



Honest Assessment

Alex Jacobs

"Our landings beyond the Mist harkened back to the earliest days of the Empire and our great fore-bearers, many of whose names we still carry. Still, if we honor our ancestors and their accomplishments, I have come to believe it is at the expense of those whose names were not passed down. We honor the lessons of our ancestors because we are here to honor them, and we are here by dint of the fact that they survived. What of the lessons of those who did not?"

— From the memoirs of Kitsuki Seiji

Darkness. Seiji awoke.

Not perfect darkness. A shade or two past dim. Shapes could be seen, rough outlines without color or depth. What light there was seemed to come from the walls themselves. No, not the walls, Seiji realized, but a dimly phosphorescent growth - some type of moss, perhaps? - that clung to it.

That made sense. The air was damp, and thick. As Seiji turned his Kitsuki-trained mind to the senses that weren't hampered by the lack of light, he heard the sound of water. Dripping in a corner, sloughing somewhere on the floor. The mattress he lay upon was damp and clammy, as were his clothes, though with his own sweat or the moisture of the room he couldn't know.

A shadow at the door caught his attention. Tall but hunched over. Two filmed-over eyes flashed the dim light from the moss and Seiji recalled the image of two large, round, aquatic eyes before he'd lost consciousness.

"Hello?" he asked tentatively.

The creature stepped forward and burred something at him. It sounded vaguely familiar, a dialect similar to that on the shrine, he wondered?

The creature thrust something at him, and Seiji scuttled back in the darkness, his hands squishing the spongy mattress until he ran up against a wall. The creature repeated its words. When Seiji didn't respond it dropped whatever it carried on the mattress with a soft squelch, then disappeared into the darkness, followed by the sound of a splash. It seemed there was a source of water beyond the simple damp that permeated everything. The creature must have swum away.

Seiji moved to examine what it had dropped. Squinting in the dim light, he could make out a tray of food. Pickled seaweed, cucumber, and sashimi. Surprisingly civilized, he thought. Now the words made sense. "Eat," the creature had been saying. A rumbling from his stomach made Seiji realize that, unconscious as he'd been and now deprived of daylight, he had no idea how long it had been since he'd last eaten. Thanking the Kami that at least his captors were treating him well, Seiji tucked into the meal.

"Explain yourself, girl."

Rei gritted her teeth. Kitsuki Masanori, the venerable justicar – the old goat, she thought – was deliberately provoking her. The lack of her name and honorific, all of it she knew was calculated to move her to anger. The problem was, it was working. Forcing herself to take a deep breath, she began her story again.

"As I said, Kitsuki-sama, I received orders from Lord Hitori to escort Kitsuki Seiji on an expedition to the cliffs overlooking the bay. We met at—"

"I have heard all that," Masanori interrupted. "Explain to me why you failed to protect your charge."

Rei felt her gut rise. If she weren't in Hitori's tent with his personal guards here... For that matter, maybe even with them here. She could call him out for that insult. See if all those stories about his reputation as a duelist were earned or, even if they were, if they'd faded over time. She'd wipe the smirk off his face and shove it right up his—

"Rei-san," Mirumoto Hitori spoke from the pillow where he was seated. "Masanori-san is just trying to ascertain

what happened. Please, think back to yesterday afternoon."

Rei forced herself to take a deep breath and continued. "When we returned to camp, I went to make my report. Seiji said he wanted to wash off the road dirt and make himself presentable to you, my lord," she answered, addressing Hitori. "You know about that. After making my report I went to the bathing tent. Seiji wasn't there. Someone nearby thought they'd heard a noise earlier but when they'd looked in hadn't seen anyone. Seiji hasn't been seen since."

Masanori harrumphed. "As I said, you abandoned your charge. Did you simply think that your assignment ended when you returned to camp? Did you happen to forget that we are strangers in a far off land? Did you not realize that the very reason you left camp was to ascertain the threats besieging us on all sides? And from all of that you concluded that your best course of action was to send your charge off to take a bath?"

Rei's hand twitched towards her blades, but she restrained herself. Masanori and Hitori both noticed – of course they did – but this wasn't some lord's palace where she'd be socially outcast for having an emotional reaction to the provocation. If anything, Hitori seemed intrigued. And Masanori? Rei managed to keep her surprise hidden. He seemed genuinely pleased to have struck a nerve.

"My lord," the old justicar began, "I believe I know how Rei might redeem herself."

"Remind me again why we're sailing all the way down to the Phoenix lands?" huffed Agasha Jianyu. By the Thunders, the man got winded even sitting in the sun. How would he fare in one of Rei's classes, repeating the same kata hundreds of times until it was burned into your limbs? The thought almost made her chuckle.

"Seiji's disappearance was immediately after our return from the expedition. Masanori thinks there's a connection," Rei explained. "You and I were also on the expedition. The only thing different about Seiji, Masanori noted, was that he read from the shrine. Since the shrine mentioned Shiba, Hitori-dono thinks it would be wise to consult the Phoenix."

"Well, that explains where we're going," replied Jianyu, "but not why I am here myself. I could be back in camp with my wife. We could be having a cup of tea right now, watching the sunrise."

"You're here," continued Rei, "because you also know what the shrine said. You and Seiji could hardly contain yourselves." *In fact, Seiji couldn't,* thought Rei. *And now we don't know what's happened to him.*

"Right, right," Jianyu went on. "That's why I'm here, what about you?"

Rei shrugged. "I was his yojimbo. It's my responsibility, or so Masanori says."

Jianyu nodded, then tilted his head, inclining it towards the tiller of their small vessel. "And what about her?"

"Well," Togashi Tsurumi spoke up, "I can steer the boat."

"This is outrageous!" bellowed Rei. "What do you mean we aren't allowed in?"

The guard shrugged. "I'm very sorry, Lady Mirumoto," she apologized again, "but Isawa Hifumi has been quite clear with his instructions. No one is to be allowed into the city without his personal authorization. You are welcome to wait for him in our camp. Perhaps you can convince him otherwise."

"Wait for him in camp," Rei repeated. "And how long is that to take? If you're just trying our patience until-"

"That's enough," Tsurumi interrupted, fixing Rei with an icy stare. "I'm sure Shiba... I'm sorry, I didn't get your name," she said, her expression changing to a smile as she turned towards the guard who helpfully supplied, "Yohana."

"Yes, Shiba Yohana-sama. I'm sure Shiba Yohana-sama is being sincere. You wouldn't want to insult her, would you, Lady Mirumoto?" Tsurumi asked. Rei felt her face burn at the emphasis on title and family. As a monk, Rei

technically outranked Togashi Tsurumi, but that didn't mean Rei was free to ignore her either. Dragon leaders took a dim view of those who eschewed the wisdom of the Togashi. Besides, Rei hated to admit, she was right.

"Of course not, Togashi-sensei," Rei said, bowing her head. Turning back to Shiba Yohana, she composed herself. "My apologies, Shiba-san. We would be glad to enjoy the hospitality of your camp. Please see that Isawa Hifumi knows of our arrival."

Without waiting for a response, Rei turned towards the camp. Jianyu followed after while Tsurumi made an apologetic gesture towards the Shiba, then continued with her companions.

"It's been four days!" Rei cried. "What's taking so long?"

On the other side of the large tent – pavilion really, thought Rei. It suited the Crane more than the Phoenix, but while a Crane tent would have been filled with soft pillows and other luxuries, the Phoenix had filled theirs with all manner of desks, collections of scrolls, and other implements of scholastic pursuit – on the other side of the large tent, Agasha Jianyu barely looked up from his conversation. He'd spent the better part of a week discussing matters with one of the Phoenix scholars, a sweet young woman who somehow managed to always smell of red bean paste and sweat. Rei hated red bean paste.

"Our hosts have a number of important tasks," Jianyu answered. "Besides, I can't imagine what you expect to find in their city that would help more than they already have. Asako Reina-san here, for example, has been very helpful. Asako-san, would you care to share your insights with young Rei-san?"

Reina nodded, though perhaps not altogether enthusiastically, Rei noted. "The writing you saw is definitely a form of early Rokugani, though how it arrived here I couldn't say. Its text is also most assuredly about Shiba-no-kami, not simply one of his descendants or family members who carried his name. Beyond that..." She shrugged. Rei sighed.

"In other words, nothing we didn't know before. What fantastic use of our time," Rei huffed, pacing about the tent.

Jianyu was having none of it. "Look," he began, "I know you want answers. We all do, but even confirming our suspicions is helpful if..." Rei had already tuned him out. They had this same discussion several times a day. She knew it wasn't his fault. He was a priest, not a warrior, and he didn't have to prove himself for his failure or his- he didn't have the pressures that she did. Burn it, she wasn't helping here. Making a cursory apology, she departed the tent. She could burn off some frustration on the practice grounds at least.

Out in the camp, the Phoenix – probably the Shiba in specific, she realized – had built what was admittedly a very pleasant open air dojo. In sequestered parts of the grounds, warriors sparred with practice swords of bound bamboo slats while in another area they sparred with larger ones made to resemble the famed Shiba naginata. In a different part of the grounds they moved through kata with bokken while nearby a small group meditated. A large dueling circle, constructed in the Crane style she idly noted, was currently empty. Two students were even practicing an empty-hand kata under an old woman's supervision, though she didn't recognize the style with its sharp strikes and hard, angular blocks. She was surprised to feel homesick.

It looked like her first dojo. She hadn't been able to get out of that place fast enough, either.

Finding a small empty area, Rei exchanged her swords for a pair of bokken. She had to admit that the Phoenix had been gracious in allowing her to keep the Twin Sister Blades she wore while in their camp, but dojo or not, it wouldn't be prudent to start waving around live steel. She'd promised Tsurumi-sensei to be on her best behavior, after all. Doing her best to clear her mind, she let her long bokken fall in front of her belly, blade pointed forward towards an imaginary opponent's throat, while her shorter one rested easily at her side.

The whispers started almost immediately.

She raised her blade, cutting sideways, pulling with the elbows, never pushing with the arms. She remembered

the first time she'd practiced, how the Shiba students had found excuses to stop their own practice, take a break and watch her.

The long sword dropped behind her, against her left leg. When her invisible opponent struck, she raised the blade, seeing their arms falling into its bite as she stepped aside. She had been surprised then, but now it made sense. Of course, they were curious about this stranger, her fighting style, the vaunted niten method.

Effortlessly she completed her strike, her long sword came back, but this time to her right leg. She made to repeat the third position strike, but this time took an imaginary head off invisible shoulders, while the short sword cut down the opposing sword. She heard the whispers but by now they'd satisfied their curiosity about her style. Now they were whispering about her.

"Did you hear..."

"...Kitsuki I think, gone..."

"... not a trace..."

"... couldn't live with myself..."

The long sword was behind her again, the short sword in front, resting lightly on her belt. She was still.

"... couldn't live with myself..."

She moved back to first position

"... couldn't live with myself..."

"Do you have something to say to me?" she spun towards the whispers. "Or just something to say about me?" No one said anything but there was a collective intake of breath from the assembled warriors. She recognized the one at the lead. Shiba Yohana, from the city gates.

To her credit, Yohana stood her ground. "Is it true, Lady Mirumoto," Yohana asked, "that you lost your charge? That he was taken while under your watch?"

Rei refused to let herself blush. Burn this Phoenix. "He was taken," she answered, forcing her voice flat. "But he wasn't under my watch at the time. That's why I'm here, why the Dragon are here. We need the Phoenix's knowledge to save him."

"That's it?" Yohana smirked. "I see," she drawled. "So you seek our aid to recover from your failure."

"How dare you-"

"How dare you!" Yohana interrupted. "If it wasn't your fault, why do you feel such guilt that saving him is your responsibility? And if it was your fault, why should the Phoenix bear the cost of rectifying your mistake? Must we share our secrets, sacrifice our hard-won knowledge, or even risk our lives for your failure? You must understand. I tolerated your presence because I thought you glimpsed the truth. The truth that I thought only Asako Reina-san knew. I thought that you saw with your own eyes what was only hinted at in *The Cost of Grace*, something that could save Sanctuary or destroy it. That you were an important piece in this shoji game. But no. No. You are dragging us into a pointless, mundane feud."

White-knuckled on the bokken, Rei approached the Phoenix. She kept the wooden swords pointed down, but every eye was on them. Every eye save those of Shiba Yohana who, Rei noted, kept her eyes locked with Rei's. The woman was well-trained, Rei realized, and knew that if Rei attacked her eyes would move to her target before her blades would.

By this time, Asako Reina had already run out of the large tent. Nearly out of breath, she yelled to Yohana. "Don't antagonize her; she's still useful to us. Look, Isawa Hifumi-san has already given me the orders."

Orders, Rei thought. Neither Reina nor Jianyu had mentioned such things. What else could they be hiding?

"Show me," Yohana replied, her voice notably less tense than before.

Reina pushed her way through the crowd and handed Yohana an official-looking document. Yohana reviewed the document and then handed it back to Reina.

Yohana nods. "This is an authorization to conduct an investigation into Dragon lands." She then turns her eyes towards Rei. "Why involve her?"

Reina glared at Yohana. "She knows the victim deeply. That should be enough reason to involve her. I do not question your leadership of the army. So do not question my scholarly judgment."

Yohana glared back. "When we share our secrets with outsiders, we not only endanger our clan. We endanger the Empire itself. We should only take that risk if we are dealing with a competent and courageous samurai. Lady Mirumoto is not that samurai."

"I will give you one chance," Rei's voice smoldered, "to apologize for this insult."

Yohana's voice was ice. "One cannot apologize for the truth, Lady Mirumoto. My life is the Phoenix's and I will defend it from anyone. I will defend it from you, if I must."

They both turned towards the empty dueling ring.

When he awoke the darkness was gone.

No it wasn't. It was still just as dim, but he could see! Well, not exactly. The room just seemed brighter. Details he'd previously missed were clear. The light was dim, but it was as if the very air shimmered. No, not shimmered. Hummed. And with each vibration the picture of the world around him crystallized.

That wall. Ancient but firm. A thousand cracks, but none far enough or deep enough to weaken it. By the gods, he could see through it, see how strong it was. How? He rubbed his eyes which felt strange under his hands.

His hands...

Seiji stared at them, at the long talons stretching forth from webbed fingers. He cried out, a strange sound bubbling from his throat. Like that of a drowning child, yet a distant corner of his brain remembered that most drowning victims made no sound; they were too desperate gasping for air to make any noise. Desperately he beat monstrous hands against the door. Maybe they'd hear him, help him, anyone-

The door opened. She was there. The same creature from before, but now his perfectly inhuman eyes saw that she was female, though scaled and bulbous and finned in a way that resembled no woman he'd ever seen before. She opened her mouth and a maw of knives gaped at him. She began to say something *oh gods no NOW WE'LL HEAR HER SPEAK!*