

EMERALD LEGACY



Knowledge

Tariq Ali

Under the unblinking gaze of Lord Moon, I quietly read through Asako Reina's survey of the Empty City. The language is overwrought at times, but it's usable.

The survey starts off with a brief description of the Empty City, and includes a basic map of the area for navigation purposes. The survey then goes into detail about the many discoveries Reina made. This section is largely speculation, as no written records exist within the Empty City. Still, Reina did her duty.

The survey's highlight is its musical section. Reina would sometimes hear mysterious sounds while looking for written books. The sounds were all speaking in unison.

Reina would never find any books in this city. All she could find was noise, noise that was coming from underneath the city.

After hours of documenting these sounds, Reina determined that it was actually a song that was repeating itself. The lyrics are spoken in an old dialect that resembles pre-Rokugani language.

Reina translated the song to the best of her ability. It's about the fabric of reality - how it can be so powerful, and yet so fragile. Most people are victims of reality's cruel and sadistic manipulations. But there is still hope. A few talented individuals know reality's weaknesses, and can exploit these weaknesses for the greater good. These individuals will one day restore "the glory of the five rivers".

It's an elegant song.

If there is one thing to critique about this survey, it was a lack of detail regarding The Stranger. Reina regularly saw a male burakumin during her investigations. This burakumin would sometimes be spotted on rooftops or dark alleyways, but never spying directly at her. So if he wasn't watching the Phoenix, what was he looking for?

Reina tried to explain The Stranger - a magical hallucination, a shinobi-in-training, or maybe an operation designed to stir strife. Without any evidence, it's hard to see which hypothesis is correct.

I wished Reina spent more time analyzing The Stranger, and less time studying music.

The final page of Reina's survey, discussing the city's architecture, caught my attention.

The Empty City followed the same architectural styles of the 'Shining Prince' era. Yet, it lacks the Rokugani flourish that makes it a 'true' exemplar of that era. It sacrifices aesthetics in favor of utilitarianism. And instead of the iconography of the clans, we would see beautiful pictures of five rivers.

The buildings here keep me company and help me deal with mental anguish and isolation. I know there is something spiritual here, just waiting to be uncovered. So far though, everything I see here is cold, dead, and lifeless.

But if I cannot find the spiritual truths behind this city, then I shall content myself with cataloging these buildings for future generations. There's history here, and that history is worth documenting. If my efforts here lead to the enlightenment of a single person, then it is worth doing.

The words "cold, dead, and lifeless" took me by surprise.

There is only one place on the Rokugani mainland that is cold, dead, and lifeless - the Kuni Wastelands.

Those territories were once Tainted. The Kuni family cleansed those lands, removing the Taint along with everything else. Above ground, the spirits had fled and the soil was barren. Life only exists below ground, within the underground passageways and tunnels.

So if there is anything spiritual in the Empty City, it must exist within these underground territories. We have to look for secret compartments and corridors. We may be able to find out who - or what - is responsible for that song about reality.

"Go back to the boats. **Die** on those boats. It's better than going **there**."

Ikoma Yumiko stands in our way, just outside the watchtowers that separate us from the Empty City. She grips her katana shakily, as she begs us to turn back. Asako Reina and I warily look at each other, and at her. We need to move onward. But we don't want to provoke a diplomatic incident with the Lion clan.

Not yet, anyway.

"Isawa Hifumi has given us orders," I tell Yumiko. "It is **he** who chose this site; it is **he** who wants it to be settled by the Phoenix clan. We will carry out our orders - that is our duty."

Yumiko spits at the ground in front of us. "Even if it leads you to damnation? Have you browsed the reports of the Lion priests, who warned of spiritual traps?"

Reina hisses. "I looked at those reports. And I find them hysterical. This is not the Shadowlands we're dealing with here, but an ancient place of wonder and glory. We can handle our own affairs."

"My patron says otherwise," Yumiko smirks. "That's why she sent me here. To study the spirits, and determine if they are friendly or hostile to the Rokugani."

"Your...patron?" I ask, hesitatingly. "You're an Emerald Magistrate. The only person you should be serving is the Emerald Champion."

"But the Emerald Champion is currently busy, on account of being thousands of miles away from Sanctuary. Until the child Empress appoints a new Champion, we Magistrates must take matters into our own hands. Luckily for us, many samurai support the enforcement of Imperial Law. Like my patron."

Yumiko's ego is a weakness, one that I can exploit. "Who is your patron?" "My patron is a member of the Phoenix clan. She is opposed to Isawa Hifumi and believes that his actions will doom us all. She hired me to observe the Phoenix clan and prepare for what is to come."

"Were you the one who sent The Stranger?"

Yumiko giggles. "You gave Ichiro a nickname? I'm sure he'll be pleased."

"What did he find?"

Yumiko stops giggling. She shudders for a moment, and then speaks in a monotone voice. "A song that is sung in inhuman voices, its singers trapped by a magical curse. Blood feuds between inanimate objects, that stretches from the beginning of time to the ending of time. The screams. The endless screams."

We all pause, at a loss of words.

Asako Reina whispers to me, "You know the spirits. Is Yumiko telling the truth?"

I shrug.

On the mainland, I was a celebrated shrinekeeper. People would praise me relentlessly: *Kaito Yoshikai knows what they're doing. Look at all the wonderful books they wrote! Their competence is* —only useful on the mainland. Here, in the new lands, my knowledge is worthless.

So perhaps these spirits are too dangerous to deal with.

Perhaps.

But we can't reject the spirits simply because we're afraid of the consequences.

Ikoma Yumiko tapped her left foot impatiently.

I reply diplomatically. "What you say may be true, Yumiko. But we will not let paranoia restrain us. The spirits here may have insights worthy of respect and understanding. The Empty City could be a valuable asset to the Phoenix clan, and even to the empire."

"A valuable asset." Yumiko scoffs. "Isawa Hifumi is playing with forces that he does not understand. My patron recognizes this fact. You would be wise to do the same."

Reina scowls. "And if we run away from knowledge, then how can we ever hope to understand Sanctuary?"

"We can't."

Reina could not control her anger, and unsheath her katana. I hold her hand, yet Yumiko steps forward, ready for battle.

Then laughter comes from the watchtowers.

It's not human laughter.

I turn to the watchtowers and see ten ceremonial robes soundlessly float towards us.

These ceremonial robes look like the same brown robes worn by members of Reina's monastic order, but there were some minor differences - chiefly the presence of eyes and a beard. The long pointed collars have been converted into noses, noses that are now being used to sniff out nearby prey.

I grip my sword, prepared for battle against these intruders. The robes do not quicken their pace.

"Do not attack the robes," Yumiko warns us, as she also grips her sword. "We should not antagonize the spirits here."

"Fair advice," Reina responds, gripping her sword as well, even more tightly than Yumiko and I. "But the spirits should also not antagonize us."

As the robes got closer, a thought occurred to me. "Why would these robes announce their presence? If they were clever, they would let us fight each other, and then plunder our corpses."

Yumiko sighs reluctantly. "Stealth and ambushes are frowned upon in the Empty City. The spirits self-regulate here, preventing their endless wars from spiraling out of control."

"And how do you know any of this?" Reina asks.

"Ichiro told me."

While we squabble, the robes make it to our position.

A robe then grabs Yumiko by the throat, and throws her to the ground. The other nine robes surround us, and then motion to the watchtowers. More robes stream in, ready to participate in this skirmish.

I could count fifty in total.

The robes glare greedily at our katanas. The message is clear: give them our swords and we'll live.

I've seen spirits like these back on the mainland. They're a type of nemuranai - items that had their inner spirits awakened after a period of dormancy.

But on the mainland, nemuranai are rare; their powers are subtle and reflect their history of use. You would never expect to see so many in one place, let alone a gang of them trying to rough up samurai. A robe like these before us would be docile, connected in unseen ways to the quiet scholar who once wore it. What would have caused them to be so aggressive and violent here?

Yumiko did not appreciate the humiliation of being attacked by a ceremonial robe. She stands back up, staring at Reina. "We can kill each other later."

Reina nods.

Reina, Yumiko, and I attack the robes with our katanas. The robes use raw force to overpower us, strangling, punching, and kicking us into submission. Our swords cut through the cloth as easily as flesh; those we cut fell down motionless.

This is a battle of attrition - both sides seek to wear each other down.

Yumiko yells out a battle cry as she swings her katana against one of the robes, shredding it to pieces. "They beat us in number, but we beat them in skill!"

Yet the enemy continues to throw itself against our swords, injuring us however they please. We tire, even as we keep killing.

I stop focusing on the circle of robes and instead glance at a robe that I slain. Two other robes quickly escort the cut cloth off to the watchtowers. Freed from the battle, the slain robe then slowly reforms itself. After the robe fully heals, the cloth then returns back to the circle, to wait its turn.

The robes did not fear death. Why should they?

And we cannot retreat, as the robes cut off all escape.

Exhaustion overtakes us. Inevitability wins.

As we lay on the ground, the robes bandage up our wounds. They uttered calm words in our ears, reassuring us that we will not be harmed. Another oddity. On the mainland, the nemuranai would communicate via feelings and emotions. They do not speak in a dialect that resembles pre-Rokugani language.

Then the robes collect our katanas and flee back into the Empty City, leaving our provisions behind.

Yumiko yells curses, while tending to her bandages.

Reina swears an oath of revenge, and struggles to stand up.

I say nothing. Instead, I quietly reflect on the loss of my status marker. What else can I do? Give chase after them? We were spared once, and we can not afford a second chance.

I ask Yumiko, "If the spirits here are this hostile, then how did The Stranger survive this place?"

Yumiko shakes her head in sorrow. "Wars are not deadly affairs, but merely ways to resolve disputes. The spirits could kill Ichiro easily. But instead, they allow Ichiro to live, on one condition. He cannot do anything that can harm or destroy these spirits."

"Which means the spirits can indeed be harmed or destroyed." Reina's eyes open up wide in horror. "It may not be wise for us to destroy the spirits though. My monastic order would not approve."

I turn my attention to Yumiko. "The Stranger has a lot of knowledge about the Empty City. You have a lot of skill. And we all want our katanas back. You can guide us. We can work together..."

"...or maybe Ichiro can steal my katana back from the damned robes, and we can just let the Phoenix clan damn itself. You can't save people from their own greed and idiocy." She limps away from us, laughing at a cruel joke being played at her expense.

While Reina glares at Yumiko, I turn my attention to the eastern edge of the Empty City. I see a male burakumin, leaving the area and running towards the position of Ikoma Yumiko. This must be Ichiro.

I drag Reina to the eastern edge of the Empty City, making sure to avoid Ichiro's attention. There, in the ruins of one of the watchtowers, lie a blue staircase made out of glass. The staircase leads underground.

Reina smiles softly.

We carefully enter the staircase, afraid of what we may discover.

Ten minutes. That's how long it takes for us to get to the bottom of the staircase.

There, we see a gigantic library-palace, filled to the brim with books on different subjects. Each book is hand-bound in leather, neatly organized on different bookshelves. The bookshelves are colored in different shades of

blue.

"So this was where all the written text went," Reina mused. We browse the bookshelves, looking for anything that might fancy us. We could hear the song about reality more clearly here. The music echoes across the expansive halls, and gives us comfort.

Eventually, Reina leans on one of the stone walls and speculates. "Something disrupted the tranquility of the Empty City. The inhabitants hid underground, while fighting the enemy aboveground. The enemy was driven off, but the cost was high - the city itself became cold, dead and lifeless. The survivors built a new civilization, below ground, where life could still persist."

I smile. "If what you say is true, then there is still hope. Not just for them, but for us."

Then the books speak to us, in unison. The bookshelves shake with each utterance.

DO YOU WORK WITH THE USURPER NAMED AKODO?

Reina responds promptly. "No. We work for the usurper named Shiba."

I sternly glare at Reina.

WHY SHOULD WE TRUST YOU?

"Because we are the ones who can restore the glory of the five rivers."

The books pause in complementation.

KINUTANUKI YOITE TRUSTS YOU.

A stone wall slides to the right, revealing a silken figure who is secretly watching us from behind. She appears to be a statue that changes her shape every moment.

A shameful ronin, a prestigious courtier, a haughty Imperial, a lowly peasant, a tanuki.

The only commonality between these forms? A tattoo on the right side of her forearm, bearing a picture of five flowing rivers.

Reina takes the initiative. "Kinutanuki Yoite, I presume?"

"Yes. Follow me." She quietly escorts us to a courtyard, to begin diplomatic negotiations.

The straw sandals provide entertainment, with their chants: "*Kararin! Kororin! Kankororin!*" Short-sleeved kimonos patrol the courtyard, and with knotted sashes they descend into the garden, bringing with them exquisite tea. The paper walls carefully track our every move, silently judging us and filing reports.

All of them sing the same elegant song about the fabric of reality. Reina and I drink the tea eagerly. We feel a sense of euphoria and bliss, though such feelings can only be temporary. Yoite then pretends to drink as well, to make us feel comfortable. She subtly drops the tea to the floor, and the kimonos clean up the mess.

"Why are the ceremonial robes so hostile?" I ask. "They are pacifistic on the mainland."

"Blame Dōji," Yoite scowls. "She appointed the robes as our overlords, and told us to wait for the day when her empire turns into ashes." Yoite sighed. "The robes were good, once. Power corrupts. It always has, and always will."

Yoite then tells us that she conquered this library from the ceremonial robes, relying on the help of an insurgency of books. Now she seeks to "liberate" other libraries throughout the Empty City. She wants to overthrow the ceremonial robes. That's why she needs us.

"The spirits have been asleep for a thousand years," Yoite begins, "while everything crumbled around them. We are in no condition to reunify the Empty City. But you can. The followers of Shiba are walking swords - your violent steel tempered by the soul of peace. You can turn the tide of battle, and end our slumber. And we spirits

will richly reward you. We have knowledge and histories stretching back a thousand years."

Asako Reina nods in agreement.

I hesitate, afraid of trusting someone that I barely know.

Yet there was no alternative. Yoite is the only friendly person - well, being - here. She appears to be reasonable enough, though even the most horrible person can pretend to be reasonable.

Besides, the ceremonial robes have stolen our swords. They have waged war against the Phoenix clan. If we have to ally with Yoite to take down a common enemy, so be it.

I nod.

Yoite laughs happily. To my untrained ear, it sounds like a scream.