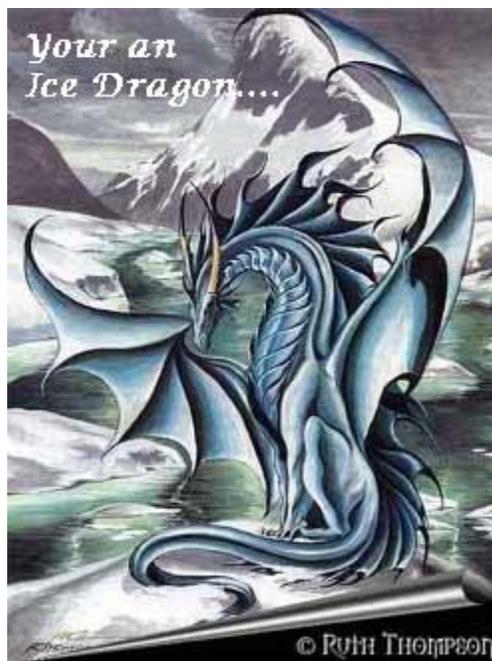


# **The Tortoise and the Ice Dragon**

**By: Alicia M. Mortimer**



Four hundred years ago, in the Feudal era of Japan, there lived a wandering tortoise. Ah, but this was no ordinary tortoise. He possessed unimaginable power. Far greater than the Shogun\* himself. He was known as Taro Itihaji. Little known as he was, he found it quite relaxing.

He made a bet with a beaver who called himself Zeta. He lost the bet, then disappeared for seven years. Now, he appeared as a mere traveler. He didn't come back to pay his debt, but to seek out the legendary Ice Dragon.

This widely known dragon was called Sakami. Sakami had such power as Taro. Legend has it that he swore an oath to protect his people. He failed to keep his word and accidentally slew one of his own. He felt such dishonor that he ran away deep into the mountains. Many search for him but never make it back alive.

Taro ran into Zeta on his way into the mountains.

"Hey, hey, hey! Just the right person to run into! Have you any debt to repay? Ho, ho, hoo! I am sure one such as you may very well remember! Heh," Zeta squealed.

"Eh? Oh! Hey, Zeta! I, uh, don't have the 200 yen. Sorry! Truly. How have ye been all these years, my good friend?" Taro said, timidly.

"Wha! You mean to say that you haven't the money? Oh, and yes, I've been exceedingly wonderful! Ho, ho!"

"That's magnificent!"

"Yeah. Well, nice to meet ya out here. Hope ta see you 'gain."

"Right. Next encounter, I'll have ye money ready for ye."

Taro continued into the mountains' misty fog. As the red and gold sun slowly disappeared upon the horizon, Taro found a sturdy tree's cavity to turn in for the night.

The next morning, Taro woke up bright and early to resume his

journey. For him, being a tortoise, it'd take longer than usual.

Half way up the mountain, the clouds opened up and it *poured*. Taro skittered like a mouse into the trees for cover. The downpour lasted about twenty minutes. Taro got up from under his tree and started back up the mountain. It was still raining as he continued his journey.

By the time the rain stopped, Taro was almost up the mountain. Taro considered taking a break for the day. He decided not to and trekked up the mountain. Even after nightfall, he kept going. When the sun rose up again, he was at the peak. He decided to rest there for a while.

Around midday, a human found Taro lying under a tree. She woke him up and said, "Would you like some ohitashi?\* They are very delicious. I think you'll love 'em."

"Ugh... oh, sure. I guess I could try it. Thanks!" Taro warily said.

"And, if you don't like that, I have lettuce, carrots, sautéed onions, and melons. You can have as much as you like," the woman told him, with a smile.

"Ah. Thank ye, dear miss. Oh, um, what would be yer name?" he asked.

"Oh! I s'pose I should introduce myself. I am Hatana, of the Oryoshi clan. My clan is well known for its exquisite cooking," Hatana informed him.

"Hey! I've heard of yer clan. Oryoshi, right?"

"Correct. Though I'm not one of the wonderful cooks like the rest of us."

"Yer kidding yerself. Yer an excellent cook." Taro tried to

encourage her, sort of.

“Thanks. Anyway, I have to get going.”

“Kay. I forgot to ask. Why are ye on this mountain?”

“Well, I’m searching for the one known as Sakami. Have you any information of this one?”

“Yeah. He is an ice dragon. He is very, *very* powerful, and that many look for him but never return alive. And I’m searching for him, too”

“Really? How about we become partners and look for him together?”

“I’d like that very much.”

Taro and Hatana journeyed on together. They slowly became very good friends. Both knew that after crossing over the mountain’s peak, there was no turning back. At the top it was very chilly. Right down to the bone marrow. Taro became extremely cold, and they had to stop their journey for the day.

Hatana found a tree for them to rest in. The tree had a cavity in the bottom, like the one Taro first rested in. They stayed there until daybreak the next day.

Hatana had woken up before Taro. When Taro woke up, she was cooking. It smelled like stew, or sausage and eggs. He wasn’t sure.

“What are ye making for breakfast? Is it stew? Or sausage and eggs?” he asked.

“Neither. It’s lobster! Have a look,” she said, cheerfully. She moved over to let him see what she was cooking.

“Oh. A lobster. Silly me for thinking it was sausage and eggs!”

Hatana gave him his dish and they ate together. He thought it was very delicious. So did Hatana, even though she rarely believed in herself.

After the breakfast, they started down the other side of the

mountain. In the valley below them, they began to notice a cavern in the next mountain. Taro wanted to check it out. He thought it was where the Ice Dragon, Sakami, would be. Hatana agreed.

They went down to the cavern to investigate. Sure enough, it was Sakami's lair. There were hundreds upon thousands of what seemed to be the dragon's precious gems. There were rubies, sapphires, diamonds, turquoise, quartz, and pieces of old shoji\* scattered around inside.

"WHO GOES THERE!?!?" boomed a loud voice.

"Uh, it is I, Itihaji Taro. And I'm with Oryoshi Hatana," Taro boldly said.

"TARO, YOU SAY YOU ARE? HMM," said the voice.

"Aye."

"COME IN! COME IN! AND BRING YOUR FRIEND, TOO."

"Come on, Hatana. He said we can come inside." Taro whispered to Hatana.

"Alright, I'm coming." she said.

They went inside to find more gems neatly assorted to the sides of the room. Which was very massive. In front of them, they saw the great ice dragon, Sakami. He was very large. Just like Hatana and Taro pictured he would be. He stood about five meters high, and three meters wide.



"AH! TARO! VERY NICE TO SEE YOU. I AM GREATLY HONORED." said Sakami.

"What a great pleasure, hmm? I have waited so long for this day to come. Wouldn't ye say the same?"

"YE PEE! DIDN'T YOU SAY THE HUMAN IS

ORYOSHI HATANA?"

"Aye. She was searching for ye, too."

"I SEE. WHAT DOES A HUMAN LIKE YOU WANT WITH A DRAGON LIKE ME?" Sakami asked.

"Well, you see. My mother and brother are very ill, and I heard that you, the ice dragon, can heal. Is this true?" Hatana said, and asked.

"YEPEE! SURE CAN! WHAT ABOUT YOU, TARO? WHAT ARE YOU HERE FOR?"

"I'm here because I want to become yer apprentice. And, I was wondering if the legend is true. Is it not?" Taro informed him.

"SO. YOU'VE HEARD THE LEGENDS. YES THEY ARE VERY WELL TRUE. Unfortunately."

"Ah. I see. So ye really did run away."

"AYE. I SHALL NOT BE ABLE TO FORGIVE MYSELF. SORRY 'BOUT THAT. Feh."

"Yeah. Ye no need to be sorry," Taro said.

"Hey, Taro. Are you finished speaking yet?" Hatana whispered.

"Almost. Just ye be patient," Taro whispered back.

"Okay."

"NOW, TO GET DOWN TO BUSINESS. ALLOW ME TO FIND YOUR GREATEST DESIRE."

"Oh. Okay," Hatana said.

The room was silent for several minutes. Sakami had his eyes closed, as did the travelers. Hatana started to feel drowsy and eventually toppled over.

Suddenly, Taro and Hatana were transported to a village in Japan. The village was near present day Tokyo. Jimsonweed\* was all around them. Behind them was Sakami. In front of them, were several Japanese Irises.\* It was a practical Japanese garden.

Hatana told Taro to follow her, so he did. She led him to a home at the top of the hill. She ushered Taro and Sakami inside. Sakami refused because of his size. Hatana sighed, and told them to wait for her to come back outside. She went inside for probably about five minutes. When she returned, she had her mother on her right shoulder and her brother to her left. She laid them in front of Sakami and nodded. Sakami placed his claws on each of their foreheads. An orange aura surrounded his claws as he was healing them.

Hatana's brother was the first to wake. When his eyes were fully open, she grabbed him up and hugged him in her arms.

"Oh! I'm so relieved that you're okay! And you, too, mother!" Hatana said graciously.

"Y-your squeezing t-the breath..... outta...me!" her brother slowly said.

"Oh! I'm so sorry, dear brother!" Hatana apologized.

"They'll be okay. They just need a little rest. To recuperate that is." Sakami informed Hatana. He started to back away, but Hatana stopped him.

"Thank you. Thank you so very much! I am extremely grateful!" she said politely. She went inside with her mother and brother.

Taro and Sakami turned around and started down the hill. A young boy came out of the irises. He asked Sakami and Taro if they wanted to play a game of Shogi\*.

"Sure! I welcome the challenge! Let's go." Sakami decided to challenge the boy.

"Thank you! And you, tortoise? Would you like to play?" the boy asked.

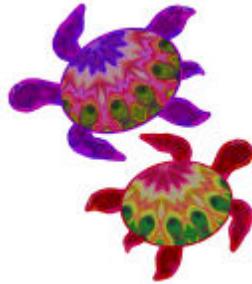
"Sure, I would be honored." Taro respectfully replied.

And that is how our story comes to an end. Taro ended up losing

the game of Shogi to the boy. But, he did it because he wanted to. He respected the boy. Sakami won all of his games.

Hatana stayed with her mother and brother. She married a man from her village. One year later, she gave birth to a baby boy whom she named Taro.

Taro Itihaji became Sakami's assistant. They decided to stay near Hatana's village. Sakami earned back the respect of his people. Taro was able to repay his debt to Zeta.



☺The Finale☺

### \*Definitions

**Shogun:** a hereditary military commander in feudal Japan who ruled the country under the nominal rule of an emperor between the years 1192 and 1867.

**Ohitashi:** boiled Japanese greens.

**Jimsonweed:** a tall poisonous weed of the nightshade family with foul-smelling foliage and spiny capsule fruits. Flowers: large, white, purple, trumpet-shaped.

**Japanese Irises:** plants with large red flowers.

**Shoji:** a rice-paper screen in a wooden frame used as a sliding partition or door in traditional Japanese houses.

**Shogi:** Japanese board game.