

Legend of the  
Five Rings™



the Market of  
100 Fortunes

MARIE BRENNAN

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE MEMOIRS OF LADY TRENT

*This is an excerpt from*

*The* MARKET *of*  
100 FORTUNES  
A LEGEND OF THE FIVE RINGS  
NOVEL

BY MARIE BRENNAN

*Publishing in February 2024 and available  
everywhere in paperback and ebook formats.*

Global ebook • 9781839082603 • 6 February 2024

US paperback • 9781839082597 • 6 February 2024

UK paperback • 9781839082597 • 25 April 2024

**Aconyte Books**

An imprint of Asmodee Entertainment

Distributed in North America by Simon & Schuster Inc, New York, USA

[aconytebooks.com](https://aconytebooks.com) // [twitter.com/aconytebooks](https://twitter.com/aconytebooks)

Copyright © 2024 Asmodee North America

Legend of the Five Rings and the Legend of the Five Rings logo are trademarks or registered trademarks of Asmodee North America. The Aconyte name and logo and the Asmodee Entertainment name and logo are registered or unregistered trademarks of Asmodee Entertainment Limited.

All rights reserved. We grant you limited permission to repost and share this free sample at our sole discretion and provided the file is not amended in any way.

And if you like the sample, you'll love the book...

*Enthralling fantasy mystery from the world of Legend of the Five Rings as two samurai risk everything to rescue an old friend from the clutches of a shadowy trickster*

Having vanquished demons and halted invasions of devious creatures from the Spirit Realms, Asako Sekken and Agasha no Isao Ryōtora are finally going to be married. But when a note from their old ally Sayashi arrives unexpectedly, the samurai find themselves dragged into another supernatural mystery.

Their investigation leads them to Crane lands and an ancient market ruled by a mysterious being. Now Sekken and Ryōtora must use all their wit and charm to save Sayashi from a hundred year bargain before they find themselves embroiled in a conflict with a forgotten deity of unimaginable power.

## CHAPTER ONE

The streets of Brittle Flower City's market were narrow to begin with, and made more so by the counters lining shop-fronts, banners advertising wares, and itinerant sellers with packs and sticks of trinkets to sell. Add in hordes of customers and residents, and making one's way down the street at any speed greater than a snail's crawl became a test of agility.

A test Sayashi was entirely capable of passing. In human form, she didn't even have to worry about someone treading on her tail.

But no feline dexterity could get her past the man now coming down the street. The heavy pole balanced across his shoulders almost scraped the walls on either side, and the wrapped bundles dangling from the ends threatened to sweep all before him like the oncoming tide. Passers-by squawked in annoyance, some of them dodging into shops for safety. A potter flung her body over the rice bowls stacked on her counter to protect them, and got a solid buffet from one of the bundles for her pains. The porter with the pole shouted

apologies with every step, twisting sideways in an attempt to present a narrower profile, but that nearly resulted in him braining the potter, who was straightening as she thought the storm had passed.

Sayashi hissed in annoyance. For one brief instant, she considered turning into a cat to escape. But her small form would get stepped on, her large form would still have a difficult time getting past the man, and in either case, a traveler suddenly revealing herself to be a bakeneko in the middle of a crowded street would only cause more trouble than it was worth.

There was no handy doorway to slip through. Instead Sayashi flattened herself against the nearest wall, face-first so that if something took an unfortunate hit, at least it wouldn't be her nose.

She found herself in licking distance of a tiny shrine embedded into the wall. Not surprising: this was the Market of a Hundred Fortunes, one of Brittle Flower City's most famous districts. Some of the Fortunes got big, fancy shrines with gateways and everything; the rest made do with little structures tucked in between the shops and houses, or even less than that. Sayashi doubted the Fortune of Whetstones felt very honored by its accommodations, but it wasn't any of her business. She wasn't here for any such piddling spiritual power.

The power she sought had no shrine. At least, not that she'd been able to find... so far.

The scrape of a pole-end across Sayashi's back made her snarl. The porter's cheerful apology didn't do much to soothe it. She stayed where she was, not trusting that he wouldn't

accidentally hit her again, until the noise of the street returned to something more like its usual clamor. Then she peeled herself off the wall. If he'd torn the fabric of her kimono, she would follow him, wait until he returned home at the end of the day, and then—

Sayashi drew in a deep breath, held it for a count of eight, let it out slowly. No. She wouldn't get revenge. That wasn't what she was here for, either.

But it was hard to resist the temptation when she was having such an absence of luck on other fronts. Sayashi had been up and down every street in the market a dozen times, by day and by night, at dawn and at dusk, walking every path in every direction. She'd examined the gates set into the four walls that surrounded the market, the gate of every shrine that had one. She'd made offerings. She'd tried to step through into the Enchanted Country, the spiritual realm that lay just to the side of the mortal world, with no success.

She could hear her mother laughing. *Foolish kitten. Why do you bother?*

Her mother was dead, split apart like her two tails by the blade of a samurai scholar. A nekomata couldn't become a ghost like a human could – Sayashi was *fairly* certain – but she didn't need actual spiritual existence to haunt Sayashi. Memory was enough.

A man bent under the weight of a water barrel and a portable brazier for tea smacked into Sayashi's back, and she hissed a curse at him before she realized it was her own fault. She'd stopped in the middle of the street, caught by a sudden thought.

That samurai scholar. Asako Sekken – assuming he hadn't

come to his senses by now and married his all-too-honorable Dragon priest. He might be Isao Sekken at this point. Sayashi didn't know why humans made such a fuss about such matters, all the names and the rituals and holding back from people they loved because society said it wasn't allowed. But it was only a few months since she'd seen him last. If Sekken hadn't yet married Ryōtora, if he hadn't gone to Dragon lands ...

She hurried onward, darting through the crowds with a grace and speed that hardly even brushed the sleeves of those she passed. To the western gate in the wall surrounding the market, leaping over the wooden sill that confined carts to a narrow path, and into the broader street beyond. Here there was space enough for her to run, and if this Crane city wasn't as abundantly supplied with stationers' shops as she'd become used to in Phoenix lands, she still didn't have to go far.

For a copper penny, she got a sheet of paper and the use of the shop's supplies. The brush was battered and the ink was watery, but Sayashi wasn't a geisha now, sending elegant letters to her clients. Still, pride made her write the opening salutation as neatly as she could.

Then she stopped. How to phrase it? How much to admit? And would Sekken even heed her letter?

Well. If he didn't, that would answer some of her questions all on its own. He wouldn't be the first human to fall victim to hypocrisy, nor even the first samurai.

Sayashi wrote and sealed her letter, then returned the brush and ink to the shopkeeper. For a bit more money – she'd even earned it honestly! – he agreed to send the letter north, to Sheltered Plains City in Phoenix lands. If Sekken wasn't there, his family could forward it on.

It would take days. Weeks even, before she received an answer. Assuming he sent one.

In the meanwhile, she would keep searching. The sword at the shrine might have proved fake, but she still had hope for the market: not the ordinary thing she'd just left behind, but the *real* Market of a Hundred Fortunes. She just had to find a way in.

Then she could buy herself some answers – and, perhaps, a new fate.



## CHAPTER TWO

Ryōtora knelt on the polished wooden floor of the little shrine behind the Dragon embassy and, closing his eyes, let out a slow breath.

He'd spent many hours meditating here since he came to Phoenix lands for winter court. First in an attempt to hold together the unstable edifice of his health; then, once he knew the truth of his affliction, to reach some kind of peace with it. To absorb the understanding that his soul was now linked with Sekken's – a link they could manage, nurture, protect, but must always, for the rest of their lives, take into account.

It didn't have to be bad. True, there were still days when they misstepped, when one or the other of them drew too deeply on their pool of shared strength without warning the other. But now that they knew that pool *was* shared, they were discovering interesting things they could do with it.

Ryōtora whispered the repetitive syllables of a mantra under his breath, barely a ghost of sound in the silence. This was one of the first techniques he'd learned, when he first

began training as a priest who could speak to the elemental spirits: the basic task of *sensing* those spirits.

They were all around him, always. Everything in the world, Ryōtora included, was made up of them. But the spirits inherent in the cypress boards beneath his knees, the sturdy cotton of his spring kimono, the incense-tinged air that brushed his skin – those were tiny, all but mindless things. It took the gift of speaking to spirits, then training to use that gift, before someone could wake them and persuade them to perform some task. Other spirits were more powerful, like those of rivers and ancient trees; some of them rose to the rank of Fortune, receiving offerings from ordinary people.

Still, in the end, everything came down to this: the simple elements of Earth, Water, Air, and Fire. And Void, the element that did not exist... and yet, through its absence, defined and gave purpose to everything around it.

Ryōtora focused on that last one now. Reaching past the solidity of Earth, the delicacy of Air; past the serenity of Water and the faint warmth of Fire as the afternoon sun crept through the open door of the shrine to touch Ryōtora's back. Beneath and behind and within them all lay the emptiness of Void, in which the boundary between him and Sekken was revealed as illusion. All things were one in the Void, distance dissolved, spirits united.

Ryōtora and Sekken.

Sekken and...

There.

For a moment, Ryōtora was both in the shrine and not. Kneeling on the floor, and trotting across a flagstone courtyard. From there down the graveled channel meant to catch water

dripping from the eaves, then onto a cushion of moss, softer against his paws. More flagstones, cypress steps ...

Tanshu had good enough manners not to shove his nose under Ryōtora's arm. But the vertiginous sight of his own body, kneeling in meditation, tipped Ryōtora out of his trance; he opened his eyes to find Tanshu sitting a short distance away, tongue lolling out in a canine grin.

"Well *done*," Ryōtora said, giving the inugami a thorough scratch behind the ears.

From outside came Sekken's voice, wry with amusement. "Are we sure this was a real test? If I were Tanshu, this shrine is the first place I would have looked for you."

"I felt him," Ryōtora said, rising. The motion seemed briefly peculiar, as if he ought to be on four paws instead of two feet. "Then I saw through his eyes. He knew exactly where I was."

"Give it another month, and you'll be a better witch than I am."

Sekken put up one hand to shade his eyes as he said it, casting his expression into shadow. Not fast enough, though, to hide the faint disappointment and frustration there – or maybe Ryōtora just felt it. He couldn't be sure how much his growing awareness of Sekken's mood was filtering through the connection between them, and how much was him coming to understand the other man more deeply.

It was peculiar to think how short a time they'd known each other. A few chaotic weeks in Seibo Mura, two strangers struggling to rescue the village from the supernatural threat of the Night Parade; a few months at Ryōdō Temple, but much of that time spent asleep or otherwise recuperating from the aftereffects of that battle. Then winter court here in

Phoenix lands, where both of them had been trying to hide their weakened health from each other and from the rest of the world. Only in these last few months had they been able to live something like normally.

Tanshu ran down the five steps to the courtyard and planted himself loyally at Sekken's side. They were still discovering just how intelligent the inugami was – or sometimes Ryōtora wondered if the spirit's intelligence was growing as his bond with Sekken did.

And through Sekken, with Ryōtora.

“Tanshu will always be *your* familiar,” Ryōtora said, following the inugami out of the shrine. “Kaimin-nushi was your ancestor, not mine, and it's your bloodline he's bound to. I only have a connection to him because you and I are connected.”

“Yes, but you're able to use it so much better.”

Because Ryōtora had more training in such matters. Sekken *knew* vastly more about many things than Ryōtora did – even the Spirit Realms, which ought to be Ryōtora's domain as a priest – but much of his knowledge was theoretical, not practical.

He could change that. Had already begun to do so, first in Seibo Mura, then here in Sheltered Plains City, when the influence of a baku from the Realm of Dreams overtook many of the samurai at court. In the end, though, it was true that Sekken didn't have the gift of speaking to the spirits. There would always be things Ryōtora could do that he could not.

Would that extend even to working with Tanshu?

Ryōtora was still searching for a good response when Sankan Yoichi, the chief clerk of the Dragon embassy, came

along the curving path through the garden and bowed to them both. “Please forgive me for interrupting, but Lord Isao, you wished to be informed when the escort arrived.”

“So soon?” Ryōtora said, blinking up at the sky as if the time of day had anything to do with it. He hadn’t expected the travelers to reach the city until tomorrow at the earliest.

“The benefits of traveling in this season, I expect,” Sekken said. “By now the roads have dried out. I can return home if you’re busy, Ryōtora—”

“Come with me to greet them,” Ryōtora said on impulse. “After all, you’ll be traveling with them, too.”

The truth was that he didn’t want Sekken to leave yet, not with the shadow of that exchange about Tanshu still lying over them both. What he said wasn’t false, though. If their two clans had been hostile to one another, Phoenix samurai would have escorted Sekken to the border between their lands, there to be handed off to a Dragon delegation. Since they weren’t – and since the Dragon preferred to limit the number of travelers in their territory – instead the delegation had come here to collect him. Together they would travel to Fire Tooth Castle... and there, at last, they would marry.

The front courtyard, where Sekken had been waiting with Tanshu not long ago, had transformed into a bustling mass of ponies and riders. Mirumoto Kinmoku, the Dragon ambassador, stood at the top of the embassy steps; she was not a woman inclined toward great formality, waiting to receive the new arrivals inside. As Ryōtora and Sekken joined her, another woman in a stiff-shouldered jacket embroidered with the crest of the Mirumoto family approached Kinmoku and bowed.

As they exchanged greetings, Ryōtora's gaze drifted past the woman to the rest of the escort. A priest had joined the Mirumoto warrior; that would be Agasha Tōemon, the man usually assigned to the embassy, who'd returned to Dragon lands over the winter for the funeral of his mother. He would remain here when the rest departed. Apart from him, Ryōtora saw two more samurai, six ashigaru, and at least a few servants, though it was hard to separate those who worked at the embassy from those who'd arrived with the group.

Did this count as a large or impressive escort, honoring Sekken, or had the Dragon kept it insultingly small? Ryōtora had no idea. It was small by the standards of a daimyō's procession, but Sekken's family wasn't *that* high in rank. He hoped it wasn't an insult. The Dragon should be pleased to have a man as esteemed as Sekken joining their ranks.

Then he spotted two familiar faces in the crowd, and his heart surged with delight. Whatever political message the escort might convey, the personal one was of clear warmth and welcome. For among the ashigaru were two faces he recognized from those harrowing days in Seibo Mura: Ishi and Tarō.

Sekken was standing close enough to Ryōtora to notice the twitch when the other man spotted their old ashigaru comrades. But Ryōtora was far too courteous to ignore Kinmoku and the others so he could go greet a pair of commoners. Not until the ambassador invited her samurai guests in for tea did Ryōtora excuse himself. Sekken murmured his own apology and followed Ryōtora, with Tanshu – now incorporeal and invisible, so there was no risk of being stepped on – close at his heels.

By then some of the ponies had been led to the embassy stables, opening up space in the courtyard. Tarō saw Ryōtora and Sekken coming, and as he tapped Ishi on the shoulder, his square face broke into an unrestrained smile.

A smile Ryōtora mirrored, for once not holding himself to some higher, more aloof standard. “Tarō! Ishi! I had no idea you would be coming – will you be escorting us back home?”

“We will,” Tarō confirmed.

His hands flicked in a few gestures before he spoke, and Sekken’s attention sharpened. The movements weren’t the ones Sekken had seen before, but he guessed at their purpose. Facing Ishi, he tapped his ear and said, “Your hearing hasn’t returned?”

The shout of a yamajijii had deafened Ishi in Seibo Mura, though when they’d parted, there’d been some hope that a priest might be able to heal that injury. Ishi shook his head, and his hands moved fluidly in the air. Tarō ducked his chin in embarrassment and said, “No, and he says – well. My daughter’s hearing isn’t good, either; that’s why I know the signs.”

Presumably whatever Ishi had said about him was more flattering than that. Ryōtora raised his own hands, but their movements were far more halting as he echoed his spoken reply. “I used to know a little... I haven’t had much occasion to use it, though.”

Sekken bit down on the impulse to say *I’m quite good at Phoenix sign language*. First, because that wasn’t strictly true, and second, because it hardly mattered if he knew the Phoenix signs. It was Dragon lands he’d be living in going forward; Dragon signs were the ones he needed to learn. He only wanted to defend his knowledge because...

Because he was feeling self-conscious about Ryōtora's success with Tanshu. And because he was used to thinking of language as one of *his* skills, a thing he knew that Ryōtora did not. Which was petty and unworthy of him.

Instead he made himself say, "I'm very glad to see you both." The two ashigaru had fought alongside Ryōtora in Seibo Mura; were it not for them, Ryōtora would have been dead long before Sekken had a chance to save him. And if Sekken watched Tarō's hands closely, marking how he translated that for Ishi... well, no harm in starting his lessons right away.

There would be plenty of time to practice on the journey west, though. And the arrival of their escort had made Sekken's impending departure suddenly, inescapably real. When he took his leave a few minutes later, Ryōtora followed him a short distance away. "Is everything all right?"

Ryōtora's voice was pitched low enough not to be overheard, and his eyes were soft with concern. Sekken made himself smile. "This has just made me realize how soon I'll be leaving. There's much to be done—"

"—and not much time to spend with your family. I understand. If there's anything I can do..."

"I'll tell you," Sekken promised.

The truth was, there was nothing Ryōtora could do. Sekken had traveled before – to Kyuden Asako, to Nikesake, through the western parts of Dragon territory – but he'd lived his entire life in Sheltered Plains City. Even his formal education had been at Yōbokutei, because why go elsewhere when there was an excellent school in town? Students lived at the compound, the better to focus on their studies, but his family had been only a short walk away.



Soon, though, he would leave all that behind – forever.

*Don't be dramatic*, he told himself as he made his way through the streets toward his family's mansion, Tanshu trotting at his side. He would still be able to travel back for visits. Though it would be a long journey, and the reclusive tendencies of the Dragon Clan meant they were reluctant to grant permission for many outsiders to enter their own territory. Sekken's mother, his father, his sisters... he'd be lucky to see them once a year.

And yet, he knew he *was* lucky. Samurai handed over in political marriages, cementing some peace treaty with their nuptials, could wind up living like virtual hostages in their new home, shackled to a spouse they barely knew. Sekken would be welcomed, would be starting the next stage of his life with the man he loved.

But reminding himself of these things did little to ease the feeling of the ground being pulled out from under him.

A feeling he was trying not to burden Ryōtora with. The Dragon couldn't afford to lose people; it had never been a question in Sekken's mind which of them would leave to join the other clan. No doubt Ryōtora had made the same calculation. It was one thing for him to know, though, and another to see Sekken visibly moping about having to leave the only home he'd ever known.

With those thoughts weighting his mind, Sekken was fully unprepared to arrive home and find Isawa Miyuki sitting with his second and third sisters, Shūkai and Ameno.

It was neither a surprise, nor unpleasant. Miyuki got along very well with Sekken's family, and she visited them often these days. But Sekken couldn't look at her without drowning

in a mixture of pride, wonder, and embarrassment... because Miyuki was carrying his child.

The arrangement was a good one for all involved. Sekken knew that. Miyuki's mother, Isawa Chikayū, wanted to ensure that the *tsukimono-suji* bloodline Sekken carried, through which he'd inherited Tanshu, would not die out. Since Ryōtora could hardly bear children, that meant finding someone else. And the Dragon Clan was desperately in need of people to bolster their declining numbers; some of Miyuki's offspring would be raised as Dragon instead.

But even though Miyuki had offered this – even though Sekken had accepted – even though everybody was in agreement and all was proceeding well – every time they met in public, he felt vaguely like he was failing to be discreet in conducting an illicit affair, the way a properly trained courtier should.

*Well, he thought wryly, there's one benefit to relocating. You can run away from your own embarrassment.* Though it would be lying in wait for him every time he came back to Miyuki.

She greeted him and Tanshu warmly, though the warmth was tinged with dismay when he told the trio of women that the Dragon escort had arrived. "So, you'll be leaving soon?"

"Not right away," Sekken assured her. "I still have preparations to make, and they'll want some time to rest before they get back on the road. But... yes, I suppose it's not long now." He tried not to look as if the bottom dropped out of his stomach when he said that.

"Then it's a good thing the message came when it did," Shūkai said. "Otherwise we'd have to send a rider chasing after you."

Sekken frowned. “Message?” He couldn’t think who would be writing to him. With all of his sisters here in town, and Ryōtora as well...

“From Crane lands,” Ameno said. “I put it on the desk in your room.”

“Don’t stand on politeness,” Miyuki said, when Sekken hesitated. “We won’t be offended if you go read it now. Who knows? It might be important.”

She knew him well, and Sekken smiled in gratitude as he rose.

His desk was a reminder that he hadn’t lied about preparations. Sekken ought to have packed far more of his belongings by now; it was just that, faced with the daunting prospect of putting his entire life into traveling chests, he rather wanted to crawl into one of those chests and hide. Ignoring the pile of books and scrolls he needed to sort through, he found the battered packet of a well-traveled letter set in the open space Ameno must have created for it so he wouldn’t overlook the new item.

The handwriting was good, the ink and paper execrable. But when Sekken saw who the letter was from, all such considerations fell out of his head.

*Sayashi* had written to him.

The last he’d seen of the bakeneko had been in the front courtyard of this mansion, not all that long ago. She’d been setting off on a journey of her own – and yes, hadn’t she said she might go to Crane lands? On the pretense that she was just following her own fancy, wandering to see what she might find... but judging by the letter in his hands, that had been an unsurprising lie.

She hadn't bothered with any formulaic opening pleasantries. After the salutation, her letter got right to the point.

*I'm in Brittle Flower City, and as much as it pains me to admit this, I need your help. Ryōtora's as well, perhaps – it's a spiritual matter. But also a puzzle.*

*You told me once that the benefit of being human was having other people to stand at your side.*

*I'm not human, but you are.*

*When I call for your aid... will you come?*

*Now, read the full novel...*

Available from all good bookstores and ebook sellers from February 2024.

THE MARKET OF 100 FORTUNES  
by Marie Brenann

Learn more:

[aconytebooks.com](http://aconytebooks.com)  
[twitter.com/aconytebooks](https://twitter.com/aconytebooks)



# CALLING ALL FANS OF WORLD-EXPANDING FICTION!

For exclusive insights and all the news  
join our free mailing list at  
**ACONYTEBOOKS.COM/NEWSLETTER**

Be the first to know *everything*.



Follow on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#)

**ACONYTEBOOKS.COM**