Bitter Destiny

Alex Jacobs

"*What do you remember?*"

The scroll still lay on the small table. Nearby stood the case in which it had traveled. The scroll itself had curled up again when Mirumoto Hitori dropped it on the table without reading it. It had been three hours and all he had done since was move it away from the edge. That and place the dried chrysanthemum blossom on top of the scroll.

He remembered the fall of the flower when he'd unfurled the scroll. He remembered watching it drift lazily through the air, as if caught in a breeze from a faraway place before it hit the floor. He remembered everything.

"Who is it from?" asked Shiriko, politely ignoring her husband's obvious discomfort.

"Togashi Yokuni," he'd answered. "The messenger said she'd been given the letter months ago, but to wait to deliver it today."

Shiriko hadn't responded. With the turmoil since Yokuni's death, the announcement of Togashi Mitsu as his heir, and Mitsu's own silent absence, a personal letter from the late Dragon Champion with instructions to deliver it after his death seemed almost fitting. But the blossom…

"*What do you remember?*"

He remembered a court, a throne, and…

…a blossom in a lady's hair. A chrysanthemum. Fitting. No one but an Empress would have the temerity to wear the Imperial flora as if a simple shy maiden who'd found a pretty flower in the gardens and on a whim decided to tuck it in her hair. It was all Hitori - no, not Hitori. Who was he this time? - could do to stop himself from staring at it.

The Phoenix ambassador suffered no such distractions.
"Then train him and return him to us," spat out Hitori. "If you seek to protect the Empire then start with my family."

"And have him betray our secrets? Never! The Phoenix will use Isawa's legacy to spare your son's life, lord of the Mirumoto, but we will not give-"

"You will," interrupted the Empress and all other conversation ceased. "You will train the child to the point he is no danger to himself or others, and then you shall return him to the Dragon. Do you understand?"

"Lady Hantei," Minori stammered, forcing his voice to a softer tone, "With all respect this is a private matter between our two clans. Surely the throne's attentions would be better spent elsewhere."

The Empress of Rokugan shook her head. "My husband has charged me with mediating this dispute. I assure you, the throne's attentions are exactly where they should be. You will do as I command and you-" she pointed her fan at Hitori "-shall obey as well. Have your son delivered to the Phoenix by nightfall. When he returns, after however long his training takes, you will ensure he speaks to no one about what he has learned."

"Your will, Empress," Hitori answered. "But if you will permit me, how am I to know the Phoenix will return him at the end of his training?"

"And how are we to know the Dragon will not exploit the child to learn our secrets?" demanded Minori.

"You have my word," the Empress responded. "That is enough. As is your obedience."

The Dragon and the Phoenix bowed and made to depart. As the Asako left the room, the Empress called the Dragon back.

"I saved your son's life today," she began. Hitori stayed quiet. "Either from madness or the Phoenix."

Hitori nodded. "I owe you a great debt," he acknowledged. "One I may never be able to repay."

"Perhaps not," she said as she reached up to her hair and pulled out the chrysanthemum flower. "But then again," she continued as she pressed the blossom into his hands. "Remember."

"What do you remember?"

It was now again. Mirumoto Hitori was himself. He shuddered. He'd thought the memories would stop when he left the Order. If he couldn't run from the past, perhaps at least he could fight it.

He opened the scroll.

> Mirumoto Hitori,
>
> Destiny has grown bored of waiting.
>
> The Empress has called in your debt, and you must prepare to meet it.
>
> Gather your best, and send them to her.
>
> 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? Send any less and you will fail the Empress.
>
> Send builders and wanderers, for it is in wandering that your destiny will await.
>
> Let them each gather their vassals and servants and bring them to her. She is waiting.
>
> Find her at the port of Jukami Mura.
>
> — Yokuni

Hitori couldn't breathe. He felt the scroll crumple in his hand and the paper tear as it balled under his fingers. Shiriko entered the room, her face turning to confusion as she saw the expression on Hitori's face. Was this why they hadn't had any children? To make it easier to leave her?

"I'm sorry," he whispered as he fled.

Branches clawed and snapped at Hitori as he ran. He ran from the letter. He ran from the memories. He ran from the house. He ran from the wife whose name he'd taken and whose house he lived in when years ago he'd run from the order that gave him those memories that explained that letter. He ran until he collapsed against a tree, gasping for breath. He just needed a moment until he could run again.

"Get up! You've got better things to do than lie in the dirt." Still gasping, Hitori looked around. His vision was blurry, but he thought he saw a figure in green. "At least I hope you do. Maybe not." He wiped the sweat out of his eyes. It sounded like a woman from the voice, though her head looked strange. "If not, we must really be in for it."

"Who're you?" he managed to get out between gasps of breath. He deliberately tried to slow his breathing down, force longer, deeper breaths. His heart was no longer beating like it was trying to break out of his chest.

"Tsurumi," she answered. "Tsurumi-Sensei to you. Did you enjoy your run?" she asked, her tone light and conversational. He now saw that the strange thing on her head was actually a brilliant white and silver tattoo wrapped around her shaved head in the shape of a bird. A crane. That and the "sensei" had to make her-

"Togashi Tsurumi?" he asked. She nodded. "A little on the nose, isn't it?"

Tsurumi shrugged. "Destiny showed me who I was. Or at least Togashi Gaijutsu did. Maybe they're the same thing. And you haven't answered my question. Did you enjoy your run?"

"Yes, very invigorating," he replied. "Great exercise. You should try it."

She smiled. "Not that little jog of yours. The path you've been running down - or running from - since you left the order. How're you enjoying that? Working out for you?"

Hitori scowled. Talking with monks made him doubly-glad he'd left. "That's none of your business. Togashi Yokuni gave me permission to leave. That's the end of it."

Tsurumi shook her head. "There is no end to destiny. You know that. Yokuni-dono, may his next incarnation find its way to us soon, may have allowed you to forswear your name, but we both know there are some things you can't fight. Or run from." She smiled.

He hated it. "And I suppose you're here to guide me back to my destiny?"

"If you like. Either way you need to come with me. It's a long way to Jukami Mura, so we should probably get going. We can talk on the way."

She turned and began walking. Southeast by his judgment. Kami above, she really expected him to just follow along with her all the way to the ocean. "Now hold up a minute," Hitori said. Tsurumi stopped and turned towards him. "We're not going anywhere. I don't know what you think you know but we're talking about-" he paused. "I don't even know what we're talking about. Promises from past lives. Letters from dead men. I'm not giving up my life here to follow some damn riddle."

"Of course you are," Tsurumi replied, her voice still remarkably cheerful. "You can't fight your destiny. All you can do is make a choice."

"I'm choosing to go home."

She closed her eyes and lowered her voice. Against his will, Hitori found himself leaning in close to listen to her. "That's not the choice you get to make. Your only choice is to embrace your destiny or be destroyed by it." She opened her eyes again and began walking around him. "Destiny is a storm and you're a ship adrift at sea. You can fight the current or let it carry you along. But you can't sail up a mountain." She stopped on the hillside path, standing over him.

"Apt metaphor."

"Thank you, I just thought of it."

"And I suppose there's a reason you walked up the path from me?"

"Well, I thought you might just ignore me and decide to walk back home." Hitori smiled. "Are you sure you want to stand in my way?"

Tsurumi grinned. "Well, there is one other reason."

"What's that?"

"I enjoy having the high ground." She twisted her torso to the right as Hitori's fist exploded past her. She backed up the path as he lunged forward. Two more quick punches that she evaded. "You're taller than I am. Had to negate that advantage somehow."

Hitori didn't respond as he continued to advance up the path towards Tsurumi. The next time he struck at her she launched what seemed a counter punch, but then pulled back and trailed her hand down his arm. Realizing he'd overextended, Hitori tried to grab onto her but she made a circle movement that twisted his wrist. A sharp pain went through his arm, forcing him to let go, and he realized he was on the forest floor.

"Nikyo," Tsurumi said, still smiling. "Wrist control technique. Very good for helping aggressive samurai sit down."

Hitori jumped to his feet. His swords were still at his side but he left them there. Tsurumi might be a skilled open-handed fighter but he'd also studied kaze-do when he was with the Order. "I know it," he muttered. "Now get out of my way."

Tsurumi laughed. "Make me."

He jumped at her again, grabbing both her wrists. Let her try another trick like that. He was already pulling her down, then a quick kick would…

She fell back with him. Suddenly off balance by her shift in weight and briefly disoriented, he followed her right arm as it raised up, bringing his arm still holding onto her along. The distraction was enough that when her left arm dropped he went with it, finding himself once more alone on the ground.

"Tenchi-nage," she called out as he picked himself up. "Guide their eyes towards heaven as you send them to the earth."

He stared at the monk. His hand darted to his side where his swords rested but she shook her head. "The more you fight, Hitori-san, the worse this will be for you." He paused and she went on. "You fought your destiny in the High House, and then were ordered to leave your wife. You fought your destiny at home and the forest left you scratched and gasping for breath. You fought against your destiny with me and ended up facedown in the dirt. What do you think will happen if you draw those blades?"

Slowly, very slowly, he moved his hand away. "What do you suggest, then?" he asked. "Give up? Leave, never knowing if I'll return? I won't do it."

Tsurumi looked into Hitori's eyes. She didn't argue, she didn't fight with him. She simply accepted. "Neither will I."

Of course.

At last the tension left Hitori. He closed his eyes and nodded. When he opened them, Tsurumi was standing by him. "Alright," he said. "Let's go."