

Day One

Dread sat like rocks in his stomach.

Ruka resisted the urge to touch at the concave dent in his armor, scrubbed clean of scorch but still pressing a little bit uncomfortably into his ribs under his arm. The temple ceiling loomed above them. The building wasn't massive or grand in architecture like some, but it was distinctly larger than any of the other buildings in the city thus far, and while they all looked to be squat, clay-brick structures, this one was made from cut stone. His violet eyes trailed the marbling and warps in it, wondering at which mountain it came out of and how hard it had been to manage, if people had died to build it or not, while he listened to the Varna go on.

"...elcome to the Temple of the One God, outsiders. Or do you prefer Dajorrans? If you are representatives of their Confederacy."

Sera's brows furrowed, and the maroon of her tattoos in the deep shadows of candlelight from sconces looked deathly. "Don't you mean our Confederacy? You're Dajorran too."

Ilchard's expression was patient, like speaking to a child. "We are the people of the One God. Other such identifiers are meaningless to His Children."

"...right," the Zabrak replied, and rallied, smiling brightly like she always did, "so you're all one people! One people, one galaxy, yeah. Like we, er— you said. Planetary unity and stuff."

She looked desperately at Qyreia. The Zeltron coughed.

"So, your Kasha? We can see them?"

"The Kasha will be informed of your intentions," Ilchard explained. "First we welcome you into the temple. You may rest and take respite here while I confer with my fellow Varna and we in turn speak to the Kasha. My Pujar will show you to quartering for the destitute and pilgrimaging of His Children. Any are welcome there." His dark eyes assessed them, not yet moving to let them pass further into the church. "Of course, there is no need for armaments here in the One God's house. We will keep them for you."

Ruka looked at the pistols on the guards' belts, then looked back at Ilchard.

"No," he said. Qyreia elbowed him, but didn't look any more pleased. All the Galerians had tensed.

"We're not willing to be unarmed," the Zeltron tried, firm but straining polite. "Like we said— there were attacks on the Kaedean settlements. There's an extremist element here somewhere, and they would probably be less hospitable to us than you and the Kasha are. We're armed for

our safety. *And,*" she added, as Ilchard began to protest, "we wouldn't expect your people to defend us when we don't even know each other yet."

The Varna considered them, his friendly if aloof demeanor interrupted by narrowing his eyes. Ruka narrowed his back. Briefly, their gazes crossed. Held. Ruka lifted his chin. Ilchard glanced away, smiled again.

"Very well, I suppose we can entrust you all your own protection, though I assure, it will hardly be necessary here. There is no violence in Surfe. The Kasha would not allow it, as it is not the will of the One God."

Until suddenly it is, the Mirialan thought, trying to suppress a glare and, he was pretty sure, failing.

Ilchard left then, and his Purja escorted them further into the church and off to the right, through a set of double doors and down several stone hallways and stairways. Ruka tried to memorize the direction in case they needed to retrace their steps quickly. Their first stop was apparently the temple's banquet hall, where all the priests, guards, scribes, and seemingly any citizen seemed to come to eat. The room was long, the tables long too, plain wood and bare walls, vaulted ceilings. A food line snaked to and from a kitchen, and dark-skinned people in plain tunics sat in groups, eating.

The fare was simple, soup and a seeded bread, the kinds of things you could feed a lot of people with. Sera and Diy both picked at it politely. Qyreia elbowed him hard for suggesting he try it first, *just in case*. Ryu was silent, eating mechanically once his weapons were set aside, and Kaled gave polite thanks and tucked in. Xenna seemed to be taking a nap upright.

They had only just finished, guards hovering and the other Sardinians present all staring at their every move, curious about the outsiders, when the Purja collected them again and herded them back upstairs.

"The masters will see you," was all one elderly woman among them would say.

The Galerians were ferried back across the main hall and into some other antechamber. This one was more lavish, decorated with more candelabra and artwork inlaid into the walls. Cora would have stopped and stared forever studying the paintings. Ruka missed him fiercely as they were walked into the middle of the round chamber and stepped down before a wide sort of desk that looked like it was fit for nobles, or the scene of a courtroom holo. Up in their high chairs sat eight men, Ilchard at their center. Ruka eyed the others. Various ages, but none particularly weathered in appearance. Soft hands, proud postures. He doubted they'd had a hard day in their lives, or ever been punched. Cora would've been disappointed in how he glared, if he'd been pulled away from the decor.

"Is one of you the Kasha?" asked Qyreia, still defaulted to taking the lead.

"These are my fellow Varna," Ilchard answered, while seven other sets of eyes locked onto the Zeltron with disdain. Clearly she felt it too, because Ruka saw her spine straighten, her chin raise, her eyes narrow. It was the expression she got before she introduced someone to her 'iron-shin.'

"Well, nice to meet you guys," Sera popped in. "We're from Gale— the Confederacy. Did you want to talk to us too?"

"The Kasha will hear about your claims," one of the other Varna said. "As the Kasha hears of everything. That does not mean the Kasha will meet *you*."

The Zabrak frowned slightly. "But—"

"Do you have authority to liaison with us?" Qyreia interrupted. "Because that's what we need. We're here to investigate the raids on Tairiku, and we'd like to assist in rebuilding efforts if possible, if your people need anything in recovering from the plague still."

"Pah," another Varna scoffed, and Ilchard held up a hand.

"Perhaps this can be solved in due time," he reasoned. "If you have someone to speak for you, we Varna will hear them and consider any possible, ah, aid campaigns? The Children of the One are all pleased to serve one another and to help the unfortunate. The spirit of this generosity in you is favorable."

"You're speaking to someone right now," Ruka snapped at last, shifting on his feet.

Miraculously, the lot of the frangers all actually looked *at* him, instead of through Qyreia or Sera. Something clicked in his head, and the Mirialan had to grit his teeth and clench his fist in order to keep from shouting in two languages or yanking their stupid kriffing robes right up their sexist kriffing asses.

"The Varna oversee many matters for the Kasha," Ilchard replied. "We would, as I have said, perhaps speak again with leaders of yours or a delegate? But first we will pray and confer, and as is only right, you may rest in the temple while you do so. There is room for you and all your...*soldiers*. On the morrow, we may convene again, yes?"

Ruka knew a dismissal when he heard it. Diy looked about ready to shoot someone, because she was smiling like a tooka with a mouse, and he nudged Qyreia to let her know it. The Zeltron ground her teeth, nodded stiffly.

"Sure," was all she said, and then they were being escorted by the Purja again and by guards with slugs to what seemed like the church's basement. It split into several halls and rooms, and the Mirialan couldn't keep track of their directions by the time they made it through the maze of

natural stone — evidently the temple was build into the mountain — before they were dumped unceremoniously in a room with more than enough beds for them, small singles in plain cottons with little more than standing room for a washing bowl on a nightstand between them.

Their escorts left them, save two guards who he could sense linger down the hall, and Ruka held up a hand before any of them spoke, quickly searching the room. His paranoia seemed to actually be indulged, because only after he and Sera exchanged nods over the lack of anyone in immediate proximity they could sense did the Zeltron erupt.

"These *frackers*," hissed Qyreia, and then groaned in frustration, rubbing at her face. "I mean, it's not new, but *come on*. Like this wasn't complicated enough bantha poodoo."

"Could kick their bits right up into their tonsils," Sera grouched. Ruka put a hand on her arm, squeezed. She flashed him a smile despite her anger. Like always.

"So what?" Xenna shrugged and flopped on one cot. "Can we leave yet?"

"They feel...not the nicest," Kaled offered, the Miraluka carefully stepping forward and bumping into a bed. His droid had been left behind. Before the Mirialan could offer help, he just sat on the first one his knees touched. "Not violent or dangerous, but..."

"I'm sensing a lot of unease," Sera offered, folding herself up on a bed next to Diy as the other woman lounged. "Like we walked into a bug's nest. They're waiting to see what we do, but they're not that happy we're here."

"We need to talk to this Kasha," the Zeltron sighed. "And make nice with these assholes to do it. But we can't upset anything here."

"I'm calling in reinforcements," Ruka declared, already picking up his comm out of a pouch. He glanced to Qyreia. "Told you the other night you had the wrong husband if you wanted diplomacy, *crovja*. Cor can help, since they'll kriffing *talk* to him. That okay with you?"

The red woman pressed her lips together, considering a moment before she huffed and nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, alright. If he's really that good and it's not just your lovesickness talking, we could use the backup. No offense."

He gave her a grin. "None taken. I'll be sayin' how amazing he is until my last breath, but because it's true. Corazon's a born noble, he was raised on this stuff, supposed to have been a senator like his dad or throw parties for a living like his ma."

"Then do it. Frack knows none of us is trained for it anyway."

If their eyes drifted more towards where Xenna was using a knife she'd apparently taken from the banquet hall at Ryoguri'naga's to make her blanket into a hooded poncho and Diy twirling her blasters, then, well. The Kiffar-Zelosian only grinned herself and saluted with her barrels.

"I gots lots o' dipolmaticness," she said. "It's all in my assets an' knowing how to use 'em." The smuggler mimed shooting, bouncing on the bed, her curls following suit.

Sera snickered next to her, but promptly sobered under Ruka's raised eyebrow.

"More help is always good! Call Cora in. There's nothing we can't do together, hey? We'll solve this." Her tone grew more solemn. "We have to. On our honor. We can't let a war happen. No more deaths."

"So we can hope," Qyreia advised, sounding like she didn't expect anything so optimistic. Ruka didn't either, but he didn't comment.

He didn't sleep that night.

They seem puzzled, maybe suspicious at first, the first time he returns alone.

Ruka asks to see Toronaga, to explain that he isn't exactly with the Arconans, that he's there to help of his own accord, if they'll let him. The chief seems pleased enough to allow it, though he still gives him the creeps.

There aren't that many kids in Toronaga's village, but he makes it his first priority to learn all their names.

Amkuudit is the youngest, and as far as either Ruka or the child seem concerned, his new bestest buddy, the way he gets tackled when he leaves the manor. Apparently he loved being his partner for their odd tag game, and Ruka is fine with him clinging on.

There's six others in all: Kase, the oldest and already formally one of their warriors, which is *horrible*, but whatever, Kioka, whose older sister has gone missing since the pirates showed up, Nagenane, Pirra's granddaughter, Oshin, who was also on his little game team, Kawak, the second youngest, and Tsurawak, Kawak's 'hatchmate' which he takes to mean twin. He played with them all on their last visit, and he makes efforts to play with them again. They're all indulgent about him trying to learn more words than *yes* and *no*, especially Amkuudit, who seems to think it's his job now.

Maybe the kid thinks Ruka is his new dumb puppy.

The adults are a little warier, but they're still welcoming enough. They seem to appreciate that he and the Galerians were going to try and find their people, and they especially seemed to like that he'd killed some of their enemies.

On his next visit, he brings as many supplies as his gunship can carry, which isn't more than a couple hundred pounds of wood and tools, and asks to be pointed to the nearest building project. They *really* like the fact that he can apparently lift whole logs himself or magically and fit timber into gaps in the walls by floating it into place. Someone nearly shoots him the first time he shows it.

But he ducks the blast, so it's eventually forgiven.

He is not allowed to use the kitchen. Pirra is very firm about this. And, if he stays overnight, it's as Toronaga's guest, not in his ship or with any of the other families, even if the children seem to want to keep him — again, he wonders if he's the new puppy. He is not allowed to be alone with the women at any point, but he is allowed to help, and there is some actual hooting and cheering when he helps finish a new small, two-room house in all of two days. The fact that there isn't plumbing yet doesn't seem to be much a concern.

He is allowed to come back, and learns more words.

It's good.

Day Two

Two meters back, one of the guards that had initially come down with the 'welcoming' contingent to greet the Galerians followed him blatantly along with one of the Purja, a young woman. The slugthrower on the man's hip was a shine of metal against the simple linen of his robes, though he and the other guardsmen — and all of them were men — had leather breastplates and the like too. They proceeded back through the streets from the Temple of the One and towards the abandoned spaceport that now hosted four of the Dajorra Defense Force's gunships.

Clay stained his boots, his cape, the shoes and linens of everyone they passed in the streets, who all followed him with stares. Ruka didn't care. The dread and discomfort from keeping watch overnight hadn't abated with the rising sun, even when they'd been permitted to explore. The others were doing so now, offering help where they could, generally observing. Qyreia and Sera had ordered them to stick to pairs or groups, and Ruka was only allowed off by himself because he was going to get his partner.

The aching and urgency in his chest fluttered.

He didn't care about his guard once they reached the spaceport and his eyes landed on his own ship, the lavender flowers of her name and namesake tucked neatly along the edge of one batlike wing. The ramp was lowered, and when he extended his senses, his mind, it was like coming home.

Ruka ran, and Cora's arms spread to catch him. He lifted the Pantoran and spun them around, burying his nose in pink hair and breathing easily for the first time in over forty hours, maybe for the first time since they'd made contact with Ryoguri'naga's people four days ago. His partner clasped his cheek, probably picking up on the distress-relief mix, and gently nudged him into a brief kiss instead of just holding on to him like life depended on it.

They pulled back, thin but genuine smiles and brushed noses.

"I missed you," Ruka murmured. Cora smiled, gaze soft.

"And I missed you, angel. Now how can I help?"

"Welcome to Eldar, I guess."

They turned, and the Mirialan made to make some sort of introduction or say *something*, only to see a hand on a gun and tense. Their Purja escort was staring at them with an expression of open horror, tinged with shock. They exchanged a look, and then Corazon cleared his throat, making her jump.

"Ah, pardon me, ma'am, are you alright?"

The expression mostly vanished, her face blanking into demure eyes and simpering smiles.

"Of course, **messirs,** perfectly well. If you will, um, follow me..." she managed, only stumbling a little, and bowed again. This bow was noticeably stiffer and shallower than the original, though. The guard's hand didn't move from his weapon for a second longer, and Ruka briefly imagined having to throw him across the ground. But then he moved too, and they began back towards the city.

Cora stared after her a moment, his entire self seeming to dim, and he asked, "Was that...?"

"Yeah," the Mirialan muttered, too harsh and too tired, and then gentled his tone as he put an arm around his husband's slumping shoulders. "Yeah, it was."

But then, they both already knew that.

Cora made a wounded sound, and started to curl into him, but then shuddered and pulled away. Ruka started to protest, especially when he caught sight of tears gathering in golden eyes, but at the Pantoran's serious, troubled expression, hesitated.

"We likely shouldn't," Cora murmured, and scrubbed at his face, somehow without smudging so much as a hairsbreadth of light makeup. "It's— this is a delicate and tense situation. We shouldn't— we s-shouldn't push their particular social boundaries now. That is part of why I am here, after all, from what you said about how they're treating Qyreia and Sera. The *nerve*."

Despite the rough start, when they returned to the temple, the Varna were at least willing to speak to Cora. And Cora, perhaps because he was already deeply angry in the way only he could be over how their fellows were being treated, was absolutely ruthless. Despite his kind and measured words, if they started out greeting him with a smile, by the end they were practically in tears over him. If they initially scowled, soon they're either staring at him thoughtfully or outright grinning. He didn't give an inch though, no matter how many times they denied violence in the land of the Kasha, eventually securing a meeting with the holy leader and an end to the denials.

"I'm glad we've got somebody who can handle this stuff for once," Qyreia muttered.

Ruka glanced at her briefly, whispering back, "You always seem to handle it okay enough to me."

The Zeltron rolled her eyes. "Just because I have some common fracking sense unlike the rest of you doesn't mean I'm game for all the political frakas. I'm a merc. Make sure I'm getting a good deal or negotiate myself a better one, sure, and I've got methods if some schutta tries to get fresh." She patted her blaster, but he knew she was more fondly speaking of her knee. "But this karkery, this isn't what I want to be doing."

"Yeah," the Mirialan agreed, and looked back to his husband mingling with a room of potential threats. "Me either."

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A Sardinian slips and refers to him as Riptide, revealing they know the Kaedeans' name for him so that's the lingering clue? That they've been spying and think they're an asset

Have Xenna follow someone suspicious cloaked, but order not to kill or lightning them. She shrugs probably

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Since Pirra refuses to let him in the kitchen, he takes matters into his own hands and starts cooking at home instead, packing up the food in foil dishes and asking permission to build a campfire in the village square to reheat things. Nobody turns down food, and besides, he starts

simple with meats and fishes aplenty from Selen and rice like the paddies growing around them. After that it's expansion, more complicated dishes, things with Selen recipes, his family recipes, street style food or even the fancy sithspit Cor's family likes. Cheese is not kind to them when it's melted; two nearly choke when the strings go down their throats while still gummed around sharp teeth. He leaves it off anything hot after that.

The experiments with desserts for the children is honestly his favorite part. Caramels and toffees are, sadly, right out; they can't chew them, and the hazard is almost worse than the cheese was, if not for the fact that carefully sucking on one long enough meant it melted in the mouth back into thick sugar syrup. Jellies are kind of hilarious, because the kids like playing with it more than they do eating it, watching the jiggle. Cookies and brownies become favorites, and once he's introduced chocolate, it's doomed from there. Anything with creme gets weird looks, but delighted ones, for all the mess. Between that and the cheese, it makes him stop and consider if the Kaedeans used to have animals for dairy or not and hadn't been able to reorganize as much as quickly as they had crop growing , or if it just wasn't a thing.

Their little cold war in this style lasts about a month before she finally comes out, kicks dirt over the flames and in his face, and points him up to the manor house.

She *still* won't let him cook. She says it's for women and, more importantly, for her. So is all cleaning. And lifting of heavy things. And general work. It drives him insane. But she at least let's him learn some of their recipes. He gets to give her only one each visit. Stubborn lady. He'd die for her. He tells her so and she responds that he'd die for anyone, and he feels a little bit like someone just stripped him naked and turned on a spotlight. It's kriffing eerie.

Stubborn and terrifying.

Day Three

"No, he's got— that's black lung. That's miner's lung, I *know it.* I've watched die from that frang, I've had it when I worked the mines on Kiast. We coughed up yellow and black and red from the tibannana."

"So what if it is? Eldar was supposed to be mineral rich. They probably ARE mining."

"Yeah but they didn't mention that, just the farms."

"So they don't want to share everything."

"So they're **hiding** something. I mean, ay, yeah, okay, maybe they just don't trust us and aren't saying they got lots of mining resources, but what if not? Maybe that's where the insurgents are hiding, in the mines. Maybe that's where they got the explosive stuff to stick on those ships that hit Ryo's village."

"It would be odd to begin trade negotiations without mentioning one's most lucrative resource," Cora reasoned. "And while it may be equally profitable to without that information so as to have more stake to offer later or to use as leverage, the fact of the matter is that they did not merely not mention it, they actively denied having any operations other than their argiruclurtal ones."

The number of buildings he'd had a hand — or four, telekinesis included — in constructing now outnumbered those he hadn't. He doesn't bring food as much anymore because he can just make it there. Sometimes the children want to play, but mostly, they want to learn to fight. He keeps evading their requests. The adults are harder to dodge. They don't just appreciate him now, they watch him when he passes. Nod, or make their strange salute. Touch weapons. Not in threat, but as he now knows, an acknowledgement from one warrior to another.

It's worse after Scalebeard, after the bunker. But the ones he saved — Cora reminds him to tell himself that, *you saved them, you helped* — are a fixed point to look at, easier than hearing the nickname.

They call him Riptide, because they've seen him rip people apart, drown them, break them like rocks. He did to the pirates what a riptide would do to a foolish sailor or fisherman: flay and shred and smash.

He counters that word with names: Maiko, Keeka, Norie, Wawic, Shimi, Okan, Megu, Eichin, Hiygo, Kiyami. All Kaedean women saved from either Scalebeard or Torol. Some of them will speak. Recover. Others won't. Don't.

Norie doesn't want comfort. She wants vengeance. She wants to know how her captors died. When they drag the bodies out of the bunker, he does his best to describe each casualty as he remembers it, slowly and painstakingly translated by Pirra or Toronaga himself. He tastes bile the whole time, and nearly vomits when she gets to the ones he caused, missing legs or limbs or more of a pulp they scraped out of the mulch than a body. Those make her eyes glint, her lips smile. She clasps his hand and thanks him for each of the kills.

None of them bother him when he goes to throw up behind a tree.

Keeka watched him snap necks but doesn't ask about it. She speaks Basic fairly well, almost as well as Toronaga, and they become something like friends. She's the one to help explain when Hiro, Norie's betrothed, asks Ruka to be his second. She's also the one to pat his back when he chokes on his own spit at the explanation that apparently, being someone's second in a Kaedean marriage means that, if Hiro ever dies in battle, he's supposed to take over in the husbandry department, and also fight the guy to the death if Hiro is ever unloyal in a way Norie doesn't allow.

He doesn't figure out fast enough how to say no. Amkuudit congratulates him.

Another one of the warriors that fought with them in the bunker, Yakan, gives him a necklace that is made with a piece of dried skin from one of the pirates. It's a battle mark, and suddenly explains the other Kaedean warriors'...armor decorations. Ruka manages to accept out of politeness by fixing the image of Cora's tiny frown in his head, but is so skeeved out that he can't stand to keep it. He gets savvy with the kids and presents it as a prize for all of them for managing the village while many of their elders were fighting or captured. Thankfully, no parent seems upset by this, nor does Yakan. He actually slaps Ruka's back in approval.

Day Four

"Are you out of your minds?! You kill us, and you'll definitely start a war!"

"Did you not yourselves explain that you are representatives of a 'Lotus' and not affiliated with the Arconans? You are no one. The Arcona will not engage in a war simply over you."

"These are for you. My kids make them. Noga and Leda. They are near your age. Boy and girl. Look like me."

"Can we meet?"

"One day maybe. If you are all very good and it is safe."

The young Kaedean looks down at the drawings again, and his little crest and the swoop of his throat flare with a reddish hue. It's like he's blushing. He stamps one foot and looks back up at Ruka.

"I am a warrior. I will make it safe. And then we meet."

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"They will be good mates if they are your blood. Strong like you. I will make a good place for them."

He nodded like he was very sure of himself, downright determined, but Ruka's brain was still busy screeching somewhere around the word 'mate.'

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The Mirialan tries to explain to Pirra, who just blinks. Keeka just laughs and laughs at him, and Ruka is left to break up with a ten year old on behalf of his pre-teen children he'd inadvertently betrothed.

Day Five

After

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"Now you can cull them! Be the Riptide--"

"My *name* is Ruka," the Sith spat, voice rising. "AND I AM NOT YOUR WEAPON!"

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"I'm not anyone's weapon, and I'm not going to-- to go to war or murder for either of you, any of you!"

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The Zeltron had asked him to be nice, polite and positive and to remember that they were the outsiders here coming to play hero, so a little skepticism was warranted.

4 gunships, contingent of DDF's 7th Eldar regiment

Diy, Sera, Ryuu, Kaled, Xenna, Q, Ruka

Ryo'urinaga

Clay everywhere

Pilgrimage to the temples, through the desert

Takes place over several days, week? On Aifreann. Cora is diplomacy, hearts and minds, while they're watching for the coup stuff.

Ilchard - servant of the Kasha, called a Varna. his servants are called Pujar. People of the One insurgent cell underground in clay-baked tunnels, have barracks, hospital, lots of arsenals, all makeshift. pirates escaped from tairiku backing the insurgents and are where they got the weapons from. base far in the north mountains, others scattered around continent

Kids on both sides Ru close to, makes friends with immediately ofc.

The Sardinians do try to punish them, after initial blackmail, and it is made to look like the extremists are the ones behind it, which the main body denounces, but there's lingering suspicion. Q angry her people were hurt on her/their watch. Sera too.

Blackmail with kidnapping Cora? Burning them both alive? One of them goes full on where is my husband and gets MAD.

-try to burn them alive at stake? As sacrifice to the Kasha/whatever god, we got rid of the heathens for you

>sin of sodomy(?), adultery, (Ruka: "FUCKING WHAT?" "We have seen you comingle with the red woman as well as your proclaimed 'union' with this man" "I'M NOT KRIFFING QYREIA GODDAMMIT"), treachery, whatever shit, espionage?

>The fact that you pair of heathens happen to be quite a threat and powerful piece of the Kaedeans is also, you know, helpful aka they have heard Ruka is probably the biggest weapon they've got and they're intent on removing that potential

-Sardinians wanted to take them off the board for the coming wars but didn't think they'd manage an alliance so went with either get them to stay out of it or threat/if not bold idea to have the powerful FUs become their assassins

-Intersperse with flashbacks of helping the Kaeds.

-In end Ruka goes back to Kaeds and is relating some of it and Toronaga is like oh good now you see we need to destroy them and Ru flips his shit on Tor, not a weapon for either of them. Gets cast out of Tor's village and scorned even by friends there?

But hey you've avoided open warfare for now by choosing not to retaliate against the people who tried to kill you or those trying to use you