

Author's Note: This scene originally opened Chapter 5. It was removed for reasons of space, and the chapter works well enough without it.

4.5

SOULS OF THE BETRAYED

The
Ninth
Year of
the Reign
of Toturi I

Yasuki Masashi felt very much out of place. The Crab Clan's architecture was solid, thick, martial, and not at all like the elegant and airy Crane palaces. Grim-faced armored Crab samurai stood guard, their unstyled hair loose about their faces, well-muscled arms unabashedly bare to display their scars. The guards' armor was unpolished and battered from untold hours of fighting. Even their colors of dark blue, gray, and red cast a depressing air over the chambers. On the whole, this palace looked more like a war camp than a refuge of serenity and meditation.

Meditation. Masashi wondered if the Crab even knew the meaning of the word.

Although he was nearly as tall as the Crab samurai around him, Masashi was nowhere near as solidly built. His was the build of a Crane—thin, elegant, and agile. His pale skin contrasted sharply with the swarthy tones of the samurai around him, and his white-dyed hair, artfully arranged and perfumed, shone like a beacon among the

bleak hues of the Crab. His beautiful silk kimono whispered quietly across the unpolished flagstones on the floor, the fine material and bright, hand-painted designs raising a few eyebrows among those who watched him pass. On top of it all, he was surrounded by the golden aura of a spirit returned from Jigoku, a sign that respect and deference was his due.

I am a snow-covered pine in a field of charred boulders, he thought, and he moved the part, slowly and regally. His half-lidded eyes appeared almost sleepy, seeming to disregard all around him, yet they took in every nuance, every uncultured scratch or restless motion of the guards.

Indeed, the surroundings made Masashi feel like a carp that had leaped from the pond, but it was only fitting, considering how much the world had changed in the nine hundred years or so since his death. So much had changed in the Empire since those early days. Vast cities dotted the lands, connected by roads. The population was larger than he could have imagined, yet their ties to the gods were so distant, so far removed from those days when the Children of the Sun and Moon walked the lands.

Some growth was to be expected; it was the way of things. Yet sometimes the bonsai had to be pruned, perhaps even most of the trunk broken off, for the spirit of the tree to reach its potential. This was one such time.

The Yasuki were supposed to be a part of the Crane Clan. For them to be a part of the Crab Clan was unthinkable.

He moved across the chamber toward the doors to the Yasuki family daimyo's court. At the doors, servants stepped forward, bearing a katana stand. Wordlessly, they held it out.

Masashi stopped, turned his head ever so slightly toward the servants, and sneered, "Does Oguri fear his ancestors, that he seeks to disarm them?"

The servants said nothing, but kept their heads bowed and the katana stand extended.

For several long heartbeats, no one moved.

"Shinsei said we should honor our ancestors!" shouted

Masashi. "I would welcome mine to visit me, for I have done nothing to offend them! Why, then, am I not welcomed in my own house?"

Again, there was silence.

Then the doors to the Yasuki daimyo's chamber slid noiselessly open, rice paper doors gliding easily on well-polished tracks. Inside, Masashi saw two-score Crab bodyguards on either side, delineating a narrow path to the daimyo. Masashi knew that despite their size, Crab bodyguards were amazingly fast and tenacious. Not even a blood-raged battle maiden would be foolish enough to try to charge the daimyo with this defense.

On a raised dais at the far end of the room sat Yasuki Oguri, the Yasuki daimyo. He wore a plain kimono . . . of Crab colors. He rested on an elegant cushion in purple and gold, and at his right hand sat a small writing table. He looked at Masashi with curiosity.

Masashi entered the room, flowing more than walking. He saw the tiniest ripple move through the bodyguards, almost imperceptible, as they realized what grace he commanded. Masashi knew they were calculating how many of them would die if they had to fight him. Not that such a calculation would ever stop a Crab. Nothing ever stopped a Crab. That was what worried him.

Nonetheless, it was time to prune.

Masashi and Oguri studied each other quietly.

"Does my honored guest refuse to bow?" asked Oguri at last.

"Does my honored host refuse to bow to his revered ancestor?" replied Masashi evenly.

"I would never be so disrespectful," answered Oguri, "however, I am now the daimyo, and one must always accord respect for the position first."

Masashi contemplated this for a moment behind his impassive face. While Rokugani etiquette had no written rules regarding the proper modes of address and decorum

when facing your long-dead ancestor reborn into a new body, he did, unfortunately, have to concede that point to the daimyo.

Perhaps there is yet Crane in your blood, Masashi thought as he bowed—slightly less deeply than Oguri perhaps deserved, but not enough to be truly objectionable.

In his peripheral vision, he saw Oguri bow in return. Not as gracefully, to be sure, and perhaps more than his station as daimyo should allow, but Masashi was pleased.

After another pause, Oguri spoke again. “It does the clan great honor to receive such a venerable person as yourself, Yasuki Masashi. We know that your time is valuable, so we will not fritter it away. Please, tell us what business brings you here this day.”

Oh, how very tactless, thought Masashi. What a terribly clumsy attempt to forego etiquette. You will require much instruction.

Despite his misgivings, Masashi adopted a warm smile. “Many thanks for your thoughtfulness,” he said, steeling his mind to be blunt and forthright instead of courteous and sincere. “In brief, I am gravely concerned about your political allegiances. Your ancestors—our ancestors, yours and mine—swore their lives, souls, and honor to the service of the Doji family and the Crane Clan. You must obey those oaths, as I did. Your service must be to the Crane, and not to the Crab.” He spoke the last word through slightly clenched teeth to show his disdain, although he doubted that anyone in this room was sophisticated enough to notice the slight shift in tone.

“I inherited my vows and my honor from my father, Yasuki Taka,” replied Oguri, “just as he inherited them from his father. I must obey their vows, which are to serve the Crab Clan. Please accept my apologies that I cannot indulge you upon this matter.”

“Just as samurai inherit honor and oaths from their predecessors, so too do they inherit dishonor and shame,”

countered Masashi. “One of your ancestors betrayed his oaths to the Crane Clan and swore fealty instead to the Crab Clan. The shame of that betrayal lingers to this day, where it now resides in your heart. Do not pass this shame along to your son Kamoru, lest it kill him.”

“The Crane betrayed us!” shouted Oguri. “We served them well, yet your clan’s champion supported the Emperor’s command that we cease to serve as we always had. He exiled us! We did not leave!”

“Of course he did,” whispered Masashi. “You refused the order. The Emperor’s command is law, yet you chose to disregard it. Being a samurai is to serve, yet you chose not to honor your daimyo’s command.”

“It would have ruined us,” grumbled Oguri.

Masashi smiled. “To serve means to put your clan’s needs ahead of yourself. If your daimyo orders you to fight in a place, knowing that you will die, yet your death will save thousands, will you not fight? Or will you once again turn tail and join the other side?”

“It was not like that!” shouted Oguri. “To obey the Emperor in such a fashion, without even time to consolidate . . . you do not understand! The Crane needed those profits! They supported the southern armies! It would have been—”

Masashi raised a hand gently, stopping Oguri’s tirade. “Tell me, Oguri,” he whispered, “how much better off is the Crane Clan, since you refused to obey? The southern armies now wear Crab colors. Your lands are now under the Crab banner. Is the Crane Clan, whom you swore to serve, better off now than if your ancestors had simply humbled themselves before the Emperor?”

He paused, seeing the discomfort in the daimyo’s eyes. Time to offer him a way out. “No, Oguri, though you may try to hide behind the words of a Scorpion, your ancestors betrayed their oaths and their clan. Their actions dishonor your actions, and your actions dishonor my name. Come, Oguri, lead your clan back home, and all will be forgiven.”

Oguri crossed his arms and glowered at Masashi from beneath his brow. "You claim to be pure, but some of the Yasuki abandoned their family daimyo for the Crane Clan and changed their name to Daidoji. Are the traitors any worse?"

"I am pure," said Masashi, "for I have betrayed no one. As for the Daidoji, they served the Emperor's edict over the one who defied it. Come. Join them. Reunify the family."

"No," said Oguri flatly. "What's done is done."

Masashi raised his voice to a bellow (though not an unrefined shout, as Oguri had done), saying, "Then I challenge you, Oguri, to a duel, here and now, for the control of the Yasuki family!"

So saying, he slowly moved his left hand to his katana, pulled the sheath forward slightly, leveling it into the dueling position, and pushed the sword's hilt with his thumb to loosen the blade for a quick draw. He then dropped his left hand again, and placed the back of his right hand on the handle of his sword to await the duel.

Oguri rose from his seat. He picked up his katana from its place beside him and handed it to an aide. Likewise, he pulled his wakizashi from his belt and handed that to the aide, as well. Unarmed, he walked down between the rows of bodyguards to stand directly in front of Masashi.

"I am unarmed," he said. "Murder me if you will, but they will not follow you."

Masashi's mouth twitched slightly, once, in his frustration at having been politically outmaneuvered by a Crab, for indeed this one was too far gone to ever be a Crane again. He could not start the war by martyring their daimyo. That would only ensure the Yasuki remained loyal to the Crab. Masashi secured his sword once more, and without a word, he turned on his heel and left the chamber, gliding out of the Crab palace to where a score of his loyal Crane samurai awaited him.

Outside, he mounted his horse and turned to the most

senior samurai. "Come, Meihu," he said. "We have much work to do."