

For Love of Honor

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THE SKY HUNG CLOSE AND HEAVY, an inverted landscape of deep valleys and jutting mountains, all painted in shades of angry gray. A stiff wind swept tall grasses, yellowing with the season, into gentle waves and subtle patterns. The same wind grabbed each puff of dust tossed up by Teiji's feet and whipped it into invisibility. The weather promised storms, filling each breath Teiji took with the scent of distant but approaching rain.

It had been some time since Teiji last walked that road. Then, he had been in the company of other warriors, marching to display the loyalty of the Fujiwara clan to Emperor Go-Ichijo against his enemies. That time it was *sohei*, the warrior monks of Mount Hiei, but there had been others before. Whomever the enemy, Sakata Teiji had always marched with his fellow soldiers, departing with them toward the fields of battle and returning with those who had survived. This time, however, Teiji walked the road alone. He wore simple clothes of gray, cut of the same cloth and in the same style as those he wore every day to work the fields of his small farm or to walk the other road leading away from his home.

Teiji adjusted the straps of his small backpack, shifting the weight on his back. The little sack held a few days' food and water, a change of clothes, and a leather pouch with what money he had not given Kaeko. It bumped gently against the small of his back with each step, providing counterpoint to the swaying rhythm of the two swords belted at his sides. He had not taken much

away from the place he had called home for the past six years, but felt that traveling light would be best since he had no particular destination in mind. Where, after all, did one go when one's life had lost all meaning?

With a sigh, Teiji adjusted his pack again and resisted the urge to look back. He had not walked so long that the plume of smoke from the remains of his house would be invisible, and he had no wish to look upon it again. Burning his home had been one of the most difficult acts of Teiji's thirty years of life, and it, like so many other things in recent memory, was something he wanted to put behind him as a part of the life he had so recently given up.

It started twenty days before, but Teiji remembered it as clearly as if it had been but the previous night, coming home the day after festival, bearing a heavy load of dry goods that concealed the bolt of emerald green silk he had purchased in town that day for Kaeko. He had spent the day in town, sharing bottles of sake with friends, all of whom bore scars from surviving the same battles Teiji himself had weathered.

Closing his eyes, Teiji let his feet carry him onward. The road was straight and he had a sufficiently keen sense of balance and direction to avoid wandering off it. Teiji breathed deeply of the storm-scented air and remembered, intending to look at the last days of his life once more before consigning them to the hidden vaults of things best forgotten.

"Kaeko?" Teiji asked, frowning in puzzlement as he stepped into the house, doffing his sandals with no more thought than that expended in breathing. "Kaeko?" He called, louder. "Where are you?"

"Here," came her reply from deeper within the house. "I'm in the bedroom, Tei-chan."

Teiji followed the sound of her voice, smiling at the casual endearment. They had not been married long enough for him to begin taking such things for granted, and every little display of affection brought a lightness to his step and a quirk to his lips. The sensation faded quickly, however, as the weighty puzzle in his hand drew Teiji's attention back to concrete matters of the world. "Kaeko," he asked, stepping through the bedroom doorway, "what is this?"

Kaeko turned from where she knelt at the low bedroom table, a half-painted fan resting on the varnished wood beside a row of colored inks. She frowned and

held the flowing sleeve of her *tomesode* carefully while setting her brush down on its stand. "It's a sword," Kaeko observed, rising from her pillow to stand before her husband.

"I know it's a sword," Teiji said wearily, holding the sheathed weapon up for inspection. "I mean, where did it come from? Who does it belong to? I was putting away the rice and salt when I found it stashed away behind the firewood."

"I'm sure I don't know, dear," Kaeko said, smiling sweetly. "Perhaps some passing scoundrel hid it away?"

Teiji frowned, drawing the *katana* partway from its sheath. He supposed Kaeko's explanation was possible, but it seemed unlikely that someone would be passing their house while in need of a place to hide their weapon. "It was not there two days ago," Teiji mused, turning the weapon in his hands. "I brought wood in from the pile and would have seen it. And this," he pointed to a small metal medallion held against the sword's handle by leather wrappings, "this looks familiar."

Kaeko laid her hand gently atop her husband's and asked, "Why not just put it back, Tei-chan? Forget that you found it, and perhaps whoever owns it will take it away."

Teiji nodded thoughtfully, turning to leave the bedroom. "You're probably right. Better to just forget it than invite trouble." But even as he carried the sword back to its hiding place, something nagged at Teiji's mind. He pried the little medallion free before replacing the blade behind the piled cords of wood, pocketing the metal disc and intending to ask around town as to its providence on his next trip.

"I want to know what's going on here, Kaeko."

Kaeko turned away from preparing dinner to look at Teiji curiously. He stood in the kitchen doorway, one hand on his hip and anger writ plain across his face. "Going on where, Teiji?"

"This," Teiji explained, holding out an open palm with the little medallion he had prized from his discovery ten days before. "I took it from that sword I found out in the shed and showed it to some people in town. They say it's a symbol related to a group calling itself Amaterasu's Sons."

Kaeko smiled and shook her head, "I'm sorry, should I recognize the name?"

"I'm not sure," Teiji said cautiously. He desperately wanted to believe that the conclusions he had come to on his journey home from town that morning were incorrect. "They say in town that these men are trying to assassinate the emperor."

"How awful!" Kaeko frowned and turned back to her dinner preparations. "Do you think it was one of them that left his sword here?"

"Yes," Teiji agreed, "but I think there's more than that."

"What do you mean?" Kaeko asked curiously and, Teiji thought, nervously.

"I've found other things since then," he explained. "A blanket wadded up in the corner of the shed with some scraps of food. A man's hair thong near the well. Food and supplies missing."

"What—what are you suggesting?" Kaeko asked, now clearly nervous.

"Someone from this group has been staying here," Teiji said flatly, crossing the distance between him and his wife. "An old peddler in town said he even saw someone in the fields the other day while I was in town. I want to know what you know about this."

Kaeko did not respond; she only continued stirring the mix of vegetables in her pan.

"Kaeko," Teiji asked again, touching her arm, "what is going on here? What do you know about these people?"

Still, it was a long moment before Kaeko responded. When she did, it was with a whisper: "I did it for you, Tei-chan."

Teiji frowned and gripped her shoulder gently, turning her to face him. "What do you mean? What did you do for me?"

Kaeko looked away from his eyes, casting her gaze down toward the floor and shifting nervously. "I—one of—one of those men," she explained hesitantly, "those men from the Sons. He came a month ago, while you were away with Fuji-san, and asked to stay overnight in our shed. It—I know you said not to allow anyone in while you are away, but it was raining so hard and—and I—" Kaeko's voice cracked and she half-collapsed against her husband, sobbing.

"Shh," Teiji whispered, smoothing Kaeko's hair and wrapping one arm comfortingly around her shoulders. "Calm down, Kaeko. Just tell me what happened so that I can fix it."

“He told me about Amaterasu’s Sons,” Kaeko continued a sniffing moment later. “He didn’t say anything about killing anyone at first. He just said that they were trying to change the emperor’s mind. He said that the *sohei* would attack again soon if Ichijo-sama did not relent to the temple’s tax requests. I thought it was a good idea, trying to prevent another war.” She looked up desperately at Teiji’s face and pleaded for his understanding. “Please, Teiji, please understand.... I did not know at first what they were doing, and then, when he finally told me, he made it sound like it was the only way to stop the war.”

“But why, Kaeko?” Teiji asked, implications of his wife’s confession swirling darkly through his mind. “Why do anything? If they would challenge the emperor, they must be taught their place.”

“Because you would have to go away again,” Kaeko murmured sadly. “You’d have to go fight them again, and—and you might not come back. Last time you had that horrible wound on your back that took so long to heal. What if you were not so lucky next time?”

“Then I would die in battle, protecting the will of my lord,” Teiji said sternly. That was the way a man should die. He had learned that as a child and known it all his life. Given his choice, he would gladly die on the field of battle rather than an old man in bed.

“And leave me behind,” Kaeko sighed. “I would be all alone, Tei-chan. What would I do without you? How could I live?”

“So you would jeopardize the entire empire?”

Kaeko was silent for seconds that stretched like hours in Teiji’s mind, then she nodded and whispered, “Yes. If that is what it takes to keep you, then yes.”

Teiji opened his eyes and sighed again. That had been the beginning of the end. He tried, at first, to hide Kaeko’s treachery both from himself and from his friends, but he knew it could not last. Kaeko’s words haunted his dreams, and he had told his best and oldest friend Musashi all of his discoveries as he made them. When word came from town that men from the Sons had been captured, Teiji knew it was merely a matter of time. They would draw confessions from the traitors and hunt down their compatriots and benefactors, and Sakata Kaeko would be among them.

For five days Teiji debated his choice. To do as honor demanded and turn

Kaeko in for abetting a traitor to the empire, or to send her away where she could not be found? He knew which was the right choice, but his heart would not let him take that path. He could not bear the thought of Kaeko being put to death for her crime, especially not when he knew that she had done it only out of concern for his own life.

So on the fifth day, when Teiji doubted they could wait any longer before men from the village arrived with blades drawn demanding his wife's head, he made his decision. He packed two bags and gave most of their money to Kaeko, telling her to go into the woods and stay there as long as she could, then flee the area. Find a new town and start a new life and perhaps, someday, he would find her again. She did not wish to leave him, but Teiji made it clear that if she did not take the out he presented, he would take her head himself. She believed him.

Teiji took his own bag and burned his home, hoping it might slow their pursuers, then set off down the winding dirt road he had so seldom traveled.

“Sakata-san.”

The sound of Musashi's voice drew Teiji back to the present and brought a curse to his lips for his foolishness. So absorbed in the past had he been that the sound of his friend's horse had not registered in his mind. Teiji turned slowly, looking up at Fuji Musashi where he sat atop a proud brown stallion. His friend was in clothes much like Teiji's and wore similar swords at his hips.

“Fuji-san,” Teiji replied politely, executing a short bow.

“What are you doing?” Musashi asked, and Teiji knew that any pretense was as good as wasted.

“Leaving,” Teiji said shortly.

“To go where?” Musashi asked, his face as blank of emotion as his voice.

“I don't know,” Teiji sighed. “Wherever the road takes me.”

“You would run away from your problems?” Musashi asked, a hint of anger entering his tone. “You would slink away like a thief in the night? We found your wife.”

“No,” Teiji gasped. He had suspected she would not get away, but it had been only hours. Surely they could not have found her so quickly?

“Your house had barely begun to burn when we arrived. We looked inside, and when we found it empty searched the woods.”

“And you—”

Musashi frowned and opened the whicker basket hanging behind his saddle to draw forth a leather sack. He opened it and spilled the contents on the ground before saying, “She has paid the price for her crimes.”

Teiji looked down at his wife’s face in horror, then back up at the man he had called friend. Shame, honor, loyalty—all vanished beneath a consuming wave of sorrow and fury. She had acted only out of love. “You bastard,” Teiji hissed, glaring up at the mounted man.

“Me?” Musashi asked, seeming genuinely shocked. “You would malign me? You who hid your wife’s treachery? In your actions you are as guilty as any of the would-be assassins. And now you sneak away, intending to slip the repercussions of your acts?” He spat angrily, wetting the dirt inches away from Kaeko’s severed head. “You have no honor.”

Teiji grimaced and drew his *katana*, more out of reflex than any intent to use it. He held the blade down, tip inches off the ground, and stared at the shifting hooves of Musashi’s horse.

“And what will you do with that?” Musashi asked, drawing his own sword. It hummed slightly in the still air, promising as much violence as the coming storm. “Add murder to the list of your crimes? If you have any shred of memory left of what it was to be a man, you will fall on your blade and spare me from tainting my own with your honorless blood.”

Teiji looked down at his wife’s face, serenely calm in death, and asked, “Has there not been enough death already? Death lead to this, and now it will lead to further killing.”

“Death defines life,” Musashi countered. “Without death, life is meaningless. You would deny that? More empty words from an empty man. End your existence now, Sakata-san. I will do your memory the favor of not telling the others of your cowardly actions here. There is no room in this world for men like you have become.”

Sinking slowly to his knees, Teiji nodded. “You’re right, Musashi,” he sighed, staring down at his wife’s face. “There is no room in this world for those who do not seek death.” He turned his *katana* in his hands and grasped the blade just above the *tsuba*, holding the tip against his abdomen.

“Then go,” Musashi said, some of his anger faded. “You were an honorable man once. Find some of yourself again.”

Impaling himself hurt less than Teiji expected it to. He fell forward what seemed, to him, very slowly. A raindrop fell with him, and Teiji watched its descent, tracing the glittering gemstone until it struck his wife’s pale cheek. Dust lifted when his face struck the ground, but Teiji did not notice. He reached out and stroked the streak of moisture away from Kaeko’s face, leaving a red one in its place. He smiled then and, remembering the last time he had been happy, murmured, “Don’t cry Kae-chan. We’re going to the shrine tomorrow for carnival.”