

Hidden Markings

By Robert Denton III

Asako Maezawa had to admit, the man was an expert in his craft. Perhaps all that woodblock carving actually was good practice for tattooing. The method seemed the same to his old layman's eyes, and he was even sure that the chisels and needles applied to his skin were interchangeable with those the artist used on wood. He imagined this artist would have enjoyed some popularity here at the City of Remembrance, perhaps among the frequently visiting Mantis sailors, or the city firefighters who imprinted their entire bodies, or even passing Daidoji caravan leaders, who had a story for each image on their sleeve tattoos. But today, the shop was empty. This was no tattoo parlor, no seedy sweet-smoke nook perched along the harbor. Few patrons of this woodblock print shop knew the owner carved designs not only into wood, but also into human flesh. He was forbidden from advertising this service or tattooing without his lord's consent. His talents were only for certain Phoenix with certain duties...

"Apologies," the artist uttered, jabbing the long-handled needle into the taunt flesh of Maezawa's palm. "I know it is unpleasant."

But truthfully, the stabs were distant pinpricks to him by now. He'd done this more times over the years than he could count. The artist guided the jabbing needle with a thumb and forefinger, and Maezawa absently recalled days spent spearing fish in the stream by his father's estate.

"I'll never understand why those of the *kakushibori* rank must tattoo the palm," the artist said, wiping away excess ink and inspecting the stained skin. "I can hardly think of a more painful location, except perhaps the bottom of the feet. And besides, a palm tattoo fades so quickly. How many times have we touched up this design just this season?"

"This is the third time," Maezawa distantly answered.

"The third, you say?" The artist clicked his tongue. "Another location would be more practical. It would last longer. The back, the shoulder..." He set aside his tools and smothered the design with aloe. "Why force a *kakushibori* to endure the pain of palm-tattooing so often?"

Maezawa stared at the marks on his palm, where auburn, saffron, and soot formed an unblinking human eye.

Never forget...

"Some pains help us remember," he replied as the artist wrapped the eye tattoo in a loose bandage.

The wind chime sang at the entrance, and then came padded footsteps. "We're closed!" the artist called out, but Maezawa knew without looking that the newcomer was not here to buy



woodblock prints.

The door slid aside. The artist lowered his head as a woman entered the room. "Apologizes, Isawa-sama. I did not realize it was you."

Maezawa turned to the newcomer, extending a vertical hand in apology; he could not rise so swiftly on his old bones.

"That is fine," the woman said, smiling brightly as she regarded Maezawa. "Greetings, Asako-san. Do not stand and discomfort yourself on my account." Her bow was steep. "How fortunate our paths should cross."

Isawa Yaeko, a herald of the Council. There was only one reason she would be here.

"Indeed," he agreed. "How does Master Tsuke fare lately?"

"Troubled," she replied, and presented a scroll.

"Pardon me, honored elder. Do you require help?"

The woman regarded Maezawa with concerned brown eyes. Her white kimono and red hakama contrasted brightly against the lush green of the mountainside and the glittering blue of the surrounding sea. Her black hair shone with a reddish hue. A large basket of water rested against her hip.

Maezawa shrugged. His belongings were scattered across the road, his torn traveling bag discarded in plain view. He was out of breath and glistened with sweat, his withered frame resting on a trunk that he'd dragged this far. The ferrymen had been kind enough to carry his belongings as far as the mountain base, but he'd sent them back at the torii arch where the path to the shrine began. They were eager to obey. They didn't want to spend any more time on this island than absolutely necessary.



"Thank you, young miss. I am just resting." He dabbed sweat from his brow. "These old bones like to remind me of my age."

A wry smile tugged at her cheek as she regarded his things. She probably thought he was a fool. "Where are your servants?" She looked down the road and back. "Are you all alone?"

He gestured at her basket. "I do not suppose you are carrying water to the Shrine of the Sea Fortunes at the top of this mountain?"

"I am," she affirmed. "I am Kaito Mai, the keeper of that shrine."

"This one is Asako Maezawa, a man of little importance." He tilted his head as she



approached. "I was not aware the shrine had a keeper. Locals said it stayed empty until Spring."

"I am attending to it while I am here," she replied. "I will not stay much longer."

"Then it is my good fortune that I chose now to make my pilgrimage. I don't suppose I could accompany you up the mountain?" He made to stand, his stiff knees contesting his effort.

"Of course! In fact..."

Effortlessly, she balanced her water basket on top of her head, freeing her arms to gather his things. No matter how she bowed and swayed, the basket remained in place.

"That is a nice trick. But you needn't trouble yourself."

"Nonsense," she insisted. Mai unfurled Maezawa's travel blanket and stacked his belongings neatly on top so that she could wrap them into a bundle. "It's terrible that an honored elder should travel alone. What if something happened?" She paused, squinting at his face. "Have we met before? You look familiar."

"I lived among the Kaito at Cliffside Shrine for some time," Maezawa admitted. "Perhaps you saw me there."

She brightened. "Of course! My apologies for not recognizing you sooner." She bowed her head. "You advised the late Kaito daimyō, didn't you?"



He had anticipated being recognized. Cliffside Shrine was a small community, after all. Humility would be the right play. Disarm her suspicions early. "It is my deepest regret that Nobukai-sama passed during my time in his service. Although I knew him only a short while, I am certain he would be proud of how far your family has recently come."

She beamed with pride. "We are rising in the world, are we not?" With deft hands, she tied the blanket into a bindle. "That leaves only your trunk. I'll take that for you, if you can carry this."

"Much obliged." Maezawa inwardly sighed with relief. He had hoped she would offer to carry the trunk. It would make things much easier.

"Well, I would not want you to aggravate your injury." She gestured to his wrapped hand. "Does it hurt much?"

From beneath the bandage, Maezawa felt the hostile stare of the tattooed eye.

For when you are tempted...

"We can only relate to pain that is our own," he said. When she met him with confusion, he shook his head. "Ah, never mind my prattle. No, it does not hurt much."



"May I ask, what brings you on this pilgrimage? Shrines to sea-bound Fortunes pepper the coast, north to south."

"And have them come to me? What poor manners." Maezawa smirked. "For what I must ask, I must come to them."

She paused, regarding him with amusement. "What favor do you ask?"

"Perhaps too much. I am hoping to save a young fool's soul."

Her eyes softened. "That is never too much. And there is no distance too far, no mountain too tall, to seek what you seek."

He shrugged. "In the end, it may not be up to the Fortunes what happens. But I will take whatever help I can get!"

She nodded, lifting the trunk. Then Mai gasped, dropping the trunk at her feet. She hissed, waving her hand.

"Are you alright?"

"I'm fine." Mai uncurled her fingers, revealing a tiny sting. "It must have been a wasp or a splinter or something. I can treat it at the shrine."

Maezawa only nodded, but made a mental note of the smooth jade stud he had hidden inside the trunk handle.

Mai checked in around the Hour of the Boar. Maezawa knew she could not see his face in the gloom with his back to the sliding door. Even so, he kept his eyes closed and his breathing gentle, until he finally heard the door slide shut again, and then her footsteps fading as she ventured deeper into the shrine. If the Fortunes were kind, she would not have noticed the dusting of colorless powder at her feet, paying no mind when she stepped in it.

Maezawa counted to ten, then sat up. His eyes were already accustomed to the darkness, so he gathered his things as quietly as he could, then lit the candle in the paper lantern he procured from his trunk. Mai had kindly allowed him to sleep on the floor in the commons, even affording him a guest's privacy. But he was certain that she would check in on him during the night. They always did.

He rolled the door aside softly. The shrine's branching hallway stretched beyond the light of his lantern, and he saw no sign of Mai.

Maezawa rummaged blindly through the pocket of his sleeve until his weathered fingers found the smooth vial. It was the second half of a Kitsuki mixture; he'd forgotten the true name, but the magistrate who'd given it to him called it "Fox's Footsteps." The first half he'd scattered on the floor hours before now. He uncorked the vial, poured himself a handful, and whispered a prayer to Saibankan, the Fortune of Justice, before tossing it into the hall.

A trail of pale green footprints appeared where the two powders touched. As he'd hoped, Mai had unwittingly tracked the first half of the illuminating mixture. Whispering his thanks, Maezawa followed the faintly glowing trail, pausing now and again to toss the mixture and



conjure new prints at each junction. Each print was fainter than the last, and it occurred to him that if she'd left the shrine, or gone a significant distance, then his efforts, and the expensive powder, would have been wasted. Perhaps another prayer was in order...

Just as he began to fear that he would run out of powder, Mai's footprints took a drastic turn, seemingly ending at a rice-paper wall. It appeared much the same as the others, but if he held his breath, he could hear a faint whisper on the other side. He set the lantern down, careful to place it so his shadow was cast behind him instead of against the wall. *You're taking many risks tonight*, he thought as he drew his *tantō* and stealthily cut a slit through the thick paper. He knew acting on the first night was too quick, and it was wiser to just observe for now, but there was an urgency rolling in his belly that he couldn't explain. He wanted to be done with the entire affair.

Beyond the slit was a hidden room. Peeking through, Maezawa spotted Kaito Mai with her face against the corner. In her hands was a tome, a number of bound scrolls with no cover. She whispered words from an unfurled page as if reciting to someone. But there was no one else there, at least not that he could discern. Before her was an altar, and in the dim light, Maezawa could just make out something small and unmoving on its surface. Something wet and fleshy. A fish's innards, probably, or a bird's.

Grimly, he returned the knife to its sheath. He'd been doing this for a long time now. Every instinct told him she was *mahō-tsukai*, yet her words did not have the dark tone of a benediction to *kansen*, the corrupted malevolent kami twisted by Jigoku's taint. No, her tone was closer to that of the Brotherhood of Shinsei, the sing-songy poetry favored by the Topaz Sutras. He raked his mind for something else familiar about this scene, but recalled nothing.

The corner shadows stirred like a curtain. Mai stopped and spun, a startled deer, staring directly into the slit in the wall.

Then, a bloody eye filled Maezawa's vision.



A thundercrack, and the wooden frame of the wall shattered. Maezawa struck the opposite wall with a teeth-shaking jolt. His vision bleached, and he collapsed. Kaito Mai's voice cried out, "No! Leave him alone! Please!"

The narrow hall filled with supernatural wind, whipping at his robes and beard. He shook his head to restore his senses. Mai had dropped the tome, and the wind tore the pages away, engulfing them in a whirlwind of papers. Maezawa pulled his *wakizashi* free. His

knees shook as he forced himself up.

A gust wrenched the blade away, and a sheet sliced across his arm, leaving a thin papercut. Then another slashed against his cheek. He felt his blood being drawn from the wounds, thin red threads dangling in the air. A shapeless form hovered at the whirlwind's center, faint but becoming more solid, more red. Another stinging cut, this one against his lip.

The lantern. It was his only hope now. He dare not look at it, lest the creature know his intentions. He closed his eyes as the wind battered him, picturing where he'd placed it...

"Here!" Mai shouted. She held up a vial. A thick dark liquid coated the inside. Even in the chaos and gloom, Maezawa could tell what the vial contained.

The wind halted. The papers hovered. The immutable form seemed to waver, indecisive.

"This is what you want, right?" Mai pleaded. "Take it! My blood for the pilgrim's life!"

It was now or never. Throwing himself at the lantern, Maezawa tore the paper shell away, revealing the jade-laced candle within. The room lit with an unfiltered holy glow.

A flash. Heat, like a hearth against his face. The papers combusted into ash. With the blink of an eye, the thing was gone.

Maezawa slumped to the floor. His joints were on fire, his head throbbing. He made no effort to stand as Mai tossed aside a hidden door and vanished into the hall beyond. *I need to go after her*, he thought. She was mahō-tsukai. Every moment was a chance for her to bargain again, to weave her blood magic, or perhaps even give her name to an *oni*! But he simply had no energy. So he sat, panting, while his heart thudded like a prisoner's fists.

It felt like an eternity before his knees would cooperate again. By now, the jade candle had all but burned down. He scooped up his sword and followed Mai's path. It led to a spiral stair, rising up. The lighthouse, the shrine's most distinguishing feature. He almost laughed at his poor luck. Of course he'd have to climb.

He called, "I do not suppose you are willing to come down?"

No reply.

The trip up was agony. The fight had aggravated his old wound; his right knee would not support his weight. He leaned against the wall and used his sheathed wakizashi as a cane.

He tried again. "I've never seen a kansen take that form before. And those pages, they were not *mahō* writings, right?"

Again, nothing.

He sighed. *Fine. Have it your way, then.*

The open top was like the inside of a massive stone lantern, or an eight-columned pagoda. But the mirrors that amplified the torch were dark. Only the moon lit the interior. Panting in the doorway, catching his breath took longer than he would have liked, but Mai was not pressing her advantage. She had her back against the railing and a long fall to the rocks below. She held a knife against her palm, as if to shed her blood and assail him with demons.



But she didn't. She just waited, almost politely.

They both stood like that for some time, him hunched over and gasping, her silent and still.

At last, Maezawa broke the silence. "So, you suspected me all along?"

She nodded. "Rumors said you were the reason Nobukai-sama died."

"Rumors exaggerate."

"But rumors are why you're here, right?" The little knife flashed as her face hardened. "Or were you sent by my sensei? She was always threatened by my epiphanies." The girl looked hurt. "You believe what they say about me?"

Leaning his sword against a pillar, Maezawa drew his pipe and dug for his smoking grass. "You are the one with a blade to your palm, Mai-san."

She swallowed, a concession to his point. "I didn't call the kansen to this place. They were already here."

He searched her gaze. In his experience, mahō-tsukai would say anything to escape justice, but she didn't seem to be lying. And if she had not summoned tainted kami to this shrine, then what did?

"I know how it looks," she continued, "and while it may be true that I have communed with the kansen, and I have even offered blood to hear their voices, I am no bloodspeaker."

He nodded. "I know."

Her brow pinched in surprise. "You...know?"

"Of course you're not. A bloodspeaker would not make such beginner's mistakes." Maezawa packed the pipe with his thumb, then searched for his striker. "For one, they would never cut the palm. Too many delicate tendons, too much risk of infection or permanent damage. Bloodspeakers cut across their forearm with a special knife. Less risky, easier to conceal." Finding his striker, he lit the pipe, then took several puffs. "No, I'd guess you saw palm-cutting in a play or painting or something. You are self-taught and you work alone. You wanted power, and this is how you could get it."

Her face turned pale. "Who are you really? Why did you come here?"

"I already told you. I am Asako Maezawa. And I have come to save a young fool's soul. If she will listen."

Realization washed over her. "So, there really are inquisitors."

There would always be rumors that the Phoenix Inquisitors—the secret magistrates of the Elemental Council—were real. What mattered was that the rumors were not dependable, and mostly incorrect. Misinformation served their purposes. If only those rumors had been a deterrent now.

Mai slowly lowered her knife, but planted herself, squaring her shoulders and jutting out her bottom lip. "Well, you're wrong about one thing. I didn't trade blood for power. I wanted to redeem them and ease their suffering."





Now *that* was new. “Redeem them, you say?”

“Yōkai are trapped in cycles of rejection and clinging. Their forms are reflections of their preconceived notions. They know no other way to exist. They cling to their hatred and pain just as they revile it. This is no different than grasping a hot coal with the intention of burning another. They only harm themselves.” She smiled, but he could see she was shaking. “Kansen are just a kind of yōkai, honored elder. Through compassion and respect, I believe they can

be cleansed of the taint, returning to their former selves.”

She was quoting the Jade Shore Sutras, a syncretic text that blended generations of shugenja’s musings on the way of Suitengu with the wisdom of the Tao of Shinsei. It had its place, but was not for beginners. Somehow, she’d extended the teachings to kansen and drawn these conclusions. Maezawa wondered how many generations the Jade Shore Sutras had kept from the true path to enlightenment.

“I know you’ve come to stop me,” she continued. “But doesn’t the Tao teach us to extend our compassion to all beings? I want only to cleanse them. I am asking you to let me.”

He took a long puff from his pipe. “Let me tell you a story, Kaito-san. It is about a young boy who once lived on a bay. Every day, he would take his father’s boat out to harvest kelp. Often, he saw sharks. He felt bad for them, because he believed that by eating innocent sea creatures, they were dooming themselves to a worse reincarnation. If only they knew what they were doing, then they could be saved. He decided one day that he would swim out to them and teach them to eat kelp instead.”

She frowned. “I know what you’re trying to—”

“But the sharks,” he continued, “they were mindless. They lived only to eat. He was bitten, and as he bled, more came. What do you think became of him?”

When she didn’t reply, he took one last puff and emptied his pipe over the side. “Kansen are not mere yōkai. They are not confused. They are tainted spirits. They want only to feed.”

“Does the Jade Shore Sutra not say, *‘There is no stain so dark that it cannot be cleansed away?’*” She faltered over the last words, holding back an emotional swell. But she did not break. “I cannot abandon them. They need help.”

“I am familiar with that sutra. What else does it say?”

She didn’t reply.



He stepped forward. "No being can redeem a soul, except for that soul itself." He risked another step, halting when her fingers twitched and the blade returned to her palm. "If the sutras apply to both spirits and mortals, then a mortal cannot redeem a lost spirit on its behalf. The lost must redeem themselves."

She cast him a wry smile. "Yet some would still try."

A lump formed in his throat. He could only nod.

"I won't let you kill me."

He couldn't look at her. *Why is it always someone young? he thought. Someone hopeful, misled, and seduced? Just once, can't the target be an old, evil, power-hungry servant of Jigoku? Must whomever I kill always be someone who only meant well?*

He pointedly glanced at his wakizashi against the pillar, just within reach. "It would be a mercy, child. Painless. Not like the path you have chosen. That path leads to a more complete death than my blade could inflict. Not even Shinsei would feed himself to the sharks."

He extended his hand. The bandages around it were loose. A gust of wind tore them away.

"You don't understand," came her calm, sad reply. "You don't know what it is like to be marked because you want to help others. To be distrusted by everyone because you try to save beings that others call lost. To endure the pain, over and over, and know that the reason it stings is because you made that choice. Out of compassion, you chose, and doomed yourself to be alone."

Maezawa stared at his tattooed palm. "Actually," he whispered, "I do."

Must I always be culling from the best of us?

The flash of the knife as she crossed the room was slower than the flick of his wrist. When she saw the eye tattooed there, she flinched. It was all the time he needed to draw his blade free.

The sampan boat rocked beneath Maezawa's feet as it pulled away from the island. His gaze lingered on the shrine at the top of the mountain. The lighthouse peeked just over the trees. It would be months before the Phoenix sent priests to reconsecrate the grounds, but that could not be helped.

"Asako-san," the ferryman spoke as he approached, "We are making good time. Would it be permitted for the oarsmen to—"

A wave tilted the boat. A round object rolled out of his bags and onto the deck: his *kubi bukuro*, a net filled with something round. Unseeing brown eyes. Black hair with a reddish shine.

Maezawa carefully returned the heavy net to his bag and handed a coin to the paling ferryman. "I'm in a hurry," he said. "No delays, please."

The ferryman nodded, swallowing hard. Maezawa thought he would leave, but instead he seemed rooted to the spot. Maezawa turned away and looked down at his palm. The unblinking eye tattoo stared back. If he closed his eyes and blocked out the splashing oars and the sea



wind, he could still hear his sensei's voice the day he'd reached the high rank of kakushibori, and received this tattoo, his secret badge of office.

"It is for when you are tempted, Maezawa-san. Fight monsters for long enough, and you may well become one. This is so you never forget. We are always watching."

"Always."

"Was that the witch's head?" the ferryman suddenly spoke. "Is she gone? Does that mean... will the fish come back now? The birds? Is it safe to live here again?"

"Only Fortunes know," Maezawa replied. He couldn't shake the notion that his tattoo's ink was fading. It would need touching up.

