

Surmise of a Samurai

The expanse of ancient sugi trees pierced into the sky above, only allowing faint rays of midday sunlight to filter onto the forest floor. Okuda Haruki continued to ride carefully down the overgrown path, guiding his mounted kisouma around the gnarled trunks with taut reins. He had been travelling since the early morning, ears and eyes intensely alert, looking for distant movement or any signs of life.

An old forest, such as this one, held more than just the danger he now sought. It was a place where spirit gathered, and the veil between worlds became thinner. Making it easier for entities to root themselves in the physical realm and unleash chaos and death upon the unsuspecting or unworthy.

Okuda knew that there was no room for error. A virtuous opportunity was finally within reach... he would not allow this inkling of purpose to slip through his fingers. It was determination fueled by desperation. An existential need to regain what he had lost, and to serve something greater than himself once more.

-

A mere day before, he had moved deliberately down the well-paved road, the small metal scales of his kozane-dou armour clinking together rhythmically with each stride. A single ashigaru soldier had flanked on the right, leading him past the reinforced ninomaru and towards the intimidating gates of Liyama Castle.

"Have you been graced by my Daimyō Matsudaira Tadateru's presence before, rōnin?" the meagerly equipped ashigaru asked coldly as they grew closer, passing a few servants tending to flowers in the gardens.

"I have not had the pleasure," Okuda replied respectfully through clenched teeth, ignoring the rueful pang within his chest at the reminder of his status. Honourless in the eyes of those who would have once been beneath him.

"He should be pleased to hear that the word of his enlistment has spread," the man continued indifferently, maintaining a forward gaze.

"Is he in need of many men?" Okuda asked with a level voice, curious to learn more of what exactly the opportunity might be. After the Sekigahara war there had been little to no demand for larger militias, or armed forces. What could he, or the Tokugawa shogunate, be fighting?

The ashigaru seems to hesitate for a moment before speaking, his tone more subdued and serious, "That still need to be determined,"

Interest piqued, Okuda continued to follow in silence, eventually climbing up a set of small stairs towards the castle doors. Two stationed guards blocked the entrance as they approached, their faces emotionless behind fortified helmets.

"What business does *this one* have with Daimyō Matsudaira?" one of them asked gruffly, eyeing Okuda and his attire with an air of distaste and recognition.

"This rōnin has heard of our master's call for adept fighters," said the ashigaru rather bluntly, then turning towards Okuda. "Please stay out here while I seek you an audience,"

The guards grunted and stepped aside to let him past the doorway before returning to their former positions with succinct movements. Okuda could sense judgement radiating off of them, their long spears held with tight fists, expressions unwavering.

'What did they know of loss and shame?' He thought ruefully, shifting to face the rows of cherry blossoms as he waited. It was those who still retained their ranks that held the most ill-will towards rōnin. Unable to comprehend choosing to live a life without dutiful reverence.

Yet, it had not been his choice to make.

Okuda had mourned the loss of his master as if it were his own...but had been ordered not to follow him in death as punishment for his gullibility. Having placed trust in those who had been undeserving, bringing death, disaster and shame. The blood spilt was on his hands.

Being unable to fulfil his final act of loyalty, Okuda had decided to travel in search of gaining favour with a new lord. With his fate ripped away from him, he yearned to find a place of belonging and meaning once more.

The creaking sound of the doorway reopening signalled Okuda back to attention, only to find the ashigaru waving him in. "The Daimyō will see you now,"

Nodding, he abided, entering within to find an elaborate foyer with the subtle scent of pleasant herbs filling the space. Brought to the upper level, an older man was found sitting at the head of an open floor; an eboshi cap matching the ebony shade of his braided hair, juxtaposing against a set of expensive emerald robes. A few additional guards stood watch around the perimeter, maintaining a stoic and unmoving stance.

Approaching, Okuda knelt to the floor, his body bending forward into a respectful bow.
"Thank you seeing me, Daimyō Matsudaira Tadateru,"

"Please state your name for me, ronin." Matsudaira said, his voice projecting loudly with force.

"My name is Okuda Haruki." Okuda replied dutifully with a pounding heart, careful to ensure his inflection displayed the right amount of respect. "I served Daimyō Maeda Toshitaka, under the Maeda Clan."

"And yet, here you find yourself before me - undevoted and seeking employment," he replied with displeasure, the wrinkles under his eyes deepening as he squinted. "I've been informed you have come in response to my call for recruitment, correct?"

Matsudaira allowed a pause to hang in the air as Okuda tilted his chin downward in an affirmative gesture - the sting of the Daimyō's earlier words still fresh.

"There is a situation that I am needing dealt with," he continued, a strain added to his tone as he furrowed his brow further. "To speak plainly, my people are going missing."

"About a month ago we noticed that shipments of supplies weren't arriving as scheduled. Then reports of farmers disappearing began, and so I sent a few of my men down the trading route to scout. Assuming they'd find evidence of a wild animal or attack and report back - but they too have not returned."

The older man took in an inhale of breath, which filtered out of his mouth as he kept speaking, "I have only been the Daimyō of the Shinano Province for a year. I am hearing whispers about rumours spreading, questioning my ability to protect and command. I need someone capable to go and get me information on what is happening, or to stop the cause of these disappearances outright."

Sensing a conclusion of his explanation, Okuda prepared to speak before finding himself forcefully interrupted

"If you prove your capabilities by locating and remedying the problem ... I will consider granting you a position in my personal guard." the Daimyō added with conviction, a dead smile lifting across his thin lips upon hearing Okuda voice his response without hesitation.

"It would be my honour, Daimyō Matsudaira."

-

Evening twilight brought distant cries of wild animals remarking at the moon. Okuda had started scanning for a proper area to set up camp when a far-away light caught his attention through the expanse of trees. Dismounting from his kisouma, he tied its reins around a sturdy tree before heading off to get a closer look.

It was a small rudimentary hut that appeared to be misshapen from many years withstanding the elements. Vines and roots had intruded upon the structure, slowly reclaiming the space in a tendril-like grasp around the exterior walls. Yet, despite its aged appearance there was a soft glow of light within, signalling a human presence.

Moving his feet carefully against the forest floor, Okuda quietly approached, his hand hovering over the hilt of his katana. Stopping fifteen feet from the entrance, he noticed a sound. It was singing... a soft and haunting melody emanating into the twilight air through a broken window.

"Who is there? Reveal yourself." Okuda stated loudly, adrenaline beginning to pump through his veins in anticipation. Could this be a kodama spirit that had come to seek revenge? A ghost haunting its forgotten home?

A soft clank could be heard from within the hut, feet padding against ground before a woman flew through the entrance - eyes wide and frenzied.

"Daku is that –" upon seeing Okuda standing in his worn tatami armour, she began to weep, then falling to the ground pitifully in a thin tattered kimono. Her knees crashing into the dirt.

"Who are you?" Okuda asked again loudly, dismayed by what he was seeing. What maiden in her right mind would remain alone in these woods past sunfall?

"C-chinen Yukiko," she sobbed, lifting her face up through tendrils of hair to look up at him. "My husband Daku Yukiko was a guard working under Daimyō Matsudaira ... when I had heard he hadn't returned - " she sniffed, "- I- I had to go look for him. I found this hut and decided to wait for him here, you have to understand,"

"You should go home. It isn't safe out here," Okuda said sternly, taking the opportunity to glance around them into the increasing dark.

Scrambling to stand upward, Chinen bowed urgently in front of Okuda - her voice sounding less distraught and thankful. "Of course, you are right sir. I will head back at first light"

Using a free hand to wipe away a few tears from her pale cheek, she glanced back towards the hut. "May I offer you some tea before you continue on your journey?"

Deep within, Okuda could sense a hint of remorse for his coldness towards this woman... knowing himself what it was like to face grief. The inability to accept a world in which you were missing an intricate piece of yourself. All alone.

"Yes, thank you," he responded after a moment's hesitation, choosing to follow Chinen into the tiny abode. A moment's rest would likely do little to harm his pursuit, and a hidden piece of him felt concerned over this frail woman's safety. As he entered, a single room was revealed - furnished only by a hanging lantern and a small central stove where a traditional kettle could be seen warming up against the flames.

"You could stay the night if it would please you, sir. I have plenty of food to spare," she added with a gentle smile, closing the door behind him with a soft thud.

-

Suddenly, Okuda stirred awake, a thick sense of confusion spreading throughout his body in an instant. He felt lighter.. Colder. The absent weight of his armour was a strange sensation that induced a building panic.

'Where am I?' he thought bewildered, brain spinning against his skull while struggling to recall what had happened. Groaning, he tried to pry open his eyelids with difficulty, peering into the dimmed room.

“Ah, you have *finally awoken*,” a low hissing voice said from the shadows, causing Okuda to shift in surprise and stumble hitting the floor. Only then finding his wrists and ankles were bound, and limbs substantially weakened.

“Chinen?” he called out incredulously, pulling against his restraints and pushing his head into the rotting planks in an attempt to return to a seated position.

“*I hope you enjoyed my hospitality, rōnin...*” the same voice replied with a cackle, echoing off the walls ominously.

Managing to shift onto his knees, Okuda watched as a spectral face began to manifest through the darkness... Clumps of black hair floated like serpents from what appeared to be Chinen’s skull, her skin stretched tightly against protruding angular features with white, sunken, eyes.

Aghast, Okuda realised that below the neck the rest of her body was gone... a spectral tail projecting her head forward through the air in its place.

The last thing Okuda witnessed was her curled unnatural grin before descending down upon him. Rows of jagged pointed teeth then pierced into his throat with a gurgled scream - the wet searing pain causing his consciousness to slowly fade into obscurity, body ravaged beyond repair as she continued to feed.

As the last bit of breath escaped his lungs, Okuda felt a brief moment of peace. Now released from the purgatory he had been clawing to escape from, and set adrift into emptiness.

His penance fully paid.

-