


Legend of the
Five Rings™



the Soul
of
Iuchiban

EVIL
LIVES
AGAIN

EVAN DICKEN

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Heroic samurai must defeat an ancient evil unleashed upon the world, before its malign power destroys the realm of Rokugan in this epic Legend of the Five Rings fantasy adventure

The Emerald Empire stands on the brink of destruction. The dark sorcerer Iuchiban has escaped his tomb, and desires dominion over all. Unicorn samurai Iuchi Qadan has been welcomed home and celebrated for her part in destroying the Blood- speaker rebellion. Yet she is not herself... Possessed by Iuchiban, Qadan can do nothing but watch as the undying sorcerer lord draws tight the noose he has wrapped around the throat of an unsuspecting empire. And hope that someone will realize she is not who she seems. But the other survivors of Iuchiban's tomb are few, and made speechless by the horrors they've endured. To stop Iuchiban's evil, new alliances between old enemies must be formed. They will be brittle, untested, and marred by mistrust. Should these alliances fail, there will be no Rokugan.

PROLOGUE

“Iuchiban lives.” Iuchi Qadan felt her lips move, a traitor’s voice shaping words not her own.

“Who?” Lord Shinjo Bataar leaned forward, one fist resting on his knee. Although in his eightieth year, the Unicorn Clan Champion still cut an imposing figure – deep purple robes, fringes of bleached lion fur, and jade-scaled sash a testament to the many border skirmishes he had won.

Irritation flickered at the edges of Qadan’s awareness, Iuchiban annoyed his name had sparked no recognition. In the weeks since the ancient Bloodspeaker had seized her body, she had noticed a few cracks in the ancient sorcerer’s calm façade.

“If you see anything, it is because I wish it.”

Iuchiban’s words echoed through Qadan’s thoughts. That they came in her own voice was a cutting reminder of the power the sorcerer held over her.

“You think me some ancient shade risen to plague the land. But I am human, too.”

Perhaps once. Whatever he was now, Iuchiban was more than man or demon.

"In that, you are right." His chuckle was the delighted laugh of a teacher whose student has mastered some esoteric formulation. At the same time, he was speaking to the Unicorn nobles, gesturing like some fireside storyteller set before a rapt audience.

"Iuchiban is a sorcerer of tremendous power, locked away beneath a seal of purest jade," Iuchiban said. "In centuries past, he raised a legion of dead, almost destroying the Scorpion Clan."

"Would that he had succeeded and saved the Empire trouble." Shinjo Bataar slapped his knee, laughter the sharp croak of a startled crow.

"It took the might of all Rokugan to send him back to the grave," Iuchiban continued once the tent was silent. "Even then, he could not be slain, for it is said he removed his heart, hiding it away where none could find the key to his destruction."

A lie, Qadan knew now. She and her erstwhile companions had breached the ancient sorcerer's tomb, braving Iuchiban's traps and deadly tests to reach the center. But there was no heart to be found, if such a thing even existed.

"Very clever, disciple. I knew my faith in you was not misplaced."

As much as it stung to receive praise from a dark sorcerer, Qadan could not quell the blush of satisfaction. Iuchiban could have destroyed her, but he had allowed Qadan to keep her mind if not the body that held it.

"And how do you know this?" Iuchi Arban spoke for the

first time. Although decades younger than the Unicorn Champion, the slight, dark-eyed daimyō of the Iuchi family carried himself with a wisdom belying his age. A powerful name keeper, he wore the talismans of his spirits in plain view, clearly proud of the bond they represented. The sight brought a twinge of longing to Qadan. Although Iuchiban had kept her satchel, the talismans within were empty of spirits. All save the bladed one that held one of Iuchiban's names.

Qadan had released her own spirits just before Iuchiban possessed her body. It comforted her to know they had escaped the sorcerer's grasp even when she could not.

"Do you recall my studies, Lord Iuchi?" Iuchiban asked.

Arban tapped his chin with one long finger. "You were researching our clan's history... pre-Exodus, I believe."

"My search took me into the Twilight Mountains, lands administered by the Crab Clan," Iuchiban replied. "I sought the tombs of our Ki-Rin Clan ancestors slain in ancient conflicts. In them, I hoped to find history lost to our clan over the long exodus."

Although Qadan was aware Iuchiban had access to her memories, it was still disconcerting to have the blood sorcerer repeat them. She wished he would do something to give himself away, but there was no hesitation in their voice, Iuchiban's imitation of her posture and cadence almost flawless.

Almost.

"Those are dangerous lands." Bataar grunted. "Even more dangerous now."

There were nods around the tent, hands clenched in unspoken anger. The Unicorn had lost many warriors in

the Twilight Mountains, slain along with the rest of the imperial expeditionary force sent to quell a peasant revolt. The rebellion had been but another obfuscation. In truth, the expedition had been stricken by infighting, overwhelmed by a legion of walking corpses animated by a powerful blood sorcerer known as the Shrike.

“The tombs sat at the heart of the revolt.” Iuchiban said nothing of the dead. “I lost much in the search – my horse; my wealth; my bodyguard, Jargal.”

Another cut. Jargal had been Qadan’s closest companion. He had not deserved to be slain by blood magic.

“But my search uncovered more than expected... more, indeed, than I could have dreamed,” Iuchiban continued. “We thought the Green Horde lost in the jungles of the south, but I found evidence it returned in secret, its leader possessed of powers like none seen in Rokugan.”

“You speak of blood magic?” Arban’s lips curled as if he found the very words bitter. Qadan heartily agreed with his assessment, her time with Iuchiban having only reinforced her hatred of blood magic.

“I wish it were not so.” Iuchiban gave a very credible sigh of distress. “Among the tombs, I found a terrible place laden with traps and wards. And yet, it also held the key to Iuchiban’s destruction.”

“His heart,” Arban said.

“Indeed,” Iuchiban lied. “Amidst the tumult, I discovered others also sought the ancient sorcerer’s heart – some to destroy it, some to claim its power. I joined forces with the former, and together we breached the hideous tomb. Many fell along the way, but at last I reached the heart.”

“And...?” Bataar leaned in, craggy face alight with interest.

For all his inhuman arrogance, it seemed Iuchiban was a fine storyteller.

“I had not the power to destroy it.” Iuchiban shook their head, shoulders rounding. “I barely escaped. I do not know Iuchiban’s plans now that he is free of his tomb. But I *do* know we cannot allow him to succeed, lest his dark designs consume the Empire and the Unicorn along with it. Even now, covens of Bloodspeakers work in secret across Rokugan, attempting to realize their master’s vision.”

Murmurs rose like spring midges swirling amidst the smoky shadows. Qadan could see concern writ large upon the battle-hardened faces, men and women who would face a hundred enemy samurai unnerved by the prospect of ancient sorceries. There was no question as to whether Qadan spoke the truth – she was a noble, a name keeper, a respected historian. Her lineage was impeccable as her deeds.

“*Why reveal your plans to them?*” she asked Iuchiban. “*Do Bloodspeakers not work best in secret?*”

“*Patience, disciple,*” he replied.

“This is... troubling news,” Bataar said at last, a sigh blowing out the ends of his long, white mustache. “We should inform the Imperial Court.”

“Emperor Hantei XXVI is on his deathbed, his heir lost to the plague last winter.” Iuchiban wrinkled their nose. “With succession unclear, the court will only make a mess of things – if they respond at all. Meanwhile, our rivals seek to take advantage of the chaos.”

Bataar frowned. All knew of whom they spoke. Although

pretending neutrality, the Dragon Clan never balked from interfering in politics when it suited them, and the Lion were always looking for a way to reclaim the lands they had administered during the Unicorn's long exodus.

"Then we march," Bataar said.

"To where?" Arban asked. "Iuchiban has escaped his tomb, the rebellion is scattered. Marshaling our forces would only antagonize the other clans."

Bataar sat quietly, lips pursed in thought. It did not matter if the Unicorn Champion had made a decision; to give it voice would be to insult all the others present by denying them the chance to speak. He raised a hand, nodding to one of the nearer nobles.

"What is your advice, Lord Tseren?"

There was more debate as lesser nobles rose to speak, bellicose and anxious by turns, as if by failing to state their opinion, however banal, they might be forgotten. Once, Qadan might have been among them. Now she saw the shallowness in their bearing, voices raised in meaningless discussion, wasting time while Iuchiban's agents continued their dire work.

"Do you see how they cluck and crow? Chickens jostling to be first into the slaughterhouse."

"*You seek to foment chaos?*" she asked Iuchiban.

"*Chaos does not need my aid to flourish,*" came his amused reply.

"Then what?"

"*Patience, disciple.*" Once more came the cryptic reply.

Questions were put to Qadan: What else did she know of Iuchiban? Who were her companions? Had any survived to

spread word of the blood sorcerer's return? Where was his tomb? What powers, what assets did he possess?

Iuchiban gave just enough information to stoke the flames of fear and anger. Qadan listened as carefully as the others, sifting the ancient sorcerer's replies for flecks of insight. She was a historian after all, used to seeking the truth in others' words.

"And you, Lord Iuchi?" Bataar turned to Arban.

"Something must be done," Arban said. "But massing forces might be construed as an act of war. Better to move quickly, quietly – as Iuchiban will. A small force of our clan's best samurai."

"Who shall lead this force?" Bataar asked.

The young name keeper drew in a slow breath, gaze flicking to Qadan. Muscles bunched along his sharp jawline, eyes narrowed as if in silent question. It was a look he had given her many times – in court, on the hunt, studying elemental spirits, even playing with stuffed ox hide balls when they were children.

Iuchiban cocked their head, nodding silent agreement, just as she had all those times before. Arban was powerful, but young. He depended upon his family for support, for advice. He could trust Qadan.

They *were* cousins, after all.

"Iuchi Qadan should lead." Arban's voice cut through the torrent of whispers. "She is the only one to have faced the blood sorcerer. More, she is a name keeper with strong spiritual allies."

Bataar fixed Qadan with a squint-eyed stare, as if measuring the worth of a foal at the night market.

“What of it? Can you save Rokugan?” Sharp as the champion himself, Bataar’s question cut to the heart of the issue.

“I can,” Iuchiban replied, and meant it.

Qadan wanted to tear free of Iuchiban’s clutches, invisible chains melted by the blistering heat of her wrath. Iuchiban did not chide her. What concern was Qadan’s anger to him? There was nothing to push against, nothing to break. All around her was nothing but darkness – limitless and cold as the grave.

When none objected, Bataar gave a slow nod. “Let it be done.”

And there it was. The Unicorn had placed a cadre of their best in the hands of the very creature they sought to destroy.

They bowed low to the assembled Unicorn nobility, Iuchiban’s smile hidden as they pressed their forehead to the carpeted earth.

“You shall not regret your faith in me.”

With typical Unicorn directness, the meeting dispersed quickly. Iuchiban caught up with Arban just outside the tent.

“Thank you, cousin,” Iuchiban said softly.

Arban nodded, dark eyes hooded by shadow.

“Jargal.” He swallowed, hands bunching into fists at his side. “How did he die?”

“It is better you not know.” Voice rough with false concern, Iuchiban laid a hand upon her cousin’s arm. The old Moto samurai had been tutor to them both, teaching them how to ride, to hunt, to laugh.

“This Bloodspeaker has much to answer for.” He turned to her, moonlight glinting silver on his cheeks.

“He does,” Iuchiban replied. “He will.”

“Come, cousin.” Arban scrubbed a hand across his eyes.
“We have much to discuss.”

With a nod, Iuchiban fell in beside the Iuchi daimyō, whispering softly of abominations and blood rituals, of the taking of names and dark sorceries powerful enough to shake the pillars of Heaven.

Qadan could not but listen. Although her rage had cooled, her anger remained, sharp as a fresh blade – one she longed to press to Iuchiban’s throat.

Her throat.

Qadan needed to watch, to wait, as if Iuchiban were a sheaf of ancient scrolls she sought to translate. For all she despised the blood sorcerer, he was correct about one thing.

This task required patience.

Fortunately, Qadan had nothing but time.

CHAPTER ONE

“Tuchiban is dead.” Doji Masahiro took a sip of tea, offering an appreciative sigh. The blend was mediocre as the surroundings – a rather sparse garden in one of the ancillary villas surrounding the Imperial Palace. Still, courtesy cost nothing. And Masahiro could afford to be generous.

“Who?” Lord Otomo Yasunori raised one thin eyebrow, his face wrinkled as his robes – a rather garish cherry blossom print that had been out of fashion even before Masahiro’s erstwhile exile. That Yasunori had been reduced to wearing such dross spoke volumes about the lord’s fall from grace.

At least Lord Yasunori lived. Which was more than Masahiro could say about the other members of their failed conspiracy. Even now, memory of his brother’s death came sharp as broken pottery – jagged and liable to cut. He and Hiroshige could have selected the next emperor. Instead, Masahiro’s brother had fallen to an assassin’s blade, his body lost amidst the Twilight Mountains.

That is, if Hiroshige remained dead.

Swallowing, Masahiro pushed down memories of walking corpses, of fire and death and blood-slicked blades.

“Iuchiban is a dark sorcerer, ancient and powerful.” As if to echo his dire thoughts, Masahiro’s missing hand gave a twinge of pain. It hardly mattered that the wound was long healed, smooth flesh covering the wrist of his sword arm; the spirit of his severed hand seemed bent on reminding him of its loss – severed by Shosuro Gensuke, the same Scorpion Clan assassin who had murdered his brother.

Masahiro’s only consolation was that Gensuke had come out far worse in the bargain, hacked to pieces by one of Iuchiban’s horrible traps.

Pressing down the phantom pain, Masahiro continued, “We lost several brave companions in the sorcerer’s tomb.”

“They should be memorialized.” Yasunori tapped his chin with one long finger, following the tenor of Masahiro’s thoughts. “A large ceremony. Full court honors.”

Masahiro shared a smile with the Otomo lord. The old badger had always been quick to seize advantage. For all his modest surroundings, Yasunori was a survivor.

One of the many things they had in common.

“That may be hasty.” Kitsuki Naoki shifted beside Masahiro, seemingly uncomfortable in her magisterial robes. Despite her newly exalted rank, the Dragon investigator comported herself with all the delicacy of a rustic tax assessor. If anything, her promotion to full Emerald Magistrate seemed to have magnified her willfulness.

Masahiro offered her a warning look, but as always, Naoki forged ahead with no regard for decorum.

“Lord Yasunori, we cannot know for certain if Iuchiban has been destroyed.”

“We slew his disciples, did we not?” Masahiro did not wait

for Naoki's reply. "The Shrike, that murderous monk – two vicious blood sorcerers who will no longer trouble Rokugan."

Like a stray dog with a bit of bone, Naoki would not relent. "We do not know if Qadan and the others succeeded."

"Nor do we know they failed." Masahiro flicked his fingers as if to brush away an errant insect, turning to Yasunori. "If anything, this threat will divide our opposition. With your aid, Prince Tokihito may yet rise to power."

Yasunori's gaze drifted across his sad excuse for a garden. Masahiro could almost see the Otomo lord's hungry calculations – it was not every day one was gifted a chance to select the next emperor.

"There is great opportunity here," Masahiro said.

"*Opportunity.*" Naoki spoke the word like a curse. She rose from the sitting pillow with a bow so brusque it verged on insulting. "Apologies, lords, but I have pressing matters to attend to."

Fortunately, Yasunori did not deign to take offense. He dismissed the Emerald Magistrate with a distracted wave. Only when Naoki's footfalls faded did he turn once more to Masahiro.

"Strange company you keep. Can we trust her?"

"We can trust Naoki will do her duty," Masahiro replied.

"Will that be a problem?"

"Not so long as our goals align."

"See to it they do." Yasunori spoke as if he were the senior partner in their endeavor, which, technically, he was.

"Yes, lord." Masahiro returned a low bow. He had long grown accustomed to taking orders from the petulant Otomo lord. It was one of the polite fictions that underpinned their

relationship. Yasunori possessed that particular admixture of qualities common in many who inherited high court rank – a lust for power and prestige without the wit to attain them.

What set Lord Yasunori apart was that he recognized this deficiency.

So long as forms were followed, deference paid, and results delivered, Yasunori was content to let Masahiro pull the proverbial strings.

“The magistrate did not touch her tea.” Lord Yasunori frowned at the rapidly cooling cup.

“I am sure she meant no insult. Weighty matters, and all...”

“The manners of a rustic magistrate are of little concern to me,” Lord Yasunori replied coldly. “So long as Naoki aids our cause.”

“She will.” Masahiro pushed to his feet. “Speaking of which, I had best be after her.”

Yasunori dismissed him with a nod, gaze already slipping across the garden to the Imperial Palace, its high-gabled summit rising like distant mountain peaks, gilded statues bright as flame in the autumn light.

Masahiro did not mind such naked ambition. Such fancies kept Yasunori out of trouble while Masahiro did the real work.

He hurried down the wood-paneled walkway, servants fluttering like startled pigeons as they prepared Masahiro’s rented palanquin. As he ducked under the artfully parted curtains, Masahiro reflected on how nice it was to have such base concerns as walking removed from his purview. It was pleasant to be home, even if neither the courts nor the Crane Clan knew quite what to do with him.

The palanquin swayed as the bearers shouldered their

burden. Far from the smooth ride Masahiro was accustomed to, they nonetheless navigated the streets of the Inner Districts competently enough. Although autumn had come, summer had yet to relinquish its grip upon the season.

Servants, bureaucrats, and guards hurried along the edges of the road, taking care to yield the wide thoroughfare for their betters. Most wore the colors of various imperial families, but here and there Masahiro spied clan robes – the tawny gold of Lion, the black and red of Scorpion. The majority, by far, wore the white and blue of Masahiro's own clan, the Crane. The sight of so many of his fellows conjured a strange mix of hopefulness and anxiety in Masahiro's breast.

The last time Masahiro had ridden a palanquin through the Inner Districts, he had been fleeing the city in shame – friendless, unprotected, with assassins on his heels. Now it was pleasurable to imagine the various ways he would avenge himself on those who had sought his ignominious demise.

He had dropped their assassin into a pit of accursed blades. He had faced down rebels, blood sorcerers, and an army of walking dead. What need had Masahiro to fear the machinations of perfumed courtiers?

The Emerald Magistracy sat along one of the wider avenues, a straight jaunt from Lord Yasunori's modest manor. Had it not been for the flash of emerald robes amidst the tapestry of more subdued colors, Masahiro might have missed Naoki entirely.

“What happened back there?” He did not bother with preamble, sweeping aside the bamboo curtain as his palanquin came abreast of the magistrate.

“I could ask you the same,” she replied without even looking up.

“We discussed this, Naoki.” Masahiro fought to keep his voice level. “Now is not the right time.”

“And when will that be?” She turned, hands on hips. “When Iuchiban has risen? When his dead sweep over the land? When Bloodspeakers rule the people of Rokugan?”

Masahiro grit his teeth, forcing a smile as he glanced meaningfully up and down the road. Although no one had stopped, it was clear many noted Naoki’s outburst.

Sighing, Masahiro ordered his bearers to lower the palanquin.

“Walk with me, please.” He rose, threading his handleless arm through Naoki’s as if they were out for a midmorning stroll. The magistrate tensed at his touch, but thankfully did not pitch Masahiro onto his backside. Even with two hands, he would not have fancied his chances if it came to blows.

With a regretful wave, Masahiro dismissed his palanquin. They walked for some time, long enough to dispel any lingering curiosity from potential onlookers. Masahiro remarked on various shrines and stately manors, voice light while Naoki positively vibrated at his side, arm tight as a bowstring.

When he was sure they weren’t being followed, Masahiro turned to weightier matters.

“Do you know who Lord Yasunori is?”

She shrugged. “A court noble fallen on hard times.”

“Not untrue.” Masahiro chuckled. For all her brusque mannerisms, he would do well to remember Naoki was a skilled investigator. “He is also the appointed guardian of Tokihito, Emperor Hantei’s third son – a strong, handsome

lad of eleven winters. Normally, Tokihito would have little chance of inheriting, except that my dear departed brother and I spent *years* working on his behalf. Many remain who support our cause.”

“Our cause, or yours?”

“We want the same thing, Naoki.” He ignored her rudeness. “The court is grateful for our victory over the rebellion. I have been reinstated, *you* have been promoted. We should not squander such opportunity.”

“There’s that word again... opportunity.” She looked away. “You said we were going to warn the court of Iuchiban’s return.”

“We do not know *if* he will return.”

Her brow furrowed. “We should have taken news of Iuchiban directly to the high courts.”

Masahiro drew in a calming breath. Single-mindedness made for a fine magistrate, but it made for a poor co-conspirator.

“Emperor Hantei XXVI lingers on death’s door, unconscious these long months, his heir lost to the plague. The court is in shambles, half the nobles are lining up behind potential candidates, and the other half are settling old grudges while the rule of law is weak.” He spoke softly, but urgently. “This is hardly the time to stagger about spouting nonsense about immortal blood sorcerers no one seems to recall.”

“All the more reason to bring Iuchiban’s evil to light.”

“What evil?” Masahiro asked. “You found no record of him in the Imperial Archives.”

“Then I shall look elsewhere.” Her jaw pulsed. “The High Histories of the Ikoma.”

“I have spent my life in the Imperial City, Naoki. I know this place. If you feel our cause is best served by antagonizing the high nobility, then I will accompany you to court this very moment.” He sighed, hoping inwardly she would not get them both laughed out of court. “I can assure you though, *nothing* will be done. Not yet, at least.”

“And what would you propose?”

He leaned in as if to share a secret. “Give me time to gather support and you can voice your concerns directly into the ear of the next emperor.”

That got her attention.

“How much time?” she asked.

“Three months.”

Naoki blew out a long puff of air. “Even that may be too long.”

“The healers are saying Emperor Hantei will not last the week, and it is considered inauspicious to hold Winter Court without a sitting emperor.”

“Tokihito is a boy.”

“Certainly not the youngest to assume the throne,” Masahiro replied.

“Sacrilège.” Her eyes widened. “You mean to control the next Hantei emperor?”

“I mean to influence him, yes.” Masahiro grinned. “Come now, Naoki. *Every* ruler since the first Hantei has had their advisors. What better position to ward Rokugan against the Bloodspeaker threat?”

“Did not schemes like this lead to your exile?” she asked.

“I was not exiled.” Masahiro leashed his burgeoning temper. “I *accepted* a distant posting. One, might I add, that allowed

me to assist our august company in defeating two powerful Bloodspeakers and breaching Iuchiban's tomb."

"We do not know if—"

Masahiro held up a hand. "Let me remind you, we are still not sure if Iuchiban even exists. All we know for certain is that a pair of dark sorcerers terrorized the Twilight Mountains, and that we accomplished what an entire imperial expeditionary force could not."

She shook her head. "The tomb remains."

"Where is it? Show me on a map?" Masahiro spread his fingers, mimicking confusion. "Face the truth, Naoki. We have nothing but supposition."

Feeling her tense, Masahiro moderated his tone. "Find evidence – records, stories, reports, *anything*, and I shall see them conveyed into the hands of those with the power to act. Until then, continue your work and let me continue mine."

She shrugged free of his grip, arms crossed in the sleeves of her robe, one foot tapping a jittery staccato on the stone tiles.

Used to Naoki's affectations, Masahiro knew better than to push the issue. He merely waited, patient as age.

"What do you propose?" she asked, voice wary.

"You spoke of the High Histories of the Ikoma," he replied. "I may have some... contacts among the Lion Clan to whom I can make introduction."

"And what do you require of me?"

"Simply speak to your colleagues at the Magistracy on Prince Tokihito's behalf," he said.

She glanced back, expression dark. "I am no courtier."

"And I am no warrior." Masahiro brandished the stump of

his right hand. "But alas, these times require sacrifices of us all."

Naoki's lips twitched, a flutter of pain gone quick as a midsummer breeze. Masahiro might have lost his hand, but neither of them had emerged from Iuchiban's tomb unscarred.

She straightened, shoulders firm. "If he lives, I will find him."

"I know you will." Masahiro nodded, unsure if that comforted or unsettled him.

"Three months." Naoki turned away, head high as she made her way back toward the Emerald Magistracy alone.

Masahiro watched her go, unsure if the sweat prickling between his shoulder blades was from concern or the early afternoon heat. Lady Sun had climbed high in the cloudless sky and the day was already growing uncomfortable. The streets had mostly cleared out, empty save for those few servants and officials unlucky enough to have tasks unfinished. They hurried along, heads down, eyes fixed on the middle distance.

All save one.

He stood in the shade of a temple awning, hidden by shadow. At first, Masahiro thought him some curious servant. The Inner Districts were full of such opportunistic spies. But the man was too far away to have heard anything.

Masahiro raised a hand to shield his eyes from the afternoon glare, trying to make out the watcher's face. Although the shadows parted with no secrets, there was something distressingly familiar about the man. Before Masahiro could call out, he turned, disappearing deeper into the temple grounds.

He considered following, but discarded the notion. Such

strangeness was far too reminiscent of the horrors he had witnessed in the Twilight Mountains. Almost unconsciously, Masahiro found himself gripping the stump of his severed hand.

He shook his head, grinning at his foolishness. This was the Imperial City, not some demon-haunted backwater.

Alive or dead, Iuchiban could wait.

At the moment, Masahiro's foremost concern was getting to the next audience without sweating through his best robes.

CHAPTER TWO

Kuni Seiji had almost finished overseeing repairs when the bell began to ring. He stood upon the west wall of the ancient Crab hill fort, plans in hand as he directed the workers to shore up the crumbling foundations.

The chime was soft at first, almost inaudible amidst the clatter of pick and shovel. Even so, the ringing seemed to resonate within Seiji's chest, drawing his attention from the fortress walls.

The place was centuries old, one of a score of defenses erected along the Crab Clan's western border. Abandoned generations ago, the forts had fallen into disrepair, becoming a haunt for bandits, spirits, and rebellious villagers.

The lands around were rocky and sparsely populated, hardly worth defending. Whatever threat these forts had warded against was gone. With typical practicality, the Crab had turned their attention to greater dangers.

Now, rebellion in the Twilight Mountains had Seiji's clan shoring up defenses along their western marches. The rebels

had annihilated an imperial expeditionary force, and that was worthy of consideration.

Seiji laid a hand upon the battlement, feeling the strikes of pick and hammer resonate through the cool stone. It had always been such with Seiji, more at home with plans and architectural drawings than the tomes of sorcerous lore that were his Kuni birthright.

The hammer blows began to form a rough rhythm, like the cadence of distant war drums. Eyes closed, Seiji found his head nodding along with the strikes.

“Resting already?” Hiruma Izō’s rough voice dragged Seiji from his contemplation. “Should I tell the workers to leave off?”

Normally, Seiji would have marked Izō’s approach, the uneven thump of the scarred Hiruma foreman’s wooden leg providing ample warning.

“No.” He turned, mentally chiding himself for letting Izō creep up. “I thought I heard—”

“Heard what?” Although the foreman possessed but one eye, he managed to imbue his glare with a full measure of disdain.

Seiji shook his head, straightening. “Nothing.”

Izō looked Seiji up and down as if searching a wall for cracks. The foreman had made no secret of his distaste at shepherding an unblooded scholar fresh from academy. Truthfully, Seiji could not blame him. Before giving two limbs and an eye in service to the clan, Izō had been a Hiruma scout, ranging far into the Shadowlands. Izō did not belong here.

In truth, neither of them did.

As a senior disciple of the Kaiu Architecture School, Seiji

should have been overseeing repairs on the Carpenter Wall. It was an insult to be tasked with shoring up this tumbledown ruin. Although he was the equal of any of his fellow disciples, the masters had always been skeptical of Seiji's lineage.

The Kuni were many things – sorcerers, witch hunters, walkers in shadow.

Seldom architects.

“How go the repairs?” Seiji asked.

“East wall still has gaps, but the west is...” The foreman leaned upon his crutch, remaining arm gesturing toward the workers below.

“And the central keep?”

“Relatively sound, as you suspected.” Izō parted with compliments as if doling out precious jade.

Seiji ignored the foreman's tone. “Excellent work on the bell. Although you can tell whoever is ringing it to leave off.”

“Ringing?”

“The bell.” Seiji thrust his chin at the dilapidated keep. “Can't you hear it?”

Izō frowned. “I hear nothing.”

The foreman continued, but Seiji's attention was on the keep. He had heard a bell, could hear it still, but the one in the tower stood silent.

“You well, boy?” Izō's question dragged Seiji back into the moment.

“I'm fine.” He drew in a deep breath. “See to the buttresses near the main approach.”

“As you say. Just see you don't faint and tumble from the battlements.” Izō nodded toward the long drop, smile ugly. “Long way down, and the stone is hungry.”

The foreman turned away, his posture betraying not even a hint of deference.

Had they been working the Carpenter Wall, Seiji would have called the old man to task for his insolence. But they were not on the wall, they were repairing a half-forgotten hill fort several days' ride from anywhere of note.

These were dangerous lands – wild and loosely governed. The workers were already unhappy. It would not take much for their grievances to boil over. The harshness of the Crab Clan's unending vigil made little room for ineffectual leaders. Seiji was under no illusions concerning how quickly he could vanish in these unforgiving hills.

He tried to turn his attention back to the plans only to find the paper crumpled in his fists. The ringing grew louder, more insistent. Seiji could discern neither cause nor reason for the chime, and yet it enfolded him, filled him, each chime settling upon his bones with an almost physical weight.

He had spent days upon his architectural drawings, weeks measuring, calculating, until Seiji knew the walls of the old hill fort as well as he knew the lines of his own palms. Now the plans fluttered from his grip, forgotten as he clapped his hands to his ears.

If anything, it intensified the terrible clangor. Faster and faster, as if the chimes came from inside Seiji's skull. He could make out little upon the rocky western approach, earth and boulder blurred to gray sameness by the stinging tears that filled his eyes.

And yet, somehow, he could *hear* them approach.

"Boy?" Genuine concern edged Izō's gravelly call.

Jaw tight against the urge to scream, Seiji glanced back to

see the old samurai hobbling up. Not trusting his voice, Seiji raised a trembling hand, one finger extended toward a tear-blurred smudge of cliff.

“What has possessed you?” The foreman made to grasp his arm only to stop short as his gaze tracked Seiji’s pointing finger.

“Hida’s bones.” It was as if the old scout’s curse had thrown a blanket over the bell. Blessedly, the chime receded from Seiji’s thoughts. He scrubbed a hand across his eyes, drawing in a great hitching breath.

Out in the valley, the cliffs *crawled*.

They moved like ants – progress haphazard, yet driven by singular purpose. At first Seiji thought they were rebels, but although they carried weapons, wore clothes, even stood upright, they did not move like humans.

Streaks of blood marred a mixture of peasant roughspun and battle armor. A panoply of clan colors mixed into the muddy browns of lower classes. The only uniting factor seemed the rusty red of old gore and yellow-white flashes of exposed bone.

Some wore helms, others went bareheaded, but Seiji could not see their faces. All wore a mask of pale porcelain, featureless but for two eyes and a dark slash of a mouth. Some shambled on broken legs, others were still pinioned by the spear that had ended their life. And yet they scabbled across the broken rock, movements deft as hunting spiders.

“To the walls!” Izō’s rough hand dragged Seiji back. “Protect the lord!”

Although the garrison boasted no samurai other than Seiji and Izō, it took but a few breaths for the wall to swarm with

armed laborers. Other clans might balk at training peasants in spear and bow, but the Crab had long ago discarded such refined notions. When your foe crawled up from the underworld itself, you needed every hand that could wield a weapon.

Seiji drew his own sword. Straighter than the katanas favored by most samurai, the blade swelled toward the tip, providing the extra weight needed to cleave through foes of a more unnatural aspect. Warding trigrams glittered in the chill afternoon light. Incised along the length of the blade, they were set with precious jade. Although Seiji had never manifested a talent for sorcery, he remained a Kuni, a heritage that conferred certain benefits.

Seeing the blade, Izō gave an appreciative grunt. “Seems I may have misjudged you, lad.”

Seiji leaned on the wall in an attempt to hide the tremble in his knees. “What are they?”

“Dead,” came Izō’s terse reply.

“Have you ever seen anything like it?”

“I’ve seen shadow-tainted creatures rise after killing wounds.” He shook his grizzled head. “But never so many.”

“Dark sorcery?”

“You’re the Kuni. You tell me.” Without waiting for an answer, Izō turned away. “Arrows ready!”

Seiji glanced back at the armed laborers – a few score on the walls, another dozen buttressing the gate. The dead moved too chaotically for him to get a proper count, but there were easily several hundred below.

Fortunately, the Crab were used to such odds.

“Loose!” Izō shouted.

Corpses stumbled as arrows found gaps in armor, sinking into knees, elbows, necks. A few fell, but not enough.

“Fire! Fire scours corrupted flesh.” Seiji felt a twinge of pride as Izō echoed his order.

Torches were passed, arrows dipped in the pitch, which had been used to seal cracks in ancient wood.

The next volley reaped more worthwhile results. But ultimately, there was little a score of archers could do against such a relentless advance.

The dead did not bother with the gate, instead leaping onto the wall, their bony fingers finding cracks in the old stone. Seiji pushed down a flash of irritation – another few days and he would have sealed those gaps.

Archers leaned over the walls to aim straight down while others with spears and polearms pushed to the fore. Seiji saw a spearman dragged from the wall, his weapon trapped in the torso of a bloodied Crane samurai. Two broad-shouldered women emptied a bucket of burning pitch over the wall, the dead below flailing like wind-twisted embers.

A one-armed samurai in a Dragon Clan breastplate heaved himself over the battlement. Seiji’s enchanted blade cleaved through armor and bone. He dropped a shoulder into the creature, toppling it back over the wall.

Two blood-flecked peasants had clambered up to slash at Izō with curved reaping hooks. The old scout parried the first cut, twisting to put his attacker in the path of second creature’s swing.

Seiji stepped up behind him and together they bulled the two mangled corpses over the lip of the wall.

Izō’s nod might as well have been an imperial

commendation for the upswell of pride it conjured in Seiji's chest. His satisfaction was short-lived. All along the wall, workers struggled with bloody-handed dead. The Crab might train their peasantry, but laborers were not samurai.

Like a poorly anchored wall, the defenders began to crumble.

Some tried to flee, the dead leaping upon them. Others jumped from the wall, preferring a quick death upon the stones below.

Seiji hacked at the bloodied press, wild overhand strokes like he was chopping through thick bamboo. It was impossible to miss. Behind, he could hear Izō cursing, his stream of invectives punctuated by the thud of steel into flesh. Barely a dozen laborers remained, a sweating, struggling knot that grew smaller by the moment.

"The stables." Izō ground the words out between labored breaths. "You must warn the clan."

"I won't flee."

"Are you some Lion Clan pup drunk on tales of glorious demise?" Izō almost spat the words. "Act like a Crab."

The admonition rocked Seiji like a hurled stone. Other clans might cleave to principles like valor, cleverness, or decorum, but ultimately, the Crab were a practical people. The clan elders would never take the word of a common laborer, and Izō could not ride.

Seiji was the only one who could bear tidings of this slaughter.

Cutting down the corpse of a near-headless Crane samurai, he turned to clap Izō on the shoulder.

The old scout returned the barest of nods, then hurled

himself at the teeming ranks. “Let’s show these beasts how the Crab hold a wall!”

Despite the urgency of his task, Seiji could not quell the shame that prickled along his spine. He wormed his way into one of the murder holes that opened into the courtyard below. The fort’s dilapidated stables housed the draft horses they used to haul stone up the hill. Seiji selected the one that seemed least likely to throw him – a placid roan mare who trembled as he fastened her tack. The others he freed, wishing them luck as he mounted up.

For the first time in weeks, Seiji was glad the workers hadn’t gotten around to patching the east wall.

Several abominations leapt from the battlements as Seiji thundered by, but the dead were unable to keep pace with a galloping horse. At least Seiji did not need to urge the roan on.

The east wall loomed ahead, gaps like missing teeth.

Seiji glanced back. He could not pick Izō from the struggle atop the western battlement, but the old scout’s throaty shouts told him he still drew breath.

One more sacrifice in the Crab’s endless war.

A scrap of crumpled paper fluttered past Seiji’s head. It caught along the edge of the gap, just long enough for him to see carefully inked plans upon the page. Then Seiji was through, his mare skittering down the wide switchback that led down the hillside.

No dead followed, but Seiji knew that would change. There had been clan samurai among the abominations, remains of the slaughtered imperial expedition – hundreds, perhaps even thousands of warriors.

Gradually, the sounds of battle faded, Seiji's flight silent but for the thunder of hooves, the pounding of his heart. That, and the deep, sonorous toll of a distant bell.

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