

Legend of the
Five Rings™



First Scroll
FICTION FROM
THE CORE SET

An Empire in Turmoil

In Rokugan, it is said that honor is stronger than steel. While even the finest blade can bend and break or twist under the heat of the forge, the Emerald Empire's society has been folded in the forges of politics and war for more than a thousand years, and it has not yet broken. The society of Rokugan follows a divinely ordered pattern set down by the eight Kami, who shared their celestial blessings with the mortal realm. Rokugan is a land of strict social stratification, where an improper look at the wrong time can mean death.

This is an era of sudden change and upheaval in Rokugan, however. Mortal schemes, natural calamities, and celestial turmoil alike have disrupted the political, military, and spiritual equilibrium of the land. Long-simmering rivalries and fresh betrayals ripple through the courts and on the battlefield. The Chrysanthemum Throne is beset by threats from without and within, and the honor of the seven Great Clans—the families descended from the heroes of legend and sworn to rule their lands in the Emperor's name—shall be put to the test.

Cover illustration by Shawn Ignatius Tan.

Map illustration by Francesca Baerald.

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An Anthology for
Legend of the
Five Rings™



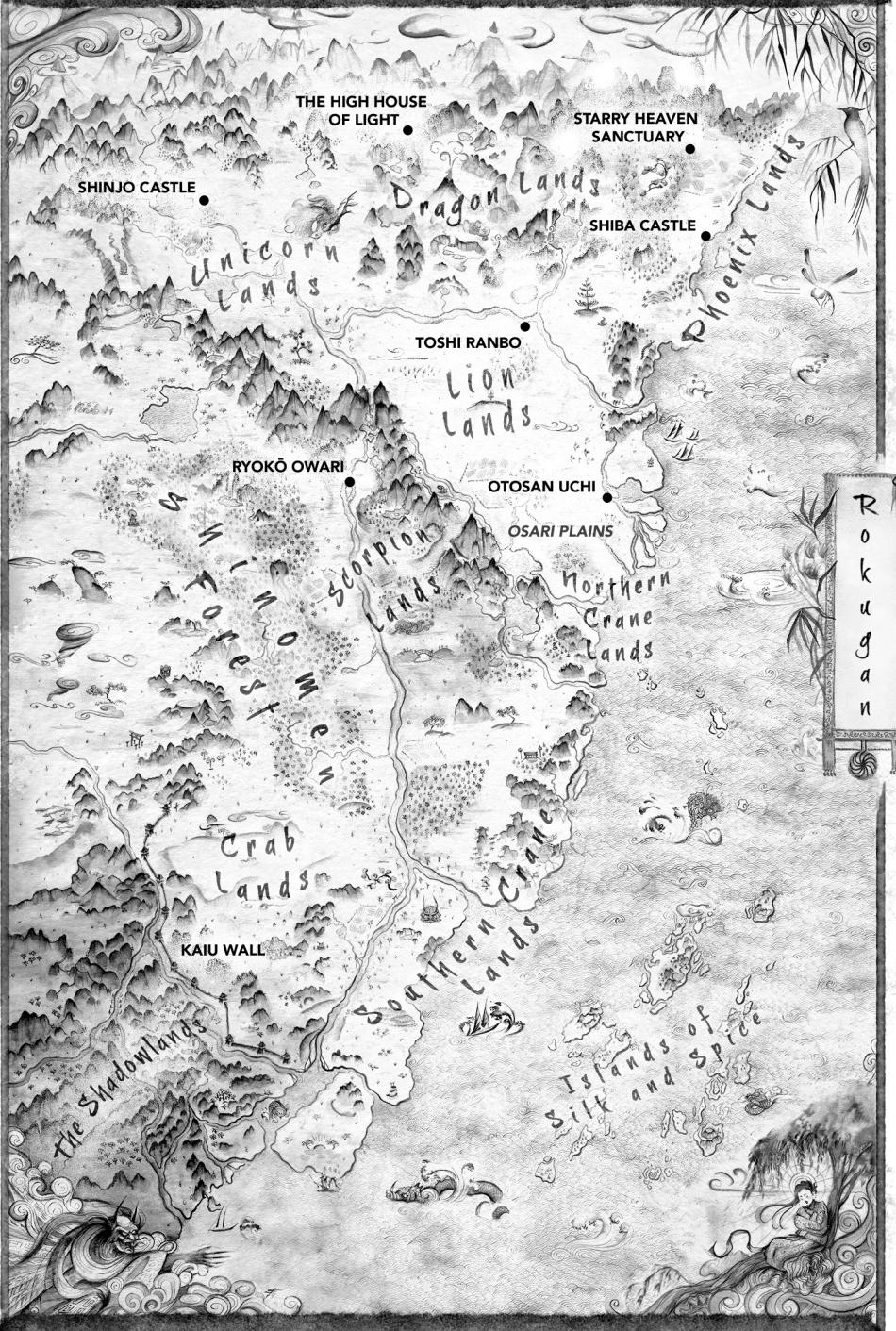
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Her Father's Daughter

By D.G. Laderoute

Somewhere along the Emperor's Road...

Daidoji Nerishma peered into the gloomy undergrowth along the road as the Crane Clan caravan he was escorting plodded along past him. Above the clopping hooves of draft oxen and the rumbling and squeaking of wagons piled high with bags of rice, he struggled to discern what had he seen, or heard—

Nerishma flung himself aside, the arrow that would have slammed into his face thumping, instead, into a bale of rice. Recovering, he raised his triple-headed spear and shouted, “Ambush! Be ready!”

Rough men in shabby peasants’ garb erupted from the undergrowth. Nerishma found himself suddenly locked in melee with two—no, three—of them, who slashed at him with peasant weapons. Frantically, he knocked aside their blows and struck back, a whirl of dust, sweat, steel, and confusion—

Silver flashed as the long blade of a *naginata* slashed one of the bandits, then another, across the throat. Nerishma gutted the third, then turned in time to see someone rush past him in a billow of dark cloak, hood held in place with a conical, straw hat. Barely breaking stride, the cloaked figure—whom Nerishma vaguely

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recognized as another of the caravan guards—struck down a bandit with another effortless sweep of the naganata. A few paces, and another fell. Another.

Back along the caravan, guards slashed and stabbed at their ambushers, holding their own, driving them back. Gripping his spear, Nerishma turned and hurried after the cloaked figure toward the head of the caravan, determined not to leave his benefactor to fight alone. He caught up in time to find the hooded guard facing a lean man wielding the swords of a samurai—a katana in his right hand, a *wakizashi* in his left. The man bore no *mon* or other heraldry on his drab kimono. He was a rōnin, then, and probably the leader of this bandit pack.

Nerishma rushed to join the cloaked figure, who was probably also a rōnin, a mercenary hired to protect the caravan. But the naganata, dripping blood, swung to block his way. At the same time, a woman's voice shouted to the bandit leader, "This caravan rightfully travels the Emperor's road. How *dare* you assault it?"

The rōnin raised his swords. "These people and their families are starving. The rice in those wagons is better filling their bellies than the Emperor's tax houses. So, they do what they must."

"It is certainly not your place to decide such a thing. Nor is any excuse sufficient for the crimes you have committed here today. There is only the penalty, which is death."

Death awaits us all," he replied, taking a stance Nerishma recognized as *niten*, the dual-wielding sword style favored by the Dragon Clan. Nerishma again started forward, determined to help dispatch this dishonorable dog of a rōnin—and once more, the bloody naganata moved to block him. This time, its wielder turned.

The face looking back at him from under the hood shone like alabaster, striking beauty framed by snow-white hair. Nerishma recognized it immediately and took an astounded step back.

It was Doji Hotaru, Champion of the Crane Clan, and his lord and master.

Nerishma instinctively began to bow, but Hotaru shook her head. "Maintain your stance, samurai-san, and step back. I appreciate your desire to assist, but I shall deal with this myself."

"O-of course, Doji-ue. As you command."

He straightened, still eager to stand with his champion despite

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her command and his own stunned amazement. Clearly she'd been with the caravan for some time now, concealing herself in traveler's garb. But why? And why would she deign to confront this rōnin cur in any case, a man so far beneath her in the Celestial Order he might as well have been an actual dog?

But it was not Nerishma's place to question, so he stepped back.

Hotaru turned back to the rōnin and raised her naganata. The rōnin bowed, and Hotaru returned the bow. A pause, then the man launched himself at Hotaru like a leaping tongue of flame. Hotaru jumped aside, lashing out with the much-longer naganata, forcing the rōnin to pull his strikes short. But the man recovered in an instant, dashing inside the naganata's arc. Hotaru dodged the katana by a finger span, but the wakizashi opened a shallow gash on her arm.

Nerishma gasped and took an involuntary step—

Maintain your stance, samurai-san.

Nerishma teetered on a knife-edge of warring compulsions: assist his champion, or obey her...

Gritting his teeth, he obeyed.

The rōnin struck again and again, but Hotaru was as water, a flow of movement avoiding the blows. Still, Nerishma began to despair at his champion's inability to seize the initiative...until abruptly she did, becoming as fire, a blur of furnace rage, but channeled by the subtlety of air. She'd been merely leading her opponent, Nerishma realized, provoking his most devastating attacks, learning his moves and countermoves, and doing it all in a matter of seconds that had only *felt* like minutes.

The rōnin fell back, desperately trying to fend off the whirling naganata. Once, he found an opening and launched himself into it—but it was a feint, leaving him unbalanced and overextended. Hotaru slammed the naganata into his shoulder, cleaving him to the opposite collarbone. The rōnin toppled back in a shower of blood, mouth gaping, gasping for air that would never reach his lungs.

The Crane Clan Champion didn't hesitate, swinging a blow that struck off the rōnin's head.

Nerishma waited for his champion to stand down from the confrontation. Instead, she simply stared down at her fallen opponent. Could there be a worse injury than her arm, one he hadn't

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seen? He started toward Hotaru, saying, “Doji-ue, I remain at your service, should you need—”

“No,” she said, flicking the blood from her naganata, then glancing at her injury. “I have suffered worse sparring with Toshimoko-sensei.” She looked back along the caravan, then turned to Nerishma. “The remaining bandits are fleeing. Retrieve the rōnin’s blades, Daidoji-san, in case there is someone deserving of their return. Then, let us return to our places in the caravan and wait for it to resume its way to Otosan Uchi.”

Nerishma bowed. “*Hai, Doji-ue.*”

It was not his place to question. Still, for the rest of the trip, Nerishma had to work very hard at pretending his clan champion wasn’t walking only paces away.

Her sister’s apartment in the Imperial Palace offered a breathtaking view. The gardens below, Hotaru saw, were impeccably arranged for the season, the fuchsia glow of pink moss a brilliant contrast to the muted cream and pale purple of wisteria. The first roses were coming into bloom, yellow and crimson counterpoints.

It rivaled the splendor of the gardens in the Chisei District of Otosan Uchi, where the Crane Clan embassy stood. Rivaled—but certainly didn’t surpass. There: a slight mismatch in the roses, a minor imbalance of color that would be missed by most samurai. Such imperfection would never be tolerated in the Fantastic Gardens of Kyūden Doji. But those were the exemplar for the Empire, always emulated but never matched, not even here, in the Imperial City...

Kyūden Doji. Hotaru touched the windowsill, but no longer saw the gardens. Instead, she saw the Crane Clan’s ancestral seat of power, a palace of white stone and impeccable grace perched on cliffs overlooking the Sea of the Sun Goddess. Waves pounded ceaselessly against their rocky base, a steady, booming rhythm—

The cliffs from which her mother had thrown herself...the waves that had swallowed and taken her...because her father, Doji Satsume, had driven her to it—

Hotaru’s grip tightened on the sill as her thoughts changed again. Doji Satsume, who had stubbornly kept the clan championship for years even as he held the office of Emerald Champion: the Emperor’s personal champion, commander of the Imperial Legions, and

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most senior magistrate of Rokugan. Satsume, who had only reluctantly passed the Crane Clan championship to her at the urging of his brothers-in-law, Kakita Toshimoko and Kakita Yoshi. Satsume, who was now dead, and just when the Empire needed its Emerald Champion the most.

A thump from behind her. Hotaru glanced back. Framed by a pair of perfectly matched paper *shōji* screens, Doji Shizue fixed her cat, Fumio, with a disapproving glare over a scroll he'd knocked off a table. Leaning on her cane, Shizue returned the scroll to its place and minutely adjusted an *ikebana* flower arrangement the cat had apparently also disturbed. Hotaru couldn't help but smile. From the polished floor of teak from the far-off Islands of Spice and Silk, to a matched series of *sumi-e* ink drawings decorating the walls, Shizue's apartment was impeccable. There would never be mismatched rose blossoms here.

Her cane softly tapping, Shizue hobbled over to join Hotaru at the window. "What is it you see, Doji-ue?"

Hotaru dissembled. "Why, the gardens, of course, resplendent under Lady Sun." Feigning disapproval, she added, "And you need not be so formal as to call me 'ue,' Sister. Not when we are alone."

"If protocol becomes ingrained in the courts of the Crane, Doji-ue, then in this esteemed place it becomes absolutely reflexive. In any case...is that *all* you see out my window?"

Her smile fading, Hotaru looked back at the gardens, but this time her gaze skipped over them, over the palace wall and the cluttered rooftops of the city beyond, to the golden expanse of the distant Osari Plains. She couldn't see the Crane blood spilled upon them in her clan's ongoing feud with the Lion Clan, of course, but she knew it was there, drying under the late-spring sun.

Hotaru briefly considered just saying, "Yes, that is all," but shook her head instead. "No. I see an Empire in turmoil."

"An attack by bandits, even one so egregiously close to the Imperial Capital, hardly constitutes an 'Empire in turmoil.'"

Hotaru touched the sleeve of her kimono, feeling the bandage beneath a white crane embroidered into the pale-blue silk. A Sep-pun *shugenja* had offered to importune the elemental water *kami* to speed the healing of her wound, but she'd refused. As she'd told the Daidoji soldier whod witnessed her battle with the *rōnin*,

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she'd suffered worse injuries sparring with Kakita Toshimoko, her uncle and boisterous old sensei, and had only ever bandaged those as well...

The rōnin. The man had been a criminal, and had earned his death.

Still.

Hotaru couldn't help but understand his motivations, at least in part. Three years ago, a devastating tsunami had ravaged the Crane Clan's coastline, destroying some of the clan's most fertile lands. No one knew how long it would be before the lands would again yield rice at all, much less in the abundance for which the Crane were known. The people were hungry, and they would only get hungrier.

Shizue frowned. "You are genuinely troubled, aren't you?"

"The rōnin who led the bandits was not entirely without honor. His intent was to secure food for his followers and their families. That is why I allowed him die as a samurai, in combat, rather than face execution as a common criminal."

"Well, you must give me a full accounting of it all. As storyteller to the Imperial Court, I am always eager for new tales to tell. This one will not only entertain the court but also bolster your reputation."

"Always the storyteller," Hotaru said, shaking her head. "Anyway, yes, I agree that a single bandit attack does not portend the doom of the Empire. But when the bandits are peasants, simply seeking food..." She touched the bandage again. "And famine is only one of the difficulties we face. Our disagreement with the Lion over the ownership of Toshi Ranbo drags on. I must travel there soon, in fact, to evaluate the situation for myself. To the north, the Dragon seek our help in dealing with a growing sect of dissidents and heretics, but we have little to offer them. To the south, the Crab are badly pressed on the Carpenter Wall, but we have little help to offer there, either. And with each passing day, the Scorpion grip on the Imperial Court grows ever tighter..."

Hotaru made herself stop. "But then," she went on, "there are *always* problems afflicting the Empire, aren't there? Perhaps I am simply not yet used to my role as clan champion."

Hotaru swept her naganata through the final movements of the kata called One-Strike Blade, then stopped, assuming a resting

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stance. Kakita Toshimoko nodded from where he stood beneath a nearby sakura tree, opening his mouth to offer...something, but Doji Satsume spoke first, cutting him off.

“That was very good, my daughter.”

Hotaru bowed. “Thank you, Father.”

“Do not thank me,” Satsume said, his face stone. “Very good is merely a guest house on the road to perfection—a place to visit briefly, not to stay. You, Hotaru, seem to have made it your home. Someday, you will lead our clan. If that leadership is merely very good, then you will have failed.”

That had been...a year and a half ago? So, only a few months before Satsume had stepped down as clan champion, elevating Hotaru in his place. She had never heard him comment on the quality of her leadership of the Crane since, not even to say if it was *very good*.

And now he was dead.

Shizue leaned on her cane. “If I may be so bold,” Shizue said, “I would agree that your newness to the position may be an issue. Take your arrival here. As exciting as it turned out, why in the world were you traveling with that caravan in the first place, rather than with the official entourage to which you are due? And in secret, at that?”

“Thanks to the bandits, it is not much of a secret now, is it?” Hotaru said, waving a dismissive hand. “I simply wished to arrive in Otosan Uchi discreetly, to gain some time to learn what I could about Satsume’s death before the inevitable fanfare caught up with me.”

“A bold, even rash thing to do—certainly not something Father would have done. Which is why I suspect you attempted it.”

Hotaru just looked out the window.

“Well,” Shizue went on, “you would have just run headlong into the Emerald Magistrates and their investigation regardless. The death of the Emerald Champion is no small matter.”

“Perhaps, but it does not matter now, does it? I have no choice now but to accept whatever the official sources are prepared to share.”

Shizue sniffed and made a fractional adjustment to another ikebana arrangement, this one near the window. “There are still somewhat less-than-official sources available, one of whom is standing right in front of you. The most important skill of a storyteller is the

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ability to listen, after all.”

“Very well. What has this less-than-official source heard?”

“That Satsume’s death remains a complete mystery. He appears to have simply...died. That has, of course, led to all sorts of speculation among the rumormongers.”

“Such as?”

“Some say the Fortunes simply decreed it was his time to return to the Karmic Wheel. Others suggest more...nefarious causes.”

Hotaru narrowed her eyes. “This is not one of your stories, Shizue. The dramatic flair is unnecessary.”

Shizue smiled and minutely adjusted the ikebana again. “Something else that has become ingrained, I’m afraid. Anyway, some suggest his death was neither natural nor accidental, and that now the Emerald Championship is available for those who might covet it.”

“If that is the finding of the magistrates, then a price will be demanded in blood.”

“Not least by our brother.”

Hotaru sighed. “Indeed. Kuwanan-kun certainly has not felt the need to wait for the magistrates’ findings. He is already demanding blood in the name of our clan’s honor.”

Shizue leaned on her cane. “Lord Satsume was his—our—father. I suspect family honor also fuels his outrage.” She cocked her head. “As I would expect it does yours?”

Hotaru turned back to the window. “The death of Doji Satsume, Emerald Champion, is indeed a grave matter. His death is a great loss to the Empire. And if it does turn out he was murdered, then yes, there will be blood—a great deal of it. Perhaps there will even be war.”

She looked down into the garden. “The death of Doji Satsume, our father, however...” She paused, her gaze on a koi pond surrounded by colorful hibiscus. “Perhaps that is simply justice finally done.”

A long moment passed. Finally, Shizue said, “Our mother’s death was, in the end, her own choice—”

“A choice she never should have been forced to make,” Hotaru snapped, turning. “Father might as well have pushed her off that cliff himself—”

A soft tap at the door interrupted her. Shizue gave Hotaru a puzzled look, then hobbled past the shōji screens to the door. She

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opened it to see a servant who immediately bowed to the floor, then moved aside, letting someone else enter.

Hotaru's breath caught as she recognized the new arrival. Bayushi Kachiko, Imperial Advisor of Rokugan—

—and the most beautiful woman in the Empire.

Fighting the desire to smile, to rush at Kachiko and embrace her, Hotaru simply bowed. So did Shizue, but more deeply, as befit her status relative to that of the woman who advised the Emperor himself. At the same time, both automatically assumed a perfect façade of formality.

"Bayushi Kachiko-dono," Hotaru said. "What a pleasant surprise. To what do we owe the honor of a visit from the esteemed Imperial Advisor?"

Kachiko, a crimson and black study in sinuous charm, returned their bows. "How could I not pay my respects to the honored Champion of the Crane Clan upon her arrival in the Imperial Capital?" Pausing to admire one of Shizue's ikebana arrangements, she let her fingers brush a sprig of gardenia, whose meaning in *hana-kotoba*, the language of flowers, was "secret love." "It would appear, however, that there has been a significant breach of protocol, for which I must profusely apologize on behalf of the Imperial Court. We were given no proper notification of your coming to Otosan Uchi, much less of your having actually arrived."

"It is not a matter of concern," Hotaru said.

Kachiko's eyes glinted through the minimal mask that framed them, leaving the rest of her features, as fine as delicate porcelain, exposed. "Nonsense. Rest assured that appropriate corrective action will be taken so that, in the future, you shall receive the recognition to which a clan champion is entitled."

Each of the Scorpion's movements was deliberate and calculated even as she spoke. From a kimono slit to reveal *almost* scandalous glimpses of her legs as she walked, to a head tilted just enough to expose a *barely* appropriate amount of shoulder, Bayushi Kachiko was all about effect—and that effect was the seductive promise of *more*.

Hotaru glanced at her sister. "Shizue-san, if I may presume upon your hospitality, would you allow us the use of your apartments for a brief time?"

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“Of course, Doji-ue. It gives me an excuse to enjoy the gardens before the setting of Lady Sun. Fumio-chan, do not give our guests any trouble.”

The cat blinked back at Shizue, then knocked a writing brush onto the floor.

Shizue sighed, then bowed, turned, and walked out of the room, sliding the door closed behind her.

Hotaru and Kachiko maintained their air of courtly propriety for a moment after Shizue had gone, then broke into warm smiles. Kachiko stepped forward, taking Hotaru’s hands in hers and opening her mouth to speak. Before she could, though, Hotaru pulled her closer, meaning to kiss her...

She hesitated at a stray thought—of her husband, now on his way to Shizuka Toshi to learn what he could about a recent attack by pirates and about the man, Yoritomo, who led them. Stopping herself, Hotaru simply looked into Kachiko’s dark eyes instead.

A silent moment passed. *My heart, Hotaru thought...surely, Kachiko can hear it beating, so hard and quickly.* Kachiko finally broke the silence.

“So, Hotaru, what is the meaning of sneaking into the city, truly?” Kachiko put on an exaggerated look of mock suspicion. “Were you trying to avoid me?”

“Of course not. I merely was hoping to have some time to myself, before all of the inevitable ceremony wrapped around me like suffocating silk.”

Kachiko released Hotaru’s hands. “And why would you do that?”

It was Hotaru’s turn to be mischievous. Offering a coy smile, she said, “Well, perhaps, rather than trying to *avoid* you, I wanted some quiet time to spend *with* you.”

An eyebrow lifted over the top of Kachiko’s mask. “That can certainly be arranged. In fact, you must allow me to host you this evening. I have just procured some *sake* from Ryokō Owari Toshi that will make even one so discerning as the leader of the Crane Clan jealous.”

“I look forward to it.”

A moment passed, and then Kachiko drew back, her manner becoming more formal. “While it flatters me to think you were

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skulking your way into Otosan Uchi just to spend some time with me, that is not the reason for your somewhat...unwarranted discretion, is it?

I think you were hoping to take advantage of the relative anonymity, however brief, to learn some unornamented truths about Lord Satsume's death."

"An obvious plan, then...and apparently not a very good one."

"On the contrary. Had you not involved yourself in an unseemly fight with bandits on the road, you might have gotten away with it."

Hotaru gave Kachiko, the woman known as the Mistress of Secrets, a wry look. "Really?"

"For a time. I may eventually come to know everything of note that goes on in this city, but *eventually isn't instantly.*" Kachiko's expression became grave. "As for Lord Satsume...you have my deepest condolences, Hotaru. He was a great man, and an honored and loyal servant of the Empire. He will be missed."

Hotaru wanted to appear—to *be*—appropriately grief stricken, but she could only see the cliffs near Kyūden Doji. "He will be missed," was all she finally managed to say.

Kachiko's eyes narrowed at Hotaru's flat tone. "I am no stranger to problematic relationships with one's father...but if I may be presumptuous, Lord Satsume *is* dead, Hotaru. I would hate to see your bitterness toward him outlive him, at least for very long."

Hotaru looked at one of Shizue's shōji screens, depicting mountains stark against a red sunset. "I do not deny my bitterness. But it is more than that. The circumstances around his death are...troubling."

"Ah...yes. I understand that the Emerald Magistrates continue their investigation. Perhaps the secrecy of your arrival had some benefit after all, and you have heard something I have not?"

Hotaru turned her gaze on Fumio the cat, who'd settled himself onto a *tatami* mat near the ink brush he'd vanquished. Were this not Bayushi Kachiko, Hotaru might have thought she was actually concerned she had missed something...or that she might even be worried something was in the process of being discovered that wasn't meant to be. But this *was* Kachiko, so it was inconceivable that she wouldn't know exactly what the Emerald Magistrates had found so far.

...some suggest that his death was neither natural nor accidental,

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and that now the Emerald Championship is available for those who might covet it.

Kachiko's brother, Hametsu, *daimyō* of the Shosuro family, was reputed to be a master of poisons, more than capable of making it appear that someone had *simply...died*. And while there was little love lost between him and Kachiko, that they were both loyal to their clan was beyond question.

...with each passing day, the Scorpion grip on the Imperial Court grows ever tighter...

Hotaru looked up from the cat to find Kachiko watching her.

"No," Hotaru finally said. "I have heard nothing, aside from stray bits of gossip. Like everyone else, I can only wait for the Emerald Magistrates to complete their investigation."

A pause; then, Kachiko nodded. "Of course. In the meantime, do you intend to remain in the capital?"

"For the time being. There is a funeral to prepare. I had originally thought to have it at Kyūden Doji, but I think it would be more appropriate for it to be here, in Otosan Uchi."

"An appropriate choice indeed. If there is anything I can do to assist, you need but ask."

Hotaru took Kachiko's hand in hers. "Thank you. That means a great deal to me."

Kachiko placed her other hand over Hotaru's. "Now, I would love to stay, but I am afraid I have matters of court to attend to. I do expect to see you this evening, though."

Hotaru wanted nothing more than to be with Kachiko *now*, but she simply nodded. "Of course."

"Then I shall send a servant with the details. Until then..." Kachiko held Hotaru's hand in hers a moment longer, then released it and turned to the door. She and Hotaru exchanged appropriate bows, and then she was gone.

For a while, Hotaru simply stared at the door.

Eventually, she turned and walked back to the window. The play of light and shadow in the garden had changed with the movement of Lady Sun, making it seem a completely different place. Again, though, her gaze was drawn beyond it, to the horizon. Rice fields, fallow and empty...blood upon the Osari Plains...darkness pounding at the Carpenter Wall...heresy and sedition...

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If Rokugan was the Emerald Empire, then the emerald was flawed—small cracks threatening to lengthen, to widen, to cause the whole of it to crumble to fragments and dust.

The Price of War

By Mari Murdock

Some weeks later, in contested territory...

Matsu Tsuko crouched within a thick copse of trees, waiting in ambush with nearly a dozen other units of Lion Clan samurai. The dense foliage hushed the screams and steel clanging of the fighting below, but nothing could rid the air of the raw-iron smell of blood. The scent tickled her into a fury, her legs itching to spring, to attack. She eyed her commander, Akodo Toturi, but the smoothness of his face betrayed no hint of his strategy as he watched the battle from afar.

What is the fool waiting for?

Tsuko's contingent had arrived nearly an hour ago, ready to reinforce the dwindling forces of Akodo Arasou, the Lion Clan Champion, in the territory dispute with the Crane Clan. In an act of insolence, the Crane had bolstered their occupying forces in Toshi Ranbo, the northernmost Lion city, to force a Lion army away from the contested grain-laden Osari Plains in the south. Arasou had been campaigning at the foot of the city for several weeks, building siege weapons, and needing reinforcements only to make his final push to retake the city and ensure the Crane could not use it as a staging ground against them. Arasou's older brother,

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Toturi, had been summoned from the monastery to answer that call for aid...yet...

Why does he hesitate?

A small Crane contingent sped past their hiding place, bearing torches, intending to sneak behind Arasou's forces and set fire to their battering rams. She clutched her katana and waited for Toturi's golden signal fan to herald the charge. However, he remained still.

"What are we waiting for?" Tsuko hissed, the heat of her blood curling her fingers tighter around her katana until her fist shook. "The Crane are right there!"

Toturi did not answer, merely lifting his fan parallel to the earth, the sign to wait. Tsuko turned away in disgust, shifting her attention to her comrades-in-arms, their anticipation as palpable as her own. Down the line, Matsu Gohei grinned, unnervingly jovial in the face of danger as ever. Just behind her, Kitsu Motso's boots creaked as he fidgeted, likely attempting to figure out what Toturi was thinking.

As if thinking works. She glared at Toturi again. Weakling. Arasou wouldn't wait on a sly calculation. Victory is only moments away!

Tsuko strained to see Arasou in the faraway skirmish. The fiery gold glint of Arasou's helmet caught her eye as he sliced through a Crane *ashigaru* in a single stroke. The Crane's shoulder and head parted, and Arasou powered through the gap straight into another Crane warrior, smashing into his face with a fierce blow and bellowing in a ferocious battle cry. Tsuko's place was by his side, fighting toward victory, not hiding in a thicket like a shy mule with a cowardly master.

Despite Arasou's ferocity, the torch-bearing Crane had proved enough of a distraction to pull the Lion from the city's walls. In that moment, a deluge of Crane spearmen poured through the gates, crashing into the forces at Arasou's back like a blue wave over golden sand. Screams shook the sky as the spear line slammed into the Lion troops, dividing them from their battering rams. Arasou signaled for a regrouping retreat, and the Lion samurai fell back, running past the trees of Toturi's hiding place with the Crane spearmen in furious pursuit.

"Toturi!" Tsuko hissed as the Lion and Crane armies passed by,

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but Toturi still did not flinch, merely watching. She raised an arm as if to strike him, but Motso snatched at her elbow.

“Patience, Tsuko-sama!” Motso muttered, struggling to keep his grip on her arm as she wrenched it from his grasp. “Our commander is waiting for the Crane momentum to swing past recovery!”

Suddenly, Toturi flicked his fan, signaling the charge. Battle cries rang from the forest as the Lion reinforcements burst from the trees, finally joining the fray. They caught the Crane in a tight pincer attack as Arasou, seeing the fresh Lion troops, pressed his forces hard in retaliation. Tsuko cut her way through the battle to where Arasou slashed through three Crane ashigaru, making short work of them despite his battle fatigue.

“You are late,” he boomed to Tsuko, smiling, Crane blood and dust spattered all over his handsome face. He spun with dexterous footwork to counter a nimble Crane samurai’s slash at his throat, finishing him with a swift strike.

“Your brother was hesitating,” she yelled over the clashing steel, deftly slicing through a Crane samurai who stumbled too close to her. The body fell with a heavy crunch, and she leaped over him toward a Crane who danced around Motso, threatening to take off his head with her graceful *kata*. Tsuko crashed into her, disrupting the pretentious fluidity of the Crane fighting style and landing a killing blow.

“Toturi-kun thinks too much!” Arasou laughed, leaping forward to meet two more Crane ashigaru in their frantic attempts to regain the upper hand. “I always tell him that!”

“That’s why you’re clan champion instead of him!” she called back, turning to face a spry Crane samurai in blue-lacquered armor. Tsuko charged, challenging the graceful agility of the Crane with a violent thrust. Despite Tsuko’s superior strength, the Crane’s deft spins and parries deflected all the blows away, and his armor mitigated the power of her strokes. A quick cut sliced across her arm, her shoulder, her side, her face, but she smiled despite the pain.

We are the teeth of the Lion!

Tsuko hurtled forward to crowd her opponent’s defensive stance, overpowering it with brute ferocity. With a loud cry, Tsuko slashed at a weak spot at his throat, and he fell to the ground.

Drum beats sounded from atop the walls of Toshi Ranbo, and

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the Crane responded with a retreat. Tsuko wheeled around to find Arasou again, ready for orders of pursuit, but Toturi had gotten to his brother first. Tsuko ran to catch the last of their exchange.

“...siege would be better,” Toturi insisted, again the calmness of his face clashing with the violence of the scene. “If we take the city by force...”

“So you admit that should we pursue, we would take it?” Arasou said, his handsome brow furrowing. “The odds are now on our side! Thanks to that pincer attack, we have seriously depleted their forces. All we need to do is push! The gates are open! Today we regain what is rightfully ours!”

Toturi’s mouth twisted in seriousness, and he stretched to his full height as if trying to play the older brother. “Taking it by force could spark all-out war with the Crane and turn the Emperor’s favor against us. Through siege, we can hope the Crane will surrender to save face and avoid a slaughter.”

Tsuko pounced forward. “Hope for surrender? What kind of Lion are you?” she snarled. “Trust your instincts, Arasou-sama. Remember, ‘Those who attack first shall win.’ That is our path to victory. A siege has no glory, and hope cannot win us the city.”

Arasou locked eyes with Tsuko, pride blazing in his gaze. He smiled. Her heart burned.

“Lady Tsuko agrees with me, Toturi-san. With her advice, I shall lead our final charge toward the city. Toshi Ranbo will be ours!”

With a powerful arm, he signaled his banners. The Lion forces, united under their champion, fell into disciplined ranks, ready for the charge. Tsuko and Toturi joined the lines on either side of Arasou.

“To victory!” he shouted, taking a last look at Toturi, then at Tsuko, before charging after the retreating Crane.

Tsuko raced toward Toshi Ranbo, her heart swelling as her brothers and sisters of the Lion rushed to overtake the foe. Arasou and his elite swordsmen bounded toward the Crane in fierce strides, overtaking the first of their prey in moments. With a mighty leap, he crashed down upon the back of a large Crane spearman, knocking him to the ground. He tumbled forward to knock the legs out from under another retreating Crane before springing into the air to again smash down upon another.

Tsuko veered to the right to cut her own path toward Toshi

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Ranbo's gates. She stabbed at one Crane, who tripped another with his falling body. Tsuko hurled herself at them, finishing them quickly. Her katana lodged deep in the lacquered folds of a breast-plate, so she kicked at it to wrench her sword free. She regained her pace.

Just three hundred more paces to the gate! Victory is upon us!

A flash of blue and white emerged from Toshi Ranbo. Doji Hotaru, the Crane Clan Champion, appeared with a small body of archers to provide cover fire for the fleeing Crane. They let fly a volley, raining death down upon the gaining Lion. Two zipped past Tsuko's face, so she darted toward the gate to find shelter from the hail of arrows. She leaped over several mangled Crane bodies that marked Arasou's ferocious path ahead of her. She managed a glimpse of the top of his shining helmet.

Tsuko sped forward to catch up to him. She could hear his battle cries, which swelled with the passion of battle. He raged through the Crane ranks, slashing through blue bodies on either side of him, leaves before a tempest. He was a mere two hundred paces from the gate. Tsuko could see Hotaru's face contorted in fear as the raging force approached. The Crane Champion's eyes glistened with tears.

“Victory!” Tsuko cried. “Arasou, lead us to victory!”

As Tsuko drew closer, however, the look on Hotaru's face became clear. It was not fear: it was sorrow.

The Crane Clan Champion drew back her bowstring in a long, graceful pull and let an arrow fly. Her bolt sped like lightning straight into Arasou's chest. The Lion Clan Champion didn't break pace. Tsuko shoved through the throng, trying to clear a path to Arasou, but a few dozen Crane ashigaru still crowded the way, ramming her in all directions. She dropped her katana and pushed back against the bodies.

Another arrow flew from Hotaru's bow. The arrowhead slammed through the back of Arasou's helmet with a sickening snap. His momentum slowed, and he tumbled forward onto the earth.

Tsuko screamed, but she could not hear the sound. Silence shuddered through her body, her stomach, her throat, her heart. Numbness spread down her limbs. Her legs shook, barely holding her up as she stumbled. Eventually, after an eternal moment, she

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stood over what was once the greatest samurai in the Lion Clan.

She fell to her knees, choking as her lungs stiffened, every part of her trembling in disbelief.

No!

She clutched at his shoulder, her hands trembling too fiercely to lift him.

This is a dream! A nightmare!

Toturi rushed to her side and heaved Arasou over. Hotaru's arrow stuck out of his eye, reddish water welling up its shaft, spilling into the other clear, open eye that saw nothing.

Shivering, Tsuko turned from Arasou's dead gaze to Toturi, but he did not notice her. With his jaw clenched, the only sign of his pain, he stared at Hotaru. The white-haired samurai wiped away her tears before fleeing with the remaining Crane back into Toshi Ranbo, the gates closing behind them.

The silence broke. The chaos of the battlefield flooded back over Tsuko—moans of the wounded and dying, crimson spattering blue and brown alike.

Motso approached, Arasou's fallen katana in hand. Crane blood still dripped from its blade, staining Arasou's golden armor.

"Lord Toturi," Motso whispered, his gentle voice cracking. He turned the ancestral hilt toward the bereaved brother. "As oldest living heir of Akodo One-Eye, you are now clan champion."

Tsuko shut her eyes and blindly reached out to grasp Arasou's gloved hand. It was still hot.

"War!" Tsuko roared, slamming her fist onto the table, scattering maps and troop markers onto the ground.

Toturi clenched his teeth, reading the faces of the other Lion Clan samurai assembled in the war pavilion like a tragic story. Their faces flickered in the firelight, sorrow deepening the lines of their frowns. Kitsu Motso fidgeted, unable to make eye contact with Tsuko or Toturi. Matsu Agetoki's wrinkled mouth lengthened into a grimace. Toturi turned back to Tsuko. Hers was the only face that wore rage—pure, seething rage.

"War against the Crane!" Tsuko repeated, the harshness of her voice slamming into the others as though to batter them into submission. "Today's losses should not go unpunished! It is an insult to our clan. It's—"

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“The price of battle!” Agetoki growled. The old Lion glared at her. “Our clan above all should know this price *and* the further cost we would pay for all-out war with the Crane!”

“The Emperor will not look kindly on an illegal declaration,” Motso mumbled. “Arasou chose to attack the Crane. The Crane can claim they were defending themselves, so we cannot seek immediate vengeance for our champion’s death. We must go through the proper channels.”

“More waiting?” Tsuko spat. “Toturi, stop behaving as a simpering child and act! Seek retribution! Reclaim Toshi Ranbo, the Osari Plains, and more from those thieving murderers. Make them cower for their insults! Think of our clan’s honor! You are clan champion now. What will you do?”

Their stares demanded an answer. He was now champion, he whom his clan had once passed over for his younger, stronger, more powerful brother, Arasou.

What will I do?

A thousand pathways opened up before him. Choices. So many choices.

Arasou. Death. The Emperor. The Empire. Hotaru.

Each road through his mind branched a dozen ways like a river, like a bursting star. He followed each strand in an instant, discovering the plots, gauging the people and their actions, inserting uncertain figures, each dangerous, each a risk.

Revenge. War.

He began counting the bodies, the true costs it would demand.

“Damn you, Toturi!” Tsuko yelled, scattering his thoughts. “You coward! You are not worthy of leading as champion! You were passed over for your lack of martial skill. You are a mockery of our ways!”

“Silence, Tsuko-sama!” Agetoki thundered, his hand snapping to his katana. “Your insubordination is a grievous error in discipline! Akodo-ue is now in command, and—”

“Stop!” Toturi shouted, towering over the Lion samurai before him. His brow wrinkled in seriousness, but he set a calm hand upon the table. “Agetoki-san, I thank you for upholding our ways—discipline, honor, and decorum—but Lion voices shall never be silenced. Tsuko-san has a right to speak, especially in this time of

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grief and heartbreak.”

Tsuko’s eyes narrowed in steely wrath. “How dare you!” she whispered, her voice sharp like a knife. She marched out of the pavilion.

Agetoki shook his head in shame, lowering his hand from his sword. “Fool. Lady Tsuko’s ways are unbecoming of the Matsu family *daimyō*.”

“Agetoki-san,” Toturi replied. “You know well that the Matsu are born and bred to fight for any cause they find just. Do not hold this against her. As an Akodo, I must take the responsibility to lead even the wildest.”

He turned from the council to stare into the fire, hoping it would illumine the correct path through the labyrinth of his thoughts. But the signposts were illegible in the darkness.

Finally, he spoke. “I shall not make decisions until I have spoken to the clan generals and the other family *daimyō*. I will also seek counsel from the Emperor. Send messengers to the palace in Otosan Uchi, informing him of my brother’s death. Motso-sama, you will ride to Yōjin no Shiro and prepare the funeral rites for Arasou-sama. I will have Tsuko-sama follow to deliver the body.”

“She will not want to go,” Motso said.

“Duty rides before us,” Toturi said, lowering his head in reverence. “He was her betrothed, and this is her last obligation to him.”

Motso bowed and left the tent.

Agetoki remained a moment, standing by the door, a full head and shoulders shorter than his new champion but still straight and proud in his carriage. “Akodo-ue,” he said, resting a strong, calloused hand on his shoulder. “Your time has come. You know the Akodo ways, but a lion is more than his roar, more than his mane, more than his teeth, more than his heart. A lion is all of these. Tsuko-sama was right to ask what you will do, because now all of the Lion Clan families look to you to act as one.”

Toturi nodded. “I’m afraid, with my brother’s loss, a schism is inevitable. Tsuko-san’s rage will poison many against me.”

“And as clan champion, you must not let that divide us.”

“Never.”

Agetoki bowed and vanished into the night.

Toturi wandered back to the fallen maps and troop markers.

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He picked them up in several armfuls and set them back on the table in a heap. A wooden lion figurine had a leg broken off.

This is a mess, isn't it? He picked up the figure and touched the amputated stump. *My mess.*

Toturi spied the map of Toshi Ranbo on top of the pile, the paper crumpled into crooked plains and false mountains. Once again, the threads of pathways started to appear. He could see Tsuko's rage swerving off into the distance toward an avenger's fire. He saw the Emperor's polite, bloodless answer to the news of Arasou's death.

Hotaru-san killed my brother today.

Those words burst unexpectedly from a thick dam in his mind. With a gasp, Toturi crushed the lion figure to splinters and squeezed until his fingers were numb. Slowly, he opened his palm, and there lay the lifeless, wooden lion. Drops of blood welled around the bone-like slivers where they had pierced his skin.

My brother...Arasou...

A rustling at the door roused him. Toturi turned to see Motso standing there.

"A message, Akodo-ue" he said, a little winded, as if he had just run across the camp. "From Champion Doji Hotaru."

He held out a delicate white scroll with a silvery seal upon it. Toturi took it and nodded before Motso bowed and ran out. The paper was scented with plum blossom, symbolizing all at once perseverance, hope, and the transitoriness of life. Elegant calligraphy curled over its surface: "To the Lion Clan Champion, Akodo Toturi."

He broke the seal.

"Akodo Toturi, brother-in-arms, friend of my heart, and now Lion Clan Champion, I write in the heat of this sorrowful night as the sun sets upon an era for your clan. Akodo Arasou-dono was the best of your clan, a noble warrior whose life called down the pride of your ancestors from the Heavens. He was an admirable foe, and..."

The flowery Crane diplomacy and social obligation melted in a pause of the brushstrokes.

"...I know you are too strong of soul to admit your pain. However, if my own soul can hardly fathom the horror of what occurred today, I know that somewhere in you, this same sentiment lurks, this anguish, this blackness.

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"I can offer no consolation that will bridge this abyss. I can make no reparations for what I have taken. Yet, you are now clan champion, and what you do will not only speak for the Akodo in your brother's memory but also speak for your clan.

"I know you to be level-headed, wise, and honorable, so I trust that you will take the best course of action; yet, though we have been friends many years, I can hardly guess what that will be. I write to ask. Toturi-san, what will you do?

"Loyally, faithfully, your comrade of old and fellow servant to the Emperor, Doji Hotaru."

Toturi shut his eyes.

Hotaru killed my brother.

He sank to the floor, dropping the bloodied Lion figure and Hotaru's letter, lowering his head into his hands as the scene played over and over before him.

Two arrows. The broken body. Hotaru's tears. Tsuko's heart. Arasou, why did you not listen? Why did you leave me with this mess?

What will you do? They had all asked—Tsuko, Agetoki, and even Hotaru.

What will I do?

A writhing chaos rose before him, again bursting in a snaking multiplicity of pathways, each needing to be followed. Twisted knots of actions to take, the inevitable cry for revenge, the threat of war, Arasou's goals and victories cut short in a thousand bleeding dead ends all twisted around choices Toturi dared not make. The trails bled together into a deep ocean and crashed around him. He pressed his heart with his bleeding hand.

Arasou's voice, echoing deep from a memory, cut through the confusion. "Brother, you think too much." The image his brother's strong face loomed before him, his eye now missing like that of Akodo One-Eye, smiling. "You think too much."

"I know!" Toturi responded aloud. He ground his fists into the earth. "That is why you were chosen! Not me. You were the man of action. You were the one who could do everything!"

Silence answered him, the silence of the dead. Arasou would never answer him again, and in that silence, Toturi felt a pause in which the universe waited for him to act.

What will I do?

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Toturi opened his eyes. On the far side of the tent, rising above the broken lion figurine on the floor, the Lion Clan *mon* flapped in a gentle breeze, golden and glowing in the firelight in fierce splendor.

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 towed 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*

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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

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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

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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.

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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."

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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

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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 moun-

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tains, 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."

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"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-

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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

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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

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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. Otosan 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.

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"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."

Dark Hands of Heaven

By Annie VanderMeer Mitsoda

Meanwhile, to the far southeast...

A brisk wind scudded across the dry plains, tugging at the robes of the *shugenja* and snapping the banners atop the Kaiu Wall. Unmoved, Hida Kisada stared impassively from the battlements to the Shadowlands beyond, where a vast force of enemy troops swayed and shifted like grass.

In the eyes of his troops—even battle hardened as they were—he had seen the shadow of fear. *Samurai do not fear death*, he thought. *An easy sentiment for those who shelter in the safety of our wall. My samurai know death too well not to fear it. But they will face it anyway.*

Kisada stared down the foe with the same impassive gaze for which the Champion of the Crab Clan was so well known. Around him gathered his children and closest retainers, who did not seem to share the Great Bear's taciturn demeanor.

“Look at them arranging their forces so considerately. One could almost mistake them for Crane,” sneered Yakamo, Kisada’s eldest child, as he casually lifted his *tetsubō* onto his shoulder, posturing with the great iron and jade war club as a youngster might a toy. “It will make it even easier to crush them outright.”

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From Kisada's left came a worried "hm," and he knew without needing to look that it came from Sukune. "I do not like this," his youngest son said matter-of-factly. "Shadowlands troops do not often amass in such a fashion. They are much more likely to hide their real strength."

"A bit of a costly maneuver for it to be a trick, displaying their power like this," mused O-Ushi, and Kisada glanced to his right briefly to see his daughter frowning in consternation before she looked at him. "Do you think this might have a connection with the attack to the north, Father?" Kisada gave a low grunt of consideration, overshadowed by Yakamo's sudden rough laugh and the *thunk* of his son's war club thumping the ground.

"Children, quaking at the sight of goblins!" the young man sneered. "Such a proud example for our noble father. Do you want me to read you bedtime stories while the real warriors fight?"

Sukune bristled. "And you would run headlong into peril, endangering our clan with your bloodlust? Do you think that you can take on an entire army by yourse—"

Kisada grunted quietly and held up a hand, satisfied when his children immediately lapsed into a reluctant silence. The champion's eyes tracked once more over the immensity of the battlefield, noting each unit like pieces on a game board, arranged in precise rows. A frown creased his features briefly. *They are much more likely to hide their real strength.* He imagined a small pile of pieces hidden beneath his opponent's hand. Unease clenched his heart.

Turning from the vista before him, he scanned along the wide corridor atop the great Wall for his chosen advisor. "Kaiu Shihobu!" he bellowed, deep voice ringing with the power that led warriors to victory and death. A tall woman looked up from one of the giant siege engines nearby, then turned and approached at a brisk pace, wiping her dirty hands on a cloth. Though the leader of a powerful family, Shihobu was never far from something she had built or repaired, and it was apparent she would not be satisfied the battle could begin until she had inspected all of the siege equipment personally. Her bow was brief, but full of respect.

"Hida-ue, how can I serve?"

"What is the latest report on the near-breach in the Ishigaki Province?"

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“Slowed by rains, but proceeding apace. The damage was severe, but the Kaiu estimate completion within seven days.”

Kisada gave a small nod of agreement. “With our current numbers, what are our siege capabilities?”

The Kaiu *daimyō*’s usually warm brown eyes dimmed, and her frown puckered the long scar on her cheek. “We have the troops needed for the siege engines, and a small force to repair damage and shuttle ammunition. But we are spread thin.” She sighed. “The Kaiu family will never fail the Crab. But if the Wall itself is hit by that force out there, we cannot guarantee its security.”

Sukune let out a long, worried breath. “Our jade stores, Father...” The pale young man trembled a moment as he suppressed a cough, but he swallowed hard and continued. “They are nearly empty. If a significant force breaks through, our resources are insufficient to deal with a possible incursion of the Taint. If the land becomes corrupted, we do not have the means to cleanse it. We will lose ground.”

Kisada turned his eyes to a nervous young retainer, who started and bowed as he saw the clan champion looking his way. “Yasuki Oguri. What of our missives to the Emperor? Have they not gotten through?”

Oguri shook his head, his words wary. “They have, Hida-ue. My father has confirmed they have been delivered, and he has sent the Emperor’s replies back. But each time it is the same. A formal letter, the finest calligraphy on the smoothest paper. ‘The Emperor regrets he cannot send any aid at this time.’ For supplies, for troops, for jade...” The young man looked down awkwardly, embarrassed. “It is always the same response.”

Yakamo growled, slamming his war club on the ground again. “A sham of courtesy!” he bellowed, seething. “I should go to Otosan Uchi myself and demand what we are owed as the protectors of Rokugan!”

Kisada waved a hand, as if sliding a door closed, and Yakamo cut off his rant, subsiding into low grumbling. “Do no disrespect to the Yasuki. Their *daimyō* is there now. If Yasuki Taka cannot catch the Emperor’s ear...” The thought trailed a moment, and then Kisada snapped his attention to Shihobu once more.

“Respect to the Kaiu and their Wall,” said the champion briskly.

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“But where are the weak spots closest to this location?”

Shihobu’s brows pinched in thought. While Kisada’s visage had been still as granite as he planned, the Kaiu daimyō’s face was all energy, the calculations flickering across her features like a merchant’s hands on a *soroban*, beads clacking back and forth. “Just north of here. A larger stream required installing a runoff pipe. It should have a grate, but no seal is perfect. If you require, I will assign a retainer to show you.”

Kisada nodded his thanks, then cleared his throat; around him, every spine straightened. “This is the duty of the Crab. The Kaiu Wall stands to protect Rokugan, but our people do as well. And even stone can only take so much before it shatters. As Kuni Osaku once raised a wall of water so the Wall could be built, so today shall we raise a wall of iron.

“Kaiu Shihobu.”

The tall daimyō bowed to her champion.

“Direct all your troops to crew the siege engines and ferry ammunition. Hiruma Yoshino, split your troops. Longbows atop the Wall, short bows at the base—each with a signal arrow.”

The daimyō of the Hiruma family bowed, the well-oiled leather of her scout garb bending without the slightest creak. “Anything else, Hida-ue?”

Kisada considered a moment. “If you think *they* are ready, then proceed.” Yoshino bowed again, and Kisada could feel the weight of the others’ curiosity. It hardly mattered: either the plan would succeed or it would fail, and everyone else had other things to consider.

“Kuni Yori,” he continued, and the Kuni family daimyō bowed as well, dark mustache twitching with a too-wide smile. “Split your forces as well—a quarter to support the Kaiu, and the rest to aid on the ground. Your skills and those of your shugenja will be needed on the field.”

Finally, he turned to his children, who all bowed as one. “Yakamo, you will be at my side. Sukune, you will remain on the Wall to relay my commands.

“O-Ushi. Collect your best troops, follow the Kaiu retainer to the weakness Shihobu spoke of, and do sweeps of that area. Make it clear the utmost vigilance is required.”

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Although his daughter made no visible sign of displeasure at being left out of the main battle, Kisada sensed her bristle a moment before she bowed to him. “I will make it so, Champion,” she agreed, turning crisply on her heel to leave, a retainer nearly stumbling in his haste to follow her. Tension rippled again as Yakamo grinned, his expression impish, and Sukune glared at his brother, grinding his teeth in an unspoken argument. Kisada raised his chin sharply, and once again the siblings quieted, the tension dispelled like a hand waving away smoke.

Turning from his children’s argument, he took a final look from the top of the Wall. The forces of the Shadowlands roiled and shifted, waiting patiently for their encounter. Such patience felt wrong: a storm would never choose to wait for a soldier to find shelter before loosing a deluge of rain.

The Crab Clan Champion gave a low grunt—one which all who knew the Great Bear understood as his final punctuation before considering a matter closed—and turned to descend the stairs, his sons and retainers following as smoothly as one of Shihobu’s machines.

Just outside the gates of the Kaiu Wall, the forces of the Crab moved into position, waiting for the word of the man who once again stared impassively into the distance. As the others around him shifted from foot to foot, or shrugged to adjust where their *sode* armor sat on their shoulders, Hida Kisada waited, as tall and impassive as the cedars that rose beyond the Wall’s protection. To the daimyō of the Hida, armor had always felt as comfortable as his own skin—although, feeling the beginning of an ache at the base of his neck, he wished the weight of years sat on him half so well.

The Crab forces waited patiently as each of their units arrayed themselves into formation, and Kisada carefully counted each of their number, measuring them against the plan in his mind. One by one, his commanders surrounded him and his eldest son—who stood at his right, cracking his neck and throwing back his shoulders like a dog straining at the leash—until the Hiruma daimyō arrived, her steps as silent as snowfall. Kisada’s dark eyes met hers a moment and locked, asking a wordless question answered by her small nod.

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“The court is arrayed,” stated Kuni Yori, in his sibilant half-whisper of a voice. “We await your orders, Hida-ue.”

Kisada nodded at his generals and withdrew his *gunbai* from his belt, raising it aloft—all around him, the shifting of thousands of bodies came to an abrupt halt, the great clack of legions of troops coming to order echoing across the vast landscape. Each gesture of his war fan meant a shifting of stones across the wooden wilderness of a game board, and the movement of hundreds along the windswept plains of the Shadowlands. A point and left-to-right sweep of the war fan sent the shugenja of the Kuni to the flanks to prevent the enemy from cutting off a retreat back to the Wall. A point and right-to-left, and the Hiruma scouts raised their bows, *daikyū* above the Wall and *hankyū* below. A point upward with a backward flick, and the siege engines atop the Wall were readied, the grinding of their mechanisms audible even from hundreds of feet away.

Finally, the troops settled into their positions, and Kisada lowered the *gunbai* a moment, finally clicking his *mempō* into place, the steel and gold faceplate hiding all but his focused eyes. He raised the war fan once more, holding it high in the air as his generals looked on nervously: the balance of life and death on a winged wand of iron, emblazoned with the Crab Clan symbol. Moments passed as though the world were taking a final breath.

Then the *gunbai* sliced forward, and the world erupted into chaos as battle was joined.

Shrieking hordes of *bakemono* ran forward—some actually aflame, for what the goblins thought of as an “honor”—and scores of them fell, riddled with Hiruma arrows.

A hideous tentacled horror rose roaring from the enemy ranks, but its roars turned into shrieks as a well-aimed rock from a Kaiu catapult found its mark, the monster writhing in agony before shuddering and going still.

The shambling forces of undead attempted to push against their southern flank, but the prayers of the Kuni shugenja fractured the earth beneath their feet, shattering them against the ground.

Above all this chaos rose the towering form of Hida Kisada, *gunbai* sweeping through the air, guiding the Crab forces as tiles on a board, rising to meet threats and bring them low.

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Suddenly a hellish shriek split the air: a detachment of *onikage*, ridden by the foul undead samurai known simply as the Lost, burst forth from enemy lines, sweeping in a scythe-like maneuver and heading directly toward the heart of the Hida forces.

Kisada frowned. He had set his troops to tease the enemy into striking from the left, to seize them in a pincer maneuver—he had even chosen this spot for his command post, about a hundred meters from the Wall, for its rough terrain. To attack them from the right, through an area meant to disrupt swift charges, and where the Crab's defense was strongest, seemed a move ill considered for even the most foolish of the Shadowlands spawn. Still, the onikage were powerful creatures, and the Lost even more so.

In his mind, Kisada saw a game piece pushed forward by the enemy, breaking the lines as its own troops fell away: its best forces in one attack, counting on just enough surviving to strike at the heart of its opponent's command. He was only too glad to make this attempt a futile one.

The gunbai hissed through the air, sending a *naginata*-wielding detachment forward. Even against the unearthly speed of the undead horses, the bladed spears of the Crab troops slashed with deadly efficiency, sending armored corpses flying as their mounts gave eerie screams and crashed to the ground. As the remaining Lost staggered to their feet, more troops flooded in to engage the enemy—and Yakamo, no longer able to restrain his bloodlust, gave a great bellow and lunged into the fray.

Kisada growled at his son's foolishness and opened his mouth to call him back—just as the ground shook beneath his feet, and the standard sounds of battle coalesced into screams of terror. A vast shape, black and rough as stone, burst out from behind the shattered mass of onikage and crashed through the Crab troops like a meteor, scattering bodies in its wake.

So the strike at the command had been genuine after all. But he had misidentified what the enemy's most powerful force was—when he had sent his troops to deal with the cavalry, he had left himself exposed. An uncharacteristic curse slipped from his lips as he brought his *kanabō* up just in time to block the twisted black blade of his opponent, the impact sending the Crab Clan Champion staggering backward.

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Kisada's enemy stretched itself to its full monstrous height: an *oni*, its massive bulk armored in chunks of chipped obsidian, its eyes burning like the fires of Jigoku itself. "Crab Champion!" the beast thundered, pointing its misshapen saber at Kisada. "You and your troops will fall! I will take great joy in tearing off your limbs and devouring you alive, like the meat you are."

Kisada allowed himself a smile, dangerous and thin as the blade of a knife, and held his war club at the ready before him. "Then let us begin," he declared, and the oni leapt forth with a howl.

The world around the champion seemed to fall away, all complexity stripped free as cloth before flames. There was only he and the oni, strike and parry, lunge and dodge. The oni roared in anger as the champion's iron club shattered one of the obsidian plates lashed over his demonic body; the champion bit back a groan as the beast's backhand caught his thigh, sending him briefly stumbling to one knee. A chuckle from the monster became a strangled grunt of surprise as Kisada's lunging swipe caught it under the chin, cracking part of its jaw and spattering the ground below with sticky black blood. The aged champion grunted as he blocked another strike with his *kanabō*, his joints howling with pain as they never had in his youth. Age was another opponent he faced, and his best defense was simply to shut it away—an act well-rehearsed with the pragmatism and stubbornness for which his clan was so well-known.

Suddenly the oni bellowed in surprise: more black blood splattered onto the ground, and a lone *bushi* appeared with *ōtsuchi* in hand, the warhammer slick with gore. The figure took a moment to duck its head to Kisada and hurriedly begged forgiveness for the interruption. Kisada, still in the haze of battle, only grunted a reply. The two joined against the creature, the smaller warrior acting as distraction while Kisada broke more of the beast's armor, the foul obsidian shattering into pieces, bits embedding themselves in the creature's flesh. The oni growled and took another step forward, making as if to swing its blade at both its assailants—

—and howled in pain as the ground gave away beneath its left leg, burying it up to the knee. The oni roared in anger and confusion, jerking as its leg was further pinioned, lashed down by rough ropes and spiked into the earth. Small furry creatures scattered

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within the hole, scurrying away into tunnels within the earth. Hiruma Yoshino's strange plan had worked, then.

He whirled at the feeling of the bushi's hand on his arm.

"Forgive me, my lord!" the warrior yelled. "But the battlefield is in disarray! Sukune-sama craves your signals. I can hold this beast here while you disengage!"

The haze cleared, and the chaos of the battlefield returned—Kisada heard at once the roars of more oni, and the screams of his troops. Gone was the red-tinged mist of combat, and the game board slid into the champion's mind once more. He clapped his hand upon the bushi's and nodded, and turned away as the warrior ran at the restrained monster, hammer in hand. The image was lost in moments as Kisada retreated, and the battle swallowed the pair.

Kisada turned back toward the Wall to see Yakamo laughing with bloodlust and smashing a trio of Lost warriors to bone splinters. With a bellow, he called his son's name, and the young man started as if in a dream, then wordlessly ran to his father's side. Through scores of surging goblins and Lost, and the madness of a hundred small fights, they pushed back to the edge of the Wall, where Hiruma Yoshino and her archers were nocking and firing arrows as quickly as their hands could move. Yakamo grabbed one of them, who yelped and nearly dropped his bow in surprise.

"Prepare the signal!" Kisada commanded, and the archer hurriedly grabbed a special reed arrow and shot it into the sky. As it arced upward, a plume of fine red dust trailed after the missile, and then it plunged toward the ground with a piercing shriek that echoed across the field.

Almost instantly, the Crab forces began to withdraw, pulling back toward the Wall, and with a howl of triumph, the Shadowlands forces started to follow them...

Then Kisada raised his gunbai high, and the sudden backward strike of the war fan was echoed by a twanging chorus from above the Wall as countless mechanisms released at once. The front lines of the advancing forces had just enough time to scream—if they were able, and not voiceless like the undead—before they were obliterated by every rock, stake, and boulder the Kaiu siege engines were able to fire.

For a brief moment, there was dust and silence. Then Kisada's

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war fan waved once more, and the troops returned to the field, bloodied but determined to continue.

Smoke, oily and black, billowed upward from the pyre of the Shadowlands dead, as bodies—smelly goblins, crumpled Lost, chunks of oni—were thrown onto the growing pile by a group of peasants covered head to toe in dirty brown robes. The Mudcrows were a common sight after battles, either drawn by the need for coin or commanded to as punishment for some crime. It was easy to tell one from the other, as the ones supporting families carried trinkets to ward off the Shadowlands Taint: charms tied to sleeves, lockets holding papers with prayers scrawled on them, chipped bracelets on thin wrists. They surely knew charms were worthless against such a grave evil—only blessed materials like jade showed any signs of preventing the physical and mental corruption inherent in the Shadowlands and its creatures.

The Mudcrows splashed oil wherever the pyre's flames faltered, forcing it to choke down its vile meal of death. There were more here, he realized suddenly, than he'd ever seen in one place before. There had been many battles in his life and aches such as the ones he felt now. But today had been different. Both his aches and the conflicts had been growing worse. One day, his strength would not be sufficient to master either of them.

The sound of a stomping gait approached, and the daimyō knew before he heard the voice who it was. “Quite the battle!” Yakamo exulted, laughing with pride. “And this is hardly the only pyre for the enemy dead. Next time the Shadowlands scum should just save us all the trouble and throw themselves into the fire directly!”

Kisada remained silent, and this time Yakamo seemed oblivious, recounting how he had taken down a trio of goblins with a single swipe of his tetsubō. The clan champion turned his head slowly, and a nearby samurai hurried to his side, long since accustomed to his master’s subtle gestures.

“My lord?”

“There was a bushi who aided me against an obsidian-clad oni, allowing me to withdraw and focus my attention elsewhere.” Kisada commanded softly. “Find out what has become of the samurai, and report back to me immediately.” The retainer bowed crisply and

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retreated, and Kisada turned his attention back toward the Kaiu Wall just in time to see a messenger jogging toward him. Yakamo made as if to intercept the woman, but stopped as the messenger held up a cloth with O-Ushi's personal seal, bowing to them both.

"My lords, I beg your pardon. Lady Hida has returned, and she has asked that I request your presence in the parade grounds. Her brother Lord Sukune has been summoned as well." Kisada grunted acceptance and gestured for the messenger to lead the way, and he and his eldest son followed.

"It's a shame you didn't slay the oni yourself, father," Yakamo drawled as they walked. "Especially one clad in obsidian. Imagine the glory of the kill! You—"

Kisada stopped short, and Yakamo stumbled a moment in confusion, turning to look up at his father as the daimyō crossed his arms over his chest and drew himself up to his full height. "Have I need of glory, eldest? Do you think the Hida family requires it? Or all of the Crab, do we seek such things?"

Yakamo opened his mouth to reply, but a gesture from his father shut it again.

"You must learn this lesson well, eldest," Kisada said, keeping his voice low. "Strength is a grand thing. Yours reminds me much of my own, when I was your age. But strength is iron, meant to be tempered. And glory is as fine a thing, but it is nothing without pragmatism. Remember that." Yakamo nodded—a bit sullen but properly humbled—and with a knowing grunt, Kisada began walking again. His son and their retinue smoothly followed after.

O-Ushi and her troops waited in the large courtyard just inside the Kaiu Wall's gates, armor splashed with black blood, and a small group of prisoners—bakemono and an ogre—chained in a line behind them. As Yakamo and Kisada approached, Sukune ran down the last steps from the Wall, out of breath and wheezing slightly, and O-Ushi gestured quickly for one of her retainers to offer her sickly sibling a drink from her canvas waterskin. "Be at ease, Brother, I have survived," she said kindly, concern evident in her voice.

"I see that—not all of your troops—were as fortunate," Sukune replied, catching his breath. "That and your prisoners make me wary. I expected a smaller number to try and break through our lines."

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O-Ushi's expression grew grim. "Actually, two groups tried to break through the Wall. The goblins snuck through the pipe that Kaiu Shihobu mentioned, but the ogre and his brethren actually climbed over a shorter section of wall. That was where my troops were lost—but we were able to capture one all the same. I'll make certain to give him to Kuni Yori-sama, per his earlier request."

The color drained from Sukune's already-pale face, and he staggered a moment, the implication of the dangers seizing on him. Yakamo growled and ground his teeth, tensing his hands on the hilts of his weapons. Only Kisada remained outwardly calm, nodding slowly. "Send a pair of shugenja to the sites of the battles to check the area for Taint—and make sure they are well equipped with jade." Sukune made to open his mouth to protest, but nodded instead.

"I will check our stores, Father." He sighed. "I know there will not be much, but I will do what I can. I pray they will not need it."

The tension was disrupted by the appearance of the samurai whom Kisada had spoken with earlier, striding in from the gate. Two brown-clad peasants trailed after him, carrying a covered body on a stretcher. "I beg my lord's pardon," he said with a deep bow. "But I searched the battlefield as you asked. The oni clad in obsidian is dead—found with a hammer buried in its skull."

"Unfortunately, as we moved the oni, we found this body in its grasp." The samurai walked over and pulled the sheet back, revealing the still form of the bushi, splattered with the black blood of the oni. "It seems they gave their own life to kill the beast."

Kisada walked slowly over, noting for the first time that the crest on the bushi's helmet was Hida, that of his own family. The strap that held the mempō in place on the helmet was snapped, and the daimyō carefully lifted the mask aside. The retainer gasped, and Kisada was deeply grateful that the man's exclamation covered his own shock.

"Ah, Hida Tomonatsu," the samurai said. "She was a promising warrior. Fortune can be cruel. At least she died well."

The bushi's face was still, almost peaceful, eerily young to be clad in such armor, and splattered with such gore. Kisada looked up to see O-Ushi gazing at him, and for a moment something in him trembled like the plucked string of a *shamisen*. He recalled the first

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moment each of his children wore armor—Yakamo, nearly popping out of his first set, even at an early age; Sukune, stumbling under its weight; and O-Ushi, confident as if she was born to wear it.

Confident as Tomonatsu had been when she stood next to him, facing the oni by his side.

“Give her a proper funeral, with all honors,” he heard himself saying, pulling the sheet back over her as he pulled his wits back together, locking his emotions back under his armor. “She honored her family, and served her daimyō well.”

The samurai bowed, and he and the peasants shuffled away with Tomonatsu’s body.

Behind him, Kisada heard his children talking—Yakamo and O-Ushi discussing their respective battles, Sukune speaking to a retainer about finding what jade they could—but the Crab Clan Champion hardly registered it. Instead, he watched the train of Mudcrows bringing in casualties: some to the infirmary, shrieking for aid; others to their families to be cleaned and redressed in simple robes before cremation, their personal effects passed on in accordance with tradition. Still others were laid out in rows, so infected with the Taint they were to be burned immediately in the smaller courtyard beyond the parade grounds, where servants ferried logs of rough-cut cedar for their pyres. For long moments, he beheld the rows of the dead, neat as pieces on a game board. The most corrupted of them would be burned in their armor, leaving nothing to send back to their families but a note of thanks and regret. It would not be on a paper so fine as the Emperor’s, but it would mean something. To the Crab, at least.

Hida Kisada’s eyes finally moved upward, following the plumes of dark smoke—on both sides of the Wall, fed by the bodies of enemy and ally alike—snaking like black fingers up into the sky.

How much smoke would it take for the Emperor to act? Or would all of Rokugan have to be aflame for his majesty to notice?

Risen from the Flames

By Robert Denton III

A week later, in the Phoenix lands to the east...

Tsukune was midstride across the threshold of the forest shrine before she realized her mistake. She winced as her right foot touched the blessed ground on the other side of the *torii* arch before her left. Before her peers and in the home of her ancestors, she'd barged into her family's shrine like a Lion.

When they had both progressed beyond the entrance, Tsukune whispered to the man matching her stride. "I did it again."

"No one noticed," Tadaka replied. "Just keep going."

Tsukune tucked her hands into her kimono sleeves and matched her pace with that of her charge, keeping their place in the wordless procession of topknots, Shiba family *mon*, and creamy white *obi*. Their path was a winding upward twist of stone steps and fiery *torii* arches. The crisp breeze stirred the sloping glades of pink moss to either side, sweeping up their petals to scatter along the way. It was a blessing in the unseasonable spring warmth, even as it painted the temple arches with thick coats of pollen.

Tadaka whispered prayers while he walked, passing a string of beads between his large hands, one jade orb at a time. He towered a full head above the rest, his elaborate layered kimono making his

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broad back into a lone banner for the Isawa family. In each backward glance he drew from the others, Tsukune saw eyes brightening with respect. Those cast at her, she could not read.

At the top of the stairs, their path finally opened into the stone temple courtyard. A mortuary tablet still stood at its center, but the other trappings of the previous day's funeral had long since been cleared away. The procession poured into the courtyard, the Shiba samurai dividing themselves into small groups as they awaited their turns in the sprawling two-story *honden*. Tsukune ladled water onto her hands and forearms, then yielded the blessed waters to the next in line. She left the smothering crowd to gaze into the nearby reflection pool, where shrine maidens fished fallen peach blossoms off its surface. In the wavering mirror at her feet, a seventeen-summers girl looked back at her.

"You're obsessing," remarked Tadaka, appearing at the pool beside her.

"I cannot make such mistakes," she whispered. "Not here. If I err during tonight's ceremony—"

"No one will notice," he reassured her. "They will be too busy watching themselves to care about you. Well," he added, "except for the ladies. They will be watching me."

Her mouth twitched upward. "I'll bet you truly believe that."

They stood in silence, watching the *miko* work: the steady dipping of the net into the glossy pond and the ceremonious sweeping of the stone rim, interwoven with the singing of nightingales.

"You know," Tadaka said, "if either of us should worry about tonight, it would be me."

"That would be a first," Tsukune replied.

"Exactly." Tadaka smiled. The wind shook the white-pink canopy, releasing a cascade of blossoms and filtered light. His eyes twinkled at the shrine maidens' distress as the flowers scattered around him. "When the breeze steals the peach tree's flowers, it appears spontaneous. But in fact, it was a planned event. That the breeze would come, that the tree would be here, that the petals should fall just so... These things were determined at the time of its birth. In light of this, what sense is there in worrying?"

"That seems fatalistic," Tsukune said.

"I take heart in it." He stepped closer to the pond. Patches of

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light moved across Tadaka's body as they reflected from the water.

"I have seen encouraging signs," he whispered. "The masters favor me...well, most of them do." He chuckled. "Tonight's ceremony will grant me the clout I need. When they see the wisdom of my plans, I will go to Crab lands to complete my research. And you will come with me. There, we will plant the seeds of the future." He paused, then softly added, "Our future."

His knuckle grazed hers. In the reflection pool, the girl's cheeks adopted the shade of the blooming camellias.

"Do my eyes deceive me, or has Isawa Tadaka-sama come down from his mountain?"

Tsukune stiffened as Tadaka grinned toward the new voice. A bright young man approached from the courtyard gathering. Above his white obi, imprinted over the chest of his elaborate silks, was a fiery wing surrounding a *naginata*, the mon of the Heaven's Wing.

Tadaka crossed his arms at the newcomer. "Tetsu-san! I was wondering when you would have the courage to approach me." They laughed together while Tsukune watched, as a child might spy on adolescents.

"Congratulations are in order," Tetsu said. "It is a great honor Master Rujo has bestowed upon you."

"I shall endeavor to be worthy of it," Tadaka replied. "I understand you too will be participating in the ceremony?"

Tetsu nodded. "Hai. Tonight, I will demonstrate sensei's additions to the Heaven's Wing *kata*. Although I will certainly fall short of his grace and expertise, I will give my all in honor of his memory."

Tsukune looked away as they chatted. Their voices faded into the ambience of the temple courtyard, a carpeting din of exchanged greetings, shouts of recognition, and steep bows. They were old, young, and *gempuku* fresh, more members of the Shiba family than she could recall ever having seen in one place. Above, the wind stirred the tapestries hanging from the slanted roofs of the stages used for the sacred dance. Gifts from other temples in other provinces, they were like the Shiba beneath them: vibrant splashes of color amid the gray stone and polished wood of the shrine. All save for one: a rustic and faded depiction of a waterfall, thrust high above a pine canopy. The column of stamps in a dry corner told

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its story: Lion in origin, completed in Phoenix lands. Among the others, its colors were faded, inexpert, and unbalanced.

Tsukune decided that she liked it. She could relate.

“After all, I must make it up to Tsukune-kun,” Tadaka teased, her name snapping Tsukune back to attention. Tadaka was perhaps the only person who could call her “kun” and get away with it. “It is because of my presence that she has no break from her *yōjimbō* duties, even when all the others do.”

She shot him a hot glare. A playful smile was his reply.

“Tsukune-san is quite diligent,” Tetsu offered. His soft smile touched his eyes. “It is good to see you again. You were missed at the Kanto festival. Some others talked, but I assured them you would have been there if your duties had permitted it.”

As she always did when she had no recourse, she merely nodded and replied, “As you say.”

Finally alone in the inner sanctum, Tsukune reverently placed her incense bowl over the hot coals. Within moments, twin coils of agarwood smoke arose, entwining the marker of the recently deceased, a lacquered box of ashes displaying a slip of paper. In the hazel candlelight, Tsukune read the words on its surface: *Shiba Ujimitsu, Champion of the Phoenix*.

Tsukune held the string of beads just as the miko had shown her. She tried not to think about what she'd overheard from that miko: that the Phoenix Champion had passed before his time. That it had strongly affected his brother. Instead, she closed her eyes and lowered her head, whispering a prayer for the spirit of the deceased.

He sat at the head of the banquet hall during the gempuku ceremony at which she had come of age. She recalled how he had appeared then, his squat frame and plain features mismatched with his glorious winged *kataginu* jacket, unfurled broadly as if to take flight. To his right was the seat belonging to his most promising student, another seat of high honor. Shiba Tetsu sat there on that day, in the seat she imagined would have otherwise gone to her brother—had he been alive.

A clatter resounded from outside. The memory faded. Tsukune looked up at the stone statue of Shiba, the founder of her family.

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He was kneeling in this depiction. It seemed larger to her now than ever before. Outside, she heard the chiding of a priestess as she directed the shrine maidens in preparation for the ceremony.

Just one night. Then she and Tadaka would return to their simple lives. To their future together.

Quietly, she reached into her white obi and withdrew a thin cloth. Frayed at the edges, no longer than her forearm, the plain cotton still displayed the cracked mon of her brother's dojo. Her fingers clasped the cloth, his *tenugui*. She released a quiet breath. And for a moment, it was as if he were here, removing this cloth from his forehead and wrapping it around the tiny scrape on her knee, smiling at his little sister.

"I will do my best," she whispered. Above, the stone face of Shiba looked down at her.

In the moonlit courtyard before the shrine, Tetsu's slender naginata traced the stars with its blade. It spun in silver arcs around him, not pausing between his steps. Tsukune saw not two entities, man and blade, but one body in a dance of light and steel and emptiness. Encoded into each graceful gesture was the death of an invisible opponent, each silk-rustling swing a final breath. Tetsu froze, one foot tucked behind the other knee, balanced on a single leg, spear outthrust. In that moment, he became a bamboo rod floating on a stream that reflected the sky.

Tetsu placed his weapon on its stand and pressed his forehead to the ground. As he rose, the courtyard brightened with the afterglow of his performance. The fiery braziers licked moths from the night air in their jealousy. He returned to his seat, a lone *sakura* among the gathered maples.

There was none other who could have performed the Heaven's Wing kata so flawlessly, not even if Ujimitsu were alive. If the late champion still dwelled in this world, surely it was in the skill of his highest pupil.

A dull chime raked the sky, signaling the Hour of the Rat. The collective witnesses of the courtyard turned as one to face the temple entrance. The shrine's painted doors slid aside. As one, the Shiba bowed. Among the procession of shrine maidens, priests, and *shugenja* that silently entered the courtyard, Tsukune caught

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the glint of moonlight tracing the edges of a lacquered palanquin.

Resting on a cypress stand was a curved sword. The detailed feathers intricately carved into its sheath drew the light of the braziers, glowing crimson and burnished gold. Even from where she sat, Tsukune could see each pearl set into its manta-skin handle, the untouched ribbons of silk woven flawlessly around its pommel, and the curved bronze wings that were its *tsuba* handguard.

Ofushikai. The ancestral sword of the Phoenix, wielded by every Phoenix Clan Champion since the dawn of the Empire.

The last to leave the shrine were five figures in elaborate silk robes, their winged kataginu each marked with a different mon of an element captured within a perfect ring. As they entered the open night, Tsukune recalled the five elements as Tadaka had long ago taught her: Fire, Water, Air, Earth, and Void. Five natural elements, and one Elemental Master for each.

At last, she spotted Isawa Tadaka as he took his place beside the Master of Earth. Tadaka looked even more resplendent than before in his ceremonial robes. The empty space in his backward-cast shadow tugged at her, but she walled her heart against the instinct to join him and remained in her seat. Only those beloved by the *kami* could preside over this part of the ceremony. If he felt odd without Tsukune there, he gave no sign. Towering over his sensei and half his age, Tadaka was a tall pine beside a withered oak. There were other apprentices as well, one for each Elemental Master. As one, they lowered their heads, lips moving in unison. Their words did not carry to the crowd, instead rising directly to the Heavens.

Tsukune instinctively felt the weight of another's gaze. From his seat upon the courtyard dais, the temporary lord of Shiba Castle looked at her: Shiba Sukazu, former *hatamoto* of the clan champion, as well as his brother. The braziers cut faint wrinkles into his face and lit the streak of silver that adorned his temples. The white of his obi nearly glowed, as did the scroll clutched in his hands. The final words of Shiba Ujimitsu, his death poem, were enclosed within that scroll.

She froze in his expressionless gaze, the guilt of having met his eyes flooding her face with heat as she struggled to identify what mistake she had made to draw his attention. But there came no reprisal from the castle's lord. He merely nodded, then returned

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his attention to the ceremony. She followed suit, head swimming in the wake of her relieved sigh.

The first apprentice to step forward was she who accompanied the Master of Air. Five shrine maidens surrounded her. The rhythmic sound of *taiko* drumming filled the clearing. Each thundering boom was a slap against Tsukune's heart. As the maidens weaved in an elaborate dance, the shugenja drew a small conch shell and placed it against her lips. As the sound reverberated throughout the crowd, a gust of wind raked the canopy, sending down a shower of white peach blossoms. The kami had accepted the offering.

It was Tadaka's turn now. With his ceremonial robes and impressive stature, he dominated the clearing. The shrine maidens shifted their dance. It was heavier now, more centered. Tadaka held out a ceramic bowl, revealing a verdant sprout within. He rotated through his prayer beads with the other hand, murmuring inwardly. Slowly at first, then all at once, the sprout parted and bloomed with white petals.

Tsukune winced as gasps arose from those around her. They swiftly grew quiet again, but even so, she could imagine the elders' thoughts about this younger, more unruly generation.

Next was the student of Fire. The sacred dance shifted into lively steps and energetic twists. The young man drew a candle and offered it with an outward thrust. He closed his eyes and murmured. The light of the courtyard flickered and grew with each inwardly whispered prayer. The crowd craned their necks, all eyes on the candlewick.

The student stopped. His eyes opened. Nothing changed. He blinked his confusion. Then came a loud cry as one of the courtyard tapestries burst into flame.

The crowd swung toward the sudden flash of light. Fire consumed the aged fabric. A gust of wind tore at the flames, lighting the shrine's thatched roof ablaze.

Tsukune felt bodies push at her. Screams pierced the night as servants broke from their stations and ran. Shiba Sukazu rose, but his face did not change. His mouth moved, giving commands. The assembled samurai burst into action, evacuating the courtyard, fetching water. Some ran toward the shrine. She realized she was one of them.

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The fire greedily peeled off hard strips of lacquer, tossing them aside before biting deep into the ancient wood beneath. Already it had touched ground, like spilled paint.

The Elemental Masters stood unmoving near the burning shrine. Their illuminated faces watched the spreading flames with calm interest, as if they were reading a scroll or judging a painting. Two seemed to exchange words, but Tsukune could not hear them. A piece of smoldering tile broke against the ground beside the Master of Water. She did not even flinch. And Tadaka watched among them, the lone remaining student in the courtyard, indistinguishable save for his massive silhouette.

Tsukune ran to his side and found her breath. She seized his arm. "Tadaka-sama! It's too dangerous. Come with me."

"No!" Tadaka's uncharacteristic bark froze the blood in Tsukune's veins. He spun, eyes glowing, his outline traced in orange light. "Forget me! The inner shrine! The library!" Genealogies, prayers, star maps, incantations. Priceless knowledge. Irreplaceable.

Someone ran past her. As she turned toward the shrine, she glimpsed Shiba Tetsu, his resplendent silks fluttering with his dash. As he leaped into the flaming shrine, his face was that of a man at peace. And then he was gone, swallowed up by the light.

She followed. The heat pricked her flesh and tears fell from her stinging eyes, but she pushed forward toward the inner sanctum, where Tetsu must have gone. All was blazing yellow light or iron-black smoke. She could not continue. Spinning around, she saw no exit. Only a few steps away, her path was curtained with flames. Should they be so fast? She remembered her brother's *tenugui* and pulled it from her *obi*. Pressing it to her face and sucking air through the fabric, she crouched low beneath the smoke and looked for options.

Above the fire's din, she heard a desperate voice. "Help us, please!" It came from the side room that had once been the administrative office. There, she found two servants and a shrine maiden. One servant was pinned beneath burning furniture, the other calling for help. The miko just stared as flames cascaded down the walls.

Tsukune slammed the case of shelves with her shoulder. It

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rocked, but it did not budge. The cloth fell from her hands as she pushed. The shrine maiden, snapped out of her trance, appeared by her side and did the same. Together they forced the case away. Tsukune did not have to look at the man's leg to know it would be no use to him.

A river of smoke rolled above them. Tsukune searched for an exit and found none—none but the flame-licked wall before her: a wooden frame, thick paper, and thin plaster.

"This way!" she shouted, and with all of her strength, she threw herself against it.

The heat seared her cheek, and the flames curled around her. But the paper wall broke, tearing a jagged hole into the shrine's garden. She fell into a bush and rolled into a facedown pile. Behind her, the miko led the limping servants out of the burning portal and into the night.

Tsukune started to rise, but froze. She was at the feet of a man in grand ceremonial robes, his shadow splayed behind him like unfurled wings. The mon of the Elemental Master of Fire beamed proudly on his chest. He stared into the flames, hands pressed tight against a long string of amber beads. His face was stone serious, yet prayers tumbled out in his rising voice in a tone that was almost pleading. He twisted his palms. The string snapped with a loud pop, scattering beads to the ground.

By the time the final bead fell, the last of the shrine's flames were extinguished. The Master closed his eyes and whispered, "Thank you, kami of flame, for accepting this gift."

Tsukune watched curling trails of smoke rise from a prayer bead lying inches from her face.

The next moments flooded quickly by as the Phoenix Clan samurai took stock of the damage. The honden fared better than it had seemed. Thanks to Shiba Sukazu's commands and the expertise of the Master of Fire, the flames had never reached the inner sanctum, nor the holy-of-holies. One third of the outer structure was destroyed, but the remaining sections had not collapsed. Other than a broken *shimenawa* rope now emptied of its hosted spirit, relatively little of importance was lost. The shrine maidens would begin floating lanterns down the babbling stream to guide the lost spirit back to the shrine while a new blessed rope was prepared.

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The priests gave offerings in the hope that the shrine's state would not offend those remaining. In time, these scars would heal.

Some Shiba stepped out of the shrine. They carried artifacts, documents, and a hearth's worth of ashes and burns. Seeing herself in the reflection pool, Tsukune noted she had fared no better. Dark smudges marked her cheeks and forehead, and her dark-brown hair was now black and stiff. Her good kimono was flame-licked, stained, and sooted. She frowned and smacked the ash from her sleeves.

Then she looked back through the hole she'd torn in the shrine wall. Beyond the yawning portal stretched a black layer of charcoal petals and wisps of smoke. She stared at the place where she recalled having dropped her brother's cloth. Now it was like him: only scattered ash, nothing of him left in this world.

"Tsukune!"

The voice was Tetsu's. He was with the Elemental Masters, returning the pine box of Ujimitsu's ashes, which he had rescued from the flames. A cache of ancient scrolls peeked from a satchel slung around his immaculate kimono. He approached Tsukune, eyes wide with concern. Although he smelled of smoke, he hadn't even the faintest hint of ash or burn.

"Are you okay?" he asked. "You shouldn't just leap into a burning building like that, Tsukune-san!"

She just stared at him, charred and sooty, like a bird with singed wings.

"Come with us," whispered the Master of Fire as he stepped beside Tadaka. "You need to hear this."

Tadaka nodded, following the Master of Fire to the cabal of Elemental Masters to ensure their words would be private. He stood beside his sensei, Isawa Rujo, the Master of Earth, and ignored the older man's disapproving eyes.

"Your student has accepted full responsibility, Tsuke-sama," said Rujo.

The Fire Master's frown deepened. "It is a shame that I must dismiss him. He showed great promise."

"It cannot be helped," Rujo replied. "We must preserve face and prevent a panic. He is noble to have done what is necessary."

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“Even so,” murmured the Master of Fire.

“It has gotten...worse,” breathed the decrepit Master of Air. He leaned on a jade-studded cane and struggled over a few breaths while the others waited. “We cannot...keep waiting for the imbalance...to correct itself. We must...become directly...involved.”

The Master of Water nodded. Her face was hidden behind twin waterfalls of black hair cascading from her cone-shaped hat. “Even a pebble will cause ripples. The other clans will soon have questions. Better that the Phoenix provide the answers.”

“Perhaps it would be wiser to temporarily suspend the ceremony,” Rujo suggested. “The destruction of the shrine is an ill omen.”

One by one, they turned to the Master of Void. Isawa Ujina had already drawn a circle on the ground. Rising, he reached into one of his many pouches, procuring a handful of polished stones. As the others watched, he tossed them into the circle. Then he squatted beside it and studied the stones with a deeply furrowed brow.

Tadaka stepped forward. “Father?”

“The ceremony must continue,” Ujina looked back. “The Phoenix Clan needs a champion.”

Tsukune took her place in the ring of Shiba. To her right stood Tetsu, eyes reverently lowered. Even Shiba Sukazu joined the circle. They all stood together, shoulder by shoulder, with the Master of Void at the center. In the Master’s hands rested the ancestral sword of the Phoenix.

“Ofushikai,” the Ujina spoke, “We humbly beg you, reveal to us your chosen.” Then, he turned to the man directly before him and bowed, extending his arms and offering the sword.

Shiba Sukazu received it with a lowered head. He held it for a few moments while the others watched. Ujina rose. From her position on the other side of the circle, Tsukune detected relief in Sukazu’s smile.

Sukazu turned to the Shiba at his right and offered the blade. It was accepted. The samurai held the blade, but when nothing happened, he bowed his head and offered it again. The blade passed from one Shiba to the next, slowly and reverently, beneath the ever-present eyes of the Void Master.

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Tsukune glanced at Tetsu and caught his concerned look. He smiled reassuringly at her. She returned the expression. The mon of the Heaven's Wing and the personal chop of Shiba Ujimitsu on his shoulders both glowed in the moonlight coating his flawless kimono.

It will be you, Tetsu-sama, she thought. Her smile broadened. *As it should be.*

She bowed when the sword came. It was lighter than the sword of her mother, as if the sheath were empty. For fleeting moments, she watched the moonlight dance along the edges of the bronze handguard and the exquisite pearls inlaid on the sword's hilt. The sheath was exquisitely carved from a single piece of wood, as if real feathers had simply petrified around the blade. She couldn't find a single flaw. The ancient sword lacked the drastic curve of a true katana and the benefits of modern smithing, yet it looked and felt as though it had just been forged. This would be the only time she would ever hold this sword. She held her breath to make the moment last just a little longer.

She turned to Tetsu. *The greatest honor will be passing Ofushikai to you, Tetsu-sama.*

The sword jutted out from the sheath, exposing one inch of flawless blade.

Isawa Ujina gasped. Tsukune froze. From the circle arose whispers and exchanged glances. Across the ring, Sukazu smiled. Tsukune looked to Tetsu. His eyes were wide saucers. Like hers.

"It has chosen!" Ujina announced. Her mouth opened, but nothing came out. He locked her gaze, smiling, clasping her arms. "It is you, Shiba Tsukune, Champion of the Phoenix!"

Not even the chirps of nocturnal frogs filled the silence befalling the courtyard. Tsukune wanted to shatter it, to tell them it was a mistake. She couldn't be the one. It wasn't possible.

But to contradict the Master of Void was unthinkable. So instead, she lowered her head, and her voice finally returned. "As you say." She knelt before the Isawa and swore to serve.

Tsukune was alone in the inner sanctum. Moonlight fell in thick shafts through burned holes in the ceiling. They painted her new winged kataginu in silver patches. In her obi rested the map of Shiba Castle and the surrounding province—her new home. She considered lighting incense before the statue of Shiba and the

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shrine to Ujimitsu, but the notion twisted her gut. This place already smelled of burnt cypress and ash. Were Tadaka here, she would let him light the incense so as not to offend the present spirits. But Tadaka was not here. And after tomorrow, when he returned to his duties, she would remain behind.

She looked down at Ofushikai as it rested in her hands, feeling its weight and the grooves of its carved sheath. Her clumsy hands against the flawless sword were calloused, rough, and dirty. Not like the graceful hands of Shiba Tetsu, hands that had never even had the chance to touch this blade. Now they never would.

In the moment after she was chosen, his eyes were dim and he'd barely concealed a frown. When the blade jutted from its sheath, had it been extending itself to him?

A rapid breath came. Then another. Then a constant stream of them. Her chest tightened as cold hands squeezed her heart. She was drowning. She was burning. She fell upward through the yawning gap of the ceiling. Clouds covered the moon. Thoughts spilled out of her mind like an overfull cup. *It's a mistake. You shouldn't be here. It's wrong. This is all wrong.*

A gentle weight on her shoulder. Eyes opening. The shrine was still here. She was still here. There was a floor beneath her feet and moonlight filtering through the ceiling. Fireflies had come into the shrine. They flashed, suspended in the air, blinking into and out of existence. Outside, the wind stirred the trees. Inside, all was still.

Tsukune still felt something on her shoulder, a light touch resting, but there was nothing there. She curled her fingers around Ofushikai's handle and, after a moment, drew the sword halfway from its sheath. In the reflection of its mirrored blade, she saw the face of a seventeen-summers girl.

And behind her, the face of Ujimitsu. Gone were his weathered wrinkles and his glorious winged kataginu. He wore simple rustic garb and the hint of a smile. His hand rested on her shoulder. Beyond him were dozens of Phoenix warriors. Old, young, female, and male, their clothes ranging from recent to antique, they filled the chamber, their glowing bodies filtering the light of the moon and casting no shadows. Generations of Phoenix Clan Champions, all standing with her, all offering that same subtle smile.

A thought came in a voice that was not hers, yet sounded so

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familiar. *You will never be alone, Tsukune.*

She sheathed the blade and released a silent breath.

"I will do my best," she whispered. Above, the stone face of Shiba smiled upon her.

Curved Blades

By Ree Soesbee

Far to the west, in Unicorn lands...

Courtiers in a rainbow of gleaming, elegant robes bowed gracefully as she passed, like flowers overburdened by dew. She smiled, her thoughts focusing not on the courtiers but instead on the celebration around them and the riders in the field.

Scimitars clashed beneath the bright sun, the finely honed edges of their dancing blades flashing prismatic light about the courtyard. Two samurai dressed in the purple and white of the Unicorn Clan fought on a verdant green swath, their display of swordsmanship drawing the attention of the surrounding courtiers, performers, and children alike. Between the waving fans and soft laughter, jugglers gamed, musicians played, and riders performed feats of athletics on the backs of magnificent, prancing steeds.

It was a special day, a festival day. The palace—with its grey slate and whitewashed lumber, stiff and proud—was bedecked with flowers and colorful emblems of purple and white to celebrate the occasion. A warm wind blew banners like candle flames flickering above the curled awnings.

Shinjo Altansarnai walked down the central pathway of the castle grounds, wearing close-fitting trousers suited for riding

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along with a purple *keikogi* top folded in elaborate ripples over an underrobe of silver and gold. Whereas others wore their swords through their *obi* belts, Altansarnai's curved weapon hung in a sheath from a frog by her side, and a knife hilt glittered above the top of her boot.

"Shinjo-sama," a guest spoke, a Crane courtier with an ever-flickering fan. "Congratulations on your upcoming wedding." His soft-blue robes were the color of the summer sky, and his white hair hung down below his waist, braided throughout with gold and silver cords.

She granted the Crane a thin smile of thanks, continuing toward the edge of the riding arena. Before she could answer, a display of magic in the courtyard caught their attention. There, a Unicorn *shugenja* raised her hands, calling on ancient names in the manner of *meishōdō*. She held aloft two small ivory carvings, which were older than living memory. As she called upon the talismans in a gentle, reverent voice, they glowed in reddish tones. Dark tendrils of magic coiled about, illuminated by inner fireworks that shifted and played amid the rippling darkness. Around the edges of the field, Unicorn samurai applauded in appreciation. The rest of the courtiers fell silent, eyes shifting away from the display, their fans rising like a winter breeze.

"Such magic...it is an unusual display. We, of the Empire, are not used to seeing the spirits treated so," the courtier said cautiously.

Of course, the strict traditionalists would balk at the Unicorn's unusual ways. "The name-magic of *meishōdō* is the tradition of our people." The Crane quailed, but Altansarnai did not pause. "No matter what the Phoenix *shugenja* say, it is ours to master and ours to control."

"But your clan has been here for more than two hundred years," the Crane pressed gently. "Surely such dangerous traditions can be left behind?"

The horses rode in circles, pacing their strides in unison as riders stood upon their backs. With a shout, the Unicorn performers leapt from one steed to another, exchanging places to the delight of the audience. Their breeches caught the wind, blowing tightly against their legs as they danced a-horseback. Curved scimitars sliced thrown oranges in two, leaving the fruit neatly severed by

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the side of the circle track.

“Look there,” she said to the Crane. “Do you see the curved blades our samurai use?” She raised a hand and pointed. “Those blades served their parents, their grandparents, and their ancestors before them. They are as sacred as your katana, and more durable. Yes, we could learn to use a straight blade, but that is not who we are. That is not what we offer to the Emperor. The Ki-Rin, our ancestors, were sent to learn about the world outside Rokugan. We were to be an unorthodox surprise against the Empire’s opponents in the Shadowlands. While we were on our travels, we chose to adopt new ways. New traditions. We blended those with the culture we brought from the Empire. Old steel, newly forged.

“Even though we are in Rokugan, many among us still choose to fight with curved swords, because our mastery of them is valuable. We carry our past forward, unifying it with the new. We remember the things we learned on our travels, and those lessons make us valuable to the Emperor.

“The Unicorn don’t leave anything behind, Doji-san. Particularly anything that makes us strong, or has saved our lives as often as *meishōdō*. The Empire will simply have to embrace pragmatism. It will have to accept our curved swords.”

“And will you carry these traditions with you when you marry into the Lion Clan, Shinjo-sama?” the Crane queried.

There was no reason to let his ignorance disrupt the beauty of the day, so Altansarnai merely replied with the sharpest of glares.

Just then, a figure across the paddock strode out of the shadows. A man, his long, dark hair pulled back into a tight knot of braids, smiled and bowed respectfully. Iuchi Daiyu. As he rose to meet her gaze, the world slowed around them. Altansarnai could not stop a shy smile from lighting her face. Nearly twenty years of companionship, and he could still make her feel like a girl being courted.

“Mother!” A samurai on the field waved, breaking the moment. Altansarnai waved in return. Shinjo Shono, her youngest son, rode his charger, his armor shining, its purple-lacquered slats woven together with silver cord. Shono was a favorite with the courtiers: young, forthright, and eager—but obedient to his mother and faithful to his clan.

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“You must be very proud.” The Crane smiled.

“I am proud. My three children have grown strong in Imperial lands. Through a thousand lives, our clan has struggled to find our home—and we have found it here, in Rokugan. My children are a sign of the past and the future combined. Our past, as Ki-Rin, and our future, as Unicorn.”

“True, Lady Shinjo Altansarnai.” The courtier’s voice stammered slightly over the foreign syllables of her name. “And I wish you well as you bow to that future.”

Nodding politely, she turned her shoulder and looked out at the field. Shinjo Shono stood first on one leg and then on the other, his horse cantering gently along below him. Riding in a circle around the enclosure, he lanced hoops with a spear. To the side, her other children—Haruko and Yasamura—cheered on their younger brother with loud cries of joy.

“Altansarnai-sama!” Altansarnai jumped slightly. The voice was loud, brash, and too close for her liking, but then again, no one had ever accused Utaku Kamoko of having much decorum. “Can you come with me?”

Altansarnai turned to regard her friend. “Kamoko-san.” She nodded. Something was wrong. “Of course.”

Back across the field, Iuchi Daiyu placed a foot into his stirrup and lunged onto his steed.

Altansarnai sighed. There would be time for enjoying the day later. She turned away from the festivities and followed the younger samurai into the castle.

The throne room of the Unicorn Clan was small for its type, rarely used and pristinely clean. It held a dais with resplendent purple pillows, a place for the champion’s battle armor, and in an alcove, a stand displaying a variety of cavalry weapons arrayed like flowers. These were old trophies, kept for centuries after their wielders had been defeated. Some were ancient Rokugani weapons; the rest came from foreign lands, from desert sands to towering mountains—all the places her clan had roamed during their time away from the Emerald Empire. The weapons were stories, once told with pride but now vestiges of a wandering freedom that set her people, the children of the wind, apart. Guards in white and purple stiffened in respect as Altansarnai entered the room. Their

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eyes were downcast, hands ready on their weapons, prepared for any movement from the figure in the center of the room.

There, kneeling on the floor between two guards, was a woman dressed all in funerary white.

Altansarnai walked to the dais and settled herself upon the tatami mat, her legs folding in a gentle movement.

"This is Asako Akari of the Phoenix Clan. She was found in one of the gardens. With these," Kamoko explained, drawing a small white-handled dagger from her belt and tossing it to the floor in front of the woman, along with a length of pure-white cord. The weapon landed with a clatter, steel glinting in the sunlight through the windows.

"A *jigai* blade?" Altansarnai frowned. *Jigai*, a form of *seppuku*, was practiced by non-warriors, those of noble blood but no military training. The rope, too, was part of the ceremony, as were the snow-white robes worn by the person seeking death.

Kamoko was a thundercloud, glowering over the captive. Altansarnai waved her back. "She is no danger, Kamoko-san. Let her speak."

Slowly, haltingly, Asako Akari murmured, "I wish to commit *jigai* in protest of your wedding." She raised her chin, a faint tremble appearing on her soft lips. The woman was only slightly younger than Altansarnai, and lovely in a quiet, composed sort of manner. Next to Kamoko, she seemed like a bird near a tiger, waiting to be eaten alive. "I...have the right to do so."

"Protest." Altansarnai remembered the recent news. "I have heard there are protests in the Lion lands. Even with a dowry of Unicorn battle steeds, the Lion are loath to see one of their respected samurai marry a Shinjo. I expected trouble from them. I did not expect it from the Phoenix."

We, of the Empire, are not used to seeing the spirits treated so. The Phoenix were even more opposed to the Unicorn Clan's magic. Had the Phoenix allowed this *jigai* because they wanted to humiliate the Unicorn? It was possible.

The woman shivered. "I wish only to give my life as my ancestors would will it, sacrificing for that which was taken from me."

"Taken from you?" Altansarnai snapped. "I am the one abdicating my position as champion to join this union. I am the

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one leaving behind my lands, my family, my..." *Iuchi Daiyu smiling, his long, dark braids spilling delicately over his shoulder.* "I am the one placing everything behind so that there may be peace. But you say we have taken something from you?"

Bowing her head, the Asako responded, "You have, great champion, though you do not know it."

Now, that was curious. Pressing the issue, Altansarnai asked, "Tell me your tale?"

"I was once Ikoma Akari, married to Lord Ikoma Anakazu, *daimyō* of the Ikoma family. For many years, we had been one household. We have a daughter—but now, for his clan and his duty, he has been ordered to put us aside." The Asako's voice gained strength in the telling. "You may believe that I dislike you, my lady. I do not. It is not your foreign ways nor your strange magic that send me to death on this day. It is love. I cannot live without him. Because he has divorced me, I will die in protest."

This woman was brazen, speaking her mind to a champion. "What do I care? Your woes are not mine. Yet, I would not see a life wasted. Can you not continue as you are, without the title? Ours is a political union, not a love match."

"No." Akari shook her head. Her eyes dimmed, and she bowed low to the floor, pressing her head and her hands against the shining floorboards. "Anakazu-sama is a man of great duty and loyalty. He will be faithful to his wife—any wife."

"And does he love you?" Love was not part of the samurai code—only duty. Still, the woman's tale surprised her. How had she not been told of this?

"He does."

A fragile stillness came upon the room.

Was this some devious Scorpion's trick? If the woman committed jigai, especially here on Unicorn lands, Altansarnai would be dishonored. The wedding would be considered unlucky in the eyes of the Fortunes. "Now that I know this, I must act. You realized that, of course?"

"This is my fate," the Asako murmured regretfully. "It is the only blow I can strike. For myself. For my daughter. It is to my great shame that I was discovered before I could complete my task."

"I told you this wedding was ill-favored." Kamoko glowered.

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“Three years we have worked toward a peace with the Lion, only to have them demand an outcome that puts her aside. What has she done wrong? Nothing.”

Altansarnai shifted in her seat. The woman’s choice of action had been brave, though ill considered. Death would not reunite her with her husband. “Kamoko-san. A wedding with Ikoma Anakazu is the only way to bring peace with the Lion Clan. If the Lion have chosen to end Anakazu’s marriage, then that is their champion’s choice.” It was disturbing to think about, but necessary. Divorces weren’t unheard-of, though they inevitably dishonored one party or the other.

“Even if it means her death.”

“According to the Rokugani, her death means nothing.”

“It means everything. She has committed no crime, performed no dishonor. Yet we rob a wife of her husband, her child of a mother. Were we not taught that family is to be honored? That life is sacred?”

“Here, in Rokugan—”

“In Rokugan, they cling to outdated customs, and they destroy lives.” The Utaku shook her head, long hair shimmering in the sunlight. “This woman is willing to die for her family. Are you not willing to live for yours? Iuchi Daiyu-sama—”

“Enough!” At the very sound of the name, Altansarnai felt heat rise in her cheeks. Her voice was as loud as a clarion call, echoing from the corners of the room. Altansarnai took a moment to compose herself, closing her eyes and rubbing her forehead with one hand. “Enough,” she said more gently, meeting Kamoko’s eyes. “Daiyu-sama is the father of my heirs and my partner. In loyalty, he supports this union. I have not put him aside.”

“He supports you, Altansarnai-sama. Not the wedding.” Kamoko said in measured tones.

Altansarnai and Daiyus’s relationship was no one’s business but their own—it was partly why they had never formally married. That, and the complications of marriage between the clan champion and a family daimyō. Still, was she being unfaithful to Daiyu? Trying to ignore her discomfort, she gazed at the tableau before her with a measuring eye. “Duty, love—they cannot always exist together. We must choose, and for my clan’s sake, I must choose

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peace. The contract is signed. We must keep our end of the deal.” She sighed at the end, adding, “What else can we do, Kamoko? We have been through this argument before.”

“It is not peace if you are a prisoner! When you agreed, you did not know he would set aside his wife like a coward, and you did not know...”

A silence fell over the room, broken only by Akari’s soft tears. Faltering, Kamoko spoke again. “These Lion! For centuries, the Ki-Rin wandered, facing dangers alone. Our clan fought and bled, struggled, and eventually returned home—only to be treated like outsiders! Our sacrifice has not been recognized. Our strength has not been respected. The Lion still refuse to acknowledge our ancestral lands; they try to claim them at every opportunity! They kill our parents, our siblings, over petty concerns of pride.

“On our own, far from home, the Ki-Rin Clan came to respect the sanctity of life. Seppuku was all but unheard-of, and punishments, while cruel, were rarely to the death. We needed every sword we could muster simply to survive.

“Our clan has returned and rediscovered our homeland. As the Unicorn, we protect Rokugan, but to remain here, we are asked to forget what we have learned and become like all the others. That is not who we are. We must not set aside the lessons of the wandering Ki-Rin. Not for the Lion. Not for anyone.”

“Great champion,” Asako Akari looked up from the floor hesitantly. “It is true: I do not understand your ways. I do not know why I am still alive to speak with you, instead of having been killed for my boldness. I cannot live without Anakazu-sama.” She breathed deeply. “There is no place for me in this world, without my family. Therefore, I beg you—either kill me, or do not marry Anakazu-sama.” Bushidō should have prevented the Phoenix from asking such a thing. Akari dishonored herself with the words, disobeying her family and betraying her honor. The woman’s statement cost her much to say aloud, but her boldness did not change the facts.

“You have no right to ask that of me.”

“Perhaps she does not.” Kamoko slowly lowered herself to her knees. “But I do.

“The Unicorn Clan respects Bushidō’s tenets, but the long years

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of travel taught us that practicality means survival. You are bound by your word, by your sense of honor—but you are ignoring what is right.” Kamoko spoke passionately, her dark eyes flashing. “Mighty champion, if I were to ask my daimyō to reconsider her plans of marriage, would she listen to me?”

“Kamoko-san,” Altansarnai shook her head. “The Lion and the Unicorn are already agreed. If I do not marry him, the clan will suffer a great loss of honor. That failure may well lead to war.” Her arms fell to her sides, the purple sleeves of her formal keikogi brushing the first knuckle of her hand. “The Lion offered this marriage as a means of finding peace. We give them a dowry of horses; they remove their claim from our southernmost lands.”

“The Lion tricked us! You did not know the cost. If you marry him, you leave the clan, and we lose a great leader. We agreed to this marriage before we knew you would become his trophy. Before we knew that by Ikoma custom, the wife takes the husband’s name and joins his lands. We did not ask for him to join your house because we did not know we needed to. It is no loss of face to claim the deal has changed, and if that saves this woman’s life, then all the better.”

Altansarnai paused. Kamoko’s arguments were sharp, and felt raw on account of her temper, but the woman was not wrong. Still, she was not thinking of duty—only of practicality. What of the possibility of a war with the Lion? Should she not accept the tradition of Rokugan and do her duty? Leave behind the traditions of her people in order to ease the tensions with another clan? To avoid war, she was considering giving up her future.

The Unicorn don’t leave anything behind.

Curved swords. It was a matter of using curved swords—finding a way to incorporate Unicorn practicality into the traditions of the Empire. Sometimes, things needed to be changed in order to become stronger. Hadn’t that been the Ki-Rin’s purpose? To find strength outside the Empire, and bring it home to empower Rokugan? This wedding was based on old traditions: traditions the Unicorn had not known to contradict. Now they were trapped, and the clan would suffer. “The Lion will not see it that way,” she said at last. “They will only see that tradition has not been followed.”

“Then we are as helpless and ill-fated as she. Marry him, and

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your spirit will die. Do not, and your honor may die instead. Either way, there is blood on your blade. This woman's *tantō* asks us—which shall we follow: spirit or duty?" said Kamoko. "Our ancestors left the Empire seeking the answer to that question. We returned with the only answer that makes sense: freedom. The freedom to choose between the two."

"Do you think I am giving up that freedom?"

"You would not choose this for yourself. You say the clan needs this—we do not need this! Our horses are swift and our swords are true. We could defeat the Lion!" The words echoed in the chamber for a long, crisp moment, tension darkening the sunlit day. Kamoko flushed, clearly embarrassed by her outburst. "I am sorry, my champion. I should not have..."

Passion was clear on Kamoko's face—too much passion. But she was right, and Altansarnai couldn't argue any further. The feeling was like a stone, sinking into her belly. If she made this choice, she opened the Unicorn up to a thousand political games. The image of the needling Crane courtier rose in her mind, and Altansarnai frowned. "You are right. It is a choice. But it is not a choice between spirit and honor. It is a choice between the future and the past. Rokugan must be brought into the future, by whatever means necessary."

Altansarnai closed her eyes. The wedding was political, meant to bring peace between the clans. Yet it could not come at the cost of all that the Ki-Rin—the *Unicorn*—Clan had learned and become. And the Lion would have to learn to respect the Unicorn ancestral lands, once and for all.

"You are right." Altansarnai repeated, fingering the hilt of the scimitar at her waist. "The tradition of Rokugan is not the law of Rokugan. I refuse to have my place taken from me over something not in the terms of our arrangement. I agreed to marriage. I did not agree to give up my name and my standing. We must draw attention to the distinction." Ringing a bell, she summoned a messenger into the room. He paused upon seeing the woman in white on her knees before the champion, but was savvy enough to say nothing and seem utterly undisturbed. Altansarnai said, "Draft a letter to the Ikoma ambassador and the Lion Clan. Tell them that I no longer approve the Lion offer of marriage. I withdraw my hand, and no dowry will be paid." The messenger bowed and scurried away.

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Altansarnai rose, prompting the soldiers in the room to bow in unison. Kamoko leaned forward as well, head gracefully dipping in respect. The Asako bowed lowest of all, face pressed into the floorboards at Altansarnai's feet.

"Ikoma Akari-san. Rise. Your life is spared. Leave these lands forever. Return to your husband, and give your renewed marriage my blessing. You are free to go."

Kamoko blinked, her eyes narrowing. Nevertheless, she stepped aside, allowing the Asako to climb gracefully to her feet. Akari, breathless with joy, wasted no time with her dismissal, gathering herself and half-fleeing while tears still stained her cheeks.

"Kamoko-san. Carry word personally to the Emperor. This steed will not be broken to rein and saddle, nor will I compromise my clan in the name of peace. If the Lion truly want war, then they will come for it—and would have, marriage or no marriage. But if they do, they will find that free horses are worth ten times a chained mountain cat.

"Only if the Emperor himself demands it will I change my mind. Let him command me—or let me remain as I am, in his service alone."

Utaku Kamoko bowed low, her long tail of hair sweeping over her shoulders with the motion. "So shall it be, my champion."

Altansarnai rose to walk toward the window, looking down at the riders below. She smiled to see them racing upon green grasses as though they hadn't a care in the world—only joy. As she watched, hooves tore the sod, and manes and tails blew in fierce winds, winds that came from mountains and deserts and lands far away. "Let the past stay the past," she said. "I will take the shame they offer."

"Despite their adherence to old ways and constraining traditions, we will bring the Empire forward, into the realm of the possible. We will teach its people our strength—and we will show them our duty." Eyes alight, she walked past Kamoko and the guards, toward the field and the horses beyond.

"We will teach them how to fight with curved blades."

The World, A Stage

By D.G. Laderoute

Meanwhile, in the Imperial Capital...

Bayushi Shoju, Champion of the Scorpion Clan, leapt over the incoming blow, dodging right and striking left as he did. He was as water, liquid movement, placing himself where his opponent's strikes were not. His opponent was as fire, speed and aggression, lashing out with a barrage of attacks that would have quickly overwhelmed a lesser adversary.

Another slash; he dodged again. This time, he kicked outward, his foot slamming into his opponent's shoulder. The woman recovered quickly, but not quickly enough. Shoju's weapon struck through the minuscule gap opened in his opponent's chain of attacks, finding the woman's stomach and driving her back with a grunt. She immediately knelt and dropped her weapon.

Shoju had landed a harder hit than he'd intended, and he lost a moment recovering. Frowning behind his mask, he turned to the *bushi* he'd defeated.

"Well fought, Yunako-san. If you hadn't swung wide on that next-to-last strike, it would be me, not you, now kneeling on the *dōjō* floor."

Bayushi Yunako bowed. "You honor me, Bayushi-ue."

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Shoju hefted the *bokken*, the wooden practice sword, in his right hand. The potency of the Shosuro potions that gave strength and flexibility to his right arm, withered since birth, was beginning to fade. He turned toward the rack of practice weapons, meaning to end the sparring bout...but stopped. A thought had occurred to him the previous night, and now was the perfect time to pursue it. He turned back.

“Yunako-san,” he said, “retrieve your katana.”

“*Hai*, Bayushi-ue.”

Shoju waited as the other Bayushi walked across open expanse of the *dōjō* practice hall, her feet whispering through the cushion of sand covering the floor. Placing the bokken down, she drew her katana with a whisper of steel, carefully replaced its sheath beside her *wakizashi*, the other blade of her *daishō*, and then returned to face her champion.

“Now,” Shoju said, “I want you to kill me.”

Yunako bowed. “As you wish, Bayushi-ue.” Straightening, she exploded into movement, slashing at Shoju with a cut that would have decapitated him had it connected.

It didn’t, but missed by barely a finger’s length as Shoju leapt aside. Twisting mid-leap, he struck back with his bokken. Once more, he was water; once more, Yunako was fire. This time, however, her strikes were edged with razor steel and the full intent, as Shoju had commanded, to kill.

A vicious cut whistled past Shoju’s gut, nearly disemboweling him. Behind his mask, he smiled and jabbed the bokken at Yunako, hard. The other Bayushi sidestepped and struck back like a literal scorpion, with an overhand swing that blurred at Shoju’s neck. He twisted and kicked at Yunako’s leg, knocking her off-balance enough to let him duck his head under the attack. Grinning now, he followed up with a backhand blow that struck Yunako’s arm. As quick as thought, she changed direction, moving with the strike to dissipate its energy. At the same time, she whipped her katana in a wide arc to slash across Shoju’s back.

He laughed.

Still water, Shoju threw himself forward, driving his whole weight against Yunako in a way that was earth, solid and inevitable. He was now also fire, as fast as a leaping tongue of flame...

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air, aware of every movement of arm and hand, leg and foot, every shift in weight, every tension and relaxation of muscle...and void in the union of it all into a single, perfect moment, fully mindful and entirely mindless—

His leap forward and sudden impact against his opponent caused a fractional hesitation in her swing...time enough for him to slam the bokken against Yunako's sword hand, drive his own left hand forward, and snatch the katana from her grasp. He deflected its momentum down, then around and up in front of his own body, letting his weight keep shoving her back and down until he landed on top of her, one knee driving up, against her stomach, pinning her, while the katana finished its new arc and came to rest against her neck.

Blood wept from the touch of steel on flesh, as crimson-bright as the *tsubaki* flower, the red camellia that bloomed in the Imperial Gardens. Shoju smiled again behind his mask, at the appropriateness of it.

For her part, Yunako simply waited, her face calm, almost serene, her eyes focused on something above and beyond her champion. A long moment passed. Finally, her eyes moved to meet Shoju's.

"My honor," she said, "and my life, for the Scorpion."

Shoju kept his gaze locked on Yunako's. Such direct eye contact was a breach of etiquette in court—but this wasn't court. He found no fear in her eyes, no hesitation or regret.

Shoju nodded once and tensed his arm holding the katana—

Then leapt and spun into a crouch, Yunako's blade ready against whoever had quietly entered the *dōjō* and now stood nearby.

"My apologies, Lord Shoju," Bayushi Kachiko said, a smile playing around her lips. "Am I interrupting?"

Shoju lowered the blade and motioned for Yunako to stand. Reversing the katana, he offered it back to her, hilt first. "I believe this is yours, Yunako-san."

Yunako bowed deeply, acknowledging both her clan champion and, now, the Imperial Advisor. Blood dripped from her wounded neck. "It is I who must apologize, Bayushi-ue, for my poor performance here today. I fear I was an unworthy opponent for you."

"On the contrary, you were most worthy, Yunako-san. I would spar with you again. Tend to your wound, then be here at dawn."

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“Hai, Bayushi-ue.” Yunako accepted her katana from Shoju, moved to retrieve the rest of her daishō, bowed again, and retired from the dōjō.

Kachiko turned her hinted smile back at Shoju. “Do you intend to make that woman your concubine?”

Shoju retrieved the bokken and returned it to its rack. “And if I did?”

“There are better choices. There is a Shosuro who would be a good candidate, and also a Yogo I could suggest...mind you, best not to actually fall in love with that one, given her family’s curse.”

Shoju scooped sand from the dōjō floor and scrubbed the sweat from his hands. His withered right arm twinged again, reminding him he needed another dose of the Shosuro potions. “What need do I have for a concubine,” he said, stepping close to Kachiko, “when my wife is the most desirable woman in Rokugan?”

“Be careful, Lord Shoju...if your wife hears you saying such things, she may begin to believe them.”

Shoju allowed his smile to touch his eyes. “Believing what is true is only sensible.”

“Such irony, coming from the Master of Secrets and Lies.”

“I do sometimes speak the truth.”

The light in Kachiko’s eyes became more intense. “And they are inevitably truths that please me.”

Shoju allowed the moment between them to linger, then stepped back. “I assume you did not merely come here to watch me spar. Allow me to bathe; then we will speak further. Let us meet by the uppermost koi pond, at the ending of the Hour of the Monkey.”

Kachiko brushed a finger along Shoju’s palm as she withdrew her hand. “I look forward to it, my husband.”

Shoju watched as the koi swam about the pond in their mindless way, orange-gold, creamy white, and occasionally black. Their movements truly *were* water, a ceaseless, languid flow. Some among the Phoenix believed that studying the actions of koi could reveal insights about the future.

Bending down, he placed a finger into the water, blocking the way of a particular fish. It bumped into his finger, recoiled, and swam another way. Another fish changed its course as a result, and

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another because of that one, and so on, until the meandering paths of most of the koi had been affected.

The Phoenix may be right, Shouju thought. But merely discerning the future wasn't enough. Changing it, shaping it, as he had just changed the actions of the koi...that was what mattered.

"Your son," Kachiko said from behind him, "would be charmed to see you playing with the fish."

Shouju kept watching the koi. "Dairu is more than old enough to recognize what is play...and what is not."

"So you are tending to the fish, then? We have servants for such things."

As they swam about, Shouju noticed the koi were now avoiding his finger, incorporating its presence into their behavior. He withdrew it and stood. "There is value, sometimes," he said, "in such simple things as tending to fish...particularly when that simplicity is deceptive."

Kachiko moved beside him. "Simplicity is almost always deceptive."

Shouju nodded. A short distance away, a peasant gardener trimmed withered blossoms from a purple sprawl of violets. Farther away, in another direction, a pair of servants carried lumber toward a teahouse undergoing repairs, tucked discreetly among a stand of cherry trees. There were other servants, Shouju knew, elsewhere among the foliage around them, engaged in all of the various labors needed to keep the gardens a place of tailored beauty. Simple people, doing simple things.

And all of it a lie.

They were servants, yes, but they were also agents of the Scorpion. Through their presence and movements, they would ensure that no one would be able to approach him and Kachiko closely enough to overhear whatever they might say—at least, not without them knowing about it. The gardener would turn his attention to a nearby hibiscus, the laborers working on the teahouse would move a particular piece of lumber, and Shouju would know someone was approaching long before they got close enough to be a concern. Small and simple things done by apparently small and simple people, but actually full of meaning—deceptive simplicity, all of it in service to the Scorpion.

"Something troubles you, my husband," Kachiko said.

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“Many things trouble me.”

“Is that why you were seriously considering killing that samurai in the dōjō?”

Shoju glanced at Kachiko, then began to walk, following a winding path away from the koi pond. Kachiko fell smoothly into step alongside him.

“She needed to see that my intent to kill her was true,” he said, “so that I, in turn, could see her reaction to it.”

“You were testing her.”

Shoju watched as the servants-who-weren’t began to move about the gardens, repositioning themselves to accommodate his and Kachiko’s movements. “Bayushi Yunako was suggested to me as a candidate for command of the Bayushi Elite Guard. Such a position demands loyalty that is absolute, and a devotion to duty that is unwavering. I therefore told her to kill me, and she immediately brought all of her skills to bear, seeking to do just that. And when I had defeated her, she was just as ready to die by my hand, without question or even understanding why.”

“A dead woman would make a poor commander, no matter how loyal or devoted.”

“Then it was a good thing,” Shoju said, “that you showed up when you did.”

Kachiko smiled. For a while, they just walked among trees in bloom, taking in the colors and mingled scents of myriad flowers. Eventually, they reached a small, arched bridge over a placid creek, one of several that meandered through the gardens of the Imperial Palace. Shoju stopped at the peak of the arch and leaned on the railing, looking along the watercourse to where it vanished beneath a spill of weeping-willow fronds.

Kachiko placed her hand on the railing, just touching his. “And still my words stand unanswered,” she said. “Something troubles you...something beyond merely selecting trusted commanders for our clan’s military forces.”

Shoju watched a solitary rose petal drift along the creek. “I am mindful of a Kabuki play I recently saw,” he said. “The attention was meant to be on the actors, of course, who all played their roles with appropriate skill. My own interest, however, kept returning to the *kuroko*: the stagehands, all dressed in black, who moved props

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about and rearranged the stage and scenery as the play progressed. They dressed in black because they were meant to be invisible and ignored.” He looked at Kachiko. “It struck me, though, that the kuroko are really the most important of the players on the stage. Their placement of the scenery and props determines the movements of those actors. Change a single element even slightly, and a performer can be made to step into shadow, or stoop slightly, or come somewhat too close to the edge of the stage. This will change how that actor delivers their performance and, with it, the delivery of the play itself.”

Kachiko watched her husband but said nothing and waited for him to go on.

Shoju looked back at the drifting petal. “If the Empire is the play, and the clans its players, then ours is at the center of the stage, where the attention is most focused.” He turned back to Kachiko. “But is that where the Scorpion belong? Are we not meant to be the kuroko, dressed in black and largely ignored, arranging and shaping the events of the Empire, while all eyes are fixed elsewhere?”

“We have labored mightily to gain the power we now hold,” Kachiko said. “Years of careful planning, of procuring key appointments and influential marriages, of removing those who would stand in our way—all of it has culminated in what we now have. The Scorpion have earned the center of the Imperial stage, have we not?”

“I don’t dispute that,” Shoju said. “We have, indeed, earned what we have. That doesn’t mean it’s what we *should* have.”

“I believe I hear echoes in your voice, husband. Echoes of the *daimyō* of the Soshi and Yogo families...”

“Soshi Shiori and Yogo Junzo have both conveyed their thoughts to me, yes. Both, in their own respective ways, believe that we have accrued power at the expense of what our true role in the Empire should be.”

“And you agree with them?”

Shoju looked for the rose petal, but it was gone, vanished beneath the willow fronds. “I do not immediately disagree with them.” He smiled at Kachiko. “However, I wouldn’t assume a position either way without first hearing what my most trusted advisor has to say about the matter.”

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"It sounds like you're suggesting we surrender power to the other clans, allowing them to make gains in the Imperial Court. And this would be to enable us to work from the margins, from a weakened position?" Kachiko raised an eyebrow. "It is an interesting approach to furthering our clan's agenda."

"My distant predecessor, Bayushi Ogoe, did this very thing, did he not? The Scorpion were then ascendant in the Empire in almost every way. By bragging about how easy it would be to defeat the Unicorn, when every other clan had failed, and then losing to them in a truly humiliating fashion, he made our clan appear over-confident and weak. The other clans dismissed us and fell back to fighting among themselves—the perfect conditions for doing the things that our clan does best."

"The difference," Kachiko said, "is that the Rokugan of Ogoe's time was relatively prosperous and stable. The clans found it easy to view the Scorpion as a common enemy." Kachiko looked toward a stand of maples farther along the path they'd been walking. Her eyes were distant, though, gazing at things beyond the trees. "By comparison, the Empire today is in turmoil. The Crane hover on the brink of famine—a famine that could spread, if harvests so much as falter in another part of the Empire. The Dragon grapple with ever-fewer births among their people, even while this Perfect Land Sect rises among them, preaching heresy and sedition. The Crab fight desperately to hold the Carpenter Wall against the darkness, the Phoenix find communion with the elemental kami ever more difficult—"

"I am well aware of the issues facing the Empire," Shoju said. "It is because of them, in fact, that the clans turn envious eyes toward us. Take Doji Hotaru. She may be young and inexperienced in her role as the Champion of the Crane, but she is Doji Satsume's daughter. She will seek power in the courts to offset her clan's weakness elsewhere, particularly in the wake of the Emerald Champion's death. She will likely find eager allies to that end in the Phoenix and the Unicorn."

"The Phoenix are of little consequence," Kachiko said, shrugging slightly, "and there will be no alliance permitted between the Crane and the Unicorn. Moreover, her clan's loss of the Emerald Championship can be our gain. Your brother, Aramoro, would be

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an excellent candidate, I think.”

“Perhaps...but Kakita Yoshi is still the Imperial Chancellor. He will likely be most accommodating when Hotaru wishes to advance her clan’s agenda in the courts.”

“You can rest assured that you needn’t worry about Hotaru or, by extension, the Crane, my husband.”

Shoju looked down into the water, taking note of the certainty in Kachiko’s tone. After a brief pause to allow her to see he *had* noted it, he continued. “Then there is the matter of the Crab. Hida Kisada begins to mutter darkly about us, over the matter of the Emperor’s apparent lack of interest in the mounting threat to the Wall. At the very least, he wonders why we don’t use our influence to convince the Emperor that securing the Wall is the Empire’s most pressing concern.”

“It is unlike Kisada to so openly admit weakness.”

“I have offered him aid from our clan, troops and material, but he demands an unacceptable degree of control over them.”

“That is just stubborn Crab pride.”

“Indeed, but it doesn’t change the fact they are another clan beginning to eye our power and influence with growing resentment.”

Kachiko said nothing for a while. Shoju felt her weighing something in the silence, as though deciding whether she should speak and, if so, what words to use. Curious, he waited, listening to the soft gurgle of the stream under the bridge.

“Perhaps,” Kachiko finally said, “there is an alternative way of seeing this play.”

Shoju looked at her.

“Perhaps,” she went on, “instead of surrendering power and moving into the shadows like your kuroko, we should do the opposite. Just as I suggested we consider seeing Aramoro made Emerald Champion, perhaps we should be gathering and consolidating even *more* power for our clan.”

“That would be a brazen strategy.”

“Possibly. But again, this is not Ogoe’s Empire. In dire times, Rokugan needs strength and leadership. Dissipating our gains and allowing them to accrue to others simply risks all of the clans being weak, at the very time when at least one of them must be strong.”

“Bayushi-no-Kami told the first Emperor we would be his vil-

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lain,” Shoju said, “not the enforcers of his will.”

“True. But many Hantei emperors have come and gone in the meantime. None have enjoyed the favor of Heaven as clearly as the first. And this one, the thirty-eighth—”

Shoju held up a hand. “Your words are becoming dangerous, my wife, if you are suggesting that the Celestial Heavens have withdrawn their favor from this Hantei.”

“I presume to suggest no such thing,” Kachiko said. “I merely observe that crisis and strife are rising across the Empire. The Emperor needs to be especially strong in such a time. He needs the strength that you have, Bayushi Shoju of the Scorpion.”

Shoju clasped his hands behind his back, his good left holding his withered right. “An absurd thought occurs to me,” he said. “Perhaps it is only because I’m fatigued after my exertions in the dōjō. However, one could take what you just said to mean that *I* could sit upon the Chrysanthemum Throne.” He smiled. “As I said, though, it is absurd to think you could even be so much as hinting at such a thing, isn’t it?”

Kachiko laughed.

“Oh, my husband...do you really believe I could even *imagine* such a thing? That I would see anyone but a Hantei upon the throne of Rokugan?” She laughed again. “When Bayushi-no-Kami said he would be Hantei-no-Kami’s villain, I don’t believe he intended quite *that* degree of villainy. As you said, it is an entirely absurd thought.”

“Perhaps,” Shoju said, his smile vanishing, “you should choose your words with more care, then, my wife.” Looking around, he saw the gardener, now trimming grass beneath a hibiscus...the teahouse laborers, now shifting another piece of lumber. These gardens, like the Imperial Court itself, effectively belonged to the Scorpion. It was almost certain no one would ever be able to overhear them.

Almost.

Kachiko bowed an apology. “You are right, of course, my husband. I will endeavor not to be so careless in the future.”

Shoju nodded and began walking again, across the bridge and toward the stand of maples. Kachiko once more fell into step beside him and they resumed their discussion, talking about the

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many troubles facing the Empire, and the challenges—and opportunities—they presented to the Scorpion Clan.

A Season of War

By Katrina Ostrander

There! Do you see that?" Doji Kuwanan's armor, lacquered in the blue and silver colors of the Crane Clan, clinked as he pointed to the thin column of dust rising along the horizon where plains met sky.

His patrol partner, Takeaki, shielded his eyes from the bright glare of the sun and squinted. "A merchant's cart? The spring rains are late this year," he said, kicking up dust of his own under his armored *zori* sandals.

Around them, birdsong mixed with the chants and drumming of the peasants as they rhythmically tilled the soil and spread seeds atop the furrowed earth. A cool breeze brought the earthy smell of fertilizer to the pair of samurai warriors and sent ripples across the plains.

Kuwanan shook his head. "There's too much dust for a single cart. And no caravan's due for weeks yet." He hurried atop the nearby arched bridge to get a better look. A blur of dark brown silhouettes emerged from behind a gently sloping hill, speeding toward them.

"Quiet!" Kuwanan bellowed at the farmers, who ceased their dance of sowing and planting in an instant. The distant thunder of

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galloping hooves soon overtook the sound of chattering birds, and Takeaki muttered a curse.

“Someone’s coming! Get back to the village!” Kuwanan shouted, and the peasants scrambled up to the road. He and Takeaki strung their bows and took up defensive positions atop the bridge. “If the Lion are finally mounting an attack, let them try to take this village from us!” He nocked an arrow and prepared to take aim.

Kakita Asami of the Crane Clan delicately refilled four teacups: one for each of her Lion Clan hosts, one for her bodyguard, and finally one for herself. How she longed to be a student again, when mastering proper tea-pouring techniques was the greatest of her worries, not whether she could prevent a war between her people and the Lion Clan.

She stifled a wistful sigh and settled back into a seated kneeling position on the tatami mat floor. The meeting room was small and plain by Crane standards, but then again, she was in a castle in the heart of Lion lands.

“Our priests have heard the laments of our honored ancestors. They demand the Crane return the Osari Plains to their rightful owners,” warned Ikoma Eiji, a Lion Clan historian and her diplomatic counterpart.

His attendant, the warrior Matsu Beiona, paced one side of the room, her mouth hardened into a frown. Beneath that mask of self-control, rage and frustration seethed. It wouldn’t take much to incite her into an outburst, but that wouldn’t serve Asami’s purposes here. Her father had bidden that she provide a diplomatic back channel in case tempers flared too hot during the more public rounds of negotiation at the Imperial Capital.

And if tempers flared here, too—well, that’s why Kaezin-san had been appointed her personal bodyguard, her *yōjimbō*.

Asami sipped her tea and smiled softly. “Perhaps your *shugenja* misread the omens. The Crane Clan *is* the rightful owner of the plains.” Even if the Lion *shugenja* *were* true mediums between this world and their ancestors, supernatural “evidence” wasn’t admissible as proof in any legal proceedings.

The Ikoma historian rose and gestured toward the horizon, his eyes narrowing in indignation. “Your warriors have occupied

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these lands for but two turns of the seasons. Before that, the Lion were its protectors."

Asami looked to her own stoic guardian, who kept a close watch on the Matsu. She began tactfully: "For three short generations, yes, the Lion *were* its protectors. But our elders can remember the days when the Crane tended the beasts of those pastures and reaped the harvest of those fields—as we did for centuries untold."

The Crane needed those lands now more than it had ever needed them before. After the tsunami, their rice paddies in the coastal provinces had been devastated, and their priests did not know when the Earth spirits would return to the fields and bless their crops once more. For the same reasons, her clan could not afford a war, especially while fighting intensified at Toshi Ranbo.

"The Crane stole those lands from the Lion!" The Ikoma snapped his fan shut and pointed it at Asami. "It was not through strength of blade and honor that the day was won, but through foul trickery. The Crane did not have enough numbers to prevail, and yet somehow they did. The Lion remember. Our ancestors do not lie."

Asami took a deep breath. She had known this accusation was coming, but the foresight did not soften the sting of his words.

The historian stopped in front of a scroll bearing a quote from Akodo's *Leadership*, the definitive treatise on the art of war by the Kami himself. "Without honor, there is no victory. Without fear, there is no defeat," it read. He stroked his goatee as if in thought.

Asami recalled a different line from Akodo's *Leadership*, and she considered offering its wisdom to her host: *On the battlefield, all actions are honorable.*

But he continued before she could speak. "At the dawn of the Empire, the first Hantei charged Lord Akodo himself with maintaining these lands on his behalf. The very Heavens ordained that they belong beneath the Lion's banner."

Asami closed her eyes, and prayed to Lady Doji that her next words would bear the weight of her determination and the levity of her foremother's grace. "We cannot forever dwell in the past; it is in the present that we must live. If the Heavens had truly decreed that the Lion be its safekeepers, your forces would not have lost to our own."

Uncomfortable silence pressed between them. Beyond the open screen doors and the veranda that circled the inner court-

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yard, cherry blossoms swirled in the breeze. The petals reminded her of a blizzard, of the long nights spent at home with stories, songs, and the smiles of her childhood sweetheart. But winter was already past, and spring would soon be over as well. Summer, the season of war, grew near.

The Ikoma began his counterattack. “The fact remains that the Lion are best equipped to ensure the plains’ continued protection. Your coastal holdings have fallen prey to pirate incursions on too many occasions. It would be a shame if a similar roving band of miscreants were to attack the Osari villages. Do we not want the same thing: to safeguard the Emperor’s lands as effectively as possible?”

Asami had to consider her words carefully, lest she insinuate that the answer was “no.” “We will protect these lands well.”

“Then let us try out the courtier’s theory!” the Matsu shouted. “Our honor demands we reclaim these lands by force! We waste our time bickering here. Let us test our mettle on the battlefield! My ancestors scream for justice. The Crane will scatter before our mighty roar!”

“Please calm your companion,” Asami said evenly, ignoring the bushi’s outburst. For a moment, she thought she saw the historian smirk.

Ikoma Eiji asked, “Are you afraid of Beiona-san making good on her threats? Isn’t Doji Kuwanan-sama posted along the front now, guarding the village of Shirei?”

Asami’s heart tightened in her chest. He could be, but she couldn’t know for sure. She hadn’t seen him in months, and his letters had ceased since the death of his father. Had she really been so obvious with her affections in public? Did the historian know about them?

No. Impossible. Surely Kuwanan was posted elsewhere, safely serving in a court on his sister’s behalf.

The screen behind them slid open, and a servant entered to proffer a scroll to his master. “An urgent letter, my lord.”

The Ikoma took the scroll and dismissed the messenger. The room grew silent as he read.

“Lady Asami, it appears that our conversation is over. It is just as I feared—a band of honorless rōnin have slaughtered the Crane forces at Shirei Mura.”

Kuwanan’s body unmoving in the mud, blood and dirt dulling the

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brilliance of his blue-silver armor. A hideous rōnin brandishing Kuwanan's ancestral katana in a mockery of the Kakita family technique.

She banished the image from her mind, but her heart still beat loudly in her ears and her cheeks scalded red. Asami instinctively raised her fan to cover her mouth and lowered it again, in one smooth motion, as though she hadn't tried to hide her reaction.

"This is terrible news," she managed. Ikoma Eiji took a seat again, opened his calligraphy set, and began to compose a letter.

The Crane Clan forces would not have fallen—not to some "band of rōnin," as the Lion had claimed. Even if there had been rōnin at the vanguard, the Lion had assuredly paid them off, and some bannerless Lion Clan *ashigaru* had no doubt supported the warriors as well.

Honor demanded that Asami believe his words, or at least act as though she did, but the hope in her heart refused. Doji Kuwanan could not be dead. If the Crane Clan Champion lost both her brother and her father in the same season, could she still pursue peace? Or would she be forced to avenge her kin?

With their diplomatic leverage gone, all she could do now was pray the Crane retook the village in time. If the Lion "overcame" the rōnin first, the Crane would be dealt a serious blow to their case. Once again the Lion were attempting to provoke the Crane, and whoever struck first would lose the sympathy of the Emperor.

"Kaezin-san," she said, standing at last, her *yōjimbō* rising beside her. "Let us return home."

Matsu Beiona's hand moved to rest on the hilt of her katana. Kaezin took a step in front of Asami, and she saw him discreetly unlock his sword, ready to strike at any moment.

Ikoma Eiji set down his brush and sighed. "The negotiations in Otosan Uchi have not yet finished, and our lord would have you remain our honored guest until everything is sorted out."

The historian said one thing, but Asami understood the message that lay beneath: she, Kaezin, and their retinue were hostages. In case it finally came to war.

"Lady Asami, you are welcome to add a few lines if you please," he said, gesturing to the parchment. "The Crane Clan delegation to the capital will be glad to see your calligraphy and know that you remain safe during your time with us."

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In her writing to him, Kakita Yuri would know with certainty that she had failed him—both as a diplomat and as a daughter.

The final cherry blossom broke away from the branch and drifted to the ground.

In the Garden of Lies

By Marie Brennan

In the City of Lies, it was almost refreshing to see a dispute settled with the clean strike of an *iaijutsu* duel.

Yogo Hiroue had suggested to his lord that it might be advantageous for them if Bayushi Gensato threw the fight. “After all,” he’d said, “Kitsuki-san will hardly be inclined to stay at your party for long if she’s humiliated by defeat at his hands.” He thought, but did not say, *she knows your reputation too well.*

The city’s governor, Shosuro Hyobu, had dismissed this notion with a single flick of her fan. “Kitsuki-san may not be trained as an investigator, but she is a master of the Mirumoto technique—however unorthodox her style may be. If Gensato does anything less than his best against her, she will know.”

So now the two *bushi* stood facing one another in the night, feet carefully planted in the gravel of the courtyard, the torch-light around them casting shadows that danced even while the sources remained still. Hiroue made a show of examining Kitsuki Shomon’s stance, but it truly was a show; he was at best an indifferent swordsman himself. Like all Mirumoto-trained bushi, Shomon stood ready to draw not only her katana but also her *wakizashi*. Any unorthodoxy beyond that, however, was invisible to him.

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She was a stocky woman, and would have been considered plain among courtiers, but Hiroue always felt that skill created its own kind of beauty. With a few wind-blown strands of hair across her face and her eyes fixed intently on Gensato, she made a striking picture. He could believe this was the woman who, in defiance of all convention, had established a dōjō in Ryokō Owari that accepted any student: not just fellow members of the Dragon Clan, not just clan samurai, but anyone with the right to carry *daishō*, down to rōnin. She even spared some of her time to instruct peasants! Not in swordsmanship, of course; any peasant found with a sword would be executed, and the sensei would be lucky if she had the opportunity to erase her shame with seppuku. But Shomon taught them the basics of jūjutsu, as if she were a monk of the Brotherhood, claiming that it improved their bodies and spirits. If it also helped those peasants protect themselves against the ruthless “fireman” gangs that held so much of the city in their grip... surely that was coincidence.

Given that many of those gangs were in the governor’s pay, Shosuro-sama had surprised nearly everyone by permitting Shomon to run her dōjō as she saw fit. But Hiroue knew that Shomon, with the typical unpredictability of a Dragon, had offered to share the fate of any student who used her teachings to transgress. So far, at least, Shosuro-sama had not made any attempt to turn that against her.

She had even given Shomon this chance to demonstrate the value of her ways, to silence the whispers of her critics. A dozen samurai stood around the dueling circle, waiting to see who would prove the greater, Shomon or Gensato. They were too respectful of the duel to gossip, but the sound of a fan snapping open cracked the stillness, shockingly loud. Hiroue didn’t look away from the duelists, but he noted the offender from the corner of his eye: Bayushi Masanao. The man would pay for that disturbance later.

Not that it had disturbed either of the duelists. Gensato even had a faint, cocky smile on his face. It was on the governor’s orders that he had publicly disparaged Shomon’s style, saying that it could not be worth much if rōnin could learn it. Shomon would never have accepted a casual invitation to a party at the governor’s mansion, but she could hardly refuse the chance to defend her honor. According to the custom of iaijutsu, the upcoming strike would

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settle the dispute one way or another.

Gravel crunched as one of the duelists shifted their foot, too minutely for Hiroue to see. He found himself holding his breath in anticipation. *It's so much more interesting when I don't know how it will end.*

There was no cue to move. He almost didn't see it happen. The two duelists were standing just out of blade's reach; then there was a brief, explosive flurry of steel. When it ended, they were on opposite sides of each other, swords out. The tableau held for a moment before Gensato relaxed and bowed to Shomon. A small patch of darkness stained his left sleeve. "I stand corrected, Kitsuki-san. Please accept my apology. You have truly shown me the strength of your blade."

Like a proper Dragon, Shomon was too self-controlled to gloat. She returned his bow. "There is nothing to forgive, Bayushi-san."

The gathered observers murmured to one another, already discussing the political implications of the duel. Shosuro-sama glided forward with a smile, ready to congratulate the victor.

Hiroue did not join them. As the governor's guest, Shomon could not leave the party immediately without giving insult. But he doubted she was the sort to enjoy Shosuro-sama's sophisticated entertainments, either. Sooner or later, she would seek out a quiet corner to regain her peace of mind.

Retrieving his shamisen from a servant, Hiroue went to find a suitable corner, and wait.

The shamisen still lay in Hiroue's hands, but many long minutes had passed since he last strummed a note. The instrument had served its purpose, luring Shomon to find the source of the delicate music floating through the nighttime peace of the governor's gardens.

The place was lovely even in the spring darkness, but nothing compared to its splendor in the daytime. Then again, perhaps it was just as well that Shomon was seeing the gardens only at night. The peasants of Ryokō Owari referred to the governor's lavish manor as "the house that opium built"—although never where they thought a samurai could hear. They weren't wrong, but the truth was no defense against a samurai's fury. Especially not in

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Scorpion lands.

Hiroue had been in the gardens many times before, but he found himself in unfamiliar territory now. Ordinarily he had a well-practiced arsenal of tricks for occasions such as these: The “accidental” brush of his layered sleeves against his target’s hand. Eye contact that lingered just an instant too long for propriety, but not so long as to be off-putting. The gradual dropping of his voice, until it rested comfortably in a low rumble that suggested the languor of the bedroom. Gestures that drew attention to his hands—he had cultivated his musical talents in the direction of the shamisen because it gave him a chance to display his most beautiful feature. He had deployed these tricks against countless men and women, and very few of them had proved resistant to his charms.

With Shomon, he had abandoned that approach mere minutes into their encounter. Seducing her might be possible, but it would take far longer than he could spare, and any attempt to rush the process would only drive her away. Instead Hiroue had directed the conversation toward religious matters—and he was getting trounced.

“Winds blow, nations change, fortunes rise and fall, but the simple folk will always be asked to shoulder the weight,” Shomon said, quoting the Tao. “And the Single Leaf Sutra reminds us that the strength of a chain depends on its weakest link. If *heimin* are asked to shoulder so much weight, should we not devote our efforts to making certain they are strong enough to bear it? Indeed, we demand the merits of Bushidō from them in countless ways, only we do not give it that name. We expect courage from *ashigaru*, duty and loyalty from laborers, reverence and courtesy when they are in the presence of their superiors. Honesty is just as meritorious in a peasant as it is in a samurai. But they lack instruction, and without knowing the pitfalls, how can they choose the correct path?”

Hiroue was fairly certain the last question was another allusion to the Tao. He would have liked to respond in kind, but none of the quotations that came to mind pointed in the direction he needed. Instead he was forced to resort to plain speech. “But the correct path of a *heimin* is different from a samurai’s, is it not? What if, by instructing them in the precepts of Bushidō, you lead them away from their proper dharma?”

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She scoffed at the question. “Tell me where it serves the Empire for a peasant to be cowardly, or cruel, or dishonest. The nature of their duty is different from a samurai’s, that I would not argue—but virtue is virtue. And true virtue is the center from which all else proceeds.”

Hiroue almost smiled. He was no swordsman, but in conversation as in combat, there were moments where the opponent’s guard slipped and left the perfect opening. “What of the notion that we live in an age of declining virtue?”

He said it as a phrase rather than a proper name, Suijindai, but Shomon followed the reference regardless. She came bolt upright on the bench. “Individuals may fall from the path of honor,” she said, biting off each word, “but those who say that means honor itself has lost value are only making excuses for their own weakness. The way of Bushidō was given to us by the Kami Akodo himself, and it is a bulwark for our spirits regardless of the age. If we fall short of its ideals, then we simply must strive all the harder to improve ourselves. As the Arrow Sutra says, ‘the path across the plain is easy, the path to the peak hard; but only from the peak may we see far.’ To claim the plain will lead one to a higher vantage point is nothing more than delusion.”

Her vehemence took him aback. Hiroue had seen the reports, patchwork and incomplete, about the controversial sect that had taken root in Dragon lands. They called themselves the Perfect Land, after the paradisiacal realm they claimed waited for believers after their deaths. One of their core tenets was that Rokugan had entered the Age of Declining Virtue and that samurai were the cause, having strayed from their proper path.

The reports spoke of peasant armies assembling in the mountains to the north. Here in Ryokō Owari, Kitsuki Shomon openly trained heimin in hand-to-hand combat. It wasn’t difficult to imagine she might have something to do with the sect. But judging by her reaction, the notion was nothing more than that—imagination.

Still, he had to be sure. “Don’t the Dragon say there are many paths to the same destination?”

“Some paths are false ones,” Shomon snapped. “My own student—”

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Hiroue flung up a hand before she could finish that sentence, looking past Shomon, into the darkness of the gardens. “Hush! I hear someone.”

The gardens of the governor’s manor were quiet. The sounds of laughter and music from the main building seemed very far away. After a moment, Yogo Hiroue lowered his hand and exhaled, tugging the embroidered sleeves of his kimono back into place. “Please forgive me for interrupting you, Kitsuki-san. I heard someone passing nearby and did not want them to misunderstand our conversation, hearing only part of it.”

Kitsuki Shomon relaxed slowly. She had not reached for her blades, but he had no doubt she could have drawn them in the blink of an eye if a real threat had emerged. “Thank you, Yogo-san,” she said. Her voice was much softer now than it had been a moment before. “As you can tell, this is a matter on which I feel passionately—but I should not allow that to make me speak without restraint. It...” She hesitated, then went on. “It is a pleasure, and a rare one, to speak with a member of your clan without feeling I am being manipulated like a puppet on strings.”

He pitied her. Kitsuki Shomon was a good and honorable soul; she did not belong in the City of Lies, with its opium trade and its fireman gangs and its courtiers who knew there were ways and ways of manipulating someone, not all of them obvious.

Then again, reflecting on what she had said concerning peasants and Bushidō...perhaps she felt this was exactly where she needed to be. Bringing the light of honor to a place that saw it so rarely.

If so, he wished the Fortunes’ blessings upon her. She would need them.

Shomon rose from the bench and bowed. “I have taken too much of your time,” she said. “And I would not want to give offense to the governor by vanishing from her party for too long.”

Hiroue rose as well, laying aside his shamisen. “There is no need to apologize, Kitsuki-san. I attend many of these parties, but I cannot say I’ve ever had a conversation quite like this one. You have given me a great deal to think about.” He glanced toward the main building and contrived to look a touch embarrassed. “I will wait here a while longer. If we were to return together, someone

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might draw the wrong conclusions about where you have been—and what you have been doing.” On any other night, with any other target, those conclusions might be correct.

But not tonight, and the consideration made Shomon smile. “Thank you,” she said fervently. “Again.”

They exchanged bows one last time, and then she turned and made her way through the gardens, back to the bright lanterns of Shosuro-sama’s party.

Hiroue waited until she had vanished inside, then sat down and began to play idly on the shamisen. He truly did enjoy music, and the sound would mask his next conversation against any prying ears that *shouldn’t* be nearby.

Not even one leaf rustled as Shosuro Miyako materialized by his side. She wasn’t dressed in the stereotypical garb of a *shinobi*, but the muted grey of her *jinbei* blended seamlessly into the darkness. Hiroue didn’t even know where she had been hiding. None of the stones or trees or bushes looked large enough to conceal a woman, no matter how small and wiry. But then, he was not trained for such things.

“Why did you interrupt her?” Miyako asked. “There wasn’t anyone approaching. And she was on the verge of saying something about her student.”

Hiroue shrugged and turned one of the shamisen’s tuning pegs a minute degree. “We already know about her student. They fought, and Satto left. According to current reports, she’s now very highly placed in the Perfect Land hierarchy up north. Kitsuki-san’s gratitude is worth more to me than any additional details she might have been able to offer about a woman she hasn’t seen in years. You see, I have now shown myself to be that rare breed of Scorpion: a man she can trust.”

Miyako snorted softly. She worked in the shadows and Hiroue in the light, but that didn’t make him any more honorable than she was. “So what was the point of this, then, if not to find out more about Satto?”

“There have been suspicions that Kitsuki-san’s argument with her student was staged, and that she’s been using her dōjō to recruit new followers to the Perfect Land, training them for rebellion. If that were the case, it might indicate that the leadership of

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the Dragon Clan supports the Perfect Land in secret.” With any other clan, Hiroue would have dismissed the idea out of hand. The preaching of the sect’s leaders challenged the very foundations of samurai dominance, blaming them for the Empire’s mounting problems. But the Dragon tolerance for eccentricity often led in surprising directions, and their clan champions had given some inexplicable orders in the past. Hiroue could not put anything past them—not without investigating first.

This time, the investigation had led to a dead end. “She sounded sincere,” Miyako said.

Hiroue nodded. “I think she was.” *Either that, or she’s a good enough liar that she should be invited to teach our own students.* “It doesn’t completely rule out Dragon support for the sect, of course—but I think Kitsuki-san’s dōjō can be crossed off the list.”

“So what now?”

He laid one hand on the shamisen’s strings, silencing them. “Now...now you go north.”

Miyako was very good at stillness, but she turned to look at him. “My lord?”

“We know little about this sect, but what we *do* know worries me. I’m sending you to the mountains. Disguise yourself as a peasant, infiltrate the sect, and get as close as you can to their leaders. I want to know what their goals are, and whether they have ties to the Dragon beyond Satto having trained with Kitsuki-san.” It could be useful leverage. The Scorpion could sell what they knew, or offer to remove the threat...or, if necessary, create a spark in just the right place to turn this pile of tinder into a wildfire. Whatever served their purpose best.

But only if they had more information.

Miyako bowed, lower than she ordinarily would. Her diction fell to match, into the speech of a peasant. “I hear and obey, m’lord.”

To the South

By Marie Brennan

A dusty wind blew across the village of Kosō, a flyspeck on the western edge of the Empire. Shinjo Tatsuo closed his eyes against the grit, but opened them as soon as he could. Until he established whether there was any real cause for concern, he didn't like the possibility that something might sneak past him—or up on him.

When he opened his eyes, everything was quiet. After a swift glance around, he bent to study the ground ahead of him, the land sloping down to a brush-filled hollow.

His *ashigaru* had fanned out to either side of him, likewise searching. In the distance he heard a pair of voices, Iuchi Rimei questioning the bent old woman who led this village. He couldn't make out the words, but he didn't need to. The phrase "superstitious peasants" had come up more than once on their ride here. One might expect Rimei, as a *shugenja*, to credit spiritual explanations more readily than the average samurai, but instead the reverse was true. To her way of thinking, all strange sightings were wild animals or drunken farmers until proven otherwise.

Still, their patrol had to investigate the rumors. A dead pig, odd sounds in the night, and movement seen in the distance, near the edge of the forest.

A flattening of the dry grass caught Tatsuo's eye. He followed it to

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the brush, where he found broken twigs littering the ground. No creature that large would have bothered to wade into the brush...unless it was looking for a hidden place from which to observe the village.

Tatsuo's sensei had, after several painful lessons, taught him to remain aware of *all* of his surroundings, not just the trail in front of him. He straightened and turned before Rimei reached him. "Don't tell me you found something," she said with the resignation of one who already suspected the answer.

She'd been working with the patrol long enough that she knew to give his position a wide berth, lest she trample the tracks. Tatsuo showed her what he'd discovered. "Doesn't look human," he said. "Or if it was, they were dragging something."

"Where does it lead?"

They followed the trail together, along a depression in the ground that would have concealed the intruder from the village's sight. *This thing is intelligent*, Tatsuo thought. On and on it went, until he halted Rimei with a raised hand. "We should go back. Get the horses and ashigaru before we continue."

She squinted at him, raising one hand to keep the sun from her eyes. "Continue? We're close to the southern edge of our territory, and this thing is heading yet farther south. We should report in, not chase it into lands that aren't our responsibility."

On paper, the lands to the south were Imperial possessions. In practice, virtually no one lived out there except the occasional mad hermit or criminal fleeing justice. Neither of which were supposed to be there—which meant no one was responsible for protecting them.

"What if it comes back?" Tatsuo countered. "I don't know what this thing is, but it shows signs of cunning. We were sent here to investigate; I won't consider that done until I've found more than just a trail."

He outranked Rimei, but Tatsuo knew better than to dismiss her opinions out of hand. There were two of them in this patrol for a reason. A shugenja saw things differently than a *bushi* did, and ashigaru could hardly be expected to argue with samurai.

"How far, then? At what point will you say it's time to abandon the trail?"

Tatsuo grinned. "We're Unicorn, Rimei-san. What is there in this world that we cannot run down?"

• • •

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Rimei was too polite to make Tatsuo eat his words.

He could have blamed the ashigaru's horses, which were of lesser stock than his Naigi and Rimei's Irugel. But the truth was that whatever they were following, it was *fast*. And like a gambler trying to make good his losses, Tatsuo couldn't bring himself to admit they should give up—even as the leagues rolled by, one day after another, leading them south and south and south, following the western edge of the Shinomen Mori.

The great forest was an emerald shadow to their left, primordial and wild, with untold secrets hidden in its depths. Patrols like Tatsuo's, the Shinomen Wayfinders, kept an eye on the forest's northern fringes in case anything emerged from it to trouble Unicorn lands. But even they rarely ventured very far within. If the trail had dived into the heart of the Shinomen, Tatsuo would have been forced to concede the chase. There were stories about what happened to people who risked the forest's power, and few of them ended well. He might come out a year later, or a century. Or not come out at all.

But the trail kept to the edges, dodging among the sparser clumps of trees where the Unicorn's horses could follow without difficulty. As if the creature valued speed over concealment. And though he expected Rimei to renew her arguments for giving up the chase and reporting in, the farther they went, the more committed she became.

He found out why nearly a week into the pursuit, when he sat throwing knots of grass into their tiny campfire and listing every creature he could think of that might be their quarry.

It was a short list. Animal spirits rarely moved with such purpose; *hibagon* never ventured out of the forest; more malevolent things, like hungry ghosts or spirits of slaughter, would not leave such a trail. When he came to the end of it, Rimei said, "Have you thought about where this thing is going?"

Tatsuo paused in the middle of knotting more grass. "What do you mean?"

She nodded her chin along their line of march. "It isn't chasing any other creature—none that we've seen tracks for, at least. It isn't wandering, the way it would if it were searching for something. I think this thing knows where it's going. And what's to the

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south of us?"

Nothing of note, until one reached the Twilight Mountains. Home to the minor Falcon Clan—and the Crab.

Who guarded Rokugan against the Shadowlands.

The wind picked up again, tugging the strands of grass from Tatsuo's fingertips. There were stories...the Moto had once sent an ill-fated expedition to the Shadowlands, trusting in their horses and their blades to defeat whatever they found. The few who survived came back with their hair bleached white from fear. Some people dismissed it all as exaggeration, but the Shinomen Wayfinders had seen too many strange things for Tatsuo to do the same. The enemies the Crab faced threatened more than just the body.

If some nightmare creature had found its way past the Kau Wall, it would discover in this deserted western reach an easy road across the Empire to the territory of the Unicorn.

He focused once more on Rimei, heart suddenly beating fast. "Then we *have* to warn our lord. If we vanish, they won't realize the danger."

"Right now it's only a guess," Rimei reminded him. "I have no proof. I'm not a Kuni; I don't know how to make the kami tell me whether the thing we're following is corrupted. And none of my talismans can help with that. If we raise the alarm and this turns out to be nothing serious..."

The Wayfinders already had a dubious reputation. As with the Crab, their reports were often too outlandish for others to believe, because those others had never seen the Shinomen Mori with their own eyes. Tatsuo knew he shouldn't let the risk of embarrassment affect his decision, but Rimei had a point. Right now they had nothing to report.

"Then we keep going," he said. "But the moment we're sure—"

She nodded. "I ride north."

No question that she would be the one to go. Only a rare few could learn the language of Names to command the kami; compared to her, Tatsuo was disposable. If it came to that, he would hold the creature off for as long as he could.

As if she could hear his thoughts, Rimei said, "But let's make sure it doesn't come to that."

Two days later, they saw smoke.

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It came from within the forest, but not deep within, and it was too slender a column to be a forest fire. The trail didn't lead directly toward it, though, and he glanced at Rimei. "What do you think?"

"We haven't managed to catch this thing in a direct chase yet," she said. "And they may have seen something."

If they're human. Or spirits, he supposed; then it would be up to Rimei to talk to them. Except that—

Rimei shook her head before he could even speak. "Not yet."

She was right. A fire wasn't proof of anything. Rimei did not need to ride north yet.

They approached the edge of the forest. The trees here were ancient and tall, their trunks bigger than Tatsuo and Rimei together could circle with their arms. Their roots fanned out in uneven ridges, with ferns growing between that hid unexpected dips in the ground. Riding in there was just asking to lame one of their horses. Tatsuo gestured at Tama, the youngest and least experienced of their ashigaru. "Wait here," he said. "If we haven't returned by sunset, ride north. Take my horse, and use Irugel as a remount. Do you understand?"

The youth swallowed and nodded. The rest of the ashigaru dismounted with the samurai and proceeded on foot.

They moved slowly, watching their footing as much as the forest around them, knowing that a wrong step could result in a fall that would give their position away. Before long Tatsuo lost sight of his companions, and considered trying to regroup. He wasn't far from the source of the smoke, though. Up ahead, three trees had staked out the top of a small rise. If he could get up there—

There was no sound, no movement he could see, no shift in the wind. Just the hairs on the back of his neck rising.

He whirled and brought his bow up to full draw.

Only to find himself facing the point of another arrow. And behind it, a woman in armor, muffled so it would make no noise, with her face painted to blend with the forest.

In the clipped accent of the Crab Clan, she said, "Name yourself before I put this arrow through you."

Given the reputation of the Shinomen Mori, Shinjo Tatsuo was almost prepared to believe the sight in front of him was an illusion

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crafted by some trickster spirit.

At least two dozen Crab Clan *ashigaru* were hard at work fell-ing timber, supervised by a hatchet-faced samurai with a loose roll of papers under his arm. They'd been at work for some time, judg-ing by the pile of logs laid to one side, and they hadn't wasted any of the branches, either. The excess had been transformed into a tidy palisade of fire-hardened stakes. It was a logging expedition, clearly—but what was it doing in this ancient forest?

The Hiruma scout leading them into the camp wasn't very talk-ative. She detached a group of their own *ashigaru* to watch over his, then led Tatsuo and Rimei to her commander, who set aside his papers as they approached. "Gunsō-san," the scout said, with a brief bow. "These Unicorn were scouting our camp."

"We were investigating the smoke," Tatsuo corrected her. "I am Shinjo Tatsuo, a gunsō of the Shinomen Wayfinders, and this is Iuchi Rimei. We've been pursuing a creature that was sighted out-side a Unicorn village to the north, and thought that whoever was here might be able to offer assistance."

He was in charge of their patrol, but Rimei was responsible for handling spiritual matters, and she broke in. "What are your peo-ple doing here, anyway? Logging in the Shinomen Mori—do you have any idea what spirits you might anger? Do you have any way of controlling them?"

From behind them came another voice, touched with both humor and annoyance. "That would be my job."

Tatsuo turned to find a second man approaching. He wore no armor, but his *hakama* and tied-back sleeves had none of the usual formality of a *shugenja*'s robes, either. If it weren't for his unsettling face paint, white with red lines, Tatsuo would never have identified him as a Kuni. The newcomer eyed Tatsuo and Rimei and said, "Shinomen Wayfinders? I thought you Unicorn preferred the open plains."

"Our duties do not always take us where we prefer," Tatsuo said stiffly, turning back to the commander. "Please forgive Rimei's blunt way of asking—but the question stands. I am glad to see a *shugenja* with your group, but there are a great many dangers in this forest, and cutting down trees is a quick way to wake them."

The commander looked unmoved. "We know the risks. But as you say: our duties don't always take us where we want. Heki is

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taking care to appease the spirits of the trees before we cut them.”

That must be the Kuni’s name. “Aren’t there trees in your own lands?”

“None that fit our needs,” he said. “I am Kaiu Shuichi, an engineer in the Twelfth Tower Command. We need large beams to conduct repairs on the northern end of the Carpenter Wall, and there’s nothing suitable closer to hand. We have Imperial permission to log here.”

No wonder the camp was so well constructed, with a Kaiu engineer in charge. But Tatsuo had a feeling it wasn’t just normal Crab paranoia that made them take such precautions—a feeling that grew stronger when Shuichi spoke again. “This creature you’re chasing. What is it?”

He asked as if he already had an answer in mind. And given Rimei’s suspicions, Tatsuo couldn’t see any good reason to hold back. Courtiers might treat information like treasure, to be hoarded and spent with care, but here in the hinterlands of the Empire, he preferred to reach out with the hand of alliance. “We don’t know,” he admitted. “It’s large, and it leaves a broad, flat trail. And it’s fast. We...the possibility has occurred to us that it might be something from...further south.” He couldn’t quite bring himself to say *Tainted*.

“Impossible,” Shuichi said, without hesitation. Before Tatsuo could write it off as arrogance, he added, “We have Kogoe scouting the vicinity constantly, and Heki alert for any sign of the Shadowlands Taint.”

“But you *have* seen something,” Tatsuo said.

Shuichi glanced past him, at the Hiruma scout—Kogoe, presumably. She said, “Seen, no. However, several of our laborers have gone missing. Mostly without a trace, but in one spot I found a brief track that sounds like what you’re describing.”

“How long ago?”

“Six days.”

There was no way the creature Tatsuo had been chasing could have been here six days ago; its trail wasn’t that old. Which meant there was more than one. “What do you mean, ‘a brief track’?”

“I don’t mean that I lost it,” she said evenly. “I mean that it stopped. And Heki doesn’t know of anything that flies *and* leaves a track like that. Do you?”

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“No,” Rimei admitted. “We were following our trail not far from here; we only diverted because we saw the smoke from your fire. If we go back and pursue that, we may find the source of both our problem and yours.”

That was optimistic of her, given their failure to chase the thing down yet, but Tatsuo was even less willing than before to give up. He gazed past the palisade, into the forest. He was sure it held the answers...if he was willing to risk getting them.

Hed already led his patrol far beyond the boundaries of his duty. And it was possible that not one but two clans were at risk from this unknown threat.

“Kaiu-san,” he said. “Obviously you have to devote most of your effort to protecting this camp, which means you can’t spare much for exploring the nearby forest. But we’ve come all this way to investigate, and are more familiar with the hazards of the Shinnomen Mori than your own people. I will lead my patrol on a circuit through the area—and if we find anything, we will share it with you before we return north.”

“Gunsō-san!” Rimei stared at him. Her abrupt shift to formality showed how much the suggestion alarmed her. It was one thing to ride south, but to go deeper into the forest...

Tatsuo shook his head. “Not you. If Kaiu-san is willing, I will have you remain here in his camp, until we return.” Or until it was clear that they wouldn’t.

Her expression was mutinous. “How do you expect to deal with a spirit when you have no shugenja with you?”

“I have no intention of engaging with it at all. We will scout only.” He knew as well as she did that plans like that rarely worked out—but he wasn’t going to be responsible for losing her to the forest.

Kuni Heki intervened. “If you stay here, Iuchi-san, we might be able to work together and learn more from the spirits. And if your intention is to scout, Shinjo-sama—” He turned to his own commander. “Could we lend him Kogoe-san?”

Tatsuo couldn’t deny she would be useful, given how effectively she’d crept up on him. He bowed to Shuichi. “The reputation of the Hiruma is well known in Unicorn lands. I would be grateful for the assistance.”

Shuichi nodded. “Find me what’s causing this, and find a

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solution.” He only had the authority to command Kogoe, but he seemed to be addressing both scouts indiscriminately. “We can’t afford to lose any more people or time.”

Tatsuo had to admit that Hiruma Kogoe was far more at home in the forest than he was. There were trees in Unicorn lands, of course, and he’d been in and out of the fringes of the Shinomen Mori for years—but his ancestors made their home on the plains, and he never felt comfortable being hemmed in like this.

She didn’t know nearly as much about the Shinomen as he did, though. “There aren’t a lot of friendly things where I usually patrol,” she admitted after she nearly shot a rabbit spirit. It faded away an instant before her arrow would have struck. “We’re trained to assume anything we see is probably dangerous.”

“Wayfinders learn the same thing,” Tatsuo said, “but we generally try to avoid confrontation. In the Shinomen, ‘dangerous’ and ‘needs to be killed’ aren’t always the same thing. Most creatures in the forest will leave you alone if you don’t trouble them.”

“When we find this thing,” Kogoe said darkly, “I’m not giving it the benefit of the doubt.”

He couldn’t blame her. But it would be a moot point if they couldn’t find the creature. Or creatures—however many of them there were.

Kogoe was the one who figured it out in the end, proving his sensei’s admonition once more. Stopping Tatsuo with one outstretched hand, she breathed a few words, almost too quiet to hear. “I think they move through the trees.”

Once he looked for it, he saw it, too. Fallen leaves and twigs on the ground, and up above, branches stripped suspiciously bare. It could have been *hibagon*, the reclusive ape-men who haunted the forest—but they swung by their arms, and wouldn’t leave this kind of damage. Without a word, he nocked an arrow to his bow. Kogoe did the same.

Not long after, they heard a sound up ahead. Not the chattering of animals or their spirit kin, and not the weeping of some creature in the form of a woman or a baby, hoping to lure the unwary to their doom. Two different sounds, alternating with one another—like voices in conversation. But the cadence of it was nothing like Rokugani.

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He and Kogoe separated, so that if one of them were spotted the other could attack or escape. And then, placing one careful foot at a time, Tatsuo crept forward.

The voices were coming from a small dell with a quiet, shadowed pool at the center. Two tall boulders stood alongside the pool, narrow outcroppings from some larger mass of stone below—

One of the boulders moved.

Not stone. A creature—two of them—each easily fifteen feet in length, rearing up from their long tails. They were speaking in a hissing, liquid language like nothing Tatsuo had heard before.

Perhaps his nerve failed him at this crucial moment, faced with a pair of giant serpent creatures that his mind screamed must have come straight from the Shadowlands. Tatsuo didn't think he'd made a sound...

But one of them stopped talking, and turned to look directly at him.

Smokeless Fire

By Katrina Ostrander

Are you ready?”
“Yes, sensei.”

Isawa Atsuko rapped the youth’s knees with a bamboo stick, and he stiffened with pain. Nobu showed great promise, but his sensei had to keep him grounded.

“No, sensei,” he corrected himself. “I am not ready.”
“Better. You are not prepared, not truly, to witness the Void. We must retrain your vision, so that you may learn to see without sight—strengthen your will, so that you do not lose your very self in the Realm of Void.”

The initiate nodded and closed his eyes. He breathed deeply, in a calm and focused pattern, centering himself in this moment. Atsuko settled into a meditative pose beside the initiate. Her knees complained, and the room was too hot, but she would move past the ache and discomfort soon.

“Let the sounds of the temple reach you and move past you.” She opened her ears and called attention to the current of the world. “Hear the muffled patter of shuffling feet rising and fading, rising and fading, the wind rustling through the pines, the birds chirping in their branches...”

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They continued like this for some time, and Nobu's breathing slowed even further. Others conversed in low tones elsewhere in the complex. A gust of wind surged, and a branch creaked. Faintly, the waterfall beyond the compound tumbled into the pool below. Her apprentice would perceive the river for himself, now, and allow his ego to gently drift away. Atsuko allowed herself to do the same.

Minutes passed, perhaps hours. She stood against the coursing river, serving as an anchor for her charge, when a faraway knot pulled her taut like twisted silk.

Something is wrong. Nobu-kun, leave now.

She waited until her apprentice had surfaced. Satisfied that he was safe, she searched for that constricted feeling, pulled against it, and followed it to its source, flowing against the stream of space and time.

Eyes closed, Atsuko reached for her scrying bowl. Where the mortal mind struggled to comprehend the churn of the Void, the sacred metal could capture fleeting images on the surface of the water within. The chill of emptiness cascaded over her hands, as though she were holding a bowl of mountain snow. She opened her eyes and peered within.

The purple and fur robes of a rider on horseback.

A carven antler flashing silver.

Wings of gold unfurling, a gleaming ruby glow between them, cracking in two.

The sun and moon trading places along the horizon, plunging the world into darkness.

That darkness pooled within the bowl, writhing and seething, twisting, growing darker and longer into a shadowy form. Where its feet touched the earth, blood ran like a river, coursing through rivers and mountains and plains. The creature followed the blood, and in its wake darkness spread, like a cloud blotting out the sun.

East—it was heading east. Toward the rising sun, toward the dawn-radiant Imperial Palace.

Fear struck like debris in a swollen river. She cast about for a handhold and pulled herself out of the torrent. She cried out as her consciousness slammed back into her arching body and both tumbled backward. The bowl clanged to the floor.

As she pulled herself up, Nobu was retching. The disturbance—

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it must have resonated in her ill-prepared student as well. *For the Void to have washed over him, even when I had sent him out...*

Soft wails rose up around them from elsewhere in the complex, confirming her fears. She had to make contact with Master Ujina and Lady Kaede immediately. They would have to warn the Emperor before it was too late.

Atsuko's creaking voice faded from her mind, but even when the touch of the Void left Kaede, the chill in her heart did not.

It shouldn't have surprised her—the *shugenja* of the Phoenix Clan had suspected for a long time that the Unicorn's foreign sorcery was dangerous. The Emperor should never have accepted it into his Empire.

And now, it had caused ripples in reality itself, ripples that had been felt by all those with the gift to perceive the Void. Fortune must have smiled upon Atsuko, or the Ishiken might not have had the chance to pull apart the tangled knots of the future and catch a glimpse of the source of the waves.

Kaede poured herself a cup of the tea infusion and placed her hands on both sides of the porcelain, a vain attempt to ward off the chill.

When she closed her eyes, echoes of the disturbance washed over her again, and the dizziness returned. She breathed in the sharp scent of ginger to ground herself and quell her unease.

She could reach out, try to send herself to the place and time whence the ripples came, but she dared not attempt the journey from within the capital. She could drown in the emptiness, or worse, drag down others with her. As she had before. She would not risk losing anyone else.

She opened her eyes and sipped at the tea, but still her hands trembled.

They said she had inherited Ujina's gift, that one day she might prove an even more powerful Ishiken than he. But what good was her gift if it was too powerful to be used?

"The universe seeks equilibrium in all things, Kaede," her father had assured her. To have been granted such a terrible gift meant that there would be a terrible need in her lifetime, and one day she would succeed him as the Master of Void.

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She prayed she would be ready when that day came—for both the loss of her father, and the weight of the responsibility that would be placed on her shoulders.

Here, in the capital, she could use other powers: scholarship and diplomacy. She represented her father and the rest of the Elemental Council in the highest court, and she advised His Imperial Majesty on matters of spirits and the realms. The Phoenix had supreme authority on all the realms except this one: that of Ningendō, the mortal realm, the realm threatened in Atsuko's vision. It was the sole province of the other clans' counsel.

The other clans would not take kindly to her interference in their domain.

All official Imperial business was suspended for the length of the Chrysanthemum Festival, but Kaede's warning could not wait. Not when the Ishiken had enacted powerful rituals to contact her across hundreds of miles in an instant.

And not when there was a chance the Unicorn would flaunt their foreign magics before the Emperor, endangering him and the innocents who had come to celebrate the day.

Kaede found the Emperor and his children, their Seppun guards, and the highest-ranking members of the Imperial ministries in the second-story gatehouse that marked the entry to the palace. *Kichō* curtains and reed blinds filtered the glare of the summer heat and shielded the Hantei from public sight while allowing him to observe the ceremonies. As she bowed and entered, she caught Crown Prince Sotorii's smirk and lingering gaze, but she couldn't let that distract her now.

She spied Ishikawa, Captain of the Seppun Honor Guard, and maneuvered herself closer to him, guessing correctly that he would step away to greet her. They exchanged the sophisticated dance of pleasantries, but she needed to speak with him alone, away from the rest of the royal delegation.

"Captain, would you join me in trying to catch a better glimpse of the parade?" The sounds from the thronged mass in celebration below would keep their words from becoming court gossip.

"Of course," Ishikawa replied, casting a quick glance to the Ruby Champion, Agasha Sumiko, who nodded and stepped closer

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to her charges, the Emperor and his heirs.

A cheer went up from the citizens of the Forbidden City, and the procession rounded the corner. She had been looking forward to this day, when the pall of mourning for Doji Satsume would finally be banished by the mirth of celebration. Now, the crescendo of the wooden clappers and drumbeats sounded like a sickening cicada's call.

Below them, in the crowded streets, the representatives of the Otomo, Seppun, and Miya families paraded in their Imperial raiment past the gate. Chrysanthemum blooms were draped about them in ribbons and they held aloft emerald banners emblazoned with the golden Imperial *mon*.

"What has cast the shadow I see in your eyes?" the captain asked.

Kaede took a deep breath. "I received word from Starry Heaven Sanctuary today." Ishikawa would recognize the name of the school for Void shugenja, and that whatever the message was, it could not wait. "I come bearing dire portents. Our Ishiken believe the Emperor is in danger.

"A darkness threatens from the far west, across the Spine of the World. All of us have felt it, but one of our own caught a glimpse of its provenance. We believe it originates with the Unicorn and their talismanic sorcery, their so-called 'name magic,' *meishōdō*."

The captain considered her words in silence.

After the Imperials marched the Lion, their warriors in full war regalia, white manes flowing in the wind. These samurai had defended Rokugan from invasion time and again, whether it was from the hordes of the Burning Sands, the fleets of the Ivory Kingdoms, or more far-flung foreigners.

But would they be able to protect the Emperor against this shadowy threat? Once the darkness formed, would there be any stopping it? Would the Lion, seemingly poised to start an all-out war with the Crane, be ready? The Phoenix's fledgling champion, Shiba Tsukune, would be hard-pressed to foster peace between those two bitter rivals. Perhaps not even the Emperor could, now.

The Lion warriors turned and bowed toward the gatehouse in perfect unison. They rose and shouted, "Banzai!" for their Emperor, before continuing the procession through the Forbidden City.

Her words would be an insult to the honor of the Seppun fam-

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ily and their schools, but Kaede mustered the courage to ask, “If the Unicorn use their accursed talismans today, and something happens, will the Emperor’s guards be prepared?”

Ishikawa’s eyes went wide and he immediately checked the gatehouse behind them, ensuring the safety of the Imperial family. “The members of the Honor Guard are prepared to sacrifice everything to safeguard the Emperor’s life, and the Hidden Guard shugenja have sworn to protect the Emperor’s very soul.”

She pressed further—her words bordered on impropriety, but they had known each other for years. They could be honest with each other. If she had tried to offer her advice to the Seppun shugenja, they would have dismissed her out of hand. She took a deep breath and asked, “Can they defend against forces they do not understand?”

He stood straighter, his hands curling into resolute fists. “They are the best of the best, and they have never failed His Majesty.”

Before the Lion contingent had finished their pass, the drum-beats and song of another clan floated down the avenue. The Crane were next, promising a spectacular performance of dance and artistry. Cerulean robes and ribbons flowed and ebbed like the great Sea of the Sun Goddess, and like a school of fish, silver swords flashed in a scene from a Kabuki play. Such beauty was so fragile, so easily snuffed out by the wickedness of the world.

Kaede continued unsteadily. “The techniques of the different families are among their greatest secrets, and their shugenja traditions are even more carefully guarded. Only over many centuries have the Isawa come to understand the strengths and weaknesses of each clans’ shugenja. The Soshi can lift their prayers wordlessly, while the Kitsu invoke the guidance and protection of their ancestors. We do not know precisely how they do it, but we—and the Hidden Guard—know what to expect, at the very least.”

“Are not the Asahina shugenja’s charms very similar to—if not the same as—the Iuchi’s talismans?” Ishikawa tilted his head slightly, looking askance at Kaede. “Both the Crane and Unicorn’s amulets seem to bestow the blessings of the kami upon their wielder.”

Were they truly blessings of the kami—or some demon’s boon? “Of that we cannot be certain. No one is.” The Asahina’s charms

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of bamboo, folded paper, silk, and bells looked not unlike the *omamori* crafted by shrine-keepers to share their kami's blessings, although the Asahina's protections were much more powerful. By contrast, many of the Iuchi talismans took the shape of hideous monstrosities: the human form corrupted with scale-covered tails, feathered wings, horned heads, and furry legs. They were as grotesque as the *oni* that dwelled in Jigoku.

Kaede had to make him understand. "I swear, Captain, we do not bring this to you lightly. You lead the Emperor's protectors. Please convey my fears to the Emperor—it will only mean something if it comes from you. If meishōdō is as dangerous as we fear, and your guards are met with a terrible threat to the Emperor..."

"Then you believe we must forbid it." Ishikawa filled in her blanks, releasing a sigh. "The Phoenix and the Lion will rejoice at seeing what they believe to be heresy quashed, but the Dragon and Crane will not stand idle while their ally is censured. The Crab may be relieved to see their old enemy weakened, or perhaps they will see it as losing a possible new defense for their Wall. No doubt the Scorpion will seek to capitalize on the situation either way. Most of all, the Unicorn will not look kindly on the Emperor refusing to accept their manner of service."

Yes, there would be many political ramifications, but spiritual threats were much more complex—and perilous—than mere mortal concerns. Kaede replied, "Yet, if they brought back witchcraft from the Burning Sands, then surely it is the Emperor who has the wisdom to determine whether such arts continue to serve his Empire." As Lady Sun's conduit to her lost descendants, the Emperor was effectively divine, his wisdom irrefutable except by other Hantei.

The Phoenix procession came next, instantly recognizable by the portable shrine carried by the guardians of the Shiba family. Around the warriors, a flock of shugenja, priests, and shrine-keepers danced and sang for the glory of the spirit they carried. It was said to be the kami of Seppun Hill, the guardian spirit of the land beneath this very city, who had watched over the line of the Hantei since the city's founding.

"There is another way," Ishikawa began. "If, as you suggest, the danger lies in not knowing, then perhaps instead of outlawing it

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entirely, the Unicorn will submit to teaching the Hidden Guard the nature of their powers.”

“The Iuchi will be loath to give up their secrets,” Kaede pointed out. Something so simple as the captain’s solution could never work.

“The Unicorn are a practical clan. Their champion may well decide it is better to confer with the Seppun than to lose the arts of her shugenja.”

“We shall see,” said Kaede. Ishikawa gazed out at the crowd.

The next delegation snuck up on them, hot on the heels of the Phoenix like the deepest shadow following the brightest light. A group of acrobats tumbled and contorted and leapt from atop each other’s backs, spinning through the air before landing gracefully on their feet. Dancers joined them, donning mask after mask and swirling among silks such that they seemed to flit about the street. This, too, had to be a trick of some kind, although what hidden meaning lay beneath, Kaede could not guess.

“Mine will not be the only voice advising him. The Emperor has many counselors, and you can be sure that each will have their own opinions. Any decision will come neither lightly nor quickly.”

By then, it might be too late. She would have to find a way to sway these other counselors, or find a way to protect the Imperial family herself. “This cannot be delayed as so many matters of court are! Please, take this directly to him, I beg of you. For my sake, but also for the Emperor’s.”

Ishikawa’s eyes held hers, too long, but neither of them could look away. “Very well, Kaede-san. If the Emperor indeed judges your concern sound, he will need help to enforce his laws. We have the Emerald Magistrates, but the Jade Magistrates of yore—” A cheer went up, cutting him off.

“The Phoenix will assist however they are needed, make any sacrifice,” Kaede quickly put in. The office of the Jade Champion had not been needed in centuries, and the Empire did not need them now. The Elemental Masters were the supreme authority on spiritual matters, and they would see to the law’s implementation themselves. They would ensure that there would be no cause for the Imperial ministry dedicated to rooting out heretical shugenja to be reinstated.

At last, the delegation she feared most came into view, their

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contingent mounted atop terrifying steeds, their purple and white garb bearing patterns she had never seen before. A stench wafted up from the horses, sickly sweet and turning her stomach. The clop-clop-clopping of hooves against the stone-paved avenue matched the pounding of her heart; their whickers and neighs sent shudders down her spine.

Please, let nothing happen, she prayed. Her power answered unbidden, welling up inside her. The cold emptiness of the Void lapped at her feet, as though she were standing in the surf of a starry night's sea. Despite the heat of the day, she shivered beneath her many-layered robes.

“Kaede, are you—”

“Forget me,” she managed to whisper. “Go to the Emperor. Ensure he is safe.”

While the horses trotted in circles, weaving a pattern like the shifting sun, a Unicorn shugenja at the circle's center held aloft a golden winged talisman, a ruby gem glinting with the light of Amaterasu.

No!

The Void knocked her feet from under her, and a riptide of power threatened to consume her. *Let go, and you will have all the power you need. Surrender to the will of the world.*

I will not give in. But I must see... Her vision darkened, and she saw into the Realm of Void. Where before had existed only the parade, now infinite street-goers were packed into the avenue, souls from every moment from the distant past to the far future, their elements bleeding through the scene in four colors. War, peace, desolation, desecration. She strained to find a single thread in time, to see where the Unicorn shugenja had stood.

The cold of the Void pressed down, trying to drown her. *There!* She could see it for but an instant: a spirit, a shadowy creature of smokeless fire, horned and bestial. It howled, writhing against some binding force, trying to pry itself loose.

Deeper and deeper, into the nothingness, one with an ocean that never ended—

Remember yourself, came her father's voice. *Do not lose your way.*

I am Isawa Kaede, daughter of Ujina, daughter of Ninube, sister to Tadaka, spiritual advisor to Hantei the Thirty-Eighth, betrothed

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to Akodo Toturi, friend to Ishikawa...

She surfaced from the darkness and gasped at the returned warmth of the sun. *The Emperor—the princes—*

A cry went up from the crowd—one of joy, not fear.

Her back was pressed against the battlements, her legs shaking, breath unsteady. She prayed no one had seen her stumble, or sensed that she had nearly lost herself to her power.

The Unicorn finished their display with a bow to the Emperor, and they bid their horses trot past the gatehouse.

Much of the crowd's attention turned from the parade, moving on to the next celebration or to the countless stalls of food and wine. The Crab, who were next, had offered only a dour contingent of warriors for the parade of Great Clans.

The captain returned, wariness in his eyes.

"I saw something," she managed, her voice trembling. "A spirit, trapped within the talisman. It was trying to break free, trying to get to the Emperor."

He regarded her for a long time. Something in his eyes told her he believed her, but he wasn't convinced. "I will see to it that His Majesty is warned, but that is all I can guarantee." He bowed his farewell and returned to the gatehouse.

"Fortunes guide us all," Kaede whispered.

Only the Dragon remained. Ambassador Kitsuki Yaruma and his meager delegation marched in silence.

The ambassador turned and looked upon Kaede with a cold, knowing stare. She could not fathom why.

A Most Suitable Teacher

By Katrina Ostrander

Chosen by the Hatamoto at the Kiku Matsuri, GenCon 2017

Several weeks later...

Ide Tadaji had expected such a gambit from the Scorpion, but not from the Phoenix. Suddenly, rumors swirled around *meishōdō* at the highest of levels. Some advisors were said to be advocating for the Emperor to outlaw it entirely. There had been scant time to prepare a response, to call in favors among the Emperor's most trusted counselors and ensure that the Unicorn did not suffer a major loss of face in the impending session of court. He had moved as many pieces as he could to gain the advantage, to force the game to unfold as he willed it.

If his opponent had outmaneuvered him, it would fall within Altansarnai's rights to call for his retirement—or seppuku.

"Ambassador Ide Tadaji," came Captain Ishikawa's voice as he rounded a corner and entered the audience chamber. Tadaji knelt deeply on the mat. When he straightened himself, the captain had settled in with the painted green bamboo forest on the screen behind him. Golden chrysanthemum medallions had been inlaid on each screen, lest anyone forget the Seppun's royal lineage.

"Captain Ishikawa. Thank you for inviting me this day," Tadaji offered. The Seppun family was normally reclusive—focused

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single-mindedly on their task of protecting the Emperor and his immediate family. It was on such business that the Unicorn's representative had been brought into their sanctum.

"No doubt you have heard of the concerns raised over your clan's magical practices," Ishikawa began.

Tadaji nodded. "Yes, Captain." Ishikawa had carefully omitted the Phoenix's ownership over those concerns. Was it due to his sympathies for the clan, or because he was one of the few Imperials who did not see a benefit from increased rivalry among the clans?

A heaviness weighed in the air. The moment of truth. Ishikawa sat before him, but Tadaji could feel him standing behind him as well: his second, ready to finish off the self-inflicted agony.

Had Iuchi doomed the Unicorn by adopting these practices from the *sahir*? When the Fortunes and kami ignored his prayers in the Burning Sands, should he have accepted their refusal?

Shinjo-no-Kami herself had allowed the practice. Do not dishonor her with your doubt, Tadaji.

Although it had only been a moment, Ishikawa finally said, "The Emperor does not believe the magic of the Unicorn need be censured."

The shadow standing over him fell away with the words, but Tadaji did not dare allow himself a sigh of relief. Nothing would be so simple—the terms of the Emperor's forbearance came next, and the Phoenix would not permit the Unicorn to go on their way completely unscathed. Not if the Elemental Masters had aught to say about it.

"The Unicorn have served the Emperor well in their time venturing in foreign lands as well as during their time here. We do not see cause to prevent them from serving in their fashion. However—"

There it was.

"The Seppun must serve their duty as well, and they cannot protect the Emperor knowing so little of the practice and its nature. We require that one of the Unicorn's practitioners travel to the capital to teach our guards."

Alter the bargain! Sweeten the airag for the Unicorn somehow. He made to speak, then stopped himself. What could he say to make the Imperials show greater mercy than they already had?

Ishikawa continued, "We understand that Iuchi Daiyu's own

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daughter has recently completed her *gempuku* and is among your most promising meishōdō practitioners."

Ah, yes. Shahai. The perfect candidate for a teacher—and a hostage. Was this Kaede's doing? A master stroke—if the Unicorn's magic ceased to be acceptable, the clan would be forced to cease immediately lest anything befall the daughter of the Iuchi *daimyō*.

The shadowy second had withdrawn to stand over her head, sword ready to swing.

"She will be an honored guest in this very palace and afforded all the luxuries of the Forbidden City."

So they would take her away from her people, her father, her home. She was to become a mere cog in the machinations of court and a traitor in the eyes of her people. Even if she had been commanded by the Emperor Himself to do so, she would still be sharing her family's secrets, betraying its tradition to outsiders. She would never truly be welcome among the Iuchi again.

None of that mattered to the Emperor or his family. Why should it? "Of course. I will send word to Lord Iuchi Daiyu upon one of our fastest steeds."

"The Emperor extends his assurances that all his servants are greatly valued for their service."

"We humbly accept—and are most grateful for—the Emperor's faith." The rest of the clan would have to feel the same. They had no other choice.

Yes—the Emperor's wisdom had spared the Unicorn delegation the humiliation of a tremendous blow to their resources at a time when they needed to be strong and attractive allies for the Crane, and make use of the Crane's political acumen, even if Hotaru's cofers couldn't pave the diplomatic road as easily as they once could.

The Lion would be furious, but then again, there was already no love lost between them and the Unicorn. He would deal with Ambassador Ikoma Ujiaki—even if their words might well become blows exchanged on the battlefield soon.

The Phoenix, however—they would not cease casting a suspicious eye at the Clan of the Wind. It would be almost impossible to win their aid, even with the help of the Dragon Clan.

The pieces had shifted on the board in a single stroke, as though someone had picked up the board and slid everything to one side.

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A few were bound to fall off entirely.

The question was whether the pieces could be brought back to the table once they had been removed from the game. And what Tadaji had to do to make that happen.

About the Authors

Marie Brennan is a former anthropologist and folklorist who shamelessly pillages her academic fields for material. She most recently misapplied her professors' hard work to the Victorian adventure series *The Memoirs of Lady Trent*; the first book of that series, *A Natural History of Dragons*, was a finalist for the World Fantasy Award and won the Prix Imaginales for Best Translated Novel. She is also the author of the Doppelganger duology of *Warrior* and *Witch*, the urban fantasies *Lies and Prophecy* and *Chains and Memory*, the Onyx Court historical fantasy series, the Varekai novellas, and more than fifty short stories. For more information, visit www.swantower.com.

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