

Between the Lines

By Marie Brennan

“Keep dancing!”

The exhausted, naked peasants tried to force their bodies into greater motion. Arrows thudded into the ground next to their feet, encouraging them to jump with new desperation.

Heartsick, Suna looked away. She was supposed to be watching. The rōnin insisted the entire village watch, because they claimed this was punishment for hiding food. As if there were any food to hide...this was cruelty, nothing more.

She'd seen it often enough to recognize it.

Movement drew her gaze to the ravaged field beyond the last hut. A banner was approaching. The rōnin hadn't noticed, caught up in their vicious entertainment.

The old woman's shoulders sagged. Lion? Crane? It hardly mattered. Her village had changed hands three times in the last five years, and every time, things had grown worse.

But the banner wasn't yellow or blue. It was green. And as it drew closer—fast—she saw that the emblem on it was a sinuous, twisting shape.

A dragon?

Mitsu bounded to the top of a hut in a single leap, opened his mouth, and breathed.

Flames raked over the heads of the rōnin gathered in the village square. The sudden shock of his appearance—a half-naked man, covered in tattoos, breathing fire—scattered mercenaries and peasants alike. The screams of the *heimin* sent a twinge of regret through his heart. *I'll make amends afterward.*

Right now, other things demanded his attention.

The two *bushi* of his scouting party charged from behind the hut, screaming war cries. When Mitsu shifted, the hut's ramshackle thatching sagged dangerously beneath his feet. An image flickered through his mind, the heir to the Dragon Clan Champion falling ignominiously through a roof...he leapt down to join his allies before that could happen.

As he landed, the tiger tattoo across his back flared to life, feral energy coursing down his arms and transforming his hands into claws. This time when Mitsu opened his mouth, what came out was not fire, but a snarling, guttural roar.

His first blow caught one of the rōnin across the shoulder, shredding the cords of his armor and raking bloody gouges through his skin. A strike to the chin snapped the man's head back, and then Mitsu took control of his sword, tearing it from his opponent's grasp and hurling it at one of the others coming to join the fray.





The tiger's power was both a blessing and a curse. Its ferocity was exhilarating, letting him cast restraint aside and throw his whole self into the battle, but it kept him from speaking to direct his allies. They missed a chance to surround one of the rōnin, like wolves cutting the weakest deer from the herd. The momentum of surprise carried the Dragon through the first stages of the fight, dropping four mercenaries and sending a fifth staggering out of reach, bleeding and

weaponless—but surprise only took them so far.

The rōnin leader shouted orders to his scattered people, gathering them into a more organized unit. Even with five down, Mitsu's little scouting party was still wildly outnumbered, and he couldn't breathe fire at them now without burning the village down, too. Wordlessly, he gestured for his bushi to put their backs to the wall of the nearest hut, while he counted the remaining enemies and tried to remember how many had been there at the start. Could any of the rōnin have circled around to flank?

Faint thunder reached his ears, but the sky above was clear.

Mitsu grinned.

A heartbeat later, Mirumoto Hitomi rode into the village like a one-woman army, katana and *wakizashi* raised high. Behind her came a score of bushi and *ashigaru* on foot, back banners fluttering as they ran. The rōnin didn't even attempt to stand their ground; they bolted on the spot, running in every direction available—except toward Mitsu.

He let the tiger's energy recoil back into the tattoo, tipped a bow toward Hitomi, and went to coax the peasants out of hiding.

Hitomi found him talking with the people who had been forced to dance, now decently clothed and resting in the shade of the village's granary.

Mitsu saw her pause a short distance away and wrestle her fury under control. The whole situation was difficult for her, he knew. He was the highest-ranking samurai in the Dragon



force, and he had seen more of the Empire beyond their clan's borders than all the rest of them combined. But Mitsu was a monk, not a military leader, so Hitomi was in command—giving orders to a man who in all other contexts was her social superior.

When she had achieved a stony-faced approximation of calm, she approached.

"We should speak."

By which she meant, *away from the peasants*. Mitsu nodded and excused himself. Hitomi held herself in check until they were past the village edge, standing where no one could overhear them. Then she locked her hands behind her back and said, "You were supposed to be scouting. Not attacking random villages."

Mitsu shrugged. "I scouted, and I saw a group of rōnin torturing peasants. So I took action."

"On your own. Sending your ashigaru to notify me when it was too late to stop you—because you knew I would!" A muscle jumped in Hitomi's jaw.

There was some truth to that, but it wasn't the whole story. "If I'd waited, those peasants might have been killed."

"So?" It came out a snarl. "We are not here for those peasants! We have a greater mission, given to us by our clan champion, and *you* have put that in jeopardy!"

She retained enough self-control to show the respect his rank demanded, but her words were blunt and furious. Mitsu didn't insult her by pretending he didn't understand why. They were firmly in the middle of the disputed territory west of Toshi Ranbo, not far from the Lion city of Oiku—and they didn't have permission to be there.

They'd made it this far without mishap, bypassing the Lion-controlled bridge and crossing the Drowned Merchant River with the help of their shugenja's prayers. Hitomi thought their army was large, and by Dragon standards it was—but they were still small enough that if they moved quickly and kept out of sight, they could escape notice until they reached areas more firmly in Crane hands, where they had a much better chance of being welcomed.

Stopping to fight rōnin was, he admitted, not good for staying out of sight.

Mitsu's gaze drifted across the field they stood in. Once it been a rice paddy, before someone had broken the dam that kept the irrigation water from draining away. The low levees marking the edges of the plots were trampled flat, and here and there dry blades of rice grass spiked the barren dirt.

When people thought of war, they imagined armies clashing, arrows flying, samurai in armor, ashigaru with their spears. Mitsu thought about places like this: villages that ought to be peaceful and fertile, crushed dead underfoot.

He said, "In my travels around the Empire, I've seen a great deal of suffering. Some of it is the will of the kami: floods and famine and drought. There is only so much I can do about that. But human cruelty?" He spread his hands. "There, I can make a difference. This is what my order has trained me for, *hatamoto*: to find the balance between contemplation and action. If I give up on compassion for fear that helping those in need will bring trouble to me—if I hide



from both my enemy and my duty—then what kind of samurai would I be?”

He couched it in terms of his own honor, but Hitomi couldn't possibly miss his meaning, and he didn't intend for her to. It wasn't his place to argue with her decision to slip through the edges of Lion lands to more friendly territory: she was in command, and she had good reasons for avoiding confrontation. But Mitsu wasn't about to let her hide from the implications of that decision.

Hitomi's whole body went rigid. “Those rōnin were hired by the *Crane*,” she snapped. “The very same clan we're relying on to grant us passage. If you'd coordinated with me ahead of time—if you'd presented your arguments and convinced me this was worth risking our entire *actual* duty for—then I could have surrounded the village and made certain none of the rōnin escaped. But as it stands, one of them got away. I sent scouts to chase him down, but what do you think will happen if he gets to the Crane first?”

Mitsu controlled a wince. He'd thought this area was still in Lion control, and that the rōnin were in their pay. Crane involvement—that was a different matter.

He was an *ise zumi* and master of the Togashi Order, trained through many lifetimes to channel the power of his tattoos at the right times and places to make a difference—but no amount of training could guarantee perfect understanding of the world around him. Even now, he made mistakes.

Mitsu didn't regret his choice, but he understood Hitomi's anger. Before he could find a way to apologize for the part he did regret, she pivoted without warning to face the village, hands going to her blades.

The old woman approaching across the dead field was no kind of threat. In enemy territory, though, Hitomi was not inclined to take any chances. Mitsu said, “Her name is Suna. She was helping me tend to the victims.”

Hitomi did not relax.

A polite distance away, Suna halted and lowered herself stiffly to the dirt. “Samurai-sama. We cannot thank you enough for what you have done. Our humble lives are not worth much, but—”

Mitsu crossed the gap and lifted her to her feet. The fabric of her kimono was almost as thin and worn as her skin, well patched with other material. “Grandmother, rise. Those rōnin were brutes without honor; you should never have had to suffer at their hands.”

She remained half-bent, bobbing up and down in a series of bows as she repeated her gratitude. “Please, honor us by accepting our poor hospitality for the night. Everything we have is yours.”

“We will stay,” Hitomi said, surprising Mitsu. “Speak with Mirumoto Akitake, the man whose armor is lacquered with an image of a mountain. He will make the arrangements.”

Suna creaked through more bows and thanks, then backed away with careful, hobbling steps across the rough ground. When she was gone, Mitsu said, “That was courteous. I would



have expected you to insist we move on.” The hospitality of this village might very well be less comfortable than camping in the open. It would still put a burden on the peasants, though—he’d see what he could get away with contributing from their own supplies.

“I didn’t do it to be courteous,” Hitomi snapped. “It’s close to sunset, and putting a few more miles between us and whoever comes after us won’t make much of a difference. The only question is whether it will be the Lion or the Crane.”



When dawn came, it brought a forest of banners in brown and gold.

Mitsu kept his mouth shut, watching Hitomi take the sight in. She’d made preparations the previous night for the Dragon to defend themselves, but despite Mitsu’s warnings, she’d underestimated the sheer size of the incoming force.

Hitomi’s command contained more people than the Dragon had fielded together in living memory, but this single group—only a fraction of the total Lion force—outnumbered it substantially. And it wasn’t just soldiers, either: they traveled with cooks, laundresses, stable hands, blacksmiths: a whole second army to support the first. The Dragon had their own servants in tow, but poverty and pragmatics meant that theirs was a fast-moving unit, stripped down to the bare essentials. What they faced now was a mobile town.

She would never admit that it daunted her. At the age of eight, she’d tried to challenge Hida Yakamo to a duel over her brother’s death; put her back to a wall, and she would go down fighting, no matter how bad the odds. But that wouldn’t serve anyone’s purposes right now.

Mitsu spotted a familiar banner among the rest. “Ikoma Tsanuri,” he said.

Hitomi’s gauntleted hands curled into fists. “They are unfamiliar with the capabilities of the Dragon, especially the ise zumi. If we make use of that—”

“Then at best, only some of us will survive to continue on, and we’ll have antagonized the Lion even more.” An idea began to take shape in Mitsu’s mind. “You said the rōnin were hired by the Crane, hatamoto. Let’s make use of that, and ask Ikoma-sama for a parley.”



They met in the same trampled field where he and Hitomi had spoken, in full sight of both armies. But not standing in the dirt: Lion soldiers brought out tatami mats and swiftly constructed a low platform for them to kneel on, with cushions, tables, and tea.

Hitomi spent the time preparing in her own way. Mitsu's rank made diplomatic negotiations his responsibility, but if he failed, then it would fall to Hitomi to lead the Dragon in fighting their way free. They were trespassing on another clan's territory, even if it was under dispute with the Crane; Tsanuri would be fully within her rights to send them back north, or even slaughter them where they stood.

"We captured a rōnin late yesterday," Tsanuri said once the opening pleasantries were complete. "My captains thought at first that he was mad, talking about a man breathing fire. But I know your reputation, Togashi-sama. It only surprises me that you would attack a village without provocation."

"Is that how he described it?" Mitsu said, covering his anger with amusement. "I thought I was taking action to protect heimin against the depredations of bandits. Who would have believed the honorable Crane would hire the kind of mercenaries who make peasants dance naked and shoot arrows at them for fun?"

Tsanuri's mouth flattened. *Good, she hasn't lost her sense of compassion.* Mitsu had met her once, years ago, not long after she returned from a stint among the Unicorn. Of all the Lion who might have caught them here, she was far from the worst. "I see," she said. "This war has caused many people to behave in uncharacteristic ways. For example, the famously reclusive Dragon Clan appears to have marched an army into our territory, without making any attempt at arranging for safe passage. Or did I not receive the message?"

Mitsu contrived to look startled. "Forgive me, Ikoma-sama. As you say, we are reclusive, and the news we receive is often out of date. This territory is not in the hands of the Crane? And yet their rōnin were here. How odd."

The balance was a delicate one. Attributing the disputed land to the Lion's enemies could be seen as an insult...but it gave Tsanuri the option of letting this incident pass as a simple misunderstanding, rather than an act of war.

If she chose to.

She sat impassively, considering. Tsanuri was a patient woman; she'd earned her name as a child, when she stood atop a black viper for hours to prevent it from striking and killing her. Finally, she said, "So your business here is with the Crane?"

While the Lion soldiers built their platform and Hitomi prepared for battle, Mitsu had been preparing in his own way, contemplating the different paths this conversation might take. Now he smiled. "I imagine, Ikoma-sama, that you have heard tales of the foresight Tengoku has seen fit to bestow upon our clan champions."

Everyone knew the tales. The Dragon relied heavily on them, because that sometimes made it possible for them to get away with actions that would have brought repercussions down on



the head of any other clan. Who wanted to say they went against the will of Tengoku?

Tsanuri nodded warily. "You claim that is your reason for being here?"

"The Crane will be forced to turn their sights inward," Mitsu quoted. "Those were the words of Togashi-ue, before he sent us south."

Tsanuri leaned back, fingers tapping briefly against her knees before she stilled them. Mitsu's meditation training stood him in good stead, helping him keep his breath even and unruffled while she thought.

"You are in Lion territory, not Crane," she said at last. A necessary declaration: she couldn't afford to concede the validity of another clan's claim, not if the Lion hoped to make Toshi Ranbo their own. "But you are not far from their borders. Do you give me your word of honor, Togashi-sama, that your army does not travel with the purpose of aiding the Crane in their war against my clan?"

"I do," Mitsu said without hesitation.

"Ikoma-sama!"

Tsanuri raised one hand, halting her captain's protest before he could get beyond her name. Yes, the Heavens had indeed blessed Mitsu, putting her opposite him in this negotiation. "Then I will permit you to go, so long as you continue eastward and do not turn back. If you are seen anywhere in Lion lands two days from now, then we will be forced to treat your presence as an invasion. Do you understand?"

Mitsu bowed, a degree deeper than what etiquette required from a clan champion's heir to a commander of her rank. "I thank you for your generosity, Ikoma-sama."

The tiger-inked skin between his shoulder blades itched as he left the field, but Tsanuri was far too honorable for treachery; nobody shot him. Hitomi was waiting at the edge of the village. "It worked?" she said. The words were a question, but her intonation was flat disbelief.

Mitsu nodded. "She believes Togashi-ue sent us here to interfere with the Crane."

Every word he'd spoken to Ikoma Tsanuri had been true. The clan champion had indeed seen a vision of the Crane's future; he had spoken of them turning their sights inward. So far as Mitsu knew, that had absolutely nothing to with his own mission—but it was hardly his fault if Tsanuri had drawn incorrect conclusions from what he'd said.

Hitomi blew out a slow breath. "So...we are free to go?"

"As long as we keep traveling east." Mitsu turned his gaze to the horizon, where Lady Sun slowly lifted herself higher into the sky. "As you said, hatamoto—our duty lies elsewhere."

