

EMERALD LEGACY



Trailblazer

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The keen of a hawk high overhead caused Daidōji Akikore to lift his head. He caught sight of it, wheeling across a sky so blue that not even a single wisp of clouds could be seen.

Can you see it? He silently asked the wheeling bird. *The Empire? Is it still there? Did it survive?*

The hawk gave no response, tilting its wings and plummeting to the earth with claws outstretched, likely to fetch upon some rabbit. The only answer was the rustling of the wind in the bamboo around him. He lashed out with his wedge-tipped nata again, cutting down the tough stalks.

Stop pouting, son. He could almost hear his father's voice, just as it was when they had last spoken. *These lands have wonders of their own. You just need to find them.* No small obstacle like the dirt floors or the isolation would fluster Daidōji Ienori. He tended his latest bonsai and smiled at Akikore with the same serenity he presented during an Imperial Winter Court in Kyuden Dōji.

Akikore slashed at the bamboo again. It was all very well for his father to speak of the wonders of the Island. He rarely went out into this infernal forest. But General Daidōji Ota, Commander of the Crane's Imperial Expedition... *and my Mother...* insisted that her son would be best put to use where his training might prove useful. *Might.* Strange and hostile creatures would appear unexpectedly in these woods.

The sound of bamboo shattering before him instantly brought Akikore into the familiar stance of his school, dropping his nata to rest his hand, palm up on the ray-skinned wrapped hilt of his katana. *Boar? Bear? One of those creatures that looked like a tiger with a serpent's tail? That had been nasty...*

The tall bamboo broke in front of him to show a red-faced young woman, breathing heavily, holding a heavy stick of bamboo of her own she was using to beat back the long stems so she could pass. She glared at him. "What did you do with Kirichii?" she demanded.

Indignation struck first. "I don't even know who he is! Who are you?"

The woman glared. "My hawk. I know he went down here..."

Her mons struck second. *Seppun. Imperial!* Akikore quickly tempered his tone. "I apologize. I haven't seen a fallen bird."

She whirled away from him, looking towards the side through the thick bamboo. And Akikore could see, hidden behind her rigid stance, the anxiety in her shoulders, the worry that caused her jaw to twitch. *She's afraid.* That struck him third. "I could help you find him, if you like... Seppun-sama."

"Ishiko," she answered curtly. "Now, we need to find Kirichii. He would have returned to me if he weren't hurt."

He was surprised at himself, he realized, as he found himself cutting deeper into the unbroken shafts of bamboo. He listened to Ishiko's footsteps behind him, crunching heavily through the undergrowth as she traced his own trail, calling out, from time to time, with a sharp, keening cry. It hadn't been until he was already slashing a path for them both that it occurred to him, despite the grime and sweat and angry glare, how beautiful she was.

Ishiko wasn't sure how long she had followed the Daidōji with the annoying smile, but her fears for her hawk made her want to push him out of the way and cut her own path. *Surely he could move faster than this!* She took a steadying breath.

She should have been more grateful, she knew. The hilltop she had been exercising Kirichii on overlooked the Forest of Rustling Whispers to the south, while, to the north, the glistening waters of Lake Aratana Hajimari and the growing palace developing around The Memory of Jade shone like a cabochon in the light of Lady Sun. But Lady Sun's rays slanted deep from the west now, hues of scarlet heralding the oncoming of night, and still she had not found the Empress's favorite bird.

Instead, she found this frustrating....self-absorbed...prattling...

"There's a clearing ahead," Akikore called back. "Maybe he went down there." The wall of banded brown stalks of bamboo parted before his machete as he cut his way into the clearing.

Ishiko followed.

The clearing was a perfect circle, the bamboo raising a barrier around the border without any other pathway indicating a break in the uniform barrier, not even a game trail. The ground within the circle itself was covered with thick, dark green moss, split here and there by flat flagstones that shone as if polished regularly. The pathstones led into the center of the clearing, through a torii arch that had weathered to the color of pale driftwood. The air smelled faintly of rich loam and the faintest trace of incense, though there was no sign that the shrine had ever been inhabited. In the center of the clearing, there stood a tumble of broken bamboo, masking a stone structure that only revealed a darkened entrance between the dried poles and dead leaves.

"Why would there be a shrine here, in the middle of nowhere, with no paths to it?" Akikore asked, frowning.

"The Scorpion have found giant empty fortresses defended by stone statues. The Phoenix have found an empty city inhabited by hundreds, maybe thousands, of tsukigami, pots and crockery and kimonos and biwas and umbrellas and everything else. Strange lights fill the waters off the shore of the cliffs the Dragon claim. The Unicorn say their caves speak to them. And you think the strangest thing to find is a shrine with no path to it?" Ishiko's words dripped with defensive sarcasm, but she felt a pang of guilt behind it. It wasn't this Crane's fault she was worried about her bird. *It's not his fault I'm frightened*, she admitted to herself.

Akikore glared back at her. "I didn't say it was the strangest thing." At the torii arch, he reflexively made the customary ablutions to enter sacred ground. Ishiko followed.

A soft, but familiar, 'chuuchuu' of recognition welcomed their arrival. Kirichii's deep brown feathers camouflaged him amidst the fallen bamboo, but his black eyes gleamed as he studied the pair of humans intently from his perch on the stone cap of the shrine's roof ridge.

"Is that your bird?" Akikore asked.

Ishiko nodded. "Shush." She reached into the wallet on her hip and pulled out a piece of meat. The hawk tilted its head to one side thoughtfully. The Seppun lifted her gloved fist, and offered the meat to the bird who, after a moment of indecision, left its perch on the shrine to settle on her wrist to tear into the meat.

"Should you be doing that at a shrine?" The Crane wrinkled his nose at the bird's behavior.

"He came here because it was a good place to flush out prey; the bamboo is too thick to fly. This isn't the first time a bird has hunted on the grounds of a shrine. If the Fortunes take offense at it, there is no pleasing them."

Akikore shrugged. "That would explain a few things." He approached the shrine and ducked down to peer into the darkened entrance. "I wonder what Fortune this shrine was created to serve."

"His name is Sawakiten-Sama, Fortune of Strength. Power in battle, Courage in adversity, Listener to many things, including the troubles of foolish humans." The voice was deep and powerful, completely at odds with the short, furry figure that emerged from the shrine.

A broad, beaten straw hat covered rounded dark brown ears, which themselves capped a nut brown face with wide black eyes that blinked at the pair of visitors owlishly. The little monk's body was swathed in a tattered orange robe that disguised its chubby form. The tiny hands that poked out of the end of the sleeves were black, and gripped a staff with three clinking rings at the end. Ishiko had never seen such a creature, but they were featured often enough in the paintings that decorated the children's palace on the Imperial grounds.

"A tanuki!" Akikore exclaimed.

The tanuki widened its eyes, and exclaimed in a voice that was clearly mocking, raising in a small shriek. "A human!" It shook his head. "Silly children. Why are you here?"

The Dōji had the grace to look embarrassed. Ishiko stepped forward and bowed, raising her wrist so the bird on it was not disturbed by the action. "We apologize for disturbing you. We came to retrieve this hawk, Kirichii."

"Does he want to be retrieved?" the tanuki asked, frowning. After a moment, it added, "I suppose so. He likes the easy meat." With a satisfied nod, it brought the staff down and the rings jangled. A pronouncement of judgment.

"Are you the guardian of this shrine...to the Fortune of Strength, you said? Sawakiten-sama? That is not his name...." Akikore had lowered his hand away from his katana; Ishiko hadn't noticed it was hovering near, before.

The tanuki reached up to lift the rim of his straw hat higher, to better look at the taller humans. "Those filled with the jealousy of Ningen-do live such short lives. They do not even remember names. They do not remember the empires that came before, nor do they know the empires that come after them. One being can be given many names over the centuries. And when the old empires are forgotten, the old names are also forgotten. Here we remember old names. Who can tell what new names have been created across the sea?"

"Which names are we supposed to use, then?" Ishiko asked, thinking of the shrines being set up to the Fortune of Strength in the brand new Seppun Dōjō.

"You are in old lands, very old," the Tanuki answered. "Use old names. Here, Sawakiten-sama will heed your prayers, if you are worthy."

Akikore tried to keep the amusement he felt off his face as he knelt on the soft grass of the clearing drinking tea with a yellow-robed tanuki and an annoyed Imperial. It certainly was not the way he expected to spend his afternoon, but when dealing with supernatural creatures, especially in the forest the Crane found themselves in, he had learned it was best to treat them with respect.

Besides, I don't think Seppun-san would be impressed at me screwing up a tea ceremony, no matter where it was. Ishiko held herself with rigid formality, probably uncomfortable with the limited decorum. She was, after all, an Imperial, despite the curses under her breath while she was thrashing through the woods.

"So the Sons and Daughters of Akodo claim the fields of Rice?" the aged Tanuki asked blandly. "Will such soldiers turn from swords to ox plows, then? And the children of Bayushi wish to close themselves in stone citadels instead of keeping the heartbeat of all the land?" He shook his head. "Everything changes. We warned her, but she said there was no choice."

Ishiko sent him an uncertain glance, and he too was uncertain how to respond. From the news he had heard, the Lion had claimed the fattest portion of the land, but he didn't think they held it with the intent of becoming farmers for their new homestead. And the Scorpion...not a word had come from the Crane-funded peddlers who sought information from Scorpion Lands, except that the Scorpion had not yet settled into the great fortresses they claimed. The Tanuki didn't need to know that, though.

The spirit creature turned a piercing black eye on him. "And how have the children of Dōji changed, I wonder? Do you come to tame the forest, or shape yourself to it?"

He picked a carefully diplomatic answer...one he thought his father would have been pleased with. "Only if a thing is truly in harmony with the world around it can it be beautiful."

Ishiko looked surprised, but the tanuki nodded sagely. "An answer she would have given."

"She?" Ishiko asked. "Who is she?"

The tanuki gestured at Akikore. "The Lady who prepared this place."

"The Lady Dōji? You knew her?"

"My Mother's Mother knew her. But we keep the contract, for just a little while longer."

The clearing grew chill, and Akikore asked cautiously, "What happens in a little while?"

The tanuki slowly got to his feet, and looked towards the shrine behind him. "Empires crumble into dust. It is inevitable. Your lady prepared this place to be a refuge for the warriors of her empire, on the day when her Empire would shatter also. She believed that, in a thousand years, that empire could be rebuilt, and these warriors will return to the mainland to restore it. Foolishness. For Dōji had hope for the future. That was the only thing she had." The tanuki locked his eyes at Akikore. "Foolishness. This place is not what it was a thousand years ago. And you, being here, will not be what you are now in a thousand years. Hope without understanding the future, without understanding change itself, is simply foolishness."

Akikore shook his head fiercely. "We're not supposed to know the future. We're supposed to have hope. If you know what's going to happen, you're not living...you're just an actor on the stage. If Lady Dōji has hope for the future, then so do I. We will gather strength, whatever strength we need until the day we return to the mainland."

The tanuki nodded in sorrow. "You cannot wait. You need this strength soon, not in the far future. You stand at the shrine of Sawakiten-sama, the Shrine of the Fortune of Strength. How will you be strong enough if your strength is untested? Pray for his blessings, Child of Dōji. They will be needed soon enough."

As he was talking, the clearing grew colder and colder, and a low thunder underscored his final words.

"But when? How..." Ishiko protested, standing herself to go protectively to her hawk.

"Those who act in hope act in ignorance. They do not know what they have unleashed. You will."

Akikore started to stand himself, about to follow with his own question, when the sky unleashed a battering assault of hail out of a clear sky, pelting the two samurai so hard that they were forced to bow to protect their faces from the assault. Akikore's back felt bruised through his kimono, fresh strikes plucking at his clothes and ripping at his skin. Akikore reached out to the Imperial, hoping to catch Ishiko's hand and drag her into the shelter of the shrine, but she was hunched protectively over her hawk. He pulled back to cover his head protectively with his hands, blinded by the sparkling white haze. He stumbled to Ishiko's side and leaned over her to try to shelter the hawk and falconer both from the stinging ice.

Then, within ten minutes, at most, the hail stopped. The sky cleared, blue and icy. As Akikore straightened, a few pebbles of ice rolled off his clothes to clatter on the flagstones of the clearing, while, amidst the grasses and moss, more hailstones were melting into the earth. The shrine to Sawakiten-sama was empty, untouched. And the Tanuki was gone.

Ishiko cautiously lifted her head. "What was that? It was not even cold before."

Akikore peered around. "I don't know. But we are dealing with a tanuki here — perhaps this is merely one of his tricks. But his warning...I need to go back and tell my mother."

Ishiko smoothed her hawk's feathers, her eyebrows furrowed. "I can get a message to the Empress. Somehow."

They both gave proper reverence to the shrine of Sawakiten before they left.

The Legacy of the Empire would need all the help it could get.