

EMERALD LEGACY



Hidden Lineage

Alex Jacobs

"Many of the dangers of Sanctuary were obvious: strange creatures from the sea, mystic swamps that altered one's emotions, and spirit-possessed objects fighting an eternal war against one another. All of those dangers paled, however, to one many might not only have trouble thinking of as a threat but one which they actively seek out: knowledge. A knowledge which threatened to shake the very foundation of the Empire which, however we might have departed, not one of us could truly say we had left behind."

— From the memoirs of Kitsuki Seiji

Mirumoto Hitori frowned as he watched the three samurai depart. He knew each of them by reputation at least, if not exceedingly well. Kitsuki Seiji, Mirumoto Rei, and Agasha Jianyu. All three were among the six other samurai – seven, counting himself – he had selected as the core of the Dragon's expedition to Sanctuary, the final orders of his former champion, Togashi Yokuni.

Send at least one from the Togashi, the family whose name you once carried.

Send at least two from the Kitsuki, the children who have dedicated themselves to objective truth.

Send at least two from the Mirumoto; let them test their swords against a new land.

And send at least two from the Agasha. Why not?

That last still puzzled him. No, it bothered him. It had bothered all the Dragon he had spoken with. How could his Champion be so flippant on such a matter? How could he be so random? The Togashi could be enigmatic, mysterious, and subtle but, despite what many might say, they were not mad. Well, not usually.

For that matter, why even send those directives? The Dragon expedition numbered hundreds of samurai across each of the families. Why call out seven in particular? For those tasks? How would his connection to the Togashi be of any use? What was the objective truth the Kitsuki were supposed to find, or the test for his new family's swords? And why so ambivalent about the Agasha?

Already lost in thought, Hitori barely noticed the scout striding across the camp to him. "Lord Mirumoto," the scout began, even as he bowed, "We just returned from an expedition to the forests north of us." Hitori said nothing, but motioned for the scout to continue. Whatever was so important, he wouldn't get it out any faster with Hitori asking obvious questions.

"The forest appears to be just that on the surface, my lord. Trees, as good for lumber as any other. Neither abundance nor shortage of game. No signs of inhabitants but ..." his voice trailed off in uncertainty. Hitori again found himself waiting patiently while the scout collected himself. Seeing that he wasn't going to get it out any other way, the scout continued. "There's something, my lord. A presence, a feeling. I've broken trails across the Spine of the World and that feels like a wood as much as any other. But I once trailed a thief all the way to the Shinomen. Felt like a thousand eyes on you there, my lord. This was like that."

Hitori considered the scout's report. While some samurai might have dismissed these feelings as superstition or nerves, the wise of the Empire knew that, while spirits weren't common, neither were they rare. A sensation of unease and the hair standing at the back of your neck might be all the warning a spirit felt obligated to provide. *Blast.* He'd just sent away one of his few scholars and along with him one of his only chosen Agasha.

How fortunate that he'd brought two.

Their trek so far had been uneventful. Agasha Ayako was married to Jianyu, the priest he'd sent on the prior expedition, and had accompanied Hitori without complaint. Now they stood in a shaded forest glen, drinking water from their skins and taking a brief rest as Hitori caught the Agasha up on the scant information. Unfortunately, she didn't seem to be paying attention.

"... and so while the scout didn't report any overt signs of a spiritual disturbance, I still thought the matter worth investigating. These feelings, while indefinite, are as likely to precede a- Agasha-san, are you even hearing what I'm saying to you?"

The tall woman nodded. Her face, naturally pale and washed out in the sunlight, looked positively ethereal in the forest's shadows. Yet she followed her nod with nothing, simply looking at Hitori, who was doing all he could to remain patient.

"Then what, pray tell, do you intend to do about it?"

Ayako shrugged. Hitori did his best to maintain an even tone. It almost worked. "You don't know? We're trekking into a potentially hidden forest on an unexplored island hundreds of miles from home, and you don't know? Are you feeling alright Ayako-san?" he mocked.

"Yes," she answered. "Are you, my lord?"

"Of course," Hitori spat back. He mustn't let his temper get the best of him, he mustn't.

"Then clearly this isn't the site the scout meant. Why don't we keep walking?"

Leaving an open-mouthed Hitori behind her, Agasha Ayako turned and continued walking north. Hitori stared a few beats longer before he followed. *Why not, indeed?* he thought.

They found the shrine by midday. Shrine? More like a small temple. It stood in what seemed to be a naturally-occurring clearing, probably the result of a small, stone outcropping which served as the temple's foundation. The construction looked Rokugani, though different. Slabs of timber were joined with notches, rather than with nails or glue, as was the preferred style in most of the Empire where iron for nails or saps for glues were precious resources to be hoarded for the use by the wealthy and powerful. Yet the notches were shaped in a way Hitori had never seen before. The ends of the roof curved down – perhaps to drain off rainwater, Hitori guessed – rather than up to ward off evil spirits. It was Rokugani, yet it wasn't.

"This is it?" Hitori asked. Ayako nodded. "Do you feel the unease the scout reported?" She shook her head in the negative. "Any idea why? I'd prefer to know as much as possible before we burst in on some foreign spirit, if they're even home." No reaction.

Hitori sighed. "Lady Agasha, you have been a barrel of mirth through our day's journey. Your husband's family must have been quite generous with their *nakodo*," he said referring to their matchmaker, "to win such a charming and gregarious woman into their household."

"They weren't," Ayako replied without looking, her eyes staying fixed on the shrine. "Jianyu and I arranged the matter ourselves."

Hitori's eyes bulged. While love marriages weren't common anywhere in the Empire, they happened more frequently among the Dragon than anywhere else, a combination of the Dragon's romantic fondness for destiny and the more pragmatic reality that they had few enough resources that Dragon spouses were rarely in demand. "You mean the two of you fell for each other? How?" The rude question was out before he could stop himself.

Ayako didn't seem to mind. She just shrugged, as if the question were of no import. "He makes me laugh."

Hitori studied her pale face, trying to wrap his head around this enigma. He tried and failed to imagine her laughing, and it still didn't explain Jianyu's attraction to her. It's not that she wasn't pretty, even if she wasn't a legendary beauty. Still as he looked at her, noticing for the first time the way her robes clung to her body, her hips, her waist, her belly protruding slightly-

By the fortunes!

"You're pregnant!" he practically shouted. "How?"

"Someone should have explained to you by now," Ayako replied. "Very well. When two people-

"Not that," Hitori interrupted. "It's no secret our people have had trouble conceiving. When I petitioned for samurai to bring with me, I wasn't permitted to take any couples who had had children or were expecting. The

clan leaders wouldn't deprive the Dragon of future samurai."

Ayako shrugged. "I wasn't expecting when I left our home."

"But that means-" Hitori felt his face redden.

The priestess nodded. "On the journey over. Finding privacy was nearly impossible, but my husband was very motivated." Somehow Hitori blushed even harder. "The Fortunes must have smiled on us."

"You seem certain of that."

"Oh, I am. You see, I don't feel the unease the scout felt, although there is a presence here. And she has already given us her blessing," Ayako added, rubbing her hand across her belly.

The interior of the shrine was in many ways what Hitori expected. There was an altar, braziers and candles, piles of votive offerings, knotted prayer ropes, bells, all the tools of worship. He and Ayako found a stone basin filled with water outside which they used to wash their hands and mouths. They carefully bowed, then entered through the side of a torii arch; Ayako was even diligent about using the correct feet (an ancient custom that few even remembered). Once inside they set to examining the temple but, for all its familiarity, so much was missing.

There were no statues or paintings in honor of the shrine's inhabitant or object of veneration. No writings to name them. The offerings ranged from flowers to loose grains and fruits to even a few bottles of rice wine, the latter without so much as a maker's stamp to identify whence they came.

His frustration growing, Hitori turned to Ayako to ask her if she could make any sense, but one withering glare from her was more than enough answer. Seeing Hitori properly chastised, she drew a cone of incense from a pouch inside her robes and lit it in a bowl provided for such things. The exact spirit of fertility might be unknown, but she was still sensible enough to offer thanks for the child she and her husband had conceived en route to this strange land.

Some time later, as the Agasha finished her prayers, Hitori felt he was at wit's end. He'd never been good at waiting when he was a monk and since leaving the order he'd hardly improved. He was about to suggest they make camp for the night – it would be dark soon and traipsing around a strange forest where even moonlight couldn't pierce the canopy to guide them wasn't exactly a sure plan to return to the landing site safely – when a shadow fell across the door to the shrine.

Ayako moved behind Hitori, while he took a fighting stance in front of her, weight on the balls of his feet, hands raised in front of him. He knew better than to draw steel in a sacred space, but he was hardly defenseless even without his weapons, though he hoped this battle would go better than his last attempt at jiu-jitsu had.

With the setting sun shining behind the figure, Hitori had to squint. He could only see its outline which he knew would put him at a disadvantage, but he couldn't turn to maneuver for another angle without exposing Ayako. The figure strode forward! Hitori braced himself. It was in the shrine! It was ...

... short.

And furry.

And had an enormous belly. And wide eyes with dark fur around them.

"Is that a raccoon?"

Some time later they sat around a campfire, a safe distance from the shrine. The raccoon – a tanuki, Ayako had corrected him – was with them. Despite common misconception, tanuki were regular animals, but there were also numerous stories about them. Ayako had explained that while all animals had supernatural counterparts in Chikushudo, some animals had closer ties between their mundane and supernatural counterparts. Foxes were one of the most prevalent examples, but tanuki were not far behind.

And this was no mundane creature.

It was big. Nearly four feet tall. Its features were almost comically oversized, from its eyes to its ears to a few others that made Hitori blush (though Ayako seemed unfazed, and if anything amused at her lord's discomfort). And while it said nothing, it was clearly intelligent.

Now the tanuki and Hitori sat facing each other before the fire. The tanuki had gestured to a bowl that contained five grains of rice. From a similar bowl the tanuki had secretly palmed any number of them, indicating for Hitori to do the same. Finally it had Hitori hold up either one or two fingers to indicate whether the grains of rice they each held comprised an odd or even number. The tanuki did the same and they saw who matched.

It was, Hitori thought, a rather simple and pointless game.

And they'd been playing it for hours. Hitori won as often as he lost, but so far it hadn't made any difference. There seemed to be no prize for winning, no penalty for losing. The tanuki refused to engage in any other activity, let alone answer his questions. Ayako, for her part, insisted that Hitori treat the tanuki with respect bordering on reverence. And then she'd gone to sleep, damn her.

It was morning.

They'd been playing all night and Hitori was bleary eyed from lack of sleep. He could go without sleep for several days if needed – his training among the Togashi had pushed him to his physical and mental limits – but he had tricks to keep himself alert, and wandering through a frozen wasteland in nothing but a hakama is a very motivating factor to stay invested in one's surroundings.

As Ayako woke she glanced over at the warrior and the creature still engaged in their competition. "Haven't you won yet?" she asked, sounding only mildly curious.

Hitori forced himself to reply calmly, not an easy task under the circumstances. "Win, lose, it doesn't seem to matter to our friend here. By the stars, he doesn't even seem to care about the game that much. Why are we even playing it?"

Ayako shrugged. "Clearly not to win or lose then. What's the third path?"

It was an old question for the Dragon, one every child learned. When he was still a novice at the High House of Light, Hitori had been taken to a harsh wilderness in the mountains near the temple. There he had been left at a fork in the path. One was narrow, filled with rocks and brambles and pitfalls, and climbed slowly and tortuously up the mountain, back to the High House of Light. The other path was clear and well-paved and led down the mountain, away from his home.

The message was obvious. Suffer now and be rewarded later or take the easy way out and abandon all he'd worked for.

When he'd arrived at the temple the next day, scratched and torn by thorns and brambles, exhausted from his wilderness trials, his reception had been less than favorable "What a fool you are," his sensei had admonished, "to think that there are only two paths," and he'd been returned back to the wilderness. Now the message was clear. Carve out a new path or ascend the mountainside. Call upon the kami and fly to the top. When his sensei had returned a week later, he found Hitori constructing his own temple at the base of the path.

"Hey," asked Hitori, taking a jar of sake out of his pack. "Want a drink?"

With a speed belying its girth, the tanuki grabbed the jar and in a flash had it open, its contents draining into its gaping mouth. Emptying the bottle, he let out a great belch that shook the temple walls, then wiped its hand

across its mouth before speaking.

"Now that is how you honor Tennyo, oh child of our Lady's brethren."

Hitori sat in shock. Whether from the tanuki's actions or words or the stench of the belch he couldn't say. Ayako, however, felt no such hesitation. "Who is Tennyo?" she asked. "And why do you seek to honor her?"

"Tennyo," the tanuki answered, even as he reached over to Hitori's pack and began rummaging around inside it for more sake bottles, "is a great spirit. One the Lady called a Fortune. This means something to you, yes?" Ayako nodded. "Good, you're not as stupid as you look." Hitori grimaced at this but Ayako displayed no reaction. "She is the Fortune of Happiness and Fertility." He found another bottle and opened it, draining it as quickly as the first. "To Tennyo! Oh children of our Lady's brethren, your gifts have made me very happy indeed! Have you any more, by chance?"

"It doesn't make sense," said Ayako, breaking the silence. They'd been hiking for several hours but they were at last nearing the cliffs where the rest of the clan awaited. While she and Hitori had interrogated the tanuki a bit longer, he'd fallen into a drunken sleep not long after, though he had promised his "unwavering support for the purveyors of these fine libations," before sliding to the ground and snoring loudly enough to shake leaves off the trees.

"What doesn't?" Hitori asked, as much surprised at Ayako's speaking without prompt as he was curious about whatever had her up in arms.

"Tennyo. Fortune of happiness and fertility. We know her but by a different name."

"You wonder why she has a different name here?"

"That too, I suppose. No, I wonder why she is stronger here. Our entire marriage, my husband and I failed to conceive, and despite some very arduous attempts." Hitori blushed again but Ayako continued on. "Yet the simple act of traveling towards this land – not even reaching it, but only starting the journey – was enough to allow her to bless us in a way she never could in our homelands."

Hitori shrugged. "It's a shame we can't carry word back to them. It might help them to solve whatever it is that denies the Fortune's – Tennyo's – blessing." He frowned. "But maybe it is the name. What do you know of name magic, Ayako-san?"

"Very little," she admitted. "Some say that demons steal names and attain power that way, so obviously they hold power."

"So we should ask the Crab why a Fortune might change their name?"

"I doubt the Kuni would be forthcoming on the details of how to trade your name to an oni, my Lord, though they might be very curious why you were so keen to know."

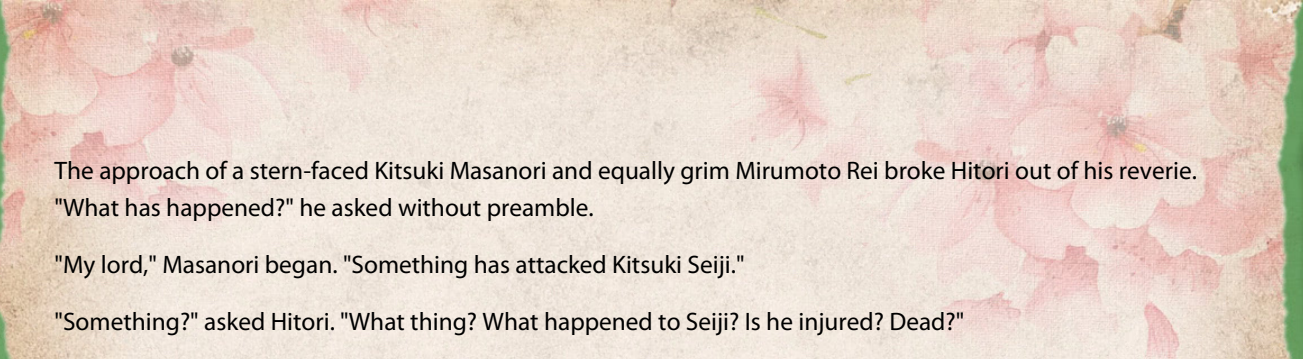
"Who else knows of name magic?"

Ayako thought before answering. "I have heard that there are a race of rats that walk like men, some near the Crab and some in the great Shinomen. It is said that they have priests who wield names as weapons. Still, we can hardly go back and ask them.

"No, the only other experts I know who are here with us are the luchu."

luchu. Unicorn. Their two clans were hardly close. Still, it was a place to begin. He'd see to it when they returned. Actually, speaking of return, those were the border sentries up ahead!

Several guards saluted Hitori as he walked past. The camp looked to be taking shape, having endured his brief time away without pain. The bathing tent looked to be up. Good, he could use wash to get this forest dirt off. Why he felt practically-



The approach of a stern-faced Kitsuki Masanori and equally grim Mirumoto Rei broke Hitori out of his reverie. "What has happened?" he asked without preamble.

"My lord," Masanori began. "Something has attacked Kitsuki Seiji."

"Something?" asked Hitori. "What thing? What happened to Seiji? Is he injured? Dead?"

"My lord," Rei answered quietly, "he is gone."

