

EMERALD LEGACY



The Pact

Tariq Ali

Isawa Hifumi paced the floor of the dusty ancient palace. The stones beneath his feet had been laid during the early days of the Emerald Empire. This building was occupied by ceremonial robes for centuries, used as a military fortress. And now? That occupation ended.

Six weeks ago, the ceremonial robes abandoned this palace. This was not because of some hard-earned victory of the Phoenix. The ceremonial robes *left* it, willingly, as compensation. The robes had stolen katanas from the Rokugani. *They did not hand back the katanas, but they gave us this palace instead. It will have to do.*

Where there was once endless violence, there are now tense stand-offs and maneuverings. The robes make their aggressive moves, the Phoenix make their aggressive moves, but they do not come to blows. An understanding exists, an implicit one. And a representative of the robes has reached out to Kaito Yoshiaki. They are holding negotiations, trying to formalize this understanding, turn it into a cease-fire.

This is a miracle — and I do not trust miracles. Have the robes found a new enemy, one that even they cannot subdue? Or do they seek to manipulate us? For some greater goal?

Hifumi set such thoughts aside and focused on the palace itself. The tsukigami that lived in the Empty City still continued the tasks their masters would have held in life, had anything survived for these thousand years. They still support the "glory of the five rivers" and still maintain the buildings here.

From the inscriptions here, it appeared that this palace is named the Palace of Knowledge. It was intended to be a gift, built by Lady Doji and the ceremonial robes.

For the humans that will come and settle here.

And thus, this palace waits.

Waiting for them to arrive.

And now they hung on the precipice of ruining it all.

"My lord, you summoned me." Shiba Akane pulled the gilded doors shut behind her, closing them with a solid thunk. The elderly Shiba was thin, her gray hair pulled back tight on her forehead, the veins on her hands clearly visible against age-spotted skin. But her pose, light on her feet, with a powerful stance, hinted at the skilled warrior hidden under her light armor, and she did not bend a hair at its weight. She could have retired, long ago, but she refused—too stubborn to desire a life of contentment.

"I did summon you. Come." Hifumi beckoned her towards the low table on a raised dais at one end of the palace. It was a conceit, to use such a large gathering hall in this fashion, as his own personal study. But this way, he knew no one was nearby, listening through the wall, and the city had many such empty chambers.

Hifumi settled himself on one plump cushion, brand new, *Important to check...it must always be new...* and Akane settled herself on another, watching him.

Hifumi studied her silently over steepled fingers. It was difficult, after Shiba Yohana's death, to find another who would be of suitable disposition. Managing the complex realities in which he found himself mired, apart from running the everyday settling in of the Phoenix clan within the confines of the Empty City, required loyalty. And a devotion to righteousness. The struggles he faced were too great for any man to challenge completely alone.

"Why am I here, my lord?" Akane asked politely. Her face gave little away, though Hifumi suspected she may have guessed something.

"I require a new...assistant...to replace Shiba Yohana. I know you by reputation, your vigilance against the Aimi heretics, and your diligence in seeking traces of their rot on the mainland. I know you believe they have followed us here, hiding themselves among the Crane, and perhaps other clans. Your suspicions have been proven true. I receive communications from our assets across the clans, seeking out all traces of heresy and forbidden magic. What we have found so far disturbs me greatly. If the Phoenix allows such evil to fester, it will corrupt the seedling

before the root of this Empire-in-Waiting can even take hold. I need someone loyal, who can gather correspondences, recruit new agents, and compile traces of this heresy."

"Why me? Surely there is someone already in your organization already doing this role."

Hifumi sniffed. "It is true Sato has experience in fighting heretics and managing my assets. She has already proven her loyalty to me multiple times. But, sadly, she is a mere peasant. It would be...embarrassing...to give a peasant an important duty like this."

Akane seemed to struggle to place the anonymous peasant who served as Hifumi's primary source of information, but the fact that peasants were forgettable was one of their great strengths. "Surely, even this minor blemish can be resolved through an adult adoption. Or by usurping the identity of a heretical samurai. If you trust her with such knowledge."

"Nobody can be trusted with knowledge." Hifumi fixed on the old woman with a stern eye. "Sato has the talent. And the experience. But not the wisdom. You know full well that to gain even limited knowledge of any heresy is enough to make you susceptible to its influence. The Phoenix are no less vulnerable in this way than the other clans. Knowledge is our armor...and our greatest vulnerability."

Akane drew herself straighter. "My years have not made me soft, my lord. Your enemies will find me a tough root to chew. If you tell me who it is we face, the nature of this heresy, I will do my best to serve."

"Of course." Hifumi gestured to summon Akane closer to the table, and passed her the first scrap of paper. "These notes are from my spies among the peasants, loyal to me in all things, words gathered from samurai from servants listening in the shadows. You see the names of each speaker with them. Together, they paint the picture. Read, and tell me what you see."

Akane picked up the first scrap, frowning as she began to read.

Shiba Ryuu: *"Samurai accept death when they carry their swords, but a stab in the dark is not how it should be. It leads to inconvenient questions. A false accusation of conspiracy is what put us together."*

Matsu Nobuiko: *"My father traded his life for time, and staked his honor on our innocence. The Pact exists through his sacrifice, and I shall take the Nobu lineage even higher. There's no greater respect."*

Shinjo Isamu: *"We lost our names, I turned back my sword, it was the darkest night. But we rode confident that truth would light back the sun."*

Akane set down the third scrap. "Shiba Ryuu, a female Void acolyte, embracing pacifism. Matsu Nobuiko, a male warrior obsessed with honor and proving his valor. Shinjo Isamu, a male archer with ties to the minor clans in Yatacabune Port. They're legendary figures. They were framed for a crime that they did not commit, lost their family names, became ronin. They then traveled the mainland, and uncovered a conspiracy against the Empire. They destroyed the conspiracy, regained their family names. Heroes."

"Are they?"

"Well, I thought they were. Three ambitious samurai, and a...pact? In exchange for their family names. But a pact to do what?"

Hifumi steeped his fingers as Akane picked up more scraps. "Read on."

Shiba Ryuu: *"We proved our innocence. On the mainland, we brought the guilty party to justice. But it was not solely due to our doing — the Void has helped us tremendously. Here, in Sanctuary, the Void uses us for a purpose, unknown and unknowable. We must pay tribute to the Void, by following its orders, traveling to new territories and documenting them for others."*

Matsu Nobuiko: *"Most of the time, we traverse the Western Shore of Sanctuary, creating beautiful maps for others to use. Yet, our thoughts would wander to the Eastern Shore, shrouded by mists. Those who claim the Eastern Shore, claim the sea beyond. Those who claim the sea, claim the world."*

Shinjo Isamu: "My mother told me about the Green Horde — Unicorn venturing forth in the darkness beyond the edge of the maps, in the shadows beyond the edge of the world. I thought they had perished in the deserts. But the Void tells us that we must be the new Green Horde...that we follow past the end of the maps. That we will see them soon, on the Eastern Shore!"

"There is a kind of madness in this." Akane was blunt. "The Void doesn't speak to Void acolytes, or to Unicorn archers. Only the Ishiken could say if it speaks at all. Yet the Pact treat the Void as if they are old friends, carrying on casual conversations with..." Akane paused. "What is this 'Void' of which they speak?"

Bitterness twisted Hifumi's lips. "Not Void. Not that of which the Ishiken tell. Philosophers have called it a darkness, a nothingness out of which words are spoken, and lies are told. It eludes our tests of jade, and thrives on the uprooted, the formless. The nameless. That is the Void which I believe these fools have ensnared themselves. The Void that threatens us all."

"You believe, then, that this Pact is under the control of this 'Lying Darkness,' Isawa-dono? And they are a threat?" Akane set the sixth scrap back on the table.

"I do not believe. I know. My agents confirmed this to me."

"The Lying Darkness. It may lie. But the best lies are the half-truths, rhetoric that leads people astray, even if it is outwardly honest."

"This darkness knew the ambitious samurai were innocent. And it helped them in their time of need, saved them and the mainland itself. Because people trust heroes. Trust them implicitly. Trust them to enter Sanctuary without the proper vetting. And thus, this heresy infects the new lands, threatening all in its wake." *I trusted Shiba Ryuū, allowing her to join the Phoenix expedition. Which means I am partly responsible for this corruption.*

Akane picked up more scraps from the table.

Miya Kogara: "I facilitate transactions. Whether it is resolving a minor dispute between the clans, or helping The Pact sell maps to the Miya cartographers, I serve the Empress through my messages. But what is the end of these transactions? What is my ultimate purpose? That is not for me to question."

Kaito Urabe: "The Pact recruit people like me and Miya Kogara. We carry out our tasks flawlessly, like a gardener assigned to a garden. We do not know why the garden exists. Nor do we care. We will study the garden. We will fulfill our duty.

Kaito Yoshiaki, my uncle, dislikes The Pact. Says that we will lose our cultural identity. But we, we in The Pact, will gain glory, wealth...and power. Our culture? A worthy sacrifice, for something greater."

She threw the scrap down in disgust.

"Informal magistracies—alliances outside the disciplined diplomacy of the historic clans—like the Pact, find ripe fruit here in Sanctuary. I have sent my agents to investigate where they grow powerful. And The Pact...it has grown powerful indeed. The Imperials respect it, admire its maps of Sanctuary."

"Your agents? You recruit from all the clans, correct?"

"Correct."

"Wouldn't this be considered an informal magistracy as well?"

Hifumi thought for a while. "Perhaps. But this is a necessary evil. Those that join The Pact — who do they truly have allegiance to? Is it to their clans? The 'Void'? Or something worse? Should we not know?"

Akane shuffled through the remaining scraps. "These others. Other 'informal organizations between clans' your spies are hunting out, searching for heretics?"

Hifumi nodded silently, his eyes hooded.

The older Shiba shook her head. "This seems like something the Scorpion could pursue." Her tone was respectful,

not challenging.

Hifumi stacked the papers she had already read and set them carefully aside. "It was studying corruption and heresy within the Scorpion clan that first gave a name to this Lying Darkness. Who corrupted these ambitious samurai, introduced them to the Lying Darkness? It may very well be that clan." He sighed. "But, perhaps, subtle overtures could be made to them. Perhaps they did not know that this canker still festers, here."

"The Scorpion has already proven their orthodoxy, by studying the shrines of the Fortunes. Perhaps, they can be trusted." Akane straightened. "The Shiba will serve, Isawa-dono, as you command. Do you wish me to round up this..." her lips took on a sneer, "...Shiba Ryuu for you? For questioning?"

"No. This link of the centipede, I recognize. I can use it to trace its way back to the head. I must sever that head, cut off each single limb, whether they be one hundred or one thousand."

"We are gambling, aren't we? We hope to eliminate this heresy entirely, in one blow, instead of just striking against those who we know are corrupted."

"Because if we strike piece by piece, then the corruption will still spread, only undetected." Hifumi sighed.

"Corruption. Selfish desire. Fear. Ambition. Greed. All these soil the purity of this sacred land. They soil the memory of the Empire that is dying as we speak, and all our hopes for the Empire that is to come. The only way that the new Empire will be worthy of its legacy is if we find in ourselves the purity of the heavens. And we are vain, weak creatures, willing to sell our souls to the Nothing for the glory of a name." Hifumi gestured at the papers in disgust. "I will not have it, Akane-san. The Isawa will keep the Empire pure. In flame, if need be."

Akane watched Hifumi silently, her own eyes thoughtful as she considered Hifumi's words. Finally, she made her decision. "And the Shiba will see it done."

They were silent for a few moments as she read more of the small paper missives. Finally, Akane looked up. "It seems the Pact wishes to claim the Eastern Shore. It makes sense. Those who claim the eastern shore control access to the sea beyond. And from the sea, to the whole rest of the world. That is where true power lies. But how will you prevent the Pact from claiming the Eastern Shore, as is their wish? Anyone can send scouts out to explore."

Hifumi's fist tightened as he made his decision. "We will convince the Empress that, for the spiritual and physical safety of all on the island, she must issue an edict preventing exploration without a Writ of Survey, granted only to an approved few. Even then, she shall declare that new settlements and outposts cannot be created without a Writ of Sanctification, ensuring that the area being settled is spiritually sound. The Phoenix, as guardians of the spiritual well-being of the Empire, will control those wrats."

"The clans would never permit the Phoenix to control all exploration. And there should be a plan if the Phoenix are not permitted sole control over the settlements."

Hifumi thought long about the problem, scenarios playing out in the dark corners of his mind. Finally, reluctantly, he answered. "A champion. Champions. One to enforce the law over the clans on behalf of the Empress in the settled lands, to keep the peace. Too high above the corruption of the heresies — we hope — to be caught up in them, but drawing their attention away from our investigations, in any event. A second to oversee the exploration of the lands, carefully. Controlled. And..." he paused, "...replaceable, should they prove traceable to the Void's pact. And a third, then, a powerful shugenja, blessed by the kami, to ensure the spiritual well-being of Sanctuary. No other clan has the power to challenge our own shugenja. Even if they did, they would have training. That must be good enough for now."

Akane stood. "I will review the rest of the correspondence, and do whatever I can to assist you, my lord. I will lobby the Imperials in public, and Sato will blackmail them in private." Suddenly she smiled, creasing the lines around her eyes like a kindly grandmother's. "And you should sleep more. A warrior knows he must get rest when he can. After all, tomorrow, the battle begins anew."