



THE AWAKENING

The world swayed from side to side. Asama Takashi, heaved up the last of her breakfast, the mixture of rice and milk was all she had been able to stomach. She sat looking decidedly dreadful, her arms round her knees, huddled away in her modest quarters. A striking girl, usually, she was green with sickness, shiny, short black hair was slick with sweat, clinging clammily to her face. The short journey had been made arduous by rough seas, it was the cycle of the great wave, an inauspicious time to set sail, also her uncle in his infinite wisdom had seen fit to secure passage for her on a trading clipper rather than the clan fleet, for her own safety. The captain had bowed low, his nose nearly scraping the floor when the Daimyo had requested this particular journey take place, Asama saw the truth in the man's features though, his easy smile never reached his eyes as he claimed the 'Swift Reward' could ride a tsunami in service to the dragon. Even though the channel was regularly plied by traders of all types as well as Prefecture war boat patrols, her uncle had feared her marriage would come to the attention of the rebels plaguing him at every turn. Ten years since he defeated the Shiho clan, their scattered remnants were harrying his trade routes, attacking out of the mists, forests and marshes almost killing entire patrols, always leaving one man to tell the common tale; a strike without warning, then disappearing back into hiding like demons. Ten years since her father died in service to the dragon lord.

Asama's keen mind was made for the courts, the subtle nuances of speeches made by the courtiers were clear as day to her. She had watched as Yudai, the Ito envoy had relentlessly pursued a marriage between Dragon and Snake. The Ito's pursuit of status never ended. She also knew through her cousin Hiro, that Yudai could not be trusted, the man's family emblem a perfect reflection of the his own personality. Lies flowed as readily as blood in battle from the little man's lips. The enmity between Yudai and Hiro was obvious to those that knew to look for it.

Whenever Hiro was away serving the clan's duties, Yudai poured poison on his name and honour, careful as he went, but at times when he had been too deep in his cups he would say something that over stepped the mark, forcing a rebuke from her uncle or one of his advisors. Yudai would bow low to placate the courts, issuing a disconcerting low whistle whenever he did so.

Here on her own she could let her true feelings be known, she had silently cried herself to sleep during the journey south to the Ito stronghold of Okyo. She remembered bitterly the night her uncle had deemed suitable to share his plans for her life with her. There in his private quarters, he had told her about his decision, but she already knew. She was to be wed to a Snake to strengthen her clan's alliance to the Ito. Her uncle and his advisors were still fully unclear why the Ito had joined with them in their war against the Shiho, and while reluctant to share his blood with such a dishonourable clan he needed to ensure that he could rely on them in the future. The war was finished but in peace new challenges arose for the dragon clan, rebels struck when least expected and now disturbing reports were coming in from across the Jwar Isles. She had concealed her true feelings from her Daimyo while he had talked, she knew that this was her fate in life, *If only I was born a boy*. Knowing that his hand was forced did not comfort her, she was sure if her father was alive her hand would have been worth more than a snake. *Everyone in the Isles know that those that offer a hand to a snake get bitten*, she had thought. Growing up with Hiro she had learned to fight alongside him, besting him in many martial skills until his strength began to tell, *I would give my life for the clan, but I hate having to do it like this*, Asama's thoughts remained her own, while her uncle laid out his how and whys, her inner turmoil had raged unabated, ambition and desire clashing with honour and duty. Her sister had been as devastated as she to hear the news. They were as similar to look at as one's own reflection, that is where the similarities ended. Asama was boyish and wanted to learn all the pursuits available to her male cousins, Matsu was more delicate and had excelled under the tutelage of the family shugenja.

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She stirred, the light pouring through the thin rice paper screens diffused to a gentle glow. She sat up gracefully, listening to the sound of the birds serenading the new day's sun as she ran her fingers through her now long black hair. She had grown it out to please her new husband, willingly. Sighing with content she leaned over and traced the intricate tattoo that tracked across his body, following the lines as the snake coiled around his defined torso splitting into two on his chest, each branch ran across his shoulder and down his arm, hissing angry faces finished on the top of his hands. Just a few cycles ago she had drawn back in fear when he had revealed his naked body to her on their wedding night, before being

pulled forward by his deep green eyes. Asama remembered the short time that led up to that amazing night, smiling fondly about how Itsunagi Ito had swept her off her feet.

She had emerged from the sequestered captain's cabin of the 'Swift Reward' and up onto deck, the bright light hurt. Too long in her murky cell, her eyes had adjusted to the gloom. The familiar sounds of port activities filled her ears, sailor's calls, the sound of winches creaking, ropes pulling taught, seagulls squawked and fought bitterly over scraps of food. And now she saw him, standing proudly, she drank in the sight of his strong jaw, the way his kimono hid away his body but suggested so much, and then his eyes, they sparkled at her, as if just for her, his eyes reminded Asama of the way the light glistened upon the Sune-Kudansu as it flowed past Ryu to the sea. *Perhaps I was wrong, the snakes tongue of the Sune-Kudansu protects Ryu, this man looks like a god*, she thought, as she appraised the man in front of her. Self-awareness blossomed. She had presented herself as she was, her own little protest. Bedraggled and beaten, her eyes sunken and black from constant tears and seasickness. She squeaked and ran back below, berating herself for speaking and for wanting to impress a snake, *but oh what a snake!* Re-emerging the smile her new look drew from her husband to be, was all the reward she needed, perfect rows of pearly white teeth, melting her heart.

The weeks and cycles that followed were filled with unrivalled joy for Asama. Itsunagi was everything a girl could ever have hoped for, he attentively hung upon every word she said. He shared his island with her, the sights and secrets delighted her and equally her reactions pleased her betrothed. Anything she wanted was hers, true the capital Okyo paled in comparison with Ryu and the Isle mainly consisted of uninhabitable rainforest but when she was with Itsunagi the simplest things became overwhelmingly interesting.

She was distracted from her reminiscing as Itsunagi woke beside her, pulling her down towards him into a loving embrace. Now was the time she hated the most when he had to leave, his duties he said, night and day his duties would take him from her. Then she felt alone, apart from her husband it appeared to her that the old sayings about the Ito clan rang true. While he was away, at first she would visit the courts of Okyo, she quickly tired of these, it seemed nothing was ever resolved in the courts of the Ito, each family member strove to gain place and favour from her father-in-law. She was a novelty at first and everyone was pleasant enough, but it felt conceited and forced, she was practiced enough to see through the false flattery of courtiers like this, *A pit full of snakes*, she surmised. So now when her only source of happiness was unavailable to her she revisited some of her favourite spots that Itsunagi had shown her. She often returned to the same place, a dilapidated shrine on the outskirts of the city. Asama was unsure what drew her back

again and again to the site, the shrine honoured the dragons of old and so perhaps it was her family ties that attracted her. Intricate dragons carved of stone lined the courtyard of the shrine. She would sit and meditate for hours in this place she had made her own, the wind whispered to her from ages passed. During these times she would often ponder what her sister, Matsu was doing now.

Asama's life continued on like this, when Itsunagi was in Okyo her days were filled with love and fun, her nights with passion. When he was away she felt at the mercy of the vipers and eventually fears and doubts crept into their marriage. She loved him completely but resented his time away, scared he must have found somebody else, she was also intrigued by his *duties* on this island. Her jealousy grew stronger within her, like a snake in her brain eating both logic and reason. She needed to know, had to find out. So she planned to follow him to clear his name of the injustices she had applied to him.

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Her horse had whinnied as she tied it to the tree, she had followed Itsunagi this far on her wedding present, becoming increasingly intrigued by what business her husband possibly had in the rainforest, the rest would be on foot. She followed his tracks, no expert but she had learned enough growing up from Atsushi the Dragon clan's prized hunter. Atsushi had mastered the art of hunting men, a skillset that made him incredibly useful to her uncle. It had been easier than she expected, Itsunagi was the heir to the Ito clan and had no fear here on his island, he travelled alone without any retinue at all. As she trekked through the undergrowth night had fallen around her, the jungle had stilled, the various sounds had ebbed away with the last of the sun's rays. Ahead she heard chanting, the mellifluous tones of her husband came to her on the night's air. She felt a mixture of emotions, her life's love was clearly not cheating on her and for that she was truly grateful, but this was tinged by the peculiarity of the situation she now found herself in. Stood listening to her husband chanting in the forest all alone in the middle of the night was not an everyday occurrence. *I should return home, Itsunagi's duties are his own*, she reasoned, and yet intrigue willed her body forward, step by step she drew closer. She crept now scared at the prospect of being discovered and having to explain her suspicions to her loving husband. And that's when she saw him, a gruesome visage of a snake masking his face. Even with his face hidden Itsunagi was unmistakable, the light of the torches danced across his bare chest, the snake there seemed to contract and relax across him. *Gods be good, NO!* Asama's mind screamed as she took in the full extent of the horror, the shrines courtyard reminded her of her dragon shrine, but it was somehow different, vicious snake statues were carved in place of dragons, wound around weeping maidens. Her husband stood amidst them all, in front of

him a young girl lay tied to an altar, bare steel in his hand. She recognised the girl, she was the daughter of one of the lesser family members of the visiting Carp clan. When she had gone missing, it had caused an uproar at court, it had not gone unnoticed how close she had come to Yunkai Ito, Itsunagi's cousin. And then he struck, the knife plunged effortlessly through her throat, her bound body convulsed, blood spurted in dark red globules, splattering his arms and chest.

Despite herself she gasped, his eyes flicked to the spot she was hiding and she fled, brush tangled in her robes tripping her and making her fall and he was upon her, turning her with one hand and brandishing his knife with the other. The mask hid his shock, but it was clear in his voice "Asama?" that was all she needed to save her life, his pause allowed her to drive her heel forward and upward into his groin. He groaned and fell, with that, she was away again. That was the last she saw of him that night, she reclaimed her prized steed and was off into the night. Asama knew she couldn't return to Okyo and yet it was all she knew. So she headed for the only place she truly felt safe on this island of snakes.

She planned her next steps carefully just like any good general would, she would disguise herself, sell or exchange her horse for enough moons to book passage back to Ryu. She knew that if she explained all of what she had seen to her uncle, war would be preferable to sending her back to these animals. Plan in place, she laid down to sleep, the shrine doing nothing to still her racing mind. Through everything she had tried to find a way to absolve Itsunagi of any wrong doing, he was kind, faithful and honest, it must have been because of his family. He was the one good apple amongst so many bad, but then as the saying goes the apple never falls far from the tree. Confused and hurt, logic and love battling within her, she cried herself quietly into a fitful sleep.

Approaching footsteps woke her, she leapt to her feet, ready for what may come. Stood before her was the man she loved, the mask was gone. "Why?" was all she asked, one word asking and pleading at the same time, to reassure her, to make it all better. That didn't happen. He simply walked forward arms outstretched towards her. Tired after her long night she went against her instincts and walked to him. She wanted to feel loved and safe in his arms, she could forgive him for what his family made him do, they could flee together and forge a new life for themselves.

She looked up at him and smiled, comforted by his embrace. His arms gripped tighter, too tightly and she became uncomfortable, her face betrayed the shift and it did not go unnoticed. His eyes looked down on her now, all passion, kindness and compassion gone. Such fearsome eyes and cold, how had she not noticed before. He raised his hand and struck her across the face, disorientated and let loose she staggered back. He was on her again brandishing his dagger. His arm whirled around and

down towards her, warrior instinct fought through the haze and she reacted. Too late to avoid she grabbed at the blade, the steel bit deep into the flesh of her palm. Rivulets of warm, red blood ran down her arm, dripping from her elbow and spattering the ground at their feet. He kicked her in her stomach sending her sprawling, she jumped back into a crouch struggling to gain her breath, yet this time he stood back.

"Foolish girl, did you really believe that I loved you? You have always been nothing but a part of my family's plan. This island that the Shiho mockingly bestowed upon us all those years ago was really a blessing, and you, your love and sad loss is the key to unlocking our true power." Itsunagi's words hit her as hard as any blow he had landed. She steeled herself, hardening like stone to the man she had once idolised.

"I will kill you for this, damn you," Asama spat at him.

"I don't think so," smirked Itsunagi, looking down at the dagger in his hand "Why, you're already dead." As he spoke his words hit home, Asama realised the fire in her hand had spread up her arm and shoulder inching ever closer towards her heart.

Time stilled as a solitary tear tracked down her face and lingered there momentarily, before dripping down and mingling with her blood on the floor. And then the world erupted around her.

She saw Itsunagi drop to the floor writhing in agony. Stone and soil flew through the air. From the courtyard ground she saw a dragon emerge and hover in the air majestically. She felt its rage within her, it directed its gaze to Itsunagi, but she pulled it back with whatever link they shared. She conjured up the image of her sister, *find her, protect her, for me.*

And she was gone.