

Two Swords Fall from Heaven

By Marie Brennan

Hour of the Ox—The Plains Beyond Otosan Uchi

Hitomi slept lightly after the Army of the Rising Wave made camp in a field near—but not too near—one of the petal villages ringing Otosan Uchi. She felt as though she hadn't truly rested since her force crossed the border of Dragon lands: taking an army through foreign territory, without diplomats first paving the way, made her as wary as a cat in a hawk's shadow. Approaching the Imperial capital with that army...

It was her duty, and she was honored to perform it. But that didn't stop her from wondering what Lord Togashi was thinking.

Fortunately, Mitsu knew how to wake her safely. With Hitomi's nerves primed for trouble, she would have come up with a blade in hand if he hadn't first murmured her name from a safe distance away.

Dawn hadn't yet bleached the walls of her tent, and the instincts of a soldier told her it was some time after midnight. "Have the Imperial Legions arrived?" she asked. To bid them all surrender or to kill them all for their audacity.

Mitsu shook his bald head. "No. It's..."

Some of the *ise zumi*, Hitomi was convinced, deliberately cultivated an enigmatic air, just to enhance the reputation of their order. But not Mitsu: he was, if anything, blunt to a fault. If he was hesitating, he had good reason. "Bad news won't get any better for delaying."

"It isn't that," Mitsu said. "Rather—I'm not sure." He was kneeling, hands serene on his knees, but his gaze was troubled and distant in the light of his small lamp. "I couldn't sleep. I thought to calm myself with meditation, and I felt..."

Hitomi bit down hard, waiting. Grabbing his shoulders and shaking him might be satisfying, but it wouldn't make the words come any faster.

"Something is wrong," Mitsu said. "I don't know what. Not the Imperial Legions coming for us—nothing so straightforward. A spiritual disturbance of some kind."

She wondered which of his tattoos gave him that sense, or whether it was simply an inner spiritual gift. *Or nothing at all*, she thought. Hitomi doubted she was the only one on edge. "I can't wake the soldiers for an undefined spiritual disturbance. And deploying them without first getting permission from the Emperor or the Emerald Champion..."

No point in finishing that sentence. She wished they had moved just a little faster, so that they arrived early enough for her to speak with Agasha Sumiko before the gates of Otosan Uchi



closed for the night. It would have meant exhausting her soldiers even more—but it would have been worth it, to get the political dance started today instead of tomorrow.

If Mitsu wasn't jumping at shadows, then tomorrow might be too late.

"Of course not," Mitsu said. "I only woke you to give the warning, and to tell you I'm going to the city. I might be able to find out more."

Hitomi shot to her feet, not caring that she wore only a thin sleeping robe. Tattooed monks went around half-naked anyway. "On your own? So *courteous* of you to let me know."

Mitsu stood as well, grimacing. "That isn't what I—look, the guards at the gate are more likely to make an exception for me than for you. Or if I absolutely have to, I can get past them on my own."

Because he was the clan champion's heir. And because people let Ise zumi get away with exceptions to all kinds of rules—even Imperial laws. "Togashi-ue placed me in command of this army," Hitomi reminded him, in a tone more often used toward *bushi* fresh out of their *gempuku*. "This close to our objective, I am not about to let you go haring off on your own. If that was what our lord intended, he would not have sent an army with us." *Nor placed me in command of it.*

"But we can't *use* the army!" Mitsu said. "Not yet. If I'm not back by morning, you can go to Champion Agasha—"

"You have no authority to tell me what I can and cannot do."

Fury drove the words out of her like a fist. Why Lord Togashi had chosen Mitsu as his heir was beyond her: the man unquestionably had martial skill and a talent for talking to peasants, but those were hardly the traits required of the Dragon Clan Champion. He was too used to operating alone, without consulting anyone else, and for all that he claimed his decisions were always the result of careful contemplation, she'd seen with her own eyes that sometimes he wasn't careful enough.

And if he acted rashly now, they might all pay the price for it.

For the briefest instant, she saw his hands tighten as if to form fists. If he'd struck at her, she would have had him in chains a heartbeat later, heir or no heir.

But then his hands relaxed. "We were sent here to aid the prince," Mitsu said quietly. "I can't swear that what I felt is some kind of threat



to him—but *hatamoto*, I don't believe either of us would want to fail because we waited until morning to act."

The use of her title mollified her. Which was undoubtedly why he'd done it, but still: it meant he remembered her authority and her responsibility. Hitomi exhaled slowly, letting her own hands fall limp. "No. Give me long enough to assemble a small escort, and we'll go together. After all, Togashi-ue sent us both." Surely, he had reason.

Mitsu nodded. "While you do that, I'll head to Hojize Gate and start talking the guards around. That way we won't waste any time."

He might be reckless sometimes, but Hitomi didn't think he was a liar. She let him go, summoned her escort, and went on believing what he'd said right up until the point when she arrived at the gate and found the pedestrian entry next to the massive main barrier hanging open.

Through that gap, she saw two guards lying unconscious.

Hitomi swore, using language she hadn't employed since her own days as a student, and called on all the Fortunes to curse Togashi Mitsu. He'd not only lied to her; he'd committed an Imperial crime and left her with an impossible choice.

Follow him—committing her own crime in turn—or wait for dawn, and risk failing her champion's orders?

"Stay alert," she said to her escort, settling her *daishō* on her hip. "Draw steel only if attacked, or in defense of the Emperor or the prince. We don't know what we'll find."

With her soldiers at her back, Hitomi entered Otosan Uchi.

Mitsu couldn't see perfectly in the predawn darkness, but he could see enough.

As he approached Otosan Uchi, he saw a patch of deeper shadow where the light of Lord Moon ought to have continued unbroken across the face of the city wall. He saw the lack of movement atop the wall, where guards ought to have been patrolling in the chill autumn night.

With his wolf tattoo sharpening his senses, he saw two guards lying unconscious just inside the gate.

The open plain around the walls of the Imperial capital gave him nowhere to hide, but he crouched low to reduce his profile and searched the area. No threats revealed themselves, and Mitsu crept closer, sniffing the air. The breeze brought him dew-softened grass, the dust of the road, and the inevitable medley of smells—not all of them pleasant—that accompanied a city.

And a fresh trail. Not large—only two people. Assassins?

If so, they had already accomplished their murder. The trail led across the open ground; they'd knocked out the guards in order to *leave* the city, not enter it.

Mitsu stood perfectly still, like a duelist studying his opponent, preparing to strike. *Aid the prince*. He and Hitomi might already be too late. Or this might be the moment for which Lord Togashi had sent them.



But that didn't tell him which way to go.

The gate stood unguarded, both at ground level and on the parapet above. Any loyal subject of the Emperor should immediately raise the alarm.

Most loyal subjects of the Emperor, though, would not have Mitsu's ability to track the escaping pair. And delay might mean losing the trail entirely.

He drew a slow breath, releasing his tension so it would not cloud his judgment. Hitomi was on her way with soldiers. She would be furious with him for vanishing, but she'd follow through in the city. If the problem was there, she would find it.

Mitsu turned and followed the scent trail with the easy, loping stride of a wolf on the hunt.

It led him, not toward the fields and carefully tended woods around Ootosan Uchi, but toward the nearest petal village.

Two people, both in sandals, and one of them expensively perfumed. Shinobi wouldn't wear such scents and would have had horses waiting in a nearby wood. Unless this was an unplanned flight... and as the trail led Mitsu toward a stable on the outskirts of the village, he suspected more and more that such was the case.

Faint noises drifted to his ears. The horses inside the stable were restless—not panicking, but shifting about. Mitsu paused, releasing the energy of the wolf tattoo, and called upon the one that spanned his back and shoulders. His hands shifted into claws. Soundless as a tiger on the hard-packed dirt, he approached the stable, rounded its corner, and peered through the gap in the door.

Someone moved inside, bridling a horse. Mitsu's vision was no longer sharp enough to pierce shadows, but he could just make out the second figure, holding the reins of another horse and waiting.

Mitsu could outrun any mount, but unless he meant to follow these two all the way to their destination, he was better off confronting them now while they were still alone. In one swift move, he tore the door open, flooding the stable with moonlight, and leaped forward.

Steel flashed up to meet him. The horses surged in alarm, and the smaller figure leapt to catch their reins. Mitsu was about to hurl a bucket at the swordsman's head and follow up with a bone-crushing kick when he realized he knew that face: painfully young, white with desperation, but still recognizably Imperial.

He skidded to a halt, bucket dangling from his claws. "Your Highness!"

It came out a wordless, feral growl, and Hantei Daisetsu raised his sword to strike. But the young woman who'd been bridling the horse caught his arm, crying, "No! Wait!"

The tiger snarled for Mitsu to fight, but he had long since mastered his tattoos. He let go of his power; his claws retracted, and speech returned. Mitsu dropped the bucket and knelt. "Your Highness, what are you doing here?"

These were unquestionably the two he'd been following. But why would they be fleeing Otosan Uchi in the middle of the night? Why would they disable the guards at the gate—and *how?*

Daisetsu lowered his blade to a guard position, but kept its point toward Mitsu. The young woman at his side wore Unicorn-style traveling robes; that plus her youth suggested she was Iuchi Shahai, the girl sent to teach *meishōdō* to the Seppun. Was she the one who had disabled the guards with her foreign magics? If so, the Phoenix would scream so loudly they'd hear it in the Burning Sands.

But those were all problems for later. Right now, Mitsu had an Imperial prince in front of him... and orders from Lord Togashi. *Travel to Otosan Uchi and aid the prince.*

No details beyond that and an army. Mitsu had not yet experienced the foresight that blessed the Champions of the Dragon Clan, but he knew how badly those visions taxed them in body and spirit. The Lord of the High House of Light had undoubtedly shared everything he knew. The rest was up to Mitsu and Hitomi.

"I've seen you before," Daisetsu said, his voice hard like that of a boy trying to hide a tremor. "You're one of the ise zumi. Togashi Mitsu. Did your clan champion send you here to stop us? I won't let you."

Shahai's hand remained on Daisetsu's arm, like she was soothing a nervous horse. "Many from my family have married into the Dragon clan over the years," she said. "He may be able to help us."

Mitsu and Hitomi had days to discuss it on the road. They'd agreed the prince they were supposed to help was probably Sotorii, the future Emperor. But now here was Daisetsu, outside the Forbidden Palace—outside the Imperial City entirely—in the middle of the night. *Maybe we were wrong.*

"Has some trouble taken place within the palace?" Mitsu asked. The cadences of formal speech weren't something he used often, but they rose to his lips with the practiced ease of many lifetimes. "Are you under threat of pursuit?"

Daisetsu laughed bitterly and sheathed his sword at last. "If they've noticed I'm gone, then yes, probably."

He was running away.

It stole the breath from Mitsu's lungs, and the formality from his speech. "Your Highness—what's going on?"

The look Shahai gave Daisetsu was all too easy to read, but Mitsu doubted Lord Togashi had sent him there just to help two teenagers elope. They conducted a wordless argument; then Daisetsu set his jaw and said, "I've had enough, Togashi-san. Of—of all of it. The courtesy that's just a mask for poison, the ambition masquerading as duty, all the lies and stupidity and— and—"



His breath came faster, strangling his words. Shahai pressed her lips together, then faced Mitsu and bowed. “We have not met, Togashi-sama, but I have heard stories about you. Your compassion for those who often get trampled in the wars of others. Please—will you help us?”

“Help you do *what*?” Mitsu said.

“Get away.” Daisetsu suddenly crouched low, putting his face close to Mitsu’s without letting his knee touch the ground. There was no supplication in his manner; he was an Imperial prince and burning with the fire of determination. “I’m trying to find my own path, Togashi-san. Surely you, as a Dragon—as an *ise zumi*— can understand that.”

It had the ring of *musha shugyō*, the warrior’s pilgrimage. But that was for adults who had passed their *gempuku*, and Mitsu didn’t believe for a single instant that Daisetsu was fleeing with a Unicorn hostage in the middle of the night simply because he wanted to seek greater understanding by traveling the Empire.

Whatever Mitsu had felt while he was meditating must have something to do with Daisetsu’s flight. He saw the signs of it in tightness of Daisetsu’s expression, the way Shahai’s hands had slipped into her sleeves—as if reaching for an amulet, just in case.

But Mitsu wasn’t about to call the prince a liar. He might not have Lord Togashi’s foresight, but he could see that future rolling out in front of him like a picture scroll: Daisetsu drawing steel, Shahai calling on her *meishōdō* amulets, Mitsu facing the choice of whether to fight an Imperial prince or let these two beat him to the ground.

He could hardly imagine Daisetsu running away with the entire Army of the Rising Wave trailing after him, though. And the army was here for a reason. Choosing his words carefully, Mitsu said, “Your Highness, I have traveled the Empire from one end to the other. There is great wisdom to be found out there...but also far more danger than anyone in the Forbidden Palace would ever admit, for fear of giving insult to the Son of Heaven. I would be happy to instruct you here, where it is safer—”

Again, that bitter laugh. “You’re afraid I’ll get killed? What does it matter if I do? My destiny is my own, not the Empire’s.”

Mitsu’s breath stopped. *Not the Empire’s.*



What if Daisetsu was wrong?

Aid the prince. He and Hitomi had thought they were to aid Sotorii, the future Emperor. But younger sons had succeeded to the throne before, or brothers, because the twists of karma set them on that path.

If that was what Tengoku intended, Daisetsu would need someone to protect him.

Mitsu had spent lifetimes learning to master not only his tattoos but his actions—and their consequences. This future, though, was too complex for anyone other than the Order's master to see, and maybe not even him. The Dragon Clan heir aiding a runaway Imperial prince and a Unicorn hostage... Even the immediate consequences, the ones Mitsu could predict, would be difficult at best.

No amount of foresight and contemplation could make a good solution emerge where none existed. And in those situations, one still had to choose.

The army still troubled him, like a pebble in his sandal. Mitsu could have come to Ootosan Uchi far more easily on his own, and he didn't believe the entire purpose of the Army of the Rising Wave was to make him camp outside the city tonight and thereby be in position to intercept Daisetsu. Surely there was more to it than that.

But the army was Hitomi's anyway. And she was a Mirumoto: she would understand that, when you had two swords, you used them both.

Mitsu bowed low, returning to formality once more. "I understand, your Highness. And I hope you will understand that I cannot fail in my duty to my lord. Your companion is correct: I was sent here to help you. And so I will travel with you."

There was no chaos in the city, no screaming. Just a gate's worth of unconscious Imperial legionnaires, and a city sleeping, none the wiser.

Hitomi didn't trust it. She kept her hands near her blades and moved as fast as she dared, not wanting to attract attention by running through the nighttime streets. She'd long since come to terms with the necessity of secrecy, sneaking an entire army through Lion and Crane lands to Ootosan Uchi; another *li* or so of hiding wouldn't matter. She left her escort to hold the gate, though, with orders to sound the alarm as soon as she was well clear.

It wouldn't buy her much leniency, once the authorities here realized she'd entered the city illegally. But right now, what mattered was getting to Agasha Sumiko. The Ruby Champion had no authority to grant the army permission to camp outside Ootosan Uchi, but as a fellow Dragon, she could help them navigate the treacherous passes of court.

Her soldiers had other orders, too. Ones they would carry out if Hitomi failed to return.

At the wall marking the edge of the Forbidden Palace, she found a very different state of affairs. The gate there was not only guarded, but held by far more people than seemed necessary. *Mitsu's spiritual disturbance?*



If so, the guards weren't telling visitors. But her seal of command got her through the gate, with a bushi to lead her to the residence of the Ruby Champion.

Hitomi hoped to find Mitsu there. The servant who greeted her denied having seen him, though, and Hitomi cursed inwardly. *Where in Jigoku has he gone?*

Mitsu couldn't be her concern right now. She had to stay focused on her own duties. Hitomi expected Sumiko would be asleep, and she had prepared a speech of urgent apology. But when the servant showed her into the Ruby Champion's study, Sumiko was not only awake but dressed, and had company: Kitsuki Yaruma, the Dragon Clan ambassador to the Imperial court.

It should have seemed like the providence of the Heavens, finding the two of them together like this. But the tension in them both made Hitomi's relief short-lived. "Mirumoto-sama," Sumiko said curtly as the servant departed. "I don't know what business brings you here at this hour, but this is not a good time—"

Hitomi knelt and bowed. "Agasha-sama. Togashi-ue sent me here with an army and orders to aid the prince. Togashi Mitsu-sama woke me tonight with a warning of some disturbance he sensed while meditating, and I saw signs of trouble on my way into the city. How can I serve?"

The silence that followed lasted long enough that Hitomi looked up. The mask of Sumiko's composure had cracked, and the bones of her face seemed to stand out like a skull. Yaruma stared at Hitomi. "To aid... the *prince*."

Her mouth went dry. "Are we too late?"

Sumiko braced her fingers against the mat, as if to steady herself. "The Emperor is dead."

It struck like a Hida's war hammer. Hitomi barely managed to say, "How?"

"His health has been bad for some time now. I imagine it took a turn for the worse... though the Imperial Advisor has been slow to share any information." Sumiko exchanged a bitter glance with Yaruma, then took a deep breath, restoring her outward serenity. "But you say you were sent to aid the prince, not the late Emperor. Did you mean the elder son, or the younger?"

"It is not clear," Hitomi said slowly, trying to absorb the sudden shock. "Togashi-ue said only the prince. I suppose there is only one prince now—the younger son. But at the time, there were two, and I would think the Crown Prince—the Emperor—was the one more in need of help."

"The kind of help he needs is beyond us all now."

Acid and despair mingled in Sumiko's voice and took Hitomi aback. "What do you mean?"

Sumiko passed a weary hand over her brow. "I had... concerns before. But it is not my place to criticize the Son of Heaven. We can only do our best to advise him, and pray to the Fortunes that it will be enough."

She didn't sound hopeful. Before Hitomi could think what to say, though, the door slid open and the servant entered again, bowing low. "Agasha-sama, Bayushi no Sentaki Yūgiri-san is here,



bearing a message from the Imperial Advisor, Bayushi Kachiko-sama.”

Sumiko nodded. “Stay,” she said, when Hitomi would have excused herself. “You said you’re here to help, after all.”

Hitomi knelt to one side, next to Yaruma. The messenger was a courtier in Scorpion robes, his mask a simple affair of honey-dark silk. When the formalities were out of the way, he said, “On this night of terrible news, please forgive me for bringing more. The Emerald Champion is missing, as well as his official sword. We do not know what has become of him, but we know that the Empire needs a champion. She has sent me to beg you to resume your previous duties as acting Emerald Champion until the fate of Akodo Toturi-sama is known. Now of all times, the Empire cannot afford to be without leadership.”

He delivered his message in the smooth tones of a practiced courtier and bowed to offer a scroll. Hitomi’s hands curled into fists as Sumiko accepted the missive. *The Emperor dead. Toturi missing. Mitsu sensing trouble—is he chasing it, or did he fall afoul of it?*

Sumiko only thanked the messenger and dismissed him, saying she would follow as soon as she was ready. Not until he was gone did she fling the scroll aside with a curse. “Something is extremely wrong.”

Yaruma’s mouth set in a grim line. “I saw Akodo Kaede-sama at the *o-tsukimi* gathering earlier this evening. She looked... unwell. There may be even more going on than we realize.”

“I’m sure there is.” Sumiko rose to her feet. “Mirumoto-san, help me with my armor, and tell me everything you know.”

It stood ready on a stand in the corner of the room. Hitomi began lacing the pieces onto Sumiko as fast as she could, describing her orders, their journey to Otosan Uchi, and the unconscious guards at the gate. “I thought that was Togashi-sama’s work,” she said, “but now I’m not so sure.” If he was determined to enter the city without her, he had more subtle ways of doing that.

Yaruma said, “I’ll look into it.”

Hitomi finished her work and knelt once more in front of Sumiko, touching her forehead to the mat. “Agasha-sama, I place my army at your disposal. I do not know what enemy we were sent here to fight, but I am certain there will be one—that there *is* one. And once you identify



it, we will crush it without hesitation.” Mitsu would probably show up out of nowhere at the last moment to do something dramatic, but in the meantime, Hitomi would prepare for battle.

“Good,” Sumiko said. “My first order as acting Emerald Champion is this: immediately bring your soldiers into the city, and deploy them to guard the palace. I don’t know what’s going on, and until I do, yours is the only force I can trust.”

Hitomi’s heart thudded like it was trying to leap free of her body. *Guard the palace.* In a single stroke, the Army of the Rising Wave had gone from tiptoeing on the edge of treason to taking responsibility for the new Emperor’s safety.

She took Sumiko’s daishō from their stand and offered the swords to her, first the wakizashi, then the katana. Two blades: all bushi carried them, but only those trained by the Mirumoto used both in tandem.

Hitomi knew her purpose. She could only pray to the Fortunes that Mitsu had found his.

