



Azure Wolf

by Tell Payne

Han stood before the spirit gate shrine and looked out across the delicate cloud floor before him. The Illuminated Peaks rose from somewhere below the delicate clouds, awaiting the sunrise peacefully, serenely. There was a breeze dancing in the leaves and grass behind Han, playfully rousing the rest of the land to wake for the morning. Dressed in a light robe, the warm breeze chased away the chill lingering on Han from the cold night.

All seemed at peace, natural. Quiet sounds of the world waking began to fill the air as the sun steadily rose behind the peaks. Han faced the sun, closed his eyes, and let a small smile snake across his face as he opened his arms in welcome to the new day.

From behind, Han heard the sound of galloping horses racing towards him. He deftly tied his robe about himself and turned to await the visitors emerging from the tree line some fifty yards away.

There were eleven men in lacquered armor mounted upon black horses. They bore the standard of the lesser noble house of General Lang Sho, an azure wolf on a field of gold. The officer in charge was at the head of the line. He bore the red band of captainship on his left arm and a gold band upon his right, identifying him as a member of one of the lesser noble houses.

The men reined their horses and dismounted in a small cloud of dust. The officer removed his helmet, revealing the face of a seasoned soldier, and walked forward to stand before Han.

“Welcome. I have been blessed that you should visit me. To what do I owe such honor?” Han asked.

“I am Sato Akira, an officer in service of General Lang Sho, son of the noble Sato Norio. And you would do well to remember proper etiquette and bow before nobility.”

“You must forgive my uncouthness, I have lived out here for so many years, that proper etiquette must have slipped my mind,” Han said, inclining his head slightly towards the officer.

Akira stared indignantly at Han, face reddening at the insult of a commoner refusing to acknowledge a noble and bestow proper etiquette.

“We have been instructed by General Lang Sho to escort you to Tozuhanai. You are to appear before the general in five days,” Akira retorted.

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“For what purpose am I being called away? I once served Lang Sho many years ago, but what need does he have for me now?”

“That will be revealed when you arrive.”

“Ah, I see. You were not told,” Han said, turning around to look out past the shrine once more.

Akira stepped forward. “How dare you turn your back to a noble before being properly dismissed!”

Han calmly turned back around. “Nobility is not found in lineage and blood, nobility is found in action and words. Speak to me with proper dignity and I will bestow such towards you.”

“Cur! You shall show proper respect and come with us, whether willingly or bound,” Akira snarled as he signaled his men to surround Han.

Han placed his hands behind his back and turned, watching the men as they circled him. Two of the men had rope in their hands.

“I see. Well, if that is how it must be, then I will respectfully refuse the binding. Please allow me some time to gather some traveling items and then we shall depart.”

Akira motioned for the men to let Han through the line. Han walked up to the hut in which he lived. It was small, only large enough to fit his bed, a stove, and a small table and chair. He hurried about the hut packing what small items and clothing he thought he’d need for the journey to Tozuhanai.

While packing, he tried to reason why Lang Sho would be summoning him. He served under Sho in a militia many years ago when he was just a young man. Han and Sho had fought alongside one another many times; they had even saved each other’s lives. Sho was an excellent warrior and a fair man, as well as a true noble, unlike this hot-headed Akira. If Sho had need of him, Han would appear.

Before he stepped out of his hut, Han grabbed his walking stick and approached Akira. “I am ready to accompany you to Tozuhanai.”

Akira glared at him. “We will depart immediately. Immediately after teaching you how to pay proper respects to nobles.”

Once again Akira’s men surrounded Han, but this time they included Akira within the circle. Men started hooting and cheering Akira; one of them threw him a staff. Akira began



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circling Han nonchalantly, looking him over.

“You do yourself wrong, noble Akira,” Han said indifferently. “I have chosen to come peacefully. Is it noble to abuse those in your charge?”

“It is a noble right to be paid respect due. And you don’t seem to understand, so we’re going to help you remember.”

Han let his traveling bundle slide to the ground and gripped his staff loosely. Akira shifted into an offensive stance to the left of Han. Han slightly shifted his feet and held his walking stick before him parallel to the ground, then let it fall.

Akira guffawed, “If you choose not to defend yourself, I shall not go easy on you.”

Han stood quietly, looking not at Akira, but more beyond him. He let his body relax and breathing slow as he awaited the attack. Seeing his stance as resignation, Akira rushed Han and swung his staff. Han brushed the strike away calmly and shifted his feet to allow a stumbling Akira a place to fall.

“You don’t need to do this, Akira,” Han warned serenely.



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