Was?” Rai-Min stood from the throne. Thoughts spiraled out of control; Masahiro was a powerful Shaeng, one of the few gifted with Black Fire. To learn he died was disheartening, “what happened? Where are the rest of his forces – where is he?!”

“Your Grace...” Ariatsu cowered before the Shaeng, “C-Caeradins attacked Yeonju Province. There was a great battle and a Qulmat killed him and the rest of the Archons...there were many casualties, hundreds of Imperial lives were lost and the heiress of the Nakamura Clan was among them.”

“What?!” Rai-Min hissed. Flames grew around the Raijin Shaeng, terrifying the infantry gathered; even Ariatsu flinched.

“Inquisitor Masahiro thought it wise to toy with those in Tajima...the Prince survived and with the help of Lady Koyuki and the Zheng Qi twins—”

A crimson glyph appeared around the man’s throat, silencing him. He choked as the glyph flited him into the air. Ariatsu dangled almost five feet off the ground. Infantry quickly fled the scene as Rai-Min drew closer, “My sister, did she survive the battle?! Answer me!!”

Ariatsu struggled to choke his response. He struggled, clawing at the crimson glyph, but the words of the new Grand Inquisitor caused

the magick to shatter. The Archon fell to the tile floors, heaving breaths and coughing his defeat. A pair of hands grabbed him, lifting him to his feet, “Your Grace! Lady Koyuki died trying to protect Zheng Qi Lin and Shaeng Min-Yun...”

“Go, Archon. There is food and water waiting at the Headquarters. I need to speak to his Grace,” Yoshinobu frowned. The two watched the Archon stumble along, keeping his head low and hidden. The Grand Inquisitor hissed, clenching his fists before whipping to face the Protector of the Realm, “Rai-Min...what the hell is wrong with you?! These are *my* men now – not yours!”

“Speak to me with respect, Grand Inquisitor,” Rai-Min hissed. The world pressed against him, almost pushing him to the floor. He fought the tears prickling against the corners of his eyes, “I am still above you. Koyuki is dead...at the hands of horned half-elves. I didn’t even know they ventured this far south. I c-can’t...”

“Get yourself together, Rai-Min,” Yoshinobu grabbed him tightly, shaking him as he did, “You still have an Empire you need to control!”

“They killed my sister...”

“And the Emperor needs us to defend his land.” The Grand Inquisitor scowled. “His children, Ayame, Kaeji and Kyuuji march with a large army of both Sons and Daughters trapped in the Shikari States and an army of Samarian warriors. Do you know what that sounds like?”

“Another enemy.”

“Exactly...do you understand that there is absolutely nothing we can do for Koyuki? I...can’t believe I’m saying this, but we have to consolidate our power first.”

“How will we know when to strike?” Rai-Min asked, staring at the men and women filing into the Throne Room. “How will we know we’re ready?”

“It’s only January...” Yoshinobu sighed. “We leave the Gin-Shaeng and his people to their own devices. What we must do now is to keep the Edo under our thumb. The Princess and her brothers will be a prick to our sides if we don’t take care of Kyojin first. Don’t forget that the Eighth and Seventh Rings are already in revolt.”

“Fine...” Rai-Min turned, walking toward his golden throne. “Send forth our legions to secure the outlands of the Shaeng State of Edo. Recruit from the Kyojin degenerates of the Middle Rings. There are more than enough to fill the ranks we lost.”

“What of the Shaeng that died in Yeonju? That died here? Those are losses that won’t be so easily filled.”

The man sighed, shutting his eyes. “You’re the Grand Inquisitor – figure something out. And send word to our allies in Barellia...the Aciei of the Ten Sky Cities will be needed...”

# Chapter I

## Direction

*Only then, can Hayu-Min find true Peace  
From the Storm of War and the Song of Blades,  
As oceans rise and seas boil,  
As hate and fear bleed through the pages of history,  
The Light of Jaehi will guide the Children of Baeorillia.*

- *An Ancient Shaeng Prophecy*

**Date: February 10, 1018 5<sup>th</sup> Age**

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

As the golden wheat fields waved and rustled in the winds, there was a soft, cooling breeze mixed within, piercing through even the thickest of hides and the hardest of steels. Even the sharpest of blades couldn't seem to match its strength. Through every passing, heaving breath that nature managed to conjure, plumes of smoke billowed into the sky like noir blotches, polluting the white streaks upon the cerulean canvas.



From the mouthwatering aroma of steaming rice, baking bread and blazing pyres, the permeating scent of flame burned into the lungs of the populace. Shaeng within the city brought the people into full festivities. With his return, he knew he would never hear the end of it. The Morning Prayer garnered a record attendance, men and women across the city, the state, shouted, screamed and cried to the heavens in their own ways to speak with the divine Jaeori, hoping their prayers would be answered.

However, within the Great Fire Temple, four figures could be seen, silhouettes at most from the grand crimson pillared entrance. Cast in shadows by the flickering torches and the large studded doorways, the four figures bowed, clasping three sticks of incense, the wisps of smoke dancing about their kneeling forms.

One wore the traditional clothing of the famed and noble Kanagami Clan of the northern Steppe. The natural colors of brown, green and light tans merged together into an earthen palette. Wrapped around her waist, a black sash held by a golden buckle cascaded against her thigh like a waterfall born of the void. The woman's eyes were snapped shut, unable to accept the coming deluge threatening to burst at the seams.

Beside her, a man with thick brown hair murmured under his breath, whispering prayers in both the native tongue of Hayu-Min and that of the Adejumo Tribe of Northern Antyria. Adorning the robes of the Hayuten Clan, colors of sandstone and desert aesthetic washed upon him as if he were drowned in sand. His sash fell over his chest and shoulder in respect of his noble cousins of the Adejumo. Like the Antyrians of the south and their love of colors and geometric shapes, the young Hayuten heir adorned his sash with triangles and squares outlined in whites and greens. With a final gasp, his breath misting before him, a tendril of smoke shuddered with his aching body.

A woman knelt beside him bearing the colors of the Sarujin Clan, the dark oranges and blacks coming together with a passionate ferocity. The decorated sash she wore waved against her leg like lava flows of the volcanoes of the Jae-Jin Mountains menacingly waiting outside the city walls. Unlike the Kanagami silent in her prayer, the woman let her tears wash her tanned cheeks. She whimpered softly, letting her body tremble in her robes and fur coats. *Gendo*, she whispered, her voice echoing like ghosts.

The final figure, the largest one shrouded, his long silver hair was his main feature. Like that of a lion's mane, it was as wild as the uncharted, unconquered fields and meadows and forests across the Empire's realm. His skin was rough, cut and weathered, however still smooth. Like the Hayuten, his skin was tanned, matching the light-colored floorboards of the temple interior. His fingers clutched the three incense sticks with a vigor between the tips.

Unlike his compatriots, his eyes remained open, the silvery slate a dim grey gleaming with tears prickling at the corners. With his passing breath, he could feel his eyes burning with heat and the stinging sensation of magick. It was hard to explain, the sudden pains he was feeling came without warning. Letting his silver eyes bleed crimson for a moment, the Shaeng sighed into the sticks burning between his fingertips. He was told by the priests that burning incense brought one closer to the gods; he found himself dripping further and further away from any of the Jaeori.

The young Prince callously gazed at the statue of Jaehi, the rays she was depicted with, bronze and golden, spread in all directions, all-encompassing, behind her as majestic as always. The flames raging in the basins at her feet painted her massive form in an orange glow, the shadows contouring to every detail sculpted and carefully formed, from the curves of her smirking face, to the creases of her robes and clothing. Below the flaming basins, a brass bowl rested before him

upon a small wooden pedestal, reinforced with steel and decorated with gold dragons and monkeys wrapping around the base.

Lowering the incense into the bowl, the ash held the sticks, letting them burn freely, dripping ash and whipping smoke about the cold winds. The boy rose from his knees, letting his coattails beat against his thighs. Turning on his heels, he bowed softly to the priests and the Temple Guard. Even as they waved their torches, chanting softly with the masses gathered in the streets and alleyways, the young prince walked unbothered. As smoke, black and laced with orange and red embers, washed over him as he stepped from the temple, he found himself relishing in the warmth it brought.

As he stood in the light of Jaehi, his body threatened to shake from the remnants of his terror. Fists clenched, gloved and shaking ever so slightly with the smallest of flickering flames he witnessed. He could feel his body tremble under the weight of his robes, even the weight of his own muscles felt like iron against his bones. Letting his silver eyes close, he ignored the crackling of wood and the snapping embers.

*Let go.*

Chants, murmurs, prayers, none of it could be heard. Not the whispering of the winds, nor the song of the birds in the trees – he forced himself into nirvana, a silence unending, a void where not even his own breath could break his concentration. Letting colors and sounds fade into nothingness, his heart beat slowed, the shaking of his arms and body came to a halt. As the emptiness in his mind came to a true void, he opened his eyes to the world around him, finally taking in every flicker of flame, to every dash of paint on walls and street signs.

It whirled at first, the greens, the blues, the oranges and the bronze horizon of Gong-Ji. The colors he'd become so accustomed to rippled as one in ways he wasn't prepared for. Taking a slow breath, he walked from the great entrance of the Fire Temple, escorted on either side by

Fire Acolytes wearing pauldrons of stylized flame. Their robes and armor were gold and crimson, almost like the Shaeng of Edo.

“Leave me...” Min-Yun ordered. “Send the Acolytes of the Fire Temple to the gatehouse, protect the city with Seekers and Blessed Warmasters. With the Yeunsoo and the armies of Tianxia spreading across our borders – it won’t be long before they decide to attack Sarujin Castle.”

“My lord, we have few men remaining. With the second regiment spread across our borders with Han, we’re spread too thin to properly protect our lands.”

“It doesn’t matter. Send men to the gatehouse. Let me know of any developments in the fronts and if there’s any word from Tajima and her allies. If need be, send word to Lords Manabu and Okano – we need to fortify Gong-Ji. Move with the speed of the gods, Acolytes.”

Letting his sandals clap against the stone steps of the temple, the Shaeng walked at a hurried pace. Winds swept by, lifting his hair revealing the heinous scar stretched across his left cheekbone. Cold stings came with flashes of the great battle, the falling fire and the dead strewn across those confused, howling fields. His eyes bled crimson beaming heat and warmth with each passing step remembering the faces and people lost.

*It’s been two months since...I the Shaeng stopped, turning his eyes to the skies above. What is happening to the Empire? It’s as if the world had begun to fall apart since Yeonju. Nevertheless, we need to get moving. Castles of the Black Queen’s creation are waiting, gathering the power of the Aetheria and if it continues, her cultists and her growing army could spread across the world – her former realm.*

*We can’t let that happen.*

He moved like wind, passing swathes of civilians and wounded soldiers praising him and calling his name like a promised messiah. At

the Fire Temple, the High Fire Sage appeared, flanked on either side by Confessors of the Flame, their flaming staves and Shakujiō causing many to fall to their knees like wheat at the behest of the scythe. Min-Yun ignored his croaked sermons and divine rituals, rather, letting the warmth of Jaehi wash over him.

*After everything...they still follow like sheep.* Min-Yun cursed as he disappeared in walkways behind flaming pyres and hid in the shadows born of the great inferno. Racing between empty alleys and barely maintained dirt paths, he found the emptiness of the lesser-known districts a patch of peace in the midst of their celebrations. He chuckled softly as he raced across the street to another alley, coughing softly to clear his lungs.

Chayumi fireworks split across the skies of Gong-Ji since the beginning of the New Year and will continue to do so until the beginning of spring. They were loud, booming like thunder in the cloudless canvas above. He took a deep breath, taking in the burning embers, the flames and the powerful aroma of blazing wheat and rice, sacrificed to the gods for a good year and harvest. Fire didn't scare him anymore, seeing the things his brethren could do in battle – what he could do – if anything, it filled him with a strange uncertainty.

The power he had within continued to flee but returned without fail whenever he needed the extra push. It saved them when they encountered a small force of cultists that had the numbers to rival five Legionary sections. No matter how strong his flame became, nor the training he received from Kenshi and Yumi when they returned to Takumi; the flame refused to be permanent. Even with meditation and training with his cousin Setsuki, there was little gained and more questions remaining.

The woman in question walked the streets of the city, her flame waving off her back like wings, bringing the tired and scorned peasantry to their knees in reverence. They both knew that it was

taking advantage of their faith, but any solace they could gift, they had to do something. On either side of her, Hitae and Jungyeon grew their own flames on their small bodies; the crimson flickers dancing back and forth as they sang hymns with the Acolytes following close on their heels. Torches were swung about and lanterns dangling on swinging chains moved in pendular motion.

The monotony, the endless drivel. There was no point to any of it. Taking his eyes to the clouded skies and the bursting bounty of colors, the world he thought he knew; the world he inadvertently created seemed a slow degradation coming to unfold as the moments, the seconds and even shaking breath that came and went. He couldn't stop it, the unintentional response to his terror; the shaking had begun once again.

Shutting his eyes, he clutched his shaking hands, careful to not shudder out of his clothing. *Koyuki. Jin. Kaede. Gendo. Talk to me...give me your guidance from the Ashen Fields.*

"Min-Yun." A voice shook him.

Whipping around, the boy's crimson eyes locked with the tanned face of Hayuten Kenichi, the heir of the Hayuten Clan, "W-What? How?"

"I could smell you." The teen chuckled, "Hiding from the celebrations? They are for you, you know that, right?"

"That's the thing, isn't it?" Min-Yun turned to the Hayuten, "I am not a god. I didn't do anything to earn these celebrations."

"In the end, you gave them something they may have forgotten," Kenichi responded quickly, "you gave them hope. After all, you gave me some hope."

"Shut up, Kenichi," the boy rolled his eyes.

“Hey, I knew you had it in you; but what you did in Yeonju sounds like the shit we’d hear from the stories of Shaeng Kenji and the Shaeng of the Third Age.”

“I didn’t think you were one for Shaeng legends, Kenichi.”

“I didn’t think you were going to burn a coastline, but here we are.”

Their laughter, though tired and ragged, echoed into the sky, “You say I gave you hope – will you follow me into the depths of hell again?”

“I’d follow you to the edge of the world,” Kenichi smiled.

“You know what we have to do, don’t you?” Min-Yun murmured, turning away, “we have to go back to Tajima to continue the fight against the Black Queen’s magick. With the relic in the field in enemy hands...we have to do what we can to close the gap. Is the Lord Sarujin in agreement?”

“Lord Sarujin said he would think of it for the duration of the Fire Festival...but I don’t see any reason why he wouldn’t agree. With the situation in Naguchi and the growing discontent in the Shikari and Nakamura States, he’ll more likely than not, send us away to not risk more noble heirs.”

“Politics,” Min-Yun scoffed, “how nice would it be if we stopped fighting amongst ourselves and focused on the real fight? Chayumi Rebellions be damned; my sister and her rebellion be damned; the Black Queen’s power remains and continues to grow stronger.”

“Believe me, I agree, but Jin and Kaede...” Kenichi’s voice trailed softly, “I’m not saying that I agree with their way of dealing with their grief, but I can understand why they’re acting the way they are. The Shaeng who swore to protect the Empire has done nothing but burn one of their own Shaeng States and the Royal Family is fractured.”

“Right. My own siblings...I can’t believe they’d face my father in open war,” Min-Yun turned to the sky, “I knew the day would come eventually, but to think it’s really happening...I can barely sleep. The Shaeng in the East are distracted with her uprising and with Rai-Min on the throne, the Inquisition only continues its stranglehold.”

“Raijin? Inquisition?” Kenichi raised a brow. “Don’t you think we have bigger enemies to worry of? You know, Cultists, the Black Queen and the *Caeradins*? I still have nightmares of those horned freaks.”

He glanced to the black and orange rooftops of the city, he could see past the growing pillars of smoke and the flickering flames dancing over the horizon, the great Jae-Jin constantly watching. From the terraced rice paddies against the slopes to the wheat fields covering the eastern and southern horizon, Gong-Ji’s beauty remained untouched, yet, that fear, crept from the corners of his inner darkness.

“The *Caeradins* are out there and they *will* pay for what they’ve taken from us...but right now we need to return to the home front. We need to reinforce our positions in Gong-Ji, Tajima and hopefully, Han if and when we bring the Marquee of Chang’an into the fold.”

“And if we manage that, what next? We still have a Shaeng Civil War raging between your siblings and your father and the forces of the Chayumi Rebellion beating at our borders again. If Kobe burns, the Shaeng could alienate the Shikari spawning yet *another* rebel faction in the Empire. Can we afford that right now? Especially with the Nakamura already enraged with what happened to Kaede...”

“What do you expect *me* to do about it?” Min-Yun scoffed, “Not one of them would listen to me. And if somehow any of them did, what could I accomplish with talking? I know they wouldn’t give us the resources to fight the real fight. To them, they’d arrest the Zheng Qi twins and throw them in a dungeon cell and laugh as they rotted away.”

“Still...”



“I know Shaeng. With an Inquisitor dead, Rai-Min and whoever’s the Grand Inquisitor now, *will* prepare to strike out again. The game we play is a dangerous one, Kenichi. Don’t forget that. We aren’t plotting around Tianxia anymore – we’re plotting against Shaeng. My Clan won’t let us get away with this for long.”

“We do nothing – the whole world dies. We do something, the whole world might survive but we still die anyway.” Kenichi surmised, “You really know how to inspire.”

“Shut up.” Min-Yun sighed into his palm, “Tajima is our safe haven – once we continue the fight, we shouldn’t return to Sarujin Castle and Gong-Ji. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“L-Leave Gong-Ji forever?” The Hayuten gasped. “But...”

“I know. Tomoko won’t like it but our safest option is to stay in Tajima until we’ve successfully hunted and destroyed all of the Black Queen’s fortresses across Maedos, at the very least, Hayu-Min. If we were to continue moving between Tajima and Gong-Ji, the Inquisition, the Yeunsoo, hell, even the Cultists could find a way to sabotage our supply lines or worse – Sarujin Castle and threaten the Sarujin Clan as a whole?”

“I understand what’s at stake but leaving Sarujin Castle behind...I don’t know if I can do that. This place is my home as much as it is Tomoko’s – I’ve spent more of my life here than I have in the Hayuten States. Everything, everyone, I love is here...”

“Then you must agree that we have to distance ourselves. To fight the war, we must leave what we want to protect. To keep them from harm, we must throw ourselves into harm. We are their shield – their protectors. We cannot risk staying here when we have targets on our backs. Besides, with Ishida here, I doubt Tomoko will be too lonely. The Lord Sarujin is thinking of adopting him into the Clan.”

Finally, the Hayuten realized. “Damn the Inquisition. Damn the Shaeng.”

“I know. Kenichi, you are my brother, my blood oath brother. I cannot do this without you...are we in agreement?”

“I told you when we first met all those years ago and I’ll tell you again; I am by your side forever, my Prince. We’ll ride for Tajima and find as many of the Black Queen’s fortresses and do what you did in Yeonju. I can only pray that the gods would be kind and save us from the same horrors...”

“I know. I feel the same.” Min-Yun narrowed his eyes to the distant sun, “I didn’t realize it was already so late. Moving through the city; to the rooftops; it’s already close to twilight.”

“Have you heard from them since we parted ways? The Zheng Qi twins...” Kenichi asked, “I...liked them, in a way. Fighting in Yeonju with them felt good...it felt right, you know, I guess.”

“I sent Lady Lin a message some time ago...I haven’t received a response yet. I’ve been curious as well...but with my sister taking Hirashi, the only logical place she could go is Kobe; the Fire Hawk Headquarters could be in danger.”

“There goes our only form of communication...” Kenichi frowned.

The Prince subconsciously ran a hand against the scar across his face, the prayer beads still wrapped around his forearm, each clicking and clacking as they collided with one another. Voices, sounds and faces flashed into his mind bringing a cold wash over his body. Slowly, his silver eyes closed, hiding from the beaming warmth of the glorious setting sun.

*Lin. Please let me know that you’re safe.*

# Chapter II

## Penance

**Date: February 10, 1018 5<sup>th</sup> Age**

**Location: The State of Wu, the Kingdom of Tianxia**

Beyond the Shan Jae-Jin, weaving through troughs and deep valleys of luscious green, an ancient city poked through the horizon. Resting its immense and idolized weight upon the banks of the Zhengyi River, its walls stretched across the river lengths, hiding the trade ships buoyant in the shallow waters, drifting slowly in the distance. Strangely enough, the powerful, towering, castle piercing the skyline held banners on every point and rooftop.

Music played in the winding city streets, even the blackened districts still recovering from Rai-Min's infamous incursion, people were active. Drums were beaten, horns were blown and strings were strum. Civilians, both native and refugee, danced and sung in the streets, throwing petals, spices and all they can get their hands upon. Many weren't even in the city itself!

Moving through the crowds, struggling to get to the great gates of the city, a young woman and her brother locked eyes, uncertainty matched in their hazel irides. Their faces contorted with confusion,

even with the Lunar New Year celebrations, this was more than worship – they were proud. Suddenly, her horse reared, screaming, nearly throwing her off its back. A trio of Castle Guards appeared, waving the very same banners that danced upon the castle stakes.

Silk and golden laced, the banners were illuminated by the light of the midday sun. Lin watched the calligraphy spelling the name of their ancient kingdom wave proudly in the winds. Instead of pride, she shook in her armor, riddled with disbelief.

*No...they couldn't have!*

“This isn’t for the lunar festival.” The young boy, Park Jungkook, murmured under his breath. “They have to be celebrating something else. In Yeonju, our celebrations would have lions, tigers and dragons to commemorate the spirits and the ancestors...this is–”

“They’re celebrating the birth of a Kingdom...” Xu Fang finished. “Our banners never declared for the Kingdom like this...no one cheered for your father this feverishly.”

“Lin, what do we do? What do we make of this nonsense? The war isn’t over, we have no place to be declaring a Kingdom.” Guanyi hissed, gripping the reins of his mount. “What we should be doing is searching for Song Fei and bringing him to justice and redirect our forces to help Tajima find and destroy Xiao-Li’s castles.”

“You’re starting to sound like me.” Lin said, her glare worsening. “Song Fei, we’ll find him on our own if we have to – Xiao-Li’s castles will wait for now. All I want right now is to learn what the hell father was thinking to do something this stupid.”

“Lin...I know what you’re thinking...” Guanyi reached out, his hand grabbing her shoulder. “Breathe.”

“They decide to declare Tianxia remade but they won’t search for Song Fei. Priorities in this nation are skewed.” Lin hissed. “Come on, we need answers.”

Marching through the crowds, it was almost unnerving when they parted perfectly. Their banners waved softly, the strands hanging off the mass whipped about, disappearing in the clouds of smoke. Men and women watched them with a mixture of surprise and pride, while there were many within the crowds that seemed almost afraid of them. It wasn’t worry, else the Zheng Qi twins would have been swarmed with gifts and prayers – this was different.

They received nothing but ire, a hateful gleam played in their thin angered eyes. From the curved brows angled with a fury, their faces contorted, twisted with hands slowly trailing to whatever they could reach to use as a weapon. Lin was prepared to defend herself, but a hand rested on her shoulder. Guanyi shook his head, sensing the tension in his sister.

“Lin, not now. We shouldn’t bother with them.” The boy said. “We need to get to the Palace and figure this whole situation out. Alright?”

“Fine.”

Wading through the celebrations, they finally arrived at the gates of the palace. Men and women, numbering in the hundreds stood with gifts of bread, cakes and sweets, along with flowers and even bags of rice placed at the foot of the great studded doors. The same banners drifted below, almost ominous in their wave. Almost expected, the civilians and even the soldiers standing in the crowds turned on their heels, watching the Zheng Qi and the small force they returned with.

Spiteful eyes narrowed at their appearance, almost as if they were hoping to burn holes in their heads. There was a fire, a sudden warmth that grew in their chests that wallowed over the assembly. She could feel their anger grow and coalesce. Suddenly, the great gates opened,

creaking as they did, silencing the growing discontent. Civilians and soldiers parted immediately, their faces pale white like ghosts. The heavy wood creaked as the studs glistened in the morning sun, as dull as unpolished bowls.

Lin took a deep breath, shaking in her armor. Awaiting her was nothing short of what she could assume was a Royal Guard. They were men dressed in ornate armor, decorated with dragons and a collection of colors that kept to the rituals of the Chayumi of antiquity. Luck; Protection; Wisdom; Dedication. An unspoken uncertainty echoed in her heart, almost like a second heartbeat, one that went against her better judgement. She couldn't do anything but watch.

Not a word shared, not a glance wavered; they stood in her path, an impassible wall of shields, gold and silver and spears. The swords at their hips were curved, broad shaped and heavy in the stylized scabbards. It was a threatening stance, their weapons held at the ready. She wasn't sure if this was custom now in their almost foreign home, but it did nothing to calm her racing heart. With a hand shaking to the hilt of her blade and magick gathering in her palm, she was prepared for anything.

“Stand aside, Han.” A gruff voice sounded. “Since your promotion to the Captain of the Honor Guard, you've grown hungry to show your worth. This is your Princess and Prince; you should know better.”

“But...Sun Xi...she defended that Shaeng. She should pay—”

The man was suddenly struck across the face and thrown to the ground, revealing the famed General Sun Xi. His grizzled black beard and silvery streaked hair, a mainstay of his appearance, was coupled with deep wrinkles and heavy bags beneath his eyes. “It's *General* Sun Xi. You Yeunsoo have no respect. Lady Lin...we are all glad that you've returned safely from your campaign.”

The Honor Guards, as they were called, moved apart, splitting like the crowds and soldiers within the city proper. “My lady...this isn’t exactly what I expected when you said we’d be welcomed in Wuxi.”

“Me neither, Jungkook.” The woman frowned. “Stay close to my brother. I don’t exactly trust this *Honor Guard*. That man, Zhao Han...he was but a lowly man-at-arms when I last saw him.”

“If I remember correctly, you threatened to kill him in this very courtyard.” Guanyi chided. “Looks to me the Yeunsoo made quick work to fill the positions needed to run a Kingdom.”

“Knowing Father...he probably listened to the Court, rather than seeking council with trustworthy people. How long has he ignored the pleas of the Honorable Three? How long has he ignored us?”

“It doesn’t matter now...we’ll sort this out soon.” Lin marched forward, shoulders shaking and jewels ringing with every step.

“Lin! Wait!” Guanyi ran after her. “Don’t do anything rash. We haven’t been home in a long while...and you’re wearing a *Shaeng* pendant. The Court will see—”

“Let them see it!” She hissed. “I could care less what they say or think. This pendant is none of their concern!”

“What would father think?”

“To hell what Father thinks! He birthed a Kingdom that shouldn’t have been made. Right now, I want to know what he was thinking – I want to know whose idea it was to do something so stupid. Look at the people out there. When they realize that Tianxia cannot survive this war, imagine the chaos. When we lose, we’ll be worse off than we were after the Barellians and Shiyumi cut our Kingdom as if they were carving a cake after Xiao-Li was defeated.”

“I can’t help but agree, Lin.” The old general said. “However, in these halls, such thoughts can be considered treason. I’m not going to

silence you, but the Wuxi you left behind no longer exists. The Yeunsoo, the Court, your father, it all changed since you left. It will be hard to explain but give it time, have some patience and all will be revealed when it's right."

"How can you expect us – me – to stand by and accept this?" Lin asked. "I'm surprised the Confederacy isn't in uproar. The Caeradins returned, Sun Xi! The *Caeradins*! That's news that could upset the entirety of Maedos! Barellians, Antyrians—"

"This is where I stop you, Lin." The general stopped mid-step. Quickly turning on his heels, the man narrowed his thin black eyes at the woman. "It is *because* of that uproar that your father decided that no action was to be made. It is *because* of the Caeradins that he declared Tianxia a Kingdom again. He gathered the Courts, the Lords of the Confederacy and declared it so with not one speaking out against it."

"Things have changed indeed." Lin murmured.

"They have changed in ways you can't imagine."

Entering the doors of the palace, the dragon designs seemed freshly carved. As they filed into the foyer, statues of ancient Chayumi heroes, golden dragons spiraled and clung to the pillars and columns within the winding halls. Despite having grown in those very corridors, it was foreign to her. The banners of the Kingdom draped from the ceiling where cobwebs used to be. The further they walked, the artwork increased, an explosion of paintings, pottery and all sorts of nonsense that the Confederacy would have never wanted; what her mother never wanted.

There was one however, that made her freeze mid-step. It was a large thing, gaudy and made of thin rice paper. There were mountains on it, curved in slope with a nearly flattened top. They were numerous, covering much of the horizon with the largest, Mount Jingu, painted



softly in the distance, almost fading into the parchment. However, as beautiful as the mountains and the flora and fauna were, in the center of the painting, there was a woman bearing a likeness she'd see only from her memories.

There she was, painted in golds, silvers and platinum. She had a kind, motherly face, with eyes that bore understanding. The robes she wore, while embellished in its beauty, remained similar to what her thoughts remembered. The prayer beads she wore wrapped firmly around her wrist, clutched in the ball of her fist – something the young woman didn't remember. Looking closer to the painting, there were things that were completely wrong. From her hair color, to the stance of her prayer. Even the rays coming from her supposed halo were an affront to the gods themselves.

*I'm no Shiyumi, but to insult Jaehi...this is ridiculous.* The woman hissed as she marched away from the painting. *What more does my father want? How many more lies does my father wish to tell the people? I don't understand – we were doing so well before Takumi. We were on the road to peace before...before...Song Fei.*

Her hazel eyes glowered, slowly glowing with a white and yellow light. It stung at first, burning into her irides, but she hushed it away. There was a silent hiss, a slight sizzle before it fizzed away, leaving her eyes in their usual shade. She turned for a moment, letting her eyes lock with that of her brothers.

He was no different. Eyes once hazel shrouded in a yellow-white light. Much like their battle at Yeonju, it felt different from the regular magick of the Aetheria. Shaking her head from her thoughts, she held herself steady before the large doors decorated with jade dragons slithering about the entrance. Taking a shaking breath, she nodded at the general as Honor Guards opened the doors in unison.

The noise it made, ominous with each creak and shrill scrape, her skin crawled with every inch it moved. Within, the dragons never

stopped; the divine iconography only seemed to increase. There were weapons, rusted and decrepit, hanging from displays. Few were of Jaeori Steel as well. At the throne, the Honor Guard stood in numbers she wasn't expecting, almost fifty in total stood before her father as he watched menacingly from his golden throne.

“Lin.” He called. “I’m glad to see you’ve returned from your campaign. However, I see that you’ve come back missing a few...”

“Lin...don’t even think about it.” Guanyi’s hand tightened around her shoulder.

“You already know the reports and what happened in Yeonju—”

“I’ve yet to understand why you were in Yeonju to begin with. Your campaign was to bring the destruction of Takumi and tear the Shaeng apart. I receive reports that you were defeated and you claim Song Fei, a decorated and well respected General and *your* chosen betrothed, betrayed us. I hear nothing for months and then I receive a message saying *Caeradins* and magick run rampant in Baekguryeo and Yeonju. Do you know what that sounds like to me and the rest of the Court?”

“It sounds to me that we’ve found a bigger enemy than the Inquisition and the Shaeng in the East.”

“It sounds like failure!” The man roared. Rising from his seat, magick energy rippled off of his body, causing the torches hanging from their sconces to tremble. “You had one task, Lin. The Yeunsoo never wanted to ally with the Shaeng; I never wanted to ally with them. I wanted to defeat them and free our people from their grip. What you have done goes against ten years of war.”

“Ten years of war that none of us wanted!”

“They struck first!”

“That doesn’t mean we have to continue falling into their wishes. Don’t you realize that the Shaeng didn’t want the war?! Who would want death of this scale? The Caeradins got what they wanted – they have taken a relic of Xiao-Li. If you’d read my reports, you might have known this!”

There was a heavy silence that wallowed over the throne room. Honor Guards looked to one another, lowering their spears slightly. There where whispers between the Court Eunuchs, there were conversations hushed in the background between lords and generals of Tianxia. News of a relic existing and in the hands of the Horned Half-Elves meant nothing short of terror. The young woman eased her stance, watching her father slowly walk the steps of his throne. There was an unspoken worry between herself and her brother, one that continued between their eyes.

“How?” Was his simple word when he stood over her. “How did the Caeradins get their hands on something so sacred?”

“They attacked in numbers we didn’t hope to expect. Kal-Mar, Ahn-Mar, Bëol-Mar. Three castes beat against the combined forces of Chayumi, Daeyumi and Shiyumi. The many Shaeng who journeyed with us, only four remained...”

“I’m certain Sun Xi has told you why I’ve done nothing that you’ve requested.”

“He did, but–”

“As dangerous as the Caeradins are – they won’t dare to move towards Baekguryeo or Maedos for another few years. If the Shaeng truly did burn their fleet to ash, then the Caeradins would be too afraid to plan for another assault into Maedos. That gives us the perfect chance to resume our war. Right now, we must continue our fight against the Shaeng and the Empire. With the death of that Nakamura heiress, the Nakamura States are prepared to fight for their own

secession. It is our job to get them to join our fight. The enemy of my enemy.”

“W-What?!” Lin spat. “I fought beside them – how can you expect me to–”

“I feel like I’m speaking to a wall. The Shaeng have lost the trust of *two* of their Noble Clans – Shikari are already aiding the Emperor’s children in their revolt against him and the Sons and Daughters are with Tajima and the Gin-Shaeng–”

“His name is *Shaeng Min-Yun!*!” Lin interrupted. Before she could continue however, Hongxi’s gloved hand smashed against her cheek, knuckles forcing spit and blood from her mouth.

“I don’t give a damn about him or his name. Right now, Lord Hiroshi has decided that he will no longer support us. The Sarujin are our enemies and we must prepare to attack Gong-Ji.” Hongxi hissed. “With the defeat of the Naguchi delegation in Kyojin and the complete disarray of their hierarchy, Naguchi has become a prime target as well. This time, I don’t want another failure like you had in Tajima. Over seven thousand men and an entire Chariot Corps lost because you underestimated your enemy.”

“It was Song Fei’s doing!”

“I will hear no more of this.” Hongxi bellowed, “You can’t hope to work with your commanding officer if you’re so deadest on his demise.”

“What are you talking about?!” Lin tensed. Tethers tightened, drawing from the Aetheria immediately. “What have you done?!”

Spinning on her heels, she came face to face with that of what she feared the most. Song Fei stood over her, smiling. He was almost a tower compared to her, even in her armor. The smile that she once thought of as sincere, only carried a certain disgust to it, a poisonous

aura followed. There was something about him, something that made her stomach twist in unnatural ways.

“How have you been, Lin?” He said, his mouth dripping with acid. “I missed you.”

Just when everything seemed lost, she opened her eyes, finding nothing but the beaming light of Jaehi herself resting upon her face. Instead of the browns and greens, the polished tiles and bright reflections of statues and bronze, she found the cerulean canvas, the clouds, large and voluminous, and the formations of birds in flight. No longer did she find the stylized halls of the Palace of Wuxi – only rubble and debris. The roof had collapsed, showing her the bright beauty of nature outside.

Peering over the great crevice that had formed, branches of Blackwood Trees, native to the State of Chu waved calmly in the winds. The rustling of leaves a nice song, merging with that of the birds above. It was peaceful – the only word she could find to describe what she saw. Shaking in her armor, blood seeping from her forehead brought her back to consciousness.

Surrounding her, the remnants of a stone dodecahedron, its twelve faces nothing more than pieces falling to the dirt, adding to the refuse. Across the ruined atrium, her brother was seen, nursing his own wounds, all the while using his magick to heal the wounds the young Park Jungkook had received in the skirmish. The Shào sisters looked at Xu Fang, who had struggled with his own enemies during the fight – if only she could remember. It was all such a blur.

“Lin, are you alright?” Guanyi called. “It looks like the Relic is yours!”

She was silent for a moment, trying to find her words. Thoughts swirled in her head, one of faces, voices and words. Seeing Song Fei, although it was nothing short of a vision, it was almost too real.

Clutching the relic in her palms, the strange ornament hummed with a soft, almost silent tune. It was nothing like the songs it sung in the vision, it was like a whispering voice. One that told her a vicious plan.

“G-Guanyi...” The woman barely managed to choke. Bringing her free hand to shade her eyes from sight, the warmth, the overbearing light of Jaehi had disappeared. “I’m fine. The relic is secured...”

Shoving the ornament into her pouch, she felt her tethers ripple within her Sea of Chi. The energy bouncing between each point, every pore in her body shuddered with it. The magick in her body merged with that of the relics she had already claimed. Taking several deep breaths, thinking of what Koyuki taught her, the woman’s energy came to accept the new energy. Her bloodstream contorted, twisting and writhing, tightening her muscles.

Lin tried to fight it, but her knees buckled, bringing her to the dirt and debris below. Blood seeped from her nostrils, painting her hands and the earth beneath a deep maroon. Her lungs hitched, forcing what little air she had taken, out. Her head pounded with the force of thunder, beating her mind with hammers. As the relics met one another, all ornaments the old Queen supposedly wore, the power she had only seemed amplified.

“Lin!!”

Rocks and stones tumbled as her brother appeared beside her. However, as his gloved hand touched her armored shoulders, the man was violently blown back, smashing into the ruined columns and boulders. Lin tried to reach out, but her own body was no longer listening to her commands. Jia and Suyin almost moved to help her, but Jungkook, the growing and knowledgeable boy moved to stop them.

“S-Stay back!” Lin cried out. “Get my brother up and set the barriers!”

They moved quick, twirling their hands, creating the wards required. It was growing more common as they raided Xiao-Li's old fortresses. As their collection of relics grew, the Zheng Qi twins and their condition worsened. It would seem that there was only so much magick their bodies could contain. No amount of meditation, no amount of training, could prepare them for this onslaught from the Aetheria. Or was it from Xiao-Li herself? Such power shouldn't be as potent as it was.

Lin fought the pressure building in her body, almost taking the air from her lungs. The cuirass she wore had never felt so tight and constricting. Shuddering in her chainmail, the metal jingled and sang with the voices growing in her head. They were saying all kinds of things, asking her questions, begging and commanding. They were legion, an entropy that only seemed to grow in the never-ending expanse of mental solitude.

Feeling a hand press on her shoulder nonetheless, she snapped, sending waves of magick in every direction. Dust, debris and rubble smashed against the orange barriers protecting her friends and team. Winds beat against the struggling pillars still standing and the crumbling walls, threatening to tear the necropolis upon them. As her hazel eyes cleared, she calmed, bringing the quake to a simple shudder against the cracks.

"Guanyi..." Lin whispered. "How many more fortresses are there?"

"Lin, we should rest for a while."

"I can't rest." She hissed, forcing herself to her feet. "*He* is out there. If we stop for even just a minute, he will find us and if we let ourselves slip – he'll catch on to what we're doing. We're doing exactly what the Yeunsoo wanted – what Father wanted. Surely, this is something that he would want to keep track of."

“All the more reason to rest.”

“What is the next fortress?” Her tone was harsh, leaving little to discuss.

Guanyi sighed in defeat. “There is one, it’s almost completely destroyed from the Great War in the Third Age. The villages in the region gave us a good idea of where to go to find it, but like this one – expect it to be a necropolis as well.”

“Another sunken fortress.” Lin rolled her eyes. “Where is it? Will we stay in Chu?”

“No...we’ll be going East.” Guanyi frowned. “However, it’s going to be a difficult fortress to get to.”

“Why? Where is it?”

“We’ll have to go back to the front lines. With what happened in Yeonju and Tajima...Father and the Yeunsoo...”

“And Song-Fei.” Lin growled. “How soon can we leave?”

“Lin–!”

“Whatever estimate you have – hasten it. Let’s go!!”





*After the events of Yeonju Province, the heroes have gone their separate ways. As the Black Queen's magick continues to rise, Baeorillia does not wait. With the conflicts unending, and death reclaiming; all that remains is the Storm of War.*

## **Baeorillia: The Storm of War**

By Derrick Sasuman

**Order the book from the publisher [BookLocker.com](http://BookLocker.com)**

**<https://www.booklocker.com/p/books/12156.html?s=pdf>**

**or from your favorite neighborhood  
or online bookstore.**