

The Rising Wave

By Marie Brennan

Meanwhile, in the northernmost mountains of Rokugan...

A more cautious man—or one with less cause—would not have attempted to leave Shiro Mirumoto so early in the season. Even by Dragon Clan standards, the winter had been a harsh one, and although its grip was loosening, it had yet to let go. Snow still towered in heaps where *heimin* laborers had shoveled it out of the town streets, and at night the cleared ground became a tiny replica of the mountains, the mud frozen into stone-hard peaks and valleys.

Mirumoto Masashige would have preferred to wait another week, or even two, before setting forth on his journey. Not for his own sake—though as the years passed, his joints objected to the cold more and more—but for the sake of his followers. He risked their safety by traveling so soon after the equinox, and he knew it.

But delay would only risk greater trouble for the clan as a whole. And Masashige knew that if he were to ask, the men and women of his retinue would insist on leaving as soon as he required, even if that meant riding into the teeth of a blizzard.

He would never insult their honor by asking. So, they mounted up in the courtyard of the castle and headed out into the bustle of the town, down the main street toward the gate: seven *bushi* and their *ashigaru*, townspeople scattering out of their way as they swept through. It would be enough, Masashige hoped, to ensure a quiet journey to the west and north. Even in the best of times, the Dragon mountains were not the peaceful fields of the Crane, and after such a hard winter, he had to take precautions.

With his thoughts on the hazards of the journey ahead, he did not see the hazard in front of him until it was almost too late.

Masashige hauled desperately on the reins. His gelding reared, shrieking, and skidded sideways, one hoof slipping in the mud. Masashige threw himself clear and rolled, knowing that if he did not, the horse would land on his leg and break it. The equine scream that overlaid the clatter of his armor told him his gelding had not been so lucky.

But the child—

Before he even regained his feet, Masashige looked for the child he had almost trampled. He found her kneeling in abject apology at the side of the street. A girl, perhaps twelve years old, dressed in the simple kimono and *hakama* of a bushi trainee. She pressed her forehead to the ice-slicked mud. “Mirumoto-ue, please forgive this careless one!”

Masashige pulled her upright, scanning her for injuries. “You are unhurt?”

“Yes, my lord. I have no excuse for my carelessness—forgive me!”



Relief turned his bones to water. *If I had hurt a child...*

"My lord!" His *hatamoto*, Mirumoto Hitomi, stood over his fallen horse. "Rakusetsu is badly injured. I don't know if he can be saved."

Masashige would have sacrificed a dozen horses to save this child's life. Whatever issue plagued the Dragon, whatever offense they had given to the Fortune of Fertility, it only affected people, not the animals of their lands. Horses and wolves and bears thrived, while humans dwindled with every passing year. The problem had crept up on them for a century or more, before the sharp minds of the Kitsuki family noticed it; by now, it was undeniable. The Dragon were not having enough children.

And among the samurai class, the problem had become desperate enough that the Dragon had resorted to desperate measures. The girl Masashige had just saved—was she born to a samurai family? Or was she originally a peasant, identified by some Agasha *shugenja* as possessing enough spiritual merit to be taken in and given the rearing, the training, the *identity* of a samurai?

There was no way for him to tell by looking. In truth, Masashige did not want to know. He collected his wits and his dignity, stepping back to a more respectable distance. Addressing the girl, he said, "You must show more caution in the future. A bushi does not fear danger, but she must be alert to its presence."

The girl knelt once more in the mud of the thaw. "*Hai*, Mirumoto-ue."

"Go," Masashige said. Only after she had departed did he turn back to Hitomi and his horse.

A quick examination told him the truth. Even the most talented horse doctor could not save his gelding; the healing would be too slow, even with a sling to hold Rakusetsu's weight off his bad leg, and he would never be fit to ride again. Only the prayers of a *shugenja* might restore his mount, and Masashige was loathe to beg the *kami* for their blessings in so minor a matter. Not when the Heavens themselves seemed to be condemning the Dragon for some unknown sin.

He did the necessary work himself, cutting Rakusetsu's throat so the gelding would not suffer. Afterward, Hitomi cleaned his knife while Masashige stepped into a nearby temple. He poured a dipper of water from the fountain over his hands and shaved head, then sought out a monk to take the impurity of death from him with a paper wand. By the time he emerged, one of his bushi had gone back to the castle and returned with a fresh horse.

Then he mounted up once more. Outside the walls of Shiro Mirumoto, trouble was stirring. He needed to speak to the clan champion before it was too late.

The loss of Masashige's gelding had unsettled his followers. None of them spoke of it openly, but he saw the effects in the frequency with which they prayed or paused to make offerings at roadside shrines. An unpleasant omen to start their journey—and when they reached Tall Pine Village, they found another.



"Where did the tree go?" Hitomi asked abruptly, breaking the silence that had lasted for most of the afternoon.

The pine had stood atop a ridge east of the village, alone in its splendor, visible for miles around. Now the ridge stood bare. Squinting, Masashige could just make out a broken stump, jagged and black. Uneasy murmurs rose behind him, then fell into silence.

They passed the remnants of the tree not long before sunset. A winter storm must have blown it down, and the local heimin had chopped away a large portion of the trunk. Masashige instructed his clerk, Kobori Sozan, to make a note of that and inquire whether the peasants had received permission from their overseer to burn the material as firewood. By law, large trees such as this one were the property of the local *daimyō*, for use in construction—but that didn't stop heimin from taking the wood for their own use. And in a winter as bitter as this one had been, he doubted they would have hesitated to do so.

Tall Pine Village was a small place, significant only because it served as a way station for travelers. Judging by what they found there, Masashige and his retinue were the first people to come through since the thaw began. Their chambers were unprepared, the tatami musty and damp, and the food served up was winter's leavings, coarse grains boiled with burdock root.

"Why no rice?" Hitomi demanded.

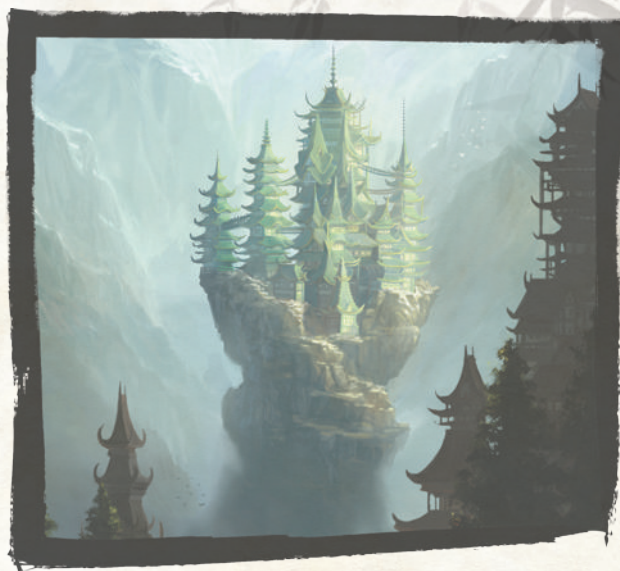
The headman, Sanjirō, bowed low. Hitomi was a tall woman, and although she was slender beneath her armor, every bit of her was muscle. She could snap the headman in two without resorting to her sword. "Please forgive our humble village, Mirumoto-sama," he said. "Vermin broke into our stores last fall; what rice they did not eat was badly fouled. We kept this grain for you, but it is nearly the last we have."

Hitomi scowled, but when she looked to Masashige, he stopped her with a tiny shake of his head. Sanjirō had been the headman of Tall Pine Village for over a decade. He was not the sort to gorge his people on stolen rice and lie to a *daimyō* about it. No, the village's misfortunes were just another sign of the Heavens' displeasure.

"Fit to make a Crane faint," Hitomi muttered, but after that she subsided. The Dragon were no strangers to hardship, and by this point in the season the meals in Shiro Mirumoto were not substantially better. Only with the thaw would things improve.

The thaw, and the favor of Tengoku. Masashige could only hope to hasten one of them.

In so small a village, with the weather still so bitter, there was little in the way of diversion



after the meal ended. His bushi sat shoulder to shoulder around the brazier, keeping the heat within the ring of their bodies and talking quietly among themselves. Masashige slipped outside to deal with necessities, watching his breath fog the air in the moonlight. In the softer lands to the south, cherry blossoms would already be blooming.

The cold, still air carried sound with perfect clarity. Not far away, in the hut where Sanjirō's wife, Yuki, had prepared their meal, he heard a woman's voice murmuring, "Shoshi ni kie. Shoshi ni kie. Shoshi ni kie."

Masashige's blood ran colder than the wind. *Devotion to the Little Teacher—or, if written with a different character, absolute trust in the Little Teacher.*

It was the mantra of the Perfect Land Sect.

The Perfect Land—here, in Tall Pine Village. The sect had flourished for years in the hinterlands of Dragon territory, in the villages too small to have names, so small they were lucky if they saw a monk from the Brotherhood of Shinsei twice a year. People living in those isolated valleys developed many strange customs, and they gladly latched onto a theology that told them they did not have to learn any difficult practices or cultivate merit within themselves; they only had to call on Shinsei, the Little Teacher, to be freed from the cycle of rebirth.

Of course it appealed to peasants, who lacked the time and education to devote themselves to the requirements of the Brotherhood. Three simple words, and Shinsei would save them. The practice was controversial at best; the Phoenix had outlawed the *kie* entirely, visiting harsh punishments on anyone, monk or peasant or even samurai, found chanting that phrase. They said it was heresy—a false path, not a genuine route to enlightenment.

Masashige was no religious scholar. He understood very little of the theological debate over the *kie* and its efficacy or lack thereof. He knew only that followers of the Perfect Land Sect had grown more vocal in recent years—and more violent. To find them here, not in the hinterlands, but in a key way station on the road north...

Other concerns forgotten, Masashige ducked back into the house. "Hitomi-kun. A moment of your time."

She rose without hesitation and followed him outside. The voice had fallen silent, but Masashige led Hitomi away from all possible ears before he outlined to her what he had overheard.

Had there been a time when Hitomi smiled? Perhaps before her brother died, but rarely since then, and hardly at all in recent years. Her scowl now was characteristic, as was her response. "Is that why they have no rice? Because they have been sending it to the sect leaders?"

"I doubt it," Masashige said. "The Crane have had very little rice to sell in recent years; our lack now is only natural. I am more concerned by this evidence of the expansion of the sect."

Ordinarily Hitomi's unbroken attention would have been on him, but now she stood warily, hands gripping her sword hilts, ready to draw them both. Her eyes darted left and right, searching the quiet shadows. "Our road had to pass through this village. If they intend to



ambush you, this would be an ideal place to do it.”

The reports had said they had grown bolder—but surely not *that* bold. “What would it gain them? To kill the Mirumoto family daimyō would only brand them as criminals in the eyes of the entire Empire.”

“They are already criminals,” Hitomi said.

“Only in Phoenix lands. Here, there has been no decree against the sect. There are many paths to enlightenment, Hitomi-kun, and if there is the slightest chance their mantra might lead them to that goal, should they not be permitted to follow it?”

Her jaw hardened. “They say they will find enlightenment after death, in the paradise they say Shinsei has created for them. People who believe that will not hesitate to throw themselves on our blades for their cause.”

She might be correct. The last reports he’d received before winter set in had hinted that the followers of the sect were arming themselves. That, more than hungry wolves or the usual late-



winter bandits, was why he had ordered his party to travel in armor. The leaders of the Perfect Land said the world had entered the Age of Declining Virtue, and that samurai were to blame for the Empire’s many ills. Such words walked close to the border of treason—or even crossed it.

Masashige took a deep breath, feeling the frigid air bite into him. “What course would you advise, Hitomi-kun?”

She answered without hesitation. “Stop the sect from taking root here, Mirumoto-ue. We’ll gather all the heimin together and

question them until we know how many adherents there are. Then make an example of them, to show others what fate awaits them down that road.”

Seven bushi and their ashigaru: they could do as Hitomi said. Leading military expeditions into the crevices of the mountains was nearly impossible, but here the problem was easy to reach.

Easy to reach—and difficult to solve. Following Hitomi’s advice might very well precipitate exactly the kind of widespread armed conflict he hoped to avoid.

But not following her advice...what price might the Dragon pay in future days? What price might the Empire pay?

Masashige’s jaw tightened. He imagined his own son kneeling alongside Sanjirō and Yuki, head bent to the strike of the blade.

“A decision now would be premature,” he said at last. “I already intended to take this matter



up with the clan champion. I will report the situation in Tall Pine Village to him, and see what course of action he favors.”

Hitomi didn't like it, he knew. She always wanted swift action, even if the cost would be high. But her discipline was stronger than her anger; she bowed and murmured, “As you say, my lord. I will have the horses ready at first light tomorrow. And we will keep watch tonight.”

Masashige would never be presumptuous enough to question the wisdom of his clan's divine founder. The Kami Togashi had valued solitude—a trait shared by all of his successors—and there was no better place to find it than in the forbidding peaks of northern Dragon territory, the fringes of the range known as the Great Wall of the North. If it made conferring with the clan champion difficult at the best of times...well, no doubt there were good reasons for that, ones beyond Masashige's own ken.

At least the road was always clear for him. It wound along narrow ledges, up steep slopes, and over passes still choked with snow and ice, but it was there. Those who sought the High House of Light without invitation could find themselves lost in the mountains, sometimes forever.

The High House towered above Masashige's party as they approached. Half-fortress, half-monastery, it clung to the bare stone of its peak like the talons of some great beast. The only approach was via a narrow set of stairs, more than a thousand steps high. At the base, a cluster of buildings waited to receive visitors, providing shelter to those who would not enter the High House itself. Silent acolytes, children in the simple robes of those training to join the *ise zumi*, took the reins of their horses.

Masashige climbed the stairs alone, leaving the rest behind—even Hitomi. Over his shoulder he carried the satchel with his clerk's reports, ready to deliver into the appropriate hands. In other parts of Rokugan, such a task would be seen as beneath the dignity of a family daimyō, but not here.

Someone waited for him at the top of the steps, an unmoving figure who did not so much as shift his weight while Masashige made his steady way upward. He was recognizable even at a distance: even among the *ise zumi*, few would show themselves in public wearing short, green-dyed *jinbei* trousers and nothing more.

But Togashi Mitsu was exceptional even within his order. While samurai throughout the Empire might adopt children if they had no suitable heirs of their own lineage, the leadership of the Dragon had always passed to the most talented monk of the *ise zumi*, regardless of the monk's origin. The boy Sō had been an acolyte at Fukurokujin Seidō, a foundling left there by unknown parents, when the clan champion had found him. Now, Sō had become Togashi Mitsu, heir to the Dragon.

Most heirs would dress in fine kimono or armor, but Mitsu's sole decoration was his tattoos,



which his near nakedness put on glorious display. They wreathed his torso and arms and even his lower legs: monkeys and crows, centipedes and dragonflies, a great crab across his chest and a tiger across his back, and the head of a dragon arching up his neck and over his shaved scalp. All the work of Togashi Gaijutsu, the greatest tattooing master among the ise zumi.

Winter had sapped Masashige's conditioning; he had to concentrate not to visibly gasp for breath as he greeted the clan's heir. "I have come to request an audience with Togashi-ue."

"Of course," Mitsu said. The High House was never surprised by Masashige's arrival. "I am to take you to meet with him as soon as you are ready."

I hope that's a good omen. Even a family daimyō often had to wait to speak with his clan champion. Masashige surrendered his satchel to an ise zumi waiting inside the gate, a woman new enough to the order that she had only two tattoos gracing her bare arms: a snake and a butterfly. Then he followed Mitsu into the High House of Light.

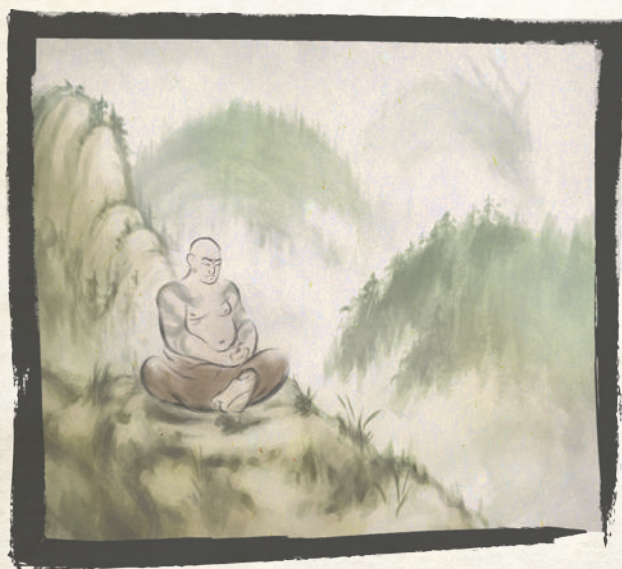
Unlike most castles in Rokugan, its fortifications did not consist of stout walls and deep moats. The mountains were the first line of defense, and the strange forces that so often hid the road were the second. Anyone who overcame those and still wished to assault the High House faced a choice between that narrow staircase and the sheer cliffs of the peak. Where another clan champion's capital would have archers' towers, the High House had shrines and meditation halls; where other families had armories and barracks for ashigaru, the Togashi had the ise zumi with their strange abilities. An atmosphere of serenity pervaded the place—serenity and something else, an otherworldly touch that lingered in the small hairs on the back of Masashige's neck.

He bathed quickly, grateful to shed his armor, which felt so out of place in this monastic setting. When he finished, he dressed in the much simpler kimono and hakama provided for him. The wind cut like knives through the thin fabric, but he set that aside, focusing on his task.

Togashi Yokuni, Champion of the Dragon Clan, did not receive Masashige in a grand hall. Instead, he sat on a bare platform atop one of the precipitous drops that served the High

House of Light for an outer wall. In sharp contrast to Mitsu's scant clothing, Yokuni wore armor of antique design, with a separate panel to cover the right-hand side of his body. Masashige had never seen him without that armor—including the helmet and the *mempō* that covered his face.

Masashige knew he should not compare his own champion to that of the dishonorable Scorpion Clan. But to serve a man without ever seeing his face...it was difficult.



Mitsu knelt a short distance from where Yokuni sat cross-legged. Masashige bowed low, touching his forehead to the stone, while the mountain air slid like ice over his bare scalp. "Lord Togashi. Although winter is hardly gone, matters within your lands cannot wait. I beg leave to present my report."

A flick of Yokuni's gauntleted hand told him to continue.

Like a man composing an ink painting, Masashige laid out the vital strokes, leaving the finer details for later consideration. The harshness of the winter, and the looming shadow of Lion aggression to the south. The continuing failure of Dragon births. The danger posed by the Perfect Land Sect. Forces pressing in on all sides, threatening to crush the clan between them.

"Togashi-ue," Masashige said, "we must reach beyond our own borders and form an alliance with the Phoenix. Separately, each of our clans is easy prey for the Lion, but together we may yet resist them. Furthermore, our own efforts to solve the mystery of our decline have come to naught; of all the clans, the Phoenix are the most likely to have the wisdom necessary to aid us. But they will not do so unless we make concessions, and there, we have only two real choices.

"The first would be to break with the Unicorn. The Isawa remain suspicious as ever of the Iuchi *meishōdō* techniques and other heretical ways; they would be glad to see us close our western border. But we benefit from the Unicorn's military strength. And more importantly, without the marriage alliances we have formed—without the children those widows and widowers bring into our ranks—we would be gambling our entire future on the hope that the Phoenix can find the solution to our problem."

He paused. Even a family daimyō could not stare his champion in the eye, but he searched every tiny shift of Yokuni's body language for a hint of the man's thoughts. The armor defeated him: it made Yokuni as inscrutable as the stone beneath them. Masashige had no choice but to go on.

"The second possibility is that we take action against the Perfect Land Sect, as the Phoenix have been urging for years. If we can root out that heresy—if you judge it to be a heresy indeed, my lord—I am certain that Shiba Ujimitsu-dono would consider it a great sign of friendship to his clan."

Yokuni spoke at last. "When the grain falls before it is ripe, the harvest is poor, and famine follows."

Did he mean that the time for action had not yet come? Masashige had years of experience with his clan champion, and still struggled to interpret Yokuni's cryptic responses. This time, however, he thought the meaning was clear. No samurai should fear death—but each life lost was the clan's strength sapped, at a time when they could ill afford it. "Yes, the cost would be high. Carrying war into our own valleys is difficult, and any strike against the sect is likely to spur rebellions in response. But there is another possibility."

He bowed once more to Yokuni. "Togashi-ue, I have heard stories of an ise zumi with a gift that might spare us the pain and waste of bloodshed. They say that when Togashi Kazue-san



speaks to a man, her words make their way into his mind until he can think of nothing else, and he loses all will to fight. If this is true, she could neutralize the leaders of the sect, taking away the central force that makes them so potent a threat. With them gone, our chances of returning their followers to the true path of Shinsei by some means other than the sword would be much higher.”

Mitsu spoke up, without any signal from Yokuni that Masashige could see.

“Kazue-san’s ability is not a thing to use lightly, Mirumoto-ue. Death only destroys the body, and those who fall in service to the Heavens better their karma for the next life. But to interfere with the mind...that is another matter.”

“I do not suggest it lightly,” Masashige said. Despite his control, the words came out sharp and hard. “Were it a handful of lives against a handful of minds, I would not hesitate to draw my sword. But our clan’s survival hangs in the balance. What are a few heretics and rebels against that?”

What is a single child, against that?

Masashige turned away from the monk, pressing his forehead to the stone once more in supplication. Too often it was like this: Masashige bowing beneath the weight of his troubles, the decisions he lacked the authority to make...while Yokuni, who possessed the authority, sat in silent contemplation. And around them, the world drifted ever closer to the brink of disaster.

“Please, Togashi-ue,” Masashige said in the strongest voice he could muster. “I beg you to lend me the assistance of Togashi Kazue-san. With her, we may yet avoid a slaughter.”

The rush of the wind was his only answer.

And then, the rattle of armor shifting.

Masashige looked up, alive with hope. But to his horror, he saw that Yokuni had gone rigid, his head thrown back, his body trembling within the ancient armor.

“Be calm!” Mitsu stopped him with an outflung hand. “There is nothing to fear. He is in the grip of a vision, nothing more.”

Masashige knew that the Champions of the Dragon had inherited some measure of their Kami’s foresight, but he had never seen it strike home. He waited, fists clenched, hardly breathing. *Now. At last. He will tell me what to do, and it will be correct, because the Heavens themselves have guided him.*

It seemed to last forever. Then the trembling subsided, Yokuni’s body relaxing. Mitsu



crouched at his side, but assistance was unneeded. Yokuni raised one hand to his mempō, then lowered it.

"I see a wave," he said, his voice barely audible over the wind. "A great wave, rising up to strike the land."

Masashige had never seen the ocean—only depictions of it in paintings and woodcuts. But he could imagine the shape described by Yokuni's hand: the cresting edge of the wave, curling overhead like a scorpion's tail.

"Where it strikes..." Yokuni's voice faded, then returned. "Devastation. Otsan Uchi laid waste; countless lives lost."

Another tsunami? Masashige flinched. The one that struck Crane lands three years before had wrought devastation all across Rokugan, in forms ranging from food shortages to Scorpion dominance in the courts. The Imperial Capital had been spared the brunt of it, but might not be so lucky a second time.

"I will send a messenger to Kitsuki Yaruma-san immediately," Masashige said. "He will warn the Emperor."

But Yokuni shook his head and went on.

"Stripped by the wave, the wasteland becomes a battlefield. On its barren plain there is nowhere for the enemy to hide, no shelter to protect them from the Empire's might. It..." His eyes were almost impossible to make out, deep in the shadows of his helmet, but Masashige had the sensation that Yokuni was staring far past him, to the lands beyond their own.

"It must be so," Yokuni murmured. "If the battle must come, then let it be on the barren plain. Only there can we prevail."

Not an actual wave. Not a tsunami. Yokuni spoke in metaphors; what he foresaw was something else entirely.

Something, Masashige feared, that had nothing to do with any of the troubles he had come here to address.

The clan champion focused on Masashige at last. "Prepare your bushi. Tell the daimyō of the Agasha and the Kitsuki families: the Dragon must move beyond our borders at last. What transpires in our mountains is a mere pebble against the avalanche that is coming."





Togashi Yokuni - Enigmatic Champion of the Dragon Clan

