

Author's note: Originally, this was a separate chapter that fell between chapters 2 and 3 of the book. It was cut in large part because Kaede's position as the Oracle of the Void did not play as large a role in the book as I had first envisioned, and hence giving her and her power their own chapter was distracting in the grand scheme. And yes, I intended that this be called "Chapter ?" because it took place outside of the mortal timeline.

?

BETWEEN THE CRACKS

In The
Eternal
Dragon
Realm

Kaede was startled to find herself back in the void, doubly so that she was there while still feeling her mortal, emotional, fragile self. She looked around, but even here, at the center of all things, she could discern nothing.

She knew better than to panic. She had been brought here for a reason. Once her heart had settled down from the surprise, she assumed the lotus position, meditated, and waited. As she stilled her mind, she began to hear a sound, a sound not unlike the echo of a great, tolling bell.

Ommmmm . . .

It neither grew louder, nor diminished, but rang precisely and continuously, in much the same way, she thought, that fish scales are precise and continuous.

Kaede opened her eyes. There, in the void, a pair of eyes regarded her.

In this place, she could not tell how large they were, whether they were gargantuan eyes a great distance away or merely alarmingly large eyes close at hand. There was no

frame of reference, which is as it should be in the void, where everything is understood as it is itself, not in relation to anything else. She simply accepted that they were eyes, and that they held great power.

She faced the Void Dragon.

She waited politely for it to speak. The eyes studied her very intently for some time.

What are you doing? the dragon asked at last.

"I am waiting for you to speak."

What are you doing?

Of course, hers was a foolish answer. The dragon was already speaking. "I am waiting for you to explain why I have been brought here."

What are you doing?

Kaede tilted her head slightly. "I do not understand the question."

Silence.

"You brought me here to understand what I'm doing?"

Silence.

"My husband was dying. My magic could not save him, nor could the combined magic of all the shugenja of the Empire. If he fell, the Empire would fall."

Silence.

"What am I doing? Nothing. I did nothing! He asked me to be the Oracle, and I was. I offered no advice beyond that. He chose of his own accord to commit seppuku, to die for the sake of the Empire. He did this to save the people. I had nothing to do with it."

You had everything to do with it.

"No, I most certainly did not," she protested. Then, after a moment's reflection, she said, "Yes, I did what I could to ease his pain, to strengthen his resolve. I prayed for his spirit, so that it might safely reach Jigoku. Yes, I did these things. Are they so important?"

That is not all you have done.

"What else have I done?"

You have taken sides.

"But he is my husband and my emperor. My duty is to serve him."

You are an Oracle. Your duty is to answer, not to act. Yours is the way of wisdom, theirs is to act upon that wisdom or ignore it.

"I am also a samurai. My life and my honor are to serve. You would have me break my vows, betray my duty, abandon my honor?"

There is no "also." An Oracle can be nothing else, most especially my Oracle. You cannot be at the center of all things and still be one of those things. It will imbalance you and tear you apart.

"But I was serving the Emperor and fighting against the evil that threatens our land. I helped him, and he was serving you as much as anyone!"

You still do not understand. He, the Emperor, has done right. It is you who have done wrong. Fortunately, he will save you from your error, and his spirit will right the wrongs you have perpetrated here today.

The eyes opened wider, flaring with intensity.

Do not fail me again.

A half a blink, and Kaede was back in Otosan Uchi again, leaning against the arm of the Jade Throne for support. Her hand ached where it touched the throne's armrest. Her mind spun, her knees quivered. She turned her head toward where her husband's body lay. Toku whispered something, but she could not hear over the pounding of her heart. Godaigo shook his head.

Kaede turned her head to look at the intricate carvings of the Jade Throne. Her throne.

The dragon had said Toturi's spirit would right her wrongs. Did that mean he would not make it to Jigoku? That he would be trapped here in this life and somehow help her? Would he be reincarnated into a new body and lead a crusade to kill her for . . . for what? What had she done?

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What had she done—other than fail to surrender herself to the blood of the dragon? And how could clinging to bushido, honoring her vows, and being a samurai . . . how could these things be wrong?

Her mind a turbulent storm of mortal and dragon blood, shortsighted passion and passionless vision, Kaede staggered out of the throne room. There was much to sort out.