



Legend of the Five Rings™

The Way of Shadow



Translated by Jennifer Wick

**DO NOT
READ
THIS**



Table of Contents



TIMELINE

The events depicted in this supplement (and in Kitsuki Kaagi's journal) are historical, occurring a little over a decade before the timeline of the rest of the RPG. Some characters, such as Isawa Ujina and Matsu Hiroru, appear in both *Way of Shadow* and the basic L5R RPG books.

This is intentional, and the statistics of such characters (where depicted) have been deliberately changed to reflect their younger, less experienced incarnations.

The adventures within *Way of Shadow* can be played as historical occurrences, or as current events – the Living Darkness is over a thousand years old, and its activities and goals have not changed in a few short years.

Introduction	4
KITSUKI YASU'S INTRODUCTION TO KAAGI'S JOURNAL	6
Investigation One: Death at Ichime Castle	
ENTRIES FROM KAAGI'S JOURNAL	7
GM'S NOTES	32
Interlude	40
Investigation Two: The Haunting of Kida Dasan	
ENTRIES FROM KAAGI'S JOURNAL	44
GM'S NOTES	64
Investigation Three: The Disappearance of Lady Ninube	
ENTRIES FROM KAAGI'S JOURNAL	76
GM'S NOTES	102
Interlude	112
Investigation Four: The Chase	
ENTRIES FROM KAAGI'S JOURNAL	116
GM'S NOTES	130
Conclusion	
ENTRIES FROM KAAGI'S JOURNAL	136
GM'S NOTES	144



KITSUKI MAGISTRATES MEDITATION JOURNALS

Kitsuki Magistrates are renowned throughout Rokugan for the thoroughness of their observations, even though the legitimacy of their means is still heavily debated. One of the most powerful tools of the Kitsuki are their journals. Investigators trained in the Kitsuki school learn, among other things, a unique kind of meditation. It allows them to focus at the end of one or several days and recall, in absolute detail, the events they have recently witnessed. The result of this is an extensive collection of observations and experiences, recorded and cataloged as if they had been written as the actual events transpired.

At the completion of each set of investigations, the magistrate turns in his records to the great library at Kitsuki castle where these volumes are kept as an ongoing resource.

Introduction

How To Use This Book

The book in your hands is the journal of a Kitsuki magistrate named Kaagi. The objective of Kaagi's work was to discover the truth behind the mask of the Ninja. Four of his most important investigations are in this book. As you read his entries, you will discover the secrets he did, through his eyes.

Way of Shadow is a long-term campaign supplement. It could be used as a stand-alone adventure series, but is ideally intended to augment your current campaign. Although Kaagi moves through the investigations one after another, you can easily insert them in between sessions of your regular, ongoing story line. While each of the adventures is unique, they all have a similar theme, so your players will begin to recognize the difference between your regular campaign sessions and the times when they've stepped into the *Way of Shadow* setting. As your players move through each investigation, they should feel that they are getting closer to a great secret, and the longer you spread out the adventures, the greater that mystery will become.

Kaagi's entries have been edited. While you're bound to come across some extraneous information (at least it may look like it at the time) many of the really monotonous details have been omitted for your reading convenience. For instance, no one really wants to know what was served at every meal. Nor do they care to know a birthday he suddenly remembered. Your editors have taken this into consideration, so you'll find spaces of time missing between investigations.

Each of the four investigations is also an adventure. All you have to do is pull Kaagi (and

his assistant, Meilekki) out of the story, and plug your characters in. Kaagi's notes are meant to give you hints on how to run the adventure, show you ways to introduce NPCs and evidence to the characters, and give you a general description of the environment. Since Kaagi is a Kitsuki magistrate, he doesn't miss many details (but occasionally, his prejudices get the better of him, and he overlooks the significance of what he's found).

For each investigation, you'll find first the journal entries themselves, followed by a section containing instructions on how to turn that investigation into an adventure. In the Game Master's section, you'll find breakdowns of the most important scenes, stats for NPCs, maps of key locations, and suggestions on what to do when your PCs vary from the course Kaagi took.

THE INVESTIGATIONS

Each of the following investigations is designed as a one-shot adventure with a beginning and a resolution. A larger picture is revealed when all of the investigations are completed, but your players should still have a sense of completion at the end of each installment. The intent is to give your players a brief glimpse of something very nasty that hovers at the fringes of Rokugan's perception. The "Ninja threat" is much more dangerous than anyone – even the Shosuro – suspect.

Kaagi's first investigation is more or less a mundane assassination, but there are some disturbing elements in the background that players may not pick up on. It is meant to foreshadow future events, to give the players a sense that something is wrong. There's background that perceptive players may pick up on, but since they only have the first few pieces of the puzzle, they probably won't be able to put it together just yet. There are elements of intrigue, but the adventure ends with an all-out brawl between the PCs and a crafty assassin.

The second investigation concerns a haunting. It begins with a Crab samurai's sudden and unexpected berserker rage (killing more than half his unit), and ends with the realization that he might not have been mad after all. The Kuni have found no trace of the Shadowlands Taint, and suspect the use of Scorpion poison, or possibly *maho*. The PCs (Kaagi in the story) are brought in to investigate this, spend the night in the dead

man's house, and in the end they confront some very personal demons.

The third investigation involves Isawa Ujina, the current Phoenix Clan Novice of Void and heir to the position of Elemental Master. His Crane bride-to-be has been kidnapped by Ninja, and the magistrates are brought in to help Ujina get her back. When they finally confront the kidnappers, however, the magistrates and Ujina are introduced to a force that will change their lives forever.

The fourth investigation is a long chase involving relentless supernatural pursuers. It introduces them to the only weapon they have against this threat.

Finally, the conclusion of Kaagi's journal wraps up his quest for the truth about the Ninja myth and the fate of his long-lost brother. The final objective of a dark force is revealed and Kaagi must make a choice: fight the darkness, or join it.

In the last chapter of this book, you'll find a description of the enemy that has been

introduced in *Way of Shadow*, and details on how to use it in your game.

The true Ninja of Rokugan are more than black-clad men and women intent on murder and robbery. Though some, trained by the Scorpion, fulfill that role, the origin of the 'Ninja myth' goes back to a far older and more sinister force. This is not the story of the false Ninja, Scorpions who hide their faces behind masks and powders, poisons and smoke, but of their darker cousins. The enemy which hides within the shadow is not human, though it tries to be. It is not intent on theft, or gain, though its actions seem motivated by human desires. It is as ancient as the footsteps of Lady Sun and Lord Moon upon the earth, and those who serve it can never be free of its dark grasp. It is nightmare. It is the supernatural horror that stands, faceless, and curses the light.

These are the true Ninja.

This is the full depth of Shadow.

Enter, if you dare.

ADVENTURE HOOKS

Through the sidebars of this text you will find NPC statistics, explanations and descriptions of the Living Darkness's minions and powers, and further adventure hooks. These are designed to give you plenty of ways to use the Darkness, even if you don't intend to have a solely Ninja-oriented campaign.

The Darkness is crafty and clever. There will be times when it was involved in an adventure, and your PCs never even knew they had a brush with it.

That's just the way the Shadow likes it.



-Kitsuki Yasu

As I write these words, I feel my age more than I ever have before. Seven days ago, in the midst of a great storm, a traveler came to Kitsuki Castle. She asked shelter from the storm, and passed an hour in the castle's hall. Then, thanking those who had admitted her, she gave them a package and asked them to pass it on to the daiyō. After doing so, she left, the storm still raging. On the morning, the package was brought to me. Unwrapping it, I found the journal of my student, Kitsuki Kaagi. Like all of our students, Kaagi always kept a journal with him to record his investigations. I knew it to be his from the mon, but the wooden box that held the pages was battered, cracked, and stained with the marks of fire and water. The clasps were scratched and scarred, but remained intact.

The servants who admitted the girl did not recognize her, but from their description, I suspect her to be Kaagi's servant, an eta. It was no difficult feat for me to open my student's box, as my key is a master to his. Inside, atop the shuffled pages, was a scrap of rough paper. Hastily scanned on the paper were the words, "Do Not Read This." I think the hand may be Kaagi's, but the letters are so distorted, I cannot be sure.

For seventeen years, Kaagi has been my student, my friend, and to all the world, my son. He came to me at the age of eight, Matsun Kaagi, to learn the ways of the Dragon. His father was an old friend who said he wanted his son to study the ways of the Kitsuki, but I think instead that he wanted Kaagi to be safe.

It was only seven months later, I received word that Kaagi's family had been killed, save for an older brother, who was away at a Phoenix school. Old Crane enemies had finally won the Emperor's ear, and the eyes of the world were averted when they struck. At the end, they had razed a lesser Matsun house to the ground, slaughtering every inhabitant.

For his protection, I took the orphaned Kaagi into my family and sent for his brother. But after three weeks, an emissary of the Phoenix arrived to say that the boy, Dyeleo, was not to be found. He had disappeared from his room three nights after his family's destruction.

The boy's enemies must have been close by. Perhaps they had taken him swiftly, in silence before protection could come. For months, Kaagi grieved, suffering from fierce night terrors. He claimed to have strange visions of dark, shadowed figures which came into his room in the night and danced. As years passed, the fears subsided and Kaagi grew into an exceptional student and a fine man.

I have feared for him over the years, more than for most of my pupils. Although our profession is seldom secure, Kaagi's studies were always particularly dangerous. Perhaps from some lingering need to explain the shadows of his past, he made it his work to seek out one of the deepest of Rokugan's enigmas: the Ninja.

Now, seated by my fireside, I await the decision of a council of Kitsuki called to discuss the matter. Kaagi's book lies locked in a sealed crystal vault of Mizumoto castle, a precaution suggested by Togashi himself. In the morning, the council will announce its decision as to whether I, or anyone, will ever be allowed to read it.

Investigation One:

*Death at
Ichime Castle*



Entry 1

I arrived this morning at Ichime Castle, the home of the recently deceased Akodo Maouri. Each servant I passed along the road stared when I asked the way to my destination, marking the sign of the Fortunes above their heads. "Kitsuki Kaagi," I thought to myself, "What have you begun?" I visited this place as a child with my father on several occasions; it is disturbing to find that the great, dark walls I recall from that time have not grown any shorter or lighter to my adult eyes.

The death of Akodo Maouri was reported in the usual way for a man of his station. His court shugenja sent mystical communications to all of the major strongholds, including Kitsuki castle. From the announcement we learned that Maouri died this last month on the night of the dark moon. He is survived by his son, Akodo Hakenka.

What struck me as peculiar about the message was that Maouri's body was not set to be interred until the next full moon, an unusually long span of time. I inquired of the shugenja who sent the message why the delay of the burial was necessary, and he responded, "For spiritual reasons." What he did not say told me that something about Maouri's death was unusual and alarming in some way. I have therefore come with all haste both to pay my respects and satisfy my curiosity about the case.

I have sent my traveling companion, Meilekki, to move about the castle and gather what she can from servants' gossip. Because she appears to be of their station, they spoke freely with her. The servants talk in quiet tones of a family curse that came upon Maouri's father and has now claimed Maouri as well. They say that the eta who prepared the body found a strange mark on the chest, and that they were instructed to remove it if possible. The mark refused their every effort. It is also rumored that Maouri's father bore the same mark on his deathbed, and that it is a sign of a curse passed from first born son to first born son.

I am doubly glad of my haste, as the body is to be laid to rest tomorrow night. I am anxious to see this mark and find if it is servants' gossip or a real thing. Meilekki has gone to offer incentives to the appropriate people so that we can view the body later this evening. In the meantime, I have arranged interviews with other members of the household.

Entry 2

Akodo Toshiin, the court shugenja, seems both arrogant and uncertain. His robes are expensive and somehow larger than the man who wears them. I could tell immediately that he disliked me.

"Kaagi-san, are all of your accommodations satisfactory? Is there anything I can have done for you?" he asks me.

It is a trick, for if I answer yes or no to either question in haste I will insult him. Answering yes to his first question indicates that I want something from him. A negative response to his second question will be taken to mean my accommodations are not acceptable. I find myself not liking him very much either.

I carefully answer, "I have been offered every courtesy and comfort since I arrived at Ichime castle. I want for nothing. Thank you."

He nods at me and we sit down at a table beside a window, overlooking the central courtyard of Ichime castle. The flowers are newly opened, and the fragrance is sweet as it floats toward us on a wayward breeze. Toshiin offers me a cup of tea, and we both drink.

"I understand you are not new to this castle," says Toshiin. "You were a playmate of Hakenka-sama, were you not?"

"I visited here on several occasions with my father. And yes, I am of nearly the same age as the lord. But you cannot have served here long. I don't recall you from those visits."

"I have been at the right hand of Akodo Maouri for nine years! I have served him as well as any shugenja ever served a lord!" His hand clenches the table top.

"Forgive me, Toshiin-san. I meant no disrespect. Only conversation." He is easily provoked then, and wears his wound, his pride, on his sleeve. The man is too loud, too volatile and too impatient to carry any secret for long. "Maouri-sama's death must grieve you greatly."

"Yes, that's it, of course. My lord's passing was too early, too hard. And in such a way..." Silence then, thick with apprehension.

The man needs a trifling nudge, I suspect. "I have heard strange things since I arrived. I was passing Maouri-sama's rooms when..."

"You heard something strange in his rooms?" More surprising still, there's an edge of panic in his voice and eyes.

"No, not at all. I meant merely to say that as I was passing them I heard two servants around a corner in the hall. They hadn't seen me yet, but as they approached I heard, quite by accident, something about dark signs and curses. Just then, they turned the corner and, seeing me, fell silent. Was there something about Maouri's death that should give cause for alarm?"

The man looks a little like a lizard, trying to look in different directions. "You must understand that I have always had the utmost respect for Maouri-sama," he says, soft and fast. "But it is still necessary to take precautions. For the sake of the rest of the household more than myself." Which tells me that it is precisely himself he has in mind.

He continues, "That's why I ordered the delay before the burial." The pride coming out again. "It was necessary, in order to be sure no ill fortune befalls the rest of us."

"Of course," I reply. "You have the paramount understanding of anyone here in these matters." I think he is starting to warm to me now. "But have you ever seen anything like this in your other experiences?"

"Not seen, no. But I've read accounts before of family curses that followed specific paths in the blood like this one. And when precautions were not taken, the misfortune sometimes spread to those in the immediate family, and in one case the entire household. That is why I ordered the burial be in light of the full moon. And why I insisted the eta do everything possible to remove the mark from the body. They are low, after all. How can misfortune harm them?"

He paused for a breath, then continued. "No, truly I think I have done all there is to do to protect the house. But the young lord, he is too brash to follow my instructions. He won't visit the temple, he won't fast, none of it. He doesn't see his own danger, and in it, our danger as well. After all, a cursed lord puts us all at risk. But his brother Sokoi is not of full blood, and so young besides..."

He stops suddenly, his mouth snapping shut like a trap. I've lost him now, I'm afraid. Speaking publicly about the overthrow of one lord for another, in the lord's own house, seems to have dampened his enthusiasm for the subject. I try again. "But the marking itself, is it familiar to you too?"

"Well, of course I've read about it in the family histories..." He's reticent now. And I've overplayed

my hand. "But that's for the family after all. I'm not at liberty to banter about their private affairs."

"Of course. Thank you again for your hospitality, Toshiin-san. I feel more secure, knowing that you're looking out for all of our good fortunes," I say, smiling as I rise.

His paranoia is complete now, and he doesn't know if I'm complimenting or mocking. I let him mull it over as I leave the room.

Entry 3

My interview with Akodo Toshiin thankfully finished, I had hoped to speak with Matsu Nari, Maouri's karo. He is otherwise detained, however, closeted with Hakenka, my other choice for conversation. Passing a small flock of servant girls, their laundry sailing out behind them like fine silken wings, I inquire where I might find Ichime Amai. They direct me to the east side of the courtyard garden, opposite from where Toshiin and I enjoyed our view. Then the young geese giggle off down the next corridor.

Amai is precisely where they promised she would be, seated in the sun near a small pond. She is carefully breaking off bits of corn and throwing them to the fish, while beside her, a gray bundle of cat stirs not at all.

"The day is lovely," I say, and sit down opposite her on a low rock conveniently located for my purpose. "Spring is pleasantly early this year."

She turns and looks at me very slowly. After several moments, she bows her head once. Whether it is agreement or a show of respect, I cannot tell. The woman is fiercely silent as she sits with her old gray cat. The beast looks as if it is waiting to die. Like the cat, Amai is past her prime and, I suspect, was never particularly pretty. Her face is blockish, her eyes are small and her skin is sallow, the too-soft lines indistinct even under the artificial definition of her makeup. Her voice, when she does speak, is like murmuring wind down hollow hallways, low and plaintive.

"May I serve you, lord?"

"I would be pleased if you would speak with me," I say, smiling. "My family has been a friend to Maouri's, and I have come to pay my respects tomorrow night. In the meantime, I hoped I might speak with some of those who were close to him, for memory's sake, and fondness. I understand you were so."

"Yes, lord." She looks up now, not at me, but past my left shoulder, to the other side of the pond. There is a boy there, sitting very still in the shade of a tree. He's watching something intently on the ground in front of him. I don't know how I could have missed seeing him as I approached.

Amai's loyalty to Maouri is rumored to be impeccable. If stories are to be believed, when she first discovered that she was pregnant with his child, she offered to throw herself from the castle walls so as not to compromise Maouri's reputation. He declined the offer, giving Amai and her child a place in the household, even though his wife still lived. The child before me must be Sokoi, the illegitimate son Amai bore him. The boy looks to be perhaps twelve.

"Amai. Were you with Maouri-sama on the night that he died?"

"No, my lord. He was restless that night, and wanted no one near him. He had been complaining that evening of not feeling well. And he said that he was nostalgic. I brought him some sake in his room, and stayed a short while to entertain him with music. Then he told me to go."

"But you found the body?"

"Yes. I came for him in the morning, to bring him tea. He was lying on his futon. His eyes were open, and he lay still."

I think there is a pallor to her face that is more than the powder she paints it with. And a sadness in her eyes. "Was he happy, in the days before his death? I only ask because, as I said, I was a friend of his family, and I hope that he was well." Silence then from my companion. Interesting. "Was he unwell, then? Did something trouble him?"

"No, my lord, all was well." Very softly spoken, that. Then abruptly, "He was happy! Before his death, he was happy! Some affair of state may have troubled him a little, the disrespect his son bore him, but nothing else."

It's the most intensity I've seen in her yet. She's not looking at me, but at the sky, the grass, her son. She seems preoccupied, as if she's not speaking to me anymore. In fact, when she turns to me again, she seems almost surprised that I am still here. With her left hand, she reaches across her body, picks up the corn bits in their bag on her right, draws out a bit, throws it to the pond. A colorful waterfowl gobbles it up indiscriminately.

"Is something amiss with your right hand, lady? Some injury?"

She cradles it in her lap, a little self consciously. "It's age," she says. "The pain in the joints that comes from living too long."

I nod to her then. "Thank you for speaking with me. It lifts my heart to know that my father's friend was happy in his last days."

She nods, but looks elsewhere again, and pays no heed when I leave. As I reach the edge of the courtyard, and the shadow of the wall, I feel a sharp chill. I turn around, suddenly anxious, but only the woman remains in the garden with her son, whom I think is looking at me.

Entry 4

Waiting for me in the hallway is Meilekki.

"We'll see Maouri's body tonight, an hour after dinner," she says. I am, as always, in love with her efficiency. "The guards charged with watching the body are very concerned that some ill luck might come to them from proximity to a cursed corpse. I explained to them that since you were a shugenja of great ability, you would be able to discern from viewing the corpse whether they were in any real danger. And of course, you could then see about protecting them."

"Am I a shugenja today then?"

"It was the most effective, least expensive method I could think of."

"Don't they have faith in the house shugenja?"

"No. You should hear the delightful names they have for him. They know full well he sees them as expendable." She then showed me her wicked smile. "They were doubtful about you, until I explained that your mother was actually hinin, and that I was secretly your half sister."

Thanks to Meilekki's colorful imagination and glib tongue, I was known through the country as everything from a tragic ronin hiding from Scorpion enemies, to a mad but brilliant eta, cleverly disguising my actual station by using information I had gathered from communication with the ancestral spirits of the Great Clans' noble houses.

"I'm afraid your improvisation is going to be the death of us one day, Mei. But in the meantime, I can't argue its effectiveness. Where are you off to next?"

"There's a cook in the kitchen who's offered to share a few cups of the castle's finer sake with me."

"Hm. As much as I'm certain that will further our cause immensely, I thought instead that you might visit Amai's rooms while she is not within, just to see if anything catches your fine eye for detail."

"Why, come to think of it, that was precisely what I'd had in mind. I'll find you before dinner is served," she says over her shoulder.

One of the many convenient attributes of my companion is her ability to go where propriety dictates I can not. For instance, the ladies' private rooms. I found Meilekki two years ago. She visited Kitsuki castle as the servant of a Crane courtier who had come to see what our "curious branch" of the Dragon tree actually did. I noticed Meilekki's intelligence and inquisitive nature immediately. What's more, the Crane noticed my attention and offered her as a gift at the end of his visit. Although I'm fairly certain he mistook the nature of my admiration, I accepted nonetheless.

Since then, I have taught Meilekki many of the basic principles of my work. She knows, for instance, how to look for anything out of place. She has a keen sense for people and can tell, almost without fault, when they are honest and when they are not. I have shown her some simple tricks with herbs and for this too she has a natural bent, along with an excellent memory.

I am not wholly certain what she did and where she came from before she was in the service of the Crane courtier. It has become something of a game wherein she tests my powers of perception by telling me one story after another about her origin (similar to the ones she makes up about me), challenging me to discern which hold truth and which are false. For example, I am certain she spent time in a geisha house. She has on several occasions produced knowledge she could not have had from any other source. But I do not know if she plied the usual trade there, or if, as she has sometimes claims, she cooked for the women and made up the rooms.

Entry 5

I find Matsu Nari in a small sitting room. He is writing by the light of a paper lantern. He looks up as soon as I enter the room.

"Kaagi-san. I had heard you arrived this morning. You should have taken some time to rest from your travels. Was your journey a good one?"

Tall and hard, Matsu Nari looks like a tree from which no sane man would cut a bow. His countenance is rough, his clothes are well worn. He has the air of a man who gives little time to small vanities. He served Maouri for nearly 18 years, during which time no questionable thing was ever said about him. By all accounts, he functioned like an extension of the daimyo. He once led the army in Maouri's place when the daimyo was too injured to take the field. The victory was decisive.

"It was a fine trip. Thank you for asking, Nari-san. I was fortunate enough to leave at the same time as a shugenja who was heading past this castle. He was in something of a hurry, and was good enough to let me to benefit from his spell for swiftness. It cut down my traveling time considerably. I was doubly glad since I hoped to arrive in time for the interment."

"How lucky for you. But what can I do for you, Kaagi-san? Is everything to your liking here?"

"Most certainly. I could only wish for a more pleasant reason to visit. Actually, I must admit, something has troubled me since my arrival. I've heard rumors that Maouri-sama's death may have arrived under dark circumstances."

"Vicious rumors. Servant's talk. I hope you haven't been greatly troubled by it."

"I wasn't when it came from servants, but the rumors I've heard have also come from higher sources. Combined with the strange circumstances of the burial... well, I must admit to being concerned."

"So, I had hoped that this talk of superstition and fear would fade rapidly, but it has not happened. I tell you truly, I am not a superstitious man, but many here are, and I fear what their words may cause."

"Do you speak of the concern that Maouri-sama's manner of death may affect his son's rule?"

"That is precisely my concern. I have done my best to keep all such matters quiet, but the shugenja insisted on delaying the burial, and so has alerted other houses that there is cause for alarm. Then there are the family histories, which I have tried to suppress. But gossips have found papers that described the death of Maouri's father, and that has only made things worse. My lord's strange behavior during the weeks prior to his passing has not helped matters either."

"I have not heard of this matter with Maouri's father, or of his behavior."

"Forgive me. To give further cause for alarm was my last intention," he said. "But I know your reputation as a man of good sense, so I will tell you of these things. Perhaps you can find something to calm superstitious minds. I fear otherwise what they might do."

"At the time of my lord's demise, a strange mark was found on his chest. It was impossible to remove, very much like a tattoo. But no one who was close to Maouri-sama could recall having seen it before."

"Could it have been a tattoo?" I inquired.

"No. Amai had seen him only two days before his death, and swears that there was no mark. While a tattoo may have been placed in the interim, there was no time for it to heal. This, of course, was bad enough for those inclined to be easily alarmed. To make matters worse, Toshiin then recalled something in the family history scrolls. Before I could discourage the effort, he made public his findings that Maouri's father had a similar design on his chest at the time of his death."

"What's more, for several weeks before he died, Maouri was troubled. He had begun to retire earlier than usual to bed. And his arguments with his son - they had always disagreed, but in those last few weeks the disagreements had grown angry, even violent. There was talk shortly after my lord's death that Hakenka might have somehow been involved. On Maouri's last night they argued viciously over lands that Maouri had agreed to concede to another family. Hakenka accused his father of being too old and cautious to lead, and Maouri declared he would return his land to the Akodo Champion before he allowed Hakenka to rule."

"No good can come from a father and son fighting."

"Quite correct," Mari agreed. "Hakenka's rashness has placed him in a precarious position. Open disrespect for his father, combined with the growing fear of powerful men around him... To be blunt, I think he may yet make a fine daimyo, but if all mouths around him cry out for him to step down, they will be heard. He cannot hope to stave off attacks forever, and frightened people become desperate."

"Would they put Sokoi, an illegitimate young boy, in his place?"

"I say only that there has been talk."

"I think I understand, Mari-san."

"Do you? I hope so."

"I will undertake as honest an investigation as I can," I say, and it seems to me that for the briefest moment, something dark passes across his face. "Good evening, Mari-san. Perhaps we will speak again."

"Perhaps we will."

Entry 6

Dinner was finished almost an hour ago, and I've seen no trace of Meilekki. I've been to our rooms, walked through the darkened hallways and lingered in the passages that lead to the ladies' chambers, but she has not appeared. Neither have I seen or heard any indication that she'd been found doing anything amiss.

Much of the rest of the household has either gathered in the main room for a bit of entertainment, or has retired. The castle is dark, and despite the warmth of the afternoon, has quickly grown cold. I'm back in the central courtyard now, in a grove of small trees near the northeast corner. The air is surprisingly brisk; I should have dressed more warmly, especially since I'm not certain where we'll be going to view Maouri's body. If Meilekki doesn't appear soon, we may miss our chance entirely. Surely she must know that. I can't imagine what could be keeping her.

A sudden blast of wind makes me shiver and the tree branches, still growing into their new foliage, clack together furiously. As I move among the trunks, I become aware of a more consistent sound, a light echoing of my own footsteps. The wind distorts the noise, so I am unsure of the distance, but I think it must be someone perhaps ten or fifteen paces behind me. I'm afraid if I turn now, in the dense grove, I'll be unable to tell my shadow's identity. So I head for clearer ground, keeping my steps measured and casual, affecting not to have noticed anything amiss.

I take a path that I expect will bring me closer to the nearby east wall of the castle. Somehow, I must have turned myself about, because I realize that I'm moving toward a grove of shrubs near the center of the courtyard. Past the shrubs, I recall a clearing. To the left of a large bush, I expect to see the south wall come into view, but instead I find the west one, and more distant.

I'm not at all certain how I came to be here and now, as I pause, I can't hear the footsteps any more. Did my shadow wander off? Or, in my distracted state, did he come closer? I begin moving more quickly, trying to regain my bearings and listen at the same time. From time to time, I think I hear the odd footfall, but nothing certain. I don't dare turn in any of the small clear patches I come to, not without knowing if they are still too far back to see.

I find myself moving through a smaller copse of trees, and the footsteps become distinct again. They're closer this time, and I am concerned that my subtle pursuer may move within striking distance faster than I can hear and react. I am about to turn and look regardless when I break into the clearing by the pond where Amai and I sat earlier in the day.

The footsteps stay with me as I move to the center of the clearing. Listening, waiting... when I'm certain he is well into open space, I turn. Silence and the stillness of a windless night are my only companions. I cannot fathom how this can be, but there are no traces of footprints on the ground beside my own.

I'm bewildered. It is difficult to question my perceptions, but I am unable to find evidence to support them. Just then, I hear the footsteps again, this time from across the clearing. Looking up, I see Meilekki step into the light.

Entry 7

"Was that supposed to be a game?" I ask. I know there is anger in my voice and I don't bother to conceal it. "I might have killed you in the grove!"

"What do you mean? In the grove, when? I've been here by the pond, and you've only just arrived." She looks confused.

I am confused. I go over the last few minutes in my head, trying to make sense of them, but somehow everything jumbles. "Where have you been? I've been looking for you for over an hour."

"I've been waiting. We agreed to meet here. What kept you?"

Something seems off - not what she's saying, but how she is saying it. There's an uncertainty that I haven't seen in her before.

"You look strange," she says, echoing my sentiment. "Is everything all right?"

"You were supposed to find me before dinner. After you searched Amai's rooms. We never planned to meet here." I try to keep my voice level.

"Then what are you doing here?" There's no ribaldry in her voice, only confusion.

"Looking for you!"

"Why, if you didn't expect me to be here?"

I'm not sure now if I'm being teased. Yet, for some reason, I'm unwilling to relate the story of my mysterious follower. I still can't seem to make any sense of it. "Are we too late to see Maouri's body?"

"No. We have another hour and a half before the guard changes."

"Where have you been?" I ask. "What have you found?" I'm walking back toward the castle now, following her lead. She pauses for a moment.

"I went to Amai's rooms," she says. "They're well appointed for a maid, but not for a mistress. The place was very clean, tidy. She keeps only a few indulgences: two hair ornaments; a book of haiku, wretched stuff; one especially fine kimono; and a very elaborate hand mirror. She doesn't seem incredibly vain, considering what she could have asked for given the circumstances."

"She hasn't so much to be vain about, really," I snap. I'm starting to feel more like myself as I listen to Meilekki's report. My head seems to be clearing, as if recovering from too much sake.

"That's the curious thing." Mei looks thoughtful as she holds open the door leading into the castle. "I haven't seen her. Does she wear a great deal of makeup?"

"More than I prefer personally," I reply, smiling. "But not so much as I've seen older women use at court when they feel their natural charms to be fading. Why?"

"She owns a lot of it. It caught my eye mostly because the mirror was so small. A woman applying her own paint, especially as much of it as I would have guessed her to wear, would usually have a mirror large enough to see all of her face at one time. Don't you think?"

"I don't really have a sufficient basis for comparison. Perhaps someone else helps her?"

"Maybe. Oh, something else. She has a small potted herb garden. It's dead."

"Hm. Perhaps she stopped tending it from distraction or grief when Maouri died. Or maybe her arthritis is too great to let her properly care for it."

"No. If you'd let me finish a sentence, then I could tell you the very curious thing."

She's wearing the confident, patronizing look she saves for special occasions. She seems very much herself now, and so I wonder if perhaps it was her all along who followed me in the garden. "Great lady, please enlighten me," I joke.

"The tools are all recently used. The garden is perfectly tended. But it's dead anyway."

"Interesting. Nothing else?" We turn down a corridor and begin moving down a steep flight of steps.

"Not that I could see. But I had to leave quickly. She came back. She didn't see me; you need not worry."

"Where did you go after that?" I ask, fishing for a confession.

"I met the boy, Sokoi. We spoke for a while, by the pond. And then you came."

"You spent the better part of three hours sitting and chatting with a twelve-year-old-boy? Was the conversation profound?" I don't try to withhold my sarcasm.

"Yes. No. I don't recall what we spoke about," She stops walking in front of a wooden door part way down the long corridor. "Isn't that odd? It didn't seem like very much time had passed at all." She looks at me suddenly. "I was going to meet you before dinner. I was, wasn't I? I only just realized, I'm starving. What a stupid thing to do, to skip dinner. I wonder where I got the idea."

"You said you were speaking with Sokoi, and then I arrived. But I didn't see either of you at first. When did he leave?" I'm still hunting for a confession. I suspect now that this is one of her story games. The details change a little each time, and it's up to me to narrow down the specifics.

"I don't know. I don't recall." She looks faintly annoyed, probably because her prank caused her to miss dinner. "Well, let's see the body!" she says with a sudden cheerfulness, then raps twice on the door. "Remember, you're a great and terrible shugenja."

Entry 8

I wasn't at all sure what to expect from Maouri's body, now separated from his spirit for nearly two weeks. Two guards let us into a small chamber, empty save for a small table where they've been playing dice and several lanterns along the walls. The scene would be comfortable, almost cheerful, except for the strained looks on the men's faces.

Then, they open a second door on the far side of the room. I am immediately struck with the odor. We each take a lantern from the wall and enter the second chamber. This room looks a little larger than the last. In the center of the room is a long, low table upon which rests a trough. Lit candles surround the trough, giving off a scent like cherry wood. But the death smell is stronger. I approach the table, unable at first to make sense of the shadows and shapes in the trough. Then Mei, coming up behind me, raises her lantern close above it.

There is the semblance of a man within. The head with features where they should be, trunk and limbs all in place. But whatever makes a man look like himself is long gone. I've seen corpses on the field and in classes during my training as a magistrate. But something here is wrong in a way I've never known before.

The features, as I look closer, are wrinkled more than a man of Maouri's age should merit. There is a leathery quality to the flesh, an inward shriveling at the eyelids. The body is the right height and proportion for the man I remember, but looks thinner. From the neck down the corpse is swathed in strips of silk, painted with arcane lettering. Further precautions, no doubt, from the diligent Toshiin.

"What is he lying on?" asks Mei, caught between interest and disgust.

"Salt. They have him lying in salt. And I think Toshiin's used a spell of some kind to preserve the body. It hasn't started to decay, really. It's just... dry... Oh no."

"Oh no, what? What is it?" Mei demands.

I'm caught between a kind of dull horror and sick mirth. Trying to hold back laughter that wouldn't have much humor in it, I tell her, "Toshiin must not have known what to do. He wanted to wait to cremate the body, but he couldn't very well let his lord rot and swell in the meantime. So he used the only spell he knew to forestall the process. It's for keeping rations over long journeys."

"How incompetent can that man be?" Mei's voice is only a little over a whisper. I'm not certain if it's shock or if she just doesn't want the guards outside to hear.

"As best I can tell, Akodo Toshiin is a man who lives in constant fear of looking foolish."

"A reasonable enough phobia," she says with derision.

"It makes him do foolish things rather than admit he isn't sure of the best course. I have to say, though, this is certainly an original improvisation."

"Brilliant," she says, moving around to the other side of the body. "I suppose it should make my work cleaner." She begins unwrapping the silk from the upper torso, leaning carefully over the flickering candle flames. Pausing, she raps her knuckles hard on the collarbone. The sound produced is a sharp, echoing report that makes me wince. Mei smiles up at me. "No one home, I'm afraid."

"You're really from the Shadowlands, aren't you? Some Oni spirit come to reside in a human form to torment the likes of mortal men."

"Not at all," she says, still grinning as she draws a small, sharp blade. "I just enjoy my work."

She moves aside the last of the silk wrappings from the chest and we both lean forward to look. I hold the lantern, casting the light onto the corpse. At first, I can see nothing against the darkened, wrinkled flesh. Then, shifting the light, I can make out the darker mark in the center of the chest. The sign is perhaps four by four inches, a simple pattern of curving lines. Looking closely, I can see they are solid black, although the edges are blurred, indistinct. "There," I say, pointing at the lines.

"I see it," she says. Rubbing lightly with her finger, then scraping a bit first with her fingernail, then the knife blade, she shakes her head. "There's no difference in the texture of the skin, and the servants are right. It won't come off. Wait a moment."

She places the knife between her teeth, and leaning in with both hands begins to probe the chest, stomach, and throat of the corpse. Next she runs her hands up and down the arms a few times, pausing at the wrists. I have to repress a shudder as she wriggles a finger between the dead man's lips, and then as far as she can reach down the throat, placing her free hand on the outside of the neck as she does so. Then she takes the knife out of her mouth.

"There's a rigidity to the chest, the area right around the mark, that's inconsistent with the rest of the body. He's stiff all over, but it's a dry stiff. This area..." she traces her finger in a rough circle a few inches around the design, "...is rigid, feels more dense." To prove her point she knocks on the center of the chest. The sound is more muffled than the one produced at the collar bone - like knocking on a thick wood door.

"The hardness continues through the larger blood-carriers," she adds. "I'm not sure, but I think the throat may have closed up prior to death."

"A poison? Could it have been something that affected the blood?" I'm thinking aloud. "Can we take a sample of the marking?" I ask.

"Of course." She begins to dig a bit with the tip of her knife until a fragment comes loose. This she puts into a small glass vial which she caps and tucks back into her obi along with the knife.

"Are there signs of a struggle? Are the fingernails broken? I don't see any bruises, but then I don't think we would at this point."

"The nails are all intact," she says, examining one hand, then the other. "I can't see any marks or bruises on him, but I don't know if there would be any after all the flesh has been through by now."

"Let's go," I say, turning away. "I don't think there's anything else for us here."

"Are you in a hurry, then?" She's laughing at me, I think. "Wait a moment. I need to replace these wrappings. There. Can you imagine..." she laughs as she comes around the table, "...if Toshiin came down here tomorrow night and found them out of place? He'd think the whole place was beset with Oni."

The guards are still in their outer room, looking pensive. I put on my best grave face for them. "I can assure you with absolute confidence that no harm will come to you or those close to you because of your duty here. There is no curse in this place that has any power to harm you." I nod to both men where they've knelt on the floor in obeisance, and Mei and I take our leave.

"What next?" she asks me as we climb the staircase.

"Bed, I think." I can feel my muscles tensing from my earlier exertions in the courtyard.

But Mei looks fully awake.

Entry 9

I can hear the footsteps moving behind me, and I think I can feel breath on the back of my neck. But as I push the silken curtains out of my way, trying to get clear of them, I seem to become more deeply entangled. I'm looking for something, but I don't know what it is anymore, and if I don't find it soon, it'll be gone. The grass is cold under my bare feet, and wet, but I didn't think to bring my shoes. The curtains are getting wet now, too. It makes them heavier, hard to push aside. The signs painted on them are beginning to run, spreading black and crimson onto my hands and clothes. There must have been a spring shower earlier, because the hem of my robe is drenched and it's tangling my feet. The footsteps are behind me, but more distant now. It must be tangled up in the wet cloth as well. If I can only remember what I was looking for — or was it whom? — then I'll be able to find my way out of here.

I am suddenly free. In the clearing at the pond, I look around, expecting Meilekki to be there. I begin to shiver in the cold night air because my robes are so wet. When I look up I can see two moons, side by side. One is full and bright, and the other is black. I'm walking toward the pond but I don't really want to. The water there, if I touch it, will make me unclean, like touching Maouri's body. But there's a body there already. Floating in the still waters, just below the surface, is Meilekki. Her eyes are wide open and a small silver fish darts from between her parted lips. Her kimono spreads out around her like a cloud and I can't understand why it hasn't grown heavy with water and pulled her down. I didn't find her in time because I couldn't remember that I was looking for her, and now it's too late.

I move closer, wanting to say I'm sorry, and I realize it's not Mei at all. The body is too small. It's Sokoi, and he's sinking back into the water as I watch. His eyes are open and dead, but his lips are moving as he sinks further and further down.

I wake cold and wet, and at first I cannot separate this from my dream. Then I realize that I'm soaked in sweat and the fire has gone out. I rise to build it back up, but as I do so, something catches my eye, a movement in the corner. As I turn, I feel all the strength run out of my legs, and I almost fall. Sokoi

is standing by the window, not as I saw him this afternoon, but as I did in the pond. His clothes are dripping green water onto the floor of my room. He looks so young and frail and his eyes stare at nothing. But his mouth is still opening and closing as if trying to speak or to breathe. And as I look at the growing puddle by his feet, I see a great rock tied tight with a thick silk rope to one ankle. The flesh around the binding is swollen and purple. And as I look back at his face, I see that has grown swollen too, the eyes puffed shut and purple all over.

I wake, tangled in my blankets. The fire gives only a little illumination to the room. It is still dark, but the first birds have begun to clear their throats. I have to get to Mei, before she drowns. No. That's not right. I have to get her before the servants awaken, and go to Maouri's rooms so that we can search them in peace. I dress quickly, trying to throw off the strange apprehension of my troubled night's sleep. As soon as I'm dressed, I hurry to meet Mei. I tell myself that my apprehension is unreasonable, that it is only a product of a fitful night's sleep and my hurry to get to Maouri's rooms before the sun rises too high. But I can't shake a slight sensation of panic as I knock lightly on the door of her room and wait for her to answer. A long moment passes, then the panel slides aside. Mei is dressed for the morning and her mouth is full of rice cake. She offers me one as she slides the panel shut behind her.

"I still can't believe I missed dinner last night," she says swallowing. For a moment, I'm overcome with a warm affection for her, before she scowls at me and says, "You could have at least saved me something."

Entry 10

"Not that way," says Meilekki. "Turn toward the left."

"Maouri's chambers are to the right. I passed them yesterday," I reply, turning to look at her.

"I know," she says. "But we're not going to Maouri's rooms. We have another appointment to keep." "What are you talking about?" I'm becoming more impatient as we stand in the painfully open corridor. "I want to look at the rooms before the servants are up and about and underfoot. That was the point of getting up this early, as I recall."

"I had a visitor last night," Mei says. She turns to the left passage and begins walking at a deliberate pace. "A servant came to me late last night. She had a message from a retired general who resides here at Ichime castle. The name was Akodo Temoru. Anyone you know?"

It's more irritating that she doesn't even turn to see if I'm following. "The name sounds a little familiar."

"From what the maid said, he's a bit before your time. He was a friend and general to Maouri's father. He's been retired for years. He stays in the castle, but he's very reclusive. And he wants to talk to you. Early. Before servant eyes and ears are about. Naturally, I assumed you'd be interested."

There isn't any real argument to be made, so I continue down the hall after her. After several minutes, we find ourselves in one of a series of back corridors.

There are hooks for lanterns on the wall but few are lit.

"This isn't a very auspicious way to keep one of your greatest generals after his retirement," I say softly. For some reason I find myself not wanting to cause more noise in these dark, echoing corridors.

"As I understand, it's his choice. He could have one of the foremost rooms, at the center of Ichime Castle's activity. He could have had whatever rooms he chose. He and Maouri's father were close as brothers. But

apparently he values his privacy and wants to spend most of his time alone. At least, that's what the girl who brought the message said."

"Hm. Are you certain you know where we're going? These passageways all look the same."

"I'm certain I'm following the directions I was given. Whether they're right, your guess is as good as mine. Here," she says, stopping suddenly. She points to a tapestry depicting two mighty lions dining on the carcass of a deer. "It should be three doors to the left of the tapestry," she says.

I walk to the indicated doorway and knock lightly. A long moment passes in silence. Then another. Then there's the faint sound of shuffling within, and the door opens slowly. The man inside looks too old to be standing unassisted. His face is as wrinkled as a dry scroll crumpled and unfolded again. His body is bent low and he leans heavily on an exquisite walking stick set with bright bits of enamel. His robes are fine, but simple and old.

For a while he looks at me, a scrutiny in his eyes that I've only felt from my sensei. It would make me nervous indeed if I felt I had anything to hide.

"I'm glad you came," he says finally. "Come in."

His apartment is not large, but it's crowded with a century's worth of mementos. Tapestries cover the walls, overlapping each other. Shelves and tables are crowded with weapons and bits of armor, some gleaming, some battered. On others, there are women's fans and the like. There is a large table in one corner of the room, close by a pile of pillows and soft blankets. Temoru moves away slowly and very carefully eases himself down onto his thick cushion. He gestures with his hand at a nearby cushion a little forward and to the left of his. I sit across from him on it, and Mei, as if she were a perfectly behaved eta servant, kneels to my right. Temoru has the look of a man who has chosen to surround himself with the remembrances of his days of glory, and retreat within them.

"Your father had a good name," Temoru says in a gruff tone, full of dust. "To some of us who remember, it is a good name still." I open my mouth to thank him, but he continues before I can begin. "I do not pretend to understand what your new family does, or what it honors. But I have heard that the Kitsuki are interested in truth and have a knack for seeking it out." A long pause comes then, and Temoru looks thoughtfully into the distance. When he speaks again, his voice is lower.

"I have not always been a friend to truth. I've found it often to be crude. But I think that some truth is needed now to prevent a great wrong." He looks at me directly then. "I will tell you a truth so that you, as a Kitsuki, can keep a wrong from taking place. But I rely on your discretion as a Matsu to keep what I tell you a secret. You must find another way to make things right than to tell others what I tell to you here."

"Temoru-sama, I will do all that is within my power to aid the Lion," I say bowing my head. "But what is the wrong that you speak of?"

"I will begin at the beginning. I was a man with Akodo Bakusho, Maouri's father. Before that, I was a boy alongside him. Bakusho and I played together as children. We threw dirt at the same little girls. Our gempukku ceremonies came near the same time. We learned to fight together as men, and when the time came, we courted together those same girls we taunted as children.

"I was of a lower station than Bakusho, but when he went away to the Akodo school he took me with him. We were the best they had ever seen." I can see the pride still smoldering like hot coals in the old man's eyes. "It wasn't long before we caught the notice of a general who taught there. He took us under his wing. We were his special pupils and we learned battle techniques more specialized than

were taught anywhere else in the school. With his other students, we became a kind of guard, a unit together. And we would assist him on special duties, patrols, watches; sometimes he led us to fight in small skirmishes. We saw battle before any others in our class. He was proud of our ability and we were loyal to him."

The old man takes a deep breath and continues. "A day came when he told us we had an important task to complete, a vital mission. There were negotiations taking place between the Akodo and the Doji. A dispute over who would guard some common territory. Neither wanted the other's forces in the area to be greater than their own, so they could come to no agreement. Our general — his name is not of consequence — knew from his own sources that a Scorpion spy would be traveling in disguise to the negotiations. The spy would use lies and tricks to discredit both sides until all negotiations were broken apart. Then, with no clear decision, the territory would be either under-guarded or protected by men already suspicious of each other, leaving it open and vulnerable to the bandits the Scorpion employed."

"We were to intercept a caravan; the spy would be pretending to be a person of noble means with an entourage. Of course, the supposed servants were assassins. We were to overtake them on the road, using surprise to our advantage. Once we eliminated the threat we would declare what we had done and the treachery of our enemies. We would be heroes."

There's a troubled look on the general's face and I feel a deep foreboding in the bottom of my belly.

"We waited for them near the road, ready to ambush them. The caravan arrived as our general's sources had predicted. We waited in the brush, and just as we'd planned, we charged them. A few of the men pulled their weapons before we were upon them, but it did them little good. We were well-trained and had the exuberance of youth on our side. One of us reached the palanquin," he says looking at me very pointedly. "One of us reached it and put his sword through the curtain. A young girl screamed. We all froze where we were. Perhaps we were not so disciplined as we had thought. The servants, and they were servants, save for two real guards who had gone down in the first rush, were too frightened to move. You could see it on their faces."

"Our general moved the curtain aside and looked into the palanquin. Inside was the daughter of the Doji daimyo, dressed in her blood-soaked Crane finery. You see, she was going to be offered in marriage to one of the Akodo generals to cement the negotiations."

"We didn't know that until later, which was just as well." Temoru isn't looking at me anymore. He's gazing straight into that day all over again.

"We were confused at first. We looked to our general for guidance. A few of us still didn't understand when he commanded us to kill the rest of the entourage... some eight men left standing, I think, and one woman, a maid. We did it because the only logic left in the world at that moment was the chain of command. I think some of our group thought things were still happening as planned. Maybe they thought, or let themselves believe, that the girl was really the spy after all."

"When we were done, he had us take money and valuables from the bodies, including the chest that held the daughter's dowry. It would look like bandits had robbed them. It turned out later that the incident sealed the Crane's decision to patrol the territory heavily, making the negotiations a success. On the way back to the school, we passed a fast, deep river, and threw in everything we had taken. We weighted the silks with the gold, and it all sank straight to the bottom. All but this," he says, reaching

to the small table to his right. He raises into the light a very delicate lady's hair comb. The little beads of gold still bob merrily as it moves, though some are crushed.

"I couldn't let it go. I suppose I saw it as a small tribute to her, to keep it and remember. When we returned to the school, our general told us that we could never speak of what had happened. Nor could we commit seppuku, as it would draw suspicion. He claimed that he had been deliberately misled, that he had been manipulated into doing something that would bring dishonor on our entire clan, and he was determined not to hand victory to the Scorpions that day.

"Two of our seven favored pupils didn't complete their training at the school, but found reasons to return home. I believe one left his family and joined a monastery. The rest of us stayed. We were forbidden to speak of what we had done or of the group we had been part of. And eventually, memory faded. We did not speak with one another much after that, although Bakusho and I stayed together as we always had. We finished our time at the school, married our wives, and Bakusho provided me a home here. No one has spoken of the matter since." He turns to me now and his eyes are sad but hard, like well-washed pebbles.

"I am honored by your trust in me in this matter, Temoru-sama," I say, bowing my head down low. "But I am not certain what you would have me do with the knowledge."

"When Bakusho died, earlier than he should have, they found a mark on him. Much was whispered about it at the time, all superstitious nonsense. I remained silent then. But now Maouri is dead, and they say they have found the mark on him as well, and it is a sign of a curse that will afflict his son. Some would keep Hakenka from the throne for the sake of their foolishness. I will not have it so." With those words, Temoru reaches up to his chest and carefully pulls aside the edges of his kimono.

"This is the mark that they found on Bakusho," he says. And there, near the center of his chest is a design like the one I had seen upon Maouri, but smaller, and much more distinct.

"This is the mark," he repeats, "and Maouri cannot bear it, because this was the mark of our brotherhood back in the Akodo school. No one has seen it since then, save our wives. And no one could have given it to Maouri but Bakusho, and he would not have. That is why I have called for you, Kitsuki Kaagi-san."

Back in the corridors beyond Temoru's room, Meilekki and I speak in hushed tones.

"Could Maouri have put the mark on himself after finding it on his father's corpse? A kind of tribute, perhaps?" Mei asked.

"It seems unlikely. Why would he do such a thing without knowing what it was? Especially when so much dark rumor surrounded it. Besides, Amai claimed to have no knowledge of it. I don't see how she could have missed it for so long. Besides, Maouri's mark was different. It was sloppy, not as precise. Temoru's was clearly tattooed."

"Could it have been drawn on after his death?"

"I don't think we can judge. We don't have enough information. I think it's a safe assumption, though, to rule out a family curse as the cause of his demise."

Entry 11

We arrive outside Maouri's rooms without incident. The heavy wooden door is locked, but that is of little consequence. I've undone the mechanism in a few moments, and the door swings open soundlessly.

Mei and I slip inside, closing the door behind us. Inside are a series of paper divisions separating the chamber into smaller rooms. There's an altar to Maouri's ancestors in one partitioned area, a writing table with implements and scrolls in another. The main part of the room contains his futon, wardrobe, a table for taking refreshments and a stand for his daisho. On the far side of the room is a window. It is open.

Mei looks at me and raises her eyebrows. "Do you think they're airing out the bad spirits?" she asks with a wry smile.

"It shouldn't be open," I reply. "This room should have been sealed after Maouri's death and left untouched."

"Except for us, of course."

"Of course," I say absently as I move to the window. It's a long way down. This wall is the one closest to the edge of the cliff-side, making it the most secure. It's nearly a straight drop from here to the base of the mountain. I duck my head inside and examine the window itself. The dust on the frame and sill is only a little disturbed, the work of the wind that blows crisply into the room now. The latch is worn. At first glance, I wouldn't say that it was worn enough to come loose, but I can't be certain.

"Do you think it's cold enough in here for the window to have been open long?" I ask Mei. "The room is cold, but it would be after having no fire. The air doesn't seem fresh enough for the window to have been open for more than a few minutes." I'm distracted by something lying a little way off on the floor.

Crossing to where it lies, I see that the object is cylindrical, about the length of my hand from heel to fingertips. It looks to be made of a white wood carved with an intricate pattern. The dust in the area around it is undisturbed, but the cylinder itself shows no trace of dust. I pick it up carefully.

"What do you make of this?" I ask, turning to Mei. She's over near the futon.

"What?" she asks, glancing up. "Are these the same blankets that were on the futon when he died?"

"They should be," I say, walking toward her. "Have a look at this." As I turn the device over, it suddenly extends. Two more cylinders, each a little smaller than the other, fall out of the first, locking with two almost inaudible clicks. The result is a segmented cylindrical object a little shorter than my forearm, tapering a little toward one end. The outermost segment is covered with a finely carved pattern of swirls interrupted by occasional sharp angles. The two inner segments are entirely smooth, allowing them to slide back into place.

"I've never seen anything quite like it. Do you think it's a Unicorn device? I've seen a few phenomenal trinkets they brought back from their travels. This isn't quite like those, but it's expertly crafted."

"It looks like a toy. I wouldn't bother with it," she says shortly. "Come have a look at this." She's bent over the futon again.

"What is it?" I ask, moving to join her.

"There's a smell," she says, her nose wrinkled a little. "Something sharp."

She's right; I can smell it too as I move closer. "It's got obuno oil as a base, I think. Mixed with something else, I'm not sure what... beeswax, maybe?"

"What's obuno oil?" asks Mei with interest.

"It's distilled from the leaves of a spiny plant. It has medicinal properties, but it's not used often because of the potential side effects. If you mix it with ginseng, it can work to stave off infection. But if you don't mix it well, if the obuno is too potent, can make you sick."

"Or dead?" asks Mei with a raised eyebrow.

"Or dead," I nod. "It's an odd poison, though. It would take a long time and..." I hesitate for a moment.

"And..." Mei asks impatiently.

"There's a reason you haven't heard of the plant before. It doesn't get much use as a medicine because there are other, safer options that are just as effective. But the first time anyone tried to find a use for it, it wasn't as a medicine. It was as a fabric dye." I'm untying the cord on my chemical pouch.

"I've got an idea." I can't help smiling at my own sudden revelation and at the annoyed expression on Mei's face. "Obuno, mixed with the essence from kello leaves and tebo, makes a deep ebony dye. Very pretty, and very fashionable in the court for about a month. This would have been years ago. I was just a boy, but I remember thinking it was funny at the time. Everyone whose clothes were dyed with it began to have a bad reaction. At first, they thought it was a plague. People were swooning, having shortness of breath, that kind of thing. They finally realized that it was the result of the dye against their skin, but they didn't figure it out until a samurai engaged in a duel suddenly fell to the ground. When they undressed him, his back was grayish black where his sweat had made the dye run. The more potent mixture had made him faint."

I shrug. "I guess it wasn't really that funny, but I was only a boy." I've got the box out now. The interior is padded silk, with places for two dozen small vials full of liquid, powders and bits of plant. "This is ginseng extract," I say, holding up one vial. "If it bubbles when mixed with the obuno, then Maouri was just old-fashioned about his medicinal uses. This," I say, holding up another, "is kebo extract. Lots of salt and water, it's very close to what you would find in a person's perspiration."

Feeling along the blankets, I find a smooth patch where the beeswax has spread out. Carefully, I pour a little from each vial on opposite ends of the area. The reaction is almost instant. Where the kebo falls, a deep stain begins to spread.

"There," I say with satisfaction.

Mei nods. "There's no bubbling. So the mark on Maouri's chest was from this obuno mixture? Is it possible that he didn't know its full effects?"

"I expect Maouri didn't know the first thing about it. To have such a black stain on his chest, someone must have been applying it for weeks. The beeswax was probably to thicken the dye, so the mixture didn't just run along his body. It would have created enough consistency to draw the same design. Then, when the obuno mix had sunk into the skin, the beeswax could be wiped away. Maouri must have seen the mark developing for weeks and not told anyone. I expect he didn't have any idea where it was coming from or why."

"That would explain why the edges were blurred," says Mei, nodding. "Someone painting him would have had to do the first few sketches from memory before the lines began to appear. It has to be Amai. She was the only one near him at night. She must have seen it when she was alone with him."

"I know. I just wish it made more sense. Her position here would be more secure the longer he lived."

I pause for a moment, looking at the bubbling black stain. "I think it's time I spoke with Akodo Hakenka."

Entry 12

I am kept waiting for my interview with Hakenka. I expect it is because he is attending to some important affair, like polishing his scabbard, or meticulously braiding of his hair.

The door before me slides open, and one of Hakenka's men beckons for me to enter. As I do so, several other samurai pass me on their way out. Apparently, Hakenka really has been busy.

Akodo Hakenka stands in the center of his war room. To his side, Matsu Nari stands, and he greets me with a polite nod, appropriate to my station. The table top before them is covered in maps and scrolls, and Hakenka leans over them with a fierce expression of determination. I'm sure his failure to acknowledge my presence is an oversight due to his preoccupation, and so I wait quietly, determined to give no outward sign of impatience.

Minutes pass. Long minutes. I can't shake the feeling that if the room contained a window I would be able to watch the rays sink below the nearby hills. A century later, he looks up from his papers with an expression of mild surprise.

"Kaagi-san. Forgive me, I'd forgotten you were waiting. You understand of course that I've much to do as daimyo. But then I suppose you don't have such responsibilities to burden you."

I find my patience slipping rapidly. "Hakenka-sama, you strike me as a man who holds his power as a child does a newfound toy. Of course, children are careless, and lose things. You are not a child, Hakenka, and you have too much at stake here to forget." Nari looks concerned, but stays silent.

Hakenka's face swells red. "How dare you speak to me in this fashion? Perhaps you give yourself airs because we knew each other as children. You are a man with no family, and I am a daimyo!" The outrage in his tone is that of a man who convinces others of his greatness in the hope that he will convince himself.

"The family that was mine is gone, that is true. It is no fault of mine, nor did I do anything to prevent it. But I have a new family now and they lack for nothing in name or in skill. I would guard my words more carefully if I were you, Hakenka-sama. You hold your position here because your father is dead. But that same death may have you cast out of power in a very short while, and you are speaking to the only man who may prevent it."

His face, purpling with rage, turns a little ashen. I continue.

"You're right, I do remember our childhood. I remember you were arrogant then, and I think you are arrogant now. But I remember also that you were brave, and not stupid when your temper did not have the better of you, so I think that you will make a good daimyo here, if not a great one. That's why I have come to speak to you about the circumstances of your father's murder." I keep my voice level. I have no time or patience for his outbursts. Nor do I have the tolerance for his pride, and so he must be humbled.

"Murder," you said. Why do you say this?" There's a milder look to him. The anger and the outrage have been supplanted by dull dread. If I weren't already certain he wasn't involved, his countenance would make him a suspect.

"Your father was poisoned, probably for quite some time. You've seen the killer's signature — the sign upon his chest." As I speak, I see Nari nod.

"There is no such mark!" he cries with the outrage of a desperate man.

"Of course it's there. I've seen it quite clearly," I reply with my calmest tone. It's tempting to gloat at his distress, but I know that will accomplish nothing. "However, the fact that your father is marked is no threat to your leadership. In fact, I think it will cement it when properly presented. The manner in which your father was killed will show clearly that he was murdered by human hands, not a spirit's wrath. And further, it proves that the hands in question were not yours, despite the bad feelings between the two of you and your obvious benefit from his loss." I cannot resist this last taunt.

"Do you have testimony to condemn the killer?" he asks, his face eager.

"Not testimony, no. But all evidence points to the culprit."

"Any fool could leave a trail of bread crumbs to point a finger. If you cannot find someone to condemn this man, then what good are you to me?"

"Perhaps we should go and speak with Amai. I think hers is the testimony that you seek."

"Is that dog my father's murderer?"

"At the very least, I think she must have hidden some knowledge of the matter. I think it best that we speak with her."

Hakenka is shaking with outrage as he summons a young samurai. With a curt order, he commands the man to bring Amai to us in all haste. I watch him as we wait. He seems almost lost in deep grief, as if feeling his father's death for the first time. I contemplate how to question Amai when she arrives. She had the opportunity, but I am still troubled by a lack of motive. Besides, her manner yesterday afternoon makes me feel that there is something missing here. Her grief was greater than any other member of Maouri's household I have seen.

My thoughts are interrupted by the sound of footsteps approaching, quickly. The samurai Hakenka sent appears at the door, flushed and short of breath. Bowing quickly, he says, "My lord, your pardon. The woman is dead." Nari steps closer to his lord, as if fearing some grave danger.

"What?" I'm not sure if it is Hakenka or my own voice. "When? Where?" he demands.

"In her room, my lord. Her body is on the bed, like..." he pauses, but his thoughts are as clear as if he had spoken them aloud. "She is like Maouri-sama." The terror on the man's face is unmistakable.

"Hakenka-sama, let us go and see," I say, turning toward the door. "Perhaps there is something to be learned." To the man by the door, "Please go and find my servant, Meilekki and bring her to Amai's rooms. I expect you'll find that woman alive."

He looks at Hakenka for approval and, at a nod, goes about my request. The new daimyo, Nari, and I leave the room, headed for the servants' quarters.

Entry 13

Amai's room is as Mei described, simply appointed and tidy. The woman herself lies on the futon. She is dressed for the day, looking for all the world as if she had just lain down for a short rest. She is partly on her back, partly on her right side. Her left arm is across her body, and her hand rests on a small silver mirror, the back of which is covered in an intricate flower pattern. The soles of her shoes, left by the door, have moist dirt upon them, further indication that she has been up already and had returned. Her face is peaceful, but light streaks in her makeup curving from her eyes down her right cheek tell me she had been crying. This much I can discern without touching the corpse.

"This is unacceptable!" thunders Hakenka. "Did the tsukai poison herself as well?"

"I can't tell at this distance," I reply. "A closer examination of the body is required."

"What would you suggest?" he asks.

"We will wait," I say as I peruse the top of the table by Amai's bed. Everything seems to be as Mei described. I see the book of haiku and recognize the name of the writer. Mei was right: they are quite bad. The plants in Amai's little potted garden are dead, although the soil has been watered today, and the tools used recently.

Just then, Meilekki arrives in the doorway. She looks at me with raised eyebrows as she bows from her knees, in the manner of a proper eta. I nod to her and then glance toward the body on the bed. She moves to it without hesitation. Assessing the positioning with a quick glance, she begins to move her hands

lightly over the body, starting at the temples and moving downward. I glance toward the doorway with interest. Two of Hakenka's three guards wear open looks of revulsion. The third has better manners.

Hakenka himself is looking on with a kind of plain fascination. He glances, at me and for a moment our eyes meet and he looks as if he is about to say something, but he doesn't. Instead, he returns to watching Meilekki.

Mei continues to check the body, pausing to look under eyelids, to open the mouth, and check the throat. She searches with a practiced efficiency. When she reaches the obi, she pauses.

"Here," she says. "This is interesting." She's withdrawn something from the obi. She holds out to me a small ceramic pot. Inside it is the white cake makeup Amai kept on her table. "She's carrying quite a lot of that for a woman who wasn't vain," says Mei. "And it's all she's carrying."

It takes a moment for that to reach me. "There's no mirror in her obi? Perhaps she was carrying the one she has in her hand."

"Doubtful," Mei replies. "That pot is well used. The painted design on the top is nearly worn off from rubbing against the cloth. I'd wager that she always carried it with her. But the mirror was here when I... stopped by the other day. It's possible that she forgot it, but not likely."

She's begun to examine the body again, going back to the face, then pushing the kimono aside at the top. I can see that the makeup ends a little below the neck. Normal enough. Next she picks up Amai's left arm, checking first the hand, then up the sleeve. Then she picks up the right and stops.

"What is it?" I ask, bending closer. She's examining the fingertips. Pulling up a corner of Amai's kimono sleeve, Mei begins wiping at them, and the pale makeup begins to rub away. At first I'm not certain if I'm seeing correctly. But in a moment, it becomes distinct. The two fingers closest to the thumb of Amai's right hand are dyed a dark ebony from the tip to a little past the first joint.

I turn to Hakenka and say, "Hakenka-sama, I think we have testimony, now."

Entry 14

All of the Ichime household has gathered in the main hall. Hakenka sits on his throne. Akodo Toshiin stands to his left, Matsu Nari to his right. Everyone else waits kneeling in a group on the lower floor before the dais. Even Temoru has roused himself from his secluded chambers. From my position to the left of the throne, near the edge of the crowd, I can clearly see Hakenka raise his arm high for silence. Within moments all conversation has stopped.

"I am aware of the rumors whispered in these halls since my father's death," Hakenka's voice is clear. "I understand and appreciate the concerns of my household," he continues. "And for that reason, I sent for the esteemed magistrate Kitsuki Kaagi-san to come and view this matter with his trained and objective eye. If I were in fact a cursed man, it would be than my duty to step down for the safety and fortune of all those loyal to me."

Yes, indeed, I think he may yet be a statesman.

"Come forward, Kitsuki Kaagi-san, and explain what you have found," says Hakenka.

"My lord," I return, bowing low before him. I rise slowly, taking a moment to gaze at the faces of the three men before me. Then I turn toward the assembled crowd.

"The circumstances of Akodo Maouri's tragic passing were strange indeed," I begin. "But I am here to assure you, absolutely, that those circumstances were not in any way supernatural. There is not, and has never been, a curse on Akodo Hakenka's bloodline."

A low murmur runs through the assembly, but is cut off by the outraged voice of Akodo Toshiin.

"How dare you!" His voice is high with shocked anger. "I examined Akodo Maouri's body myself. I saw the mark! You are not a shugenja or a monk. In what way are you qualified to judge matters of the spirit world?"

"You forget yourself, Toshiin-san." Hakenka's voice is harsh. "You have made enough trouble with your superstitious fears."

Toshiin stands back, seeming to shrink in on himself. His face is a dark crimson as he makes mumbled apologies to the man whose whim grants him either position or homeless wandering.

Taking a deep breath, I continue, "I am in no way qualified to judge such things, Toshiin-sama. I do however, have a unique insight into the affairs of men, and in this instance, those negate the involvement of the supernatural. Akodo Maouri's death was unnatural only because the dark acts of men's hands stole his life before the Fortunes' appointed time. He was murdered with poison."

I wait a moment for that to sink in to my now attentive audience.

"The mark on his chest did not appear out of the air at the moment of his death. It was drawn on him, night after night, by a hand he trusted. The substance of the ink was poison, and over time, it claimed his life. This was done to create fear in this household, and in those who hold power in Ichime castle. It made Maouri fear, and he hid the mark, not knowing its cause. The killer knew that those who saw the body would recall the death of Akodo Bakusho and be afraid. They wanted to prevent Akodo Hakenka-sama from taking his rightful place so that another would have his throne. Ichime Amai poisoned Maouri a little every night so that her son would be daimyo."

There's chaos for a few moments as the news sinks in. Then I continue.

"I have found the poison that was used. I found it in Maouri's rooms, and I found it staining the hands of Ichime Amai, who died for her own plot. To secure her son's position, she was the agent of her own death. And with that death, she testifies against herself."

I turn back to the throne. "My lord," I say, bowing again, "I am honored to have been of assistance in this matter."

"And I thank you for your help and skill, Kitsuki Kaagi-san." He nods, and I move back to my place in the crowd.

"The suspicions of a curse in my father's bloodline have been cleared," he announces. "His killer has met justice. I decree that her son, Ichime Sokoi, will continue to live here unharassed. He is young and will not be made to pay for his mother's crimes, save by her loss."

"So, was that fun?" Mei asks me. We're back in my chamber, drinking tea and relaxing a bit after the day's intrigue. Shortly, we'll make our appearance at Maouri's funeral.

"I think it was enjoyable for Hakenka," I say a little wryly.

"It's a shame you weren't facing the right direction to see Toshiin's face."

"Yes, well, you were. How did he take it?" I ask as I turn my katana over, checking its edge.

"Well enough, except for the one outburst." Mei fiddles with one of her Unicorn knives. "Where do you want me tonight?"

"Behind the paper wall separating Hakenka's altar from his sleeping chamber. Can you fit there?"

"If I move it out a little." She hesitates. "Do you think they'll come tonight?"

"I don't think they can avoid it," I say, sipping my tea. "Amai couldn't possibly have arranged all this alone. Someone had to force her into it. I'm certain she didn't know that what she was doing would hurt Maouri, or she wouldn't have been a party to it. She probably thought the point was to disturb him, unnerve him by bringing out his fears and superstitions. For that matter, if she'd known it was poison, she would have used a brush or some other object to apply it. No, I think that whoever drew her into this in the first place planned for her to die from the same poison, an easy way to tie up loose ends. It just took longer than expected, since it had to work through her blood from her fingertips to her heart."

"I think that the person who arranged this will have to make a more direct move to complete their plans. They'll come for Hakenka tonight." I take another sip of tea.

"I'll retire to my room after the ceremony, then make my way back. You won't see me again unless you need me," Mei says with a smile. She takes the last of her tea in a barbaric gulp and heads for the door. "Good luck."

"I don't really see how that applies to anything," I mutter as she goes.

Entry 15

Hakenka's rooms are black. There's no window to let in the light of the full moon. I'm not certain whether that will work to our advantage or not. I have a lit lantern concealed under a thick wood covering. No light escapes it now, but if we should need it, it will take only a moment to reveal. Hakenka and I stand behind tapestries hanging to either side of his bed. We've been here since shortly after his father's cremation. From the cramping in my legs, I would estimate two hours.

I'm beginning to fear that Hakenka's patience will fade when I feel a slight stirring of the tapestry. In the same instant, there's a muffled swoosh and thump. Hakenka leaps from his hiding place, and I'm an instant behind him, pausing just long enough to pull the cover from the lantern. Hakenka is already engaged with a dark form. Their blades clash over the shredded effigy we left in Hakenka's bed.

The assailant is covered in black, head to toe. The lantern light slides off of him, and he moves with a speed I've never seen. Hakenka is outmatched already, retreating, when I enter the fray. I only barely dodge a blade that the stranger throws at me left-handed. He sidesteps my first cut while bringing the fight closer to Hakenka, and he parries my second attack with another left-handed blade. This one he doesn't throw. I've never seen his techniques before. He's never where his next move seems to take him. Then Hakenka tries to sidestep a blow and stumbles. As he falls he slices out wildly toward our attacker's legs. The shadow falters for a moment and I press in from the side, but my blade catches only a wisp of cloth.

For a moment I think we have him as Hakenka, back on his feet, comes in fast. Then our opponent is gone, as suddenly as he appeared. I'm across from Hakenka and we're staring at each other like fools when a flash of movement to my right sends me spinning around. The shadow is there again, three yards away, and before we can move forward, there's a soft *whuft*, and a sensation like a wall of air stops me short. I hear Hakenka cough just as I feel my own throat closing. The room turns a hazy green, and my vision blurs. I try to bring my katana up to guard, but my limbs are heavy.

The figure is moving toward us, slower now. I think he's walking with a limp, but the room has tilted somehow askew. He's moving toward Hakenka, who isn't even looking up anymore, but sinking downward. The shadow raises his katana high up over his head, ready to strike Hakenka. The arm falls too far to

the side, and there's a clatter as the blade drops to the ground. I think I see more movement by the entranceway. The air is starting to clear now, and my breath is coming back to me. Something whizzes past my head and I'm already moving forward again with my katana up when I realize it was one of Mei's knives. She threw it at the enemy, he dodged and the damn thing nearly took off my ear. My clouded mind is sure that I'll resent that later.

I bring my blade down in a fast arc toward the attacker's torso, but he slides it away with his left blade and brings his right in straight for me. Hakenka's katana intercepts it and pushes it upward while I thrust my own forward, landing a glancing blow off the ribs. He cries out then... and I recognize the sound.

The voice is Matsu Nari's.

He spins then to meet Mei's attack from behind and Hakenka makes another cut at his leg. He's surrounded — and if we can just wear him down a little more — but then he flings the left blade, a wild shot, and there's another whuff of air and the space around me is filling again with green smoke. It's closer this time, and I can't breathe at all, but I feel hands drag me from the room. I fall to the corridor floor on my knees, choking, and I realize I've lost my katana. Then Hakenka falls down beside me, gasping for air. And Mei, her back against the wall, slides down to the floor with us, a weary look on her face.

"He's gone," she says. "Disappeared."

"How... how could he... move so fast?" gasps Hakenka. "How could he just... disappear?"

"How do you think?" Mei replies with a tired smile. "He's Ninja."

Entry 16

"So that's that," I say as Mei and I head across the courtyard, our bags packed and tied to our ponies. "Hakenka's settled in. I understand he's arranged for new court shugenja. They should be arriving shortly."

"I hope they're better than Toshiin," Mei laughs. "That man was an incompetent fool."

"Of course he was. Nari hired him. After all, you don't want to surround yourself with competent people when you're planning a coup. I suspect he chose him specifically for his superstitious nature. Then, after Maouri was dead, Nari just had to leave the right family histories around and wait for Toshiin to stumble on them. That way, he didn't have to be connected with the matter any more than necessary."

"It was well played. How long do you think he was setting this up?"

"Since before he arrived, in one form or another. I read through Hakenka's copy of the Ikoma Histories in his library last night and discovered that Matsu Nari died a little-remembered death a long time ago. The rest of his family, and it wasn't large, didn't last much longer. They had little wealth or land, so the closest related families divided everything and went on. As best I can guess, our Matsu Nari was trained at the Shosuro schools. He had an array of makeup hidden away that far surpassed Amai's, plus a few other trinkets. Hakenka ordered them all destroyed."

"Hm. Not a very forgiving sort, is he?" Mei smiles.

"I don't know. I thought he was rather generous considering the boy, Sokoi."

"For all the good it does him now," she says, gazing out toward the approaching tree line.

"What do you mean?"

Mei looks at me, a little surprised. "He drowned, didn't you hear? Late last night, in the courtyard pond. They found him this morning. I guess it must not have been important enough to reach influential ears." She's smiling at me, but then it fades. "Are you all right?" she asks, reaching a hand up to me. "You look pale."

"No, I'm fine." I say, pulling away. "Just a bit surprised. Did they find anything unusual about the body?" I am seeing again the Sokoi of my dream, his ankle bound with a great rock. A chill runs through me, thinking of a vengeful Hakenka's guards throwing the young boy into the cold, greenish water.

"I would have told you if they had," laughs Mei. "Do you need another mystery already? The talk is that the boy, distraught over the death of his mother and only companion, threw himself in. Or maybe he slipped. The only funny thing to me is that he'd been in there a few hours before they dragged him out, yet the fish hadn't started nibbling. Stupid fish will usually eat anything that doesn't eat back."

"You have a... strange sense of humor."

"I prefer to consider it unique."

'Unique' is always a good descriptive for Mei. 'Disturbing' is another.

But that's a question for another day, and so we travel on.





THE GM NOTES

Each Investigation has aids to help you run it. At the beginning of each Investigation is a chronology that gives you precise times for key events. We've also broken down each Investigation into Entries for quick reference.

GM Notes: Death at Ichime Castle

Chronology of Events

BEFORE THE ADVENTURE

- Amai begins poisoning Maouri.
- Maouri dies from the poison.
- The PCs receive a message that Maouri is dead.
- The cremation is set to take place two weeks after his death. He's being cremated during the full moon.
- The PCs arrive.
- Some time after they arrive, the PCs hear servants talking about a family curse.
- Toshiin - the Lion daimyo's shugenja - tells the party about Amai, the daimyo's very public courtesan.

THE NEXT MORNING

- Matsu Hiroru, a ronin formerly of the Lion Clan, breaks in. He accidentally leaves behind a blowpipe.
- Amai takes a walk in the garden. She returns to her room, takes off her shoes, and dies from the poison she used to kill Maouri.

THAT NIGHT

- If the curse isn't disproven, Hakenka is deposed and Sokoi is put on the throne. Nari will be appointed his Regent and Advisor.
- If the curse is disproven, Nari will try to kill Hakenka. If the PCs don't intercede, Nari succeeds.
- In either case, if Hakenka ascends to the throne, Sokoi's body is found, drowned, the next morning.

Scenes

The following information sums up the NPCs, events and information that can be discovered in each scene. It is meant to remind the GM what the players need to gain from the scene in question.

These scenes do not need to be played in strict order. If the PCs wish to interview Hakenka first and wait to interview Amai later, that's fine. Just remember that Amai dies early the next morning, making any interview very difficult.

BACKGROUND

Akodo Maouri is dead.

His death appears to be the result of a curse, but it is in fact due to poison. He was poisoned over many weeks by his maid/lover, Amai. Amai is an older woman who never quite had the right stuff to be a high profile geisha, but her loyalty was unquestionable. Her affair with Maouri was very public and very scandalous.

A fully trained assassin, Shosuro Geru, is posing as Maouri's trusted advisor, Matsu Nari. The Scorpion have taken full advantage of Amai's loyalty, and have convinced her to paint a black mark on her lover's chest while he sleeps. Threats toward her son, combined with assurances that the dye would do no more than scare Maouri into complying with the Scorpion's requests persuaded Amai to do as Geru asked. What Amai didn't know was that the ink she was using to paint the mark was a slow-acting poison.

Amai did not come forward after Maouri was found dead because Geru convinced her that she would be blamed for the murder (and rightfully so). Thus, again to save her son's position (and his life), she has agreed to keep absolutely silent on the matter. Her soul, however, is burdened by her loss and her part in the crime.

The stain Amai painted on Maouri's chest resembles a mark that Maouri's father had. When Maouri died, the mark was found, and Nari used Toshiin - Maouri's superstitious house shugenja - to spread the rumor of a family curse. Toshiin believes the curse is passed from first son to first son. The castle began whispering that Hakenka will inherit the curse, and that he should stand aside and let Sokoi take his place, so the curse can be broken. Toshiin has demanded that the body be buried on the first night of the next full moon ... almost two weeks away.

GETTING YOUR GROUP TO ICHIME CASTLE

Need an excuse to throw your PCs into the intrigues of Ichime Castle? Here's a few.

Like Kaagi, one (or more) of them spent some time (winter or summer) at Ichime Castle. This is a nice fit for any Lion characters, who can also be related to Maouri and Hakenka, making the matter a personal one. Characters who spent time in Ichime Castle will know the area. They will also remember Hakenka as a pretentious bully, and realize when they meet him again that he grew up to be ... a pretentious bully.

When Maouri's death was discovered, Toshiin sent out a message to all Lion in the immediate area, as well as the shugenja of the major houses. Curious shugenja may be intrigued by Toshiin's desire to begin funeral services two weeks after the death. (It is traditional to begin funeral preparations immediately after death; the body is burned on the *fourth* day, not on the eighteenth, as Toshiin plans.) Industrious shugenja (and samurai) may also wish to gain the favor of a Lion daimyo by removing the curse once and for all. Of course, they'll have to go to Ichime Castle to do it.

News travels quickly, especially bad news, and word of Maouri's death moves through Rokugan's courts like an Otaku steed at full gallop. Any courtiers who do not see an opportunity to gain an advantage from the situation aren't worth a day of rice. If the curse prevents Hakenka from ruling, someone more... suitable can be put in his place. If it does not, the characters could have been the primary reason why Hakenka retained his family position, and will be in the PCs' debt. Either way, the courtier wins.

Another angle: if there's a curse involved, then that means a *maho-tsukai* is probably also involved, and that falls under the domain of Imperial Magistrates.

One of the characters may also know someone living in the castle – an ambassador cousin, a courtier sister, a sensei uncle. A few days after the death, the characters may receive a note written in a hasty hand, urging them to come and visit. *"Something's wrong, and I don't know what it is,"* the note reads. *"Come quickly, before it's too late!"*

Whatever the reason, be sure that it doesn't take long to get to Ichime castle, no matter where the characters are. Once they get there, everything happens very quickly. They have only two days to set things straight before Maouri's line is erased from existence.

ENTRIES 1 AND 2

The characters arrive and are greeted by Akodo Toshiin.

Toshiin confirms the rumors of a curse and hints that he believes Sokoi should gain the throne, not Hakenka. If pressed, he will reveal that he saw the mark on Maouri's chest and ordered the eta to try to rub it off.

Later that night, Toshiin found a book in the library regarding the family history. When Maouri's father died, an identical mark was found on his chest. Toshiin put one and one together and came up with 'family curse'. He consulted Nari (who left the book for Toshiin to find in the first place), who half-heartedly tried to convince the shugenja to keep the curse a secret. Toshiin panicked – just as Nari expected him to – and sent out a magical message notifying the Lion of Maouri's death, which was also a poorly concealed cry for help.

If confronted with his concerns about Hakenka's ascension, he falls back on "I'm only thinking of what is best for the clan, as a loyal Lion."

Toshiin is not a very good Lion. He's not a very good shugenja, either. Kaagi remarks that his robes seem "somehow larger than the man who wears them...", implying that Toshiin's not capable of maintaining his position. Convey this to your PCs, particularly any shugenja in the group. They can also learn that Nari hired Toshiin after Maouri's last house shugenja passed away.

If the PCs wish to gain an interview with Hakenka or Nari, Toshiin tells them they will have to wait. The two are in conference and cannot be interrupted. However, Toshiin tells them they have quarters waiting for them, as well as respite from the rigors of the road. If the characters are magistrates, they can demand to look about the castle, but remind them that barging in on a host would probably dishonor their badges, and that Hakenka has just inherited a very prestigious position within the Lion army.

In other words, they shouldn't push their luck.

ENTRY 3

The characters' quarters look out on the castle's garden, and from there, the characters can see Ichime Amai, sitting and feeding the fish.

Anyone with Courtier Skill will probably know (Intelligence + Courtier, TN 10) that Amai's affair with Maouri was as notorious as it was famous. Her loyalty to him was legendary. Any



AMAI, THE COURTESAN

EARTH: 1

WATER: 1 Perception 2

FIRE: 1 Intelligence 2

AIR: 1 Awareness 3

VOID: 1

School/Rank: None

Honor: 2.2

Glory: 3.2

Advantages: Voice

Disadvantages: Bad Health, Black Sheep, True Love

Skills: Acting 1, Etiquette 3, Forgery 1, Locksmith 1, Poison 1, Seduction 3, Sincerity 3, Sleight of Hand 1



AKODO TOSHIIN

EARTH: 2

WATER: 3

FIRE: 2

AIR: 2

VOID: 3

School/Rank: Kitsuki
Shugenja 1

Honor: 2.5

Glory: 5.4

Advantages: Innate
Ability (*)

Disadvantages: Coward
(Moderate)

Skills: Etiquette 4,
Heraldry 2, History 3,
Calligraphy 2, Meditation 2,
Courtier 5, Tanto 1

Spells: (Sense,
Commune & Summon),
Blessing of Purity, Path to
Inner Peace, Reversal of
Fortunes*, Evil Ward,
Amaterasu's Blessing, Hands
of Jurojin

characters who can detect lies (TN 15) will discern from talking to her that the story of offering to throw herself from the castle walls to save his reputation is very true.

Amai tells them exactly what she did and where she was the night before Maouri's body was found. He had been complaining of a fever and nausea, and she brought him tea and played music for him. The next morning, she came into his quarters and found him dead. Anyone in the house will attest that the shock nearly killed her.

She also reports that he had been quarreling with his son Hakenka. She believes the boy does not hold the respect a son should have for his father, and she has never liked Hakenka.

When she throws crumbs to the fishes in the pond, she does it with her left hand. (Perception + Awareness at TN 20) will notice that she is not left-handed. If they inquire, she blames it on her age. Her fingers do not appear stained, but a careful observer (Perception + Awareness at 30) will notice traces of makeup.

If the characters get out of line with Amai, remind them that she was Maouri's chosen concubine, and that the house holds her in high esteem. Any inappropriate behavior toward Amai will be met by stern reprisals from the samurai of Hakenka's house, as well as whispers of their dishonorable behavior reaching every court in Lion lands. In other words, play nice with the old lady.

Also, Sokoi will appear late the scene, just out of the characters' vision. Don't make too big a deal out of the fact that he simply 'is there'. In fact, play it off. "You suppose that the boy was playing hide and seek, and you were so intent that you never saw him." Use information that will keep your players on edge, wondering if they what you have said is an important note, or another useless description of irrelevant facts.

Use the garden, and the scenes in the palace, to make your characters question everything. Be explicit when describing an old vase in Hakenka's room. Wiggle your eyebrows. Mention its age, and suspicious color. Ask the players to roll Awareness at a TN of 10, then tell them that they notice a specific type of flower in the garden. If you mention it, they will investigate, so give them plenty of things to examine. Soon, they will grow tired of looking at everything, and will have to decide what's important on their own.

And that's exactly when they should see Sokoi.

ENTRY 4

Entry four is the description of how Kitsuki Kaagi gains entry to see the body. Your PCs may choose a different method (distracting the guards, using spells to discern information about the corpse, etc.), but they should gain similar information, based on your judgment of their efforts.

The guards which have been placed to 'protect' Maouri's body are frightened of a curse, and eager for any spiritual enlightenment they can acquire. Thus, Mei's trick worked - they were convinced to let another shugenja see the corpse, in hopes that they might be able to alleviate the 'curse'. Other ruses should be similarly successful, given preparation and forethought.

ENTRY 5

Compared to Toshiin, Matsu Nari is a breath of fresh air. He seems to be a Lion with a hearty dose of Crab common sense. He appears concerned about the damage a "family curse" will do to the reputation of the house, and wants the PCs, as magistrates or as family friends, to disprove the rumors as quickly as possible.

He tells the characters about the mark on his lord's chest. He's concerned because while it is possible that the mark is a tattoo, it is impossible for such a tattoo to have healed. Thus, he is convinced that the mark is something else. He tells the characters that Toshiin found the entry in the family histories of a mark found on Maouri's father's chest. The two were identical.

He comments that Maouri's behavior before his death was erratic. He retired earlier each night, neglecting even the company of his beloved Amai. He lost control of his temper, becoming violent with his own son. If asked, Nari will reveal that Maouri and Hakenka quarreled over lands he had conceded to the Crane. He will not reveal what Hakenka and he were discussing earlier in the day, but may drop the hint that it has something to do with the same topic.

Finally, Nari mentions that many in the castle feel it will be better if Sokoi is placed on the throne rather than Hakenka. "*Toshiin believes this will break his 'curse,'*" Nari says. He's skeptical, of course, because that's exactly what the characters want to hear.

Don't forget that Nari (Shosuro Geru) is guilty. He really doesn't care what the party does. If they buy the 'family curse', Sokoi gets put on the throne, and the Scorpion have a puppet daimyo.



If they don't buy the curse theory and they figure out that Amai killed her lord, it directs attention away from him. He can still kill Hakenka later, paint him with the mark, and Sokoi inherits.

Nari is trying to get the party to look at everyone except him. Remember, everyone else has a motive, and the only innocent one - Toshiin - is the one who wants everyone to believe the curse. He even 'stumbled on' the history book to support his cause.

ENTRY 6

If the characters decide to venture into the garden at night, use this scene. It should give the PCs the impression that they've got the attention of something dark and dangerous they can't quite explain.

Whatever it is, it doesn't have the Shadowlands Taint and jade has no effect on it. However, if any of the characters have a crystal on them, they will be unaffected by the events in this Scene. They will not hear the noises, will not see moving images, and will not be able to understand what their friends are being so jumpy about. In effect, they see their companions being spooked by nothing more than the shadow of a tree, or the sound of wind blowing through the leaves.

There's tons of scary stuff you can throw at affected PCs if you know them well enough. Dark Secrets, fears or phobias, any obsessions or unresolved passions can easily be integrated into the images and sounds they hear. Know your characters. Know their weaknesses. This is the place to show them that their secrets aren't so secret... especially from the Darkness.

One important element of this scene is the vision of a drowned Sokoi. It sets up events in the future, and gives the players a hint as to exactly what's waiting for them later on.

ENTRY 7

Amai's rooms are in the servants' quarters. There's nothing of interest in her room except a lot of make-up. Of course, Amai is

getting on in years, and it is very reasonable to assume that she uses it to hide that fact. Anyone with the Disguise Skill or Lore: Ninja who asks about the make-up can tell that this is not the proper make-up for such activities. Amai also owns a mirror. Not an unusual item for a concubine, but rare nonetheless.

Finally, Amai's window garden is quite dead. She hasn't thrown it out, however. Characters with experience in gardening (Awareness + Herbalism or Poison at TN 25) will be able to tell that they died from exposure to some chemical or herbal compound which was unfriendly to plant life. Amai continues to water her little garden none the less, hoping that constant care will bring back its health.

If the characters investigate Amai's bed chamber, they get the hairy eyeball. Samurai do not enter a servant's quarters unless the servant is in some sort of trouble. If they do go into Amai's chambers, word gets around that they suspect Amai of something. This will get them the same



AKODO HAKENKA

EARTH: 3

WATER: 2 Perception 3

FIRE: 2 Intelligence 3

AIR: 3 Awareness 2

VOID: 2

School/Rank: Akodo

Tactician 2

Honor: 3.2

Glory: 6.5

Advantages: None

Disadvantages: Brash,

Idealistic, Proud

Skills: Archery 3,

Kenjutsu 2, Battle 5, Bard 1,

History 3



TYPICAL ICHIME SAMURAI

EARTH: 2
WATER: 3
FIRE: 2 Agility 3
AIR: 2
VOID: 2

School/Rank: Akodo
Bushu 2
Honor: 3
Glory: 2.1

Skills: Archery 2,
Defense 2, Kenjutsu 3,
Battle 1, Bard 2, History 1,
Hunting 1

TN to be Hit: 15
Weapon: Katana 3k2
Wounds: 4: -0; 8: -1; 12:
-2; 16: -3; 20: -4; 24: Down;
28: Out; 32: Dead

response as being disrespectful to her: a lot of angry Lions.

Amai is adored in Ichime Castle. Even hinting that she had something to do with her lord's death (and they are if they go looking through her room for evidence) will result in a loss of face for the characters. (-1 Honor point). This is why Kaagi sent Mei to check out Amai's room.

If they attempt to bribe or command a servant to perform the same investigation for them, they will be successful, but unless the servant is convinced of their good purpose (Awareness+Sincerity at TN 15), word will spread through the castle and, well, see above.



ENTRY 8

Deep in the basement of the house, Maouri's body awaits. It isn't a pretty sight. Maouri's been set in a bed of salt and enchanted with a food preservation spell. If this doesn't convince the characters that Toshiin is a little off, then nothing will.

The mark is evident on Maouri's chest. The skin is tougher in the blackened area, like a burn or brand. Mei also notices that it makes a distinct echo when you tap on it. The edges of the stain are blurred, not precise. This is due to the fact that Amai was painting the mark from memory, so when she first started, she wasn't getting the proportions exact every night. There is no other evidence to indicate poisoning, but something caused the stain.

This scene demonstrates at least one reason why Mei is invaluable to Kaagi's investigations. Samurai have no stomach for autopsy. This scene also illustrates a samurai's typical response to having to view a dead body. A dead body is like a piece of vomit. Simply touching it makes the

Fortunes dislike you, and separates you from the Celestial Order. In order to 'reenter' the order and be forgiven your unclean and dishonorable act, the PC must perform rituals at a Torii shrine - and the closest one is over ten miles away, in a small village near a monastery.

Samurai who touch the body will be treated as eta. They will be ignored, avoided, and their honor will be temporarily dropped to 0 for the purposes of PC and NPC interaction.

We recommend that if samurai characters wish to handle the body in any way, they must make a Willpower roll against a TN of their Honor x 5. If they succeed in the roll, they are able to do so, but they will permanently lose 5 Honor points (plus the temporary lowering of their perceived Honor to rank 0). If they fail, the thought swims around in their conscience for a while, causing them to lose 2 Honor points (*"How could I have even thought of doing something so disgraceful ..."*). Kuni shugenja, who work around dead bodies rather often, and other characters with similar creepy backgrounds may only lose 1 point, if you deem it appropriate.

Play this scene out very slowly, emphasizing the fact that they're in a small, enclosed room with a dead body that looks remarkably preserved. Even the Kuni PCs should be uncomfortable, though less than other characters. And remember, this is Rokugan. The dead do occasionally come back to life. While Maouri has no trace of the Shadowlands Taint, he just may very well be under a curse, and we all know how contagious those nasty curses can be.

In order to make this scene even creepier, you may want to have somebody play the corpse. Send everybody out of the room, put your corpse on the floor, lower the lights, bring in some candles, and tell your players to come back in. Ask them to do exactly what their characters are doing (but don't forget the No Touching rule in the Live Action section of the main rulebook). Encourage your corpse to twitch once when somebody leans in to get a very good look at the stain. If things work out well, everybody will jump and ask if that really happened. Smile and reply, *"Maybe. It's tough to tell in the shadows."*

ENTRY 9

There are many opportunities to use dream sequences in the *Way of Shadow* campaign. Kaagi's dreams may be omens, or they may just be his unconscious. The same could be said for



the characters. This is also another opportunity to scare your players. Here's how you set it up.

First, make sure the last thing they get to do is see the body. If you've been successful with scene six, the players should be fairly creeped out to begin with. Then, while they're in the dream, take away their clothes, their shoes, their weapons and let them run through the garden again. Something's chasing them. They see their comrades drowning. Who says it's all a dream?

Finally, if they scream, they awaken in their rooms, covered in sweat, looking at a drowned Sokoi, silk rope and rock and all. Then they wake up for real... smelling like stagnant water.

If the PCs go asking if Sokoi ever plays in the lake, have a servant tell them that the boy almost drowned. Some characters will go straight to the lake to search for a body. They won't find one. The water spirits in the lake don't remember the incident (which is telling in itself). The lake is a dead end, and Nari will remind them that they have another problem to solve before they start chasing after things they saw in their dreams.

ENTRY 10

Akodo Tamoru is an old friend of the family. He is a proud man who realizes that time has finally caught up with him. There was a time when Tamoru was a man not to be trifled with. Now, he sits in his quiet room with his past around him, and remembers.

Tamoru is a wonderful character to dive into. He surrounds himself with history so that old age will not swallow the glories of his past. He needs the physical objects of his former glories to aid his ailing memory. Find a distinct voice for Tamoru (old and creaky, or dignified and gruff), make every effort to maintain a military stance. When your concentration is broken, fade off for a moment, then snap back. Pick up random objects, look longingly at them, take a deep sigh. Then, turn back and finish what you were saying.

Tamoru has something very important to say. He has heard the rumors of the 'family curse', and he knows that the rumors are nothing more. He tells them about the secret Lion guard, the event with the Crane girl and the tattoos he and Maouri's father had. This is why he knows the 'curse' is bogus.

When the whole affair is over, Tamoru may chose to reward a character for exceptional service. He will do so with an object from his past. The gifts (chose something appropriate) will

be only trinkets, but the honor of getting a gift from the once-legendary Akodo Tamoru is worth 2 Glory points.

ENTRY 11

Just before the characters enter Maouri's room (whenever that is), Matsu Hiroru, a Kolat-trained Lion, ducks out the window, accidentally leaving behind his blowgun. He's also investigating the scene. He'll be showing up again in another adventure, but for now, he stays out of sight.

The room has one window, and it faces a sheer cliff. When the characters arrive, Hiroru is hanging with climbing claws just outside the window. The characters need to be specifically looking up, investigating the wall above the window, and succeed at a Simple Perception roll (TN 30) in order to see him. Because of Hiroru's crystal kimono (see its description on page 152) they cannot re-roll 10s for this roll. Make this roll behind your GM screen so the characters will not automatically assume there's something to see. By now, you should be 'false rolling' a lot, keeping

BLOWGUN

The blowgun is a specialized weapon, designed to deliver a poisoned dart. The blowgun has one dart (loaded), which does 1k1 damage, but delivers a poison (a variant of *fugu*) which, unless the character succeeds in a Stamina roll at a TN of 25, will kill in 2 hours. The attack must hit skin (add a +5 to be hit for non-armored, +10 for armored).





AKODO TAMORU

EARTH: 1 Willpower 4

WATER: 1 Perception 3

FIRE: 1 Intelligence 4

AIR: 1 Awareness 2

VOID: 5

School/Rank: Akodo
Tactician 3

Honor: 4.7

Glory: 73

Advantages: Clear
Thinker, Leadership,
Tactician

Disadvantages:
Idealistic, Proud, Weakness
(Arthritis: -1 Agility)

Skills: Archery 4,
Athletics 4, Battle 4, Bard 5,
Defense 4, Hand-to-Hand 4,
Heraldry 5, History 5,
Horsemanship 2, Hunting 3,
Kenjutsu 4, Tanto 4,
Wrestling 3.

the characters on their toes, and spreading completely irrelevant information, as we suggested in scene three.

There's a lot of evidence in this room; the characters should be encouraged to take their time or they'll miss something. The first piece is the black stain. It has a distinct smell that can be identified by PCs with the appropriate skills: Awareness + Poison or Herbalism (TN 20) or Awareness + Courtier (TN 30). It's obuno oil, a distinctive black dye that's also mildly poisonous. Amai was using a healthy dose of obuno oil with beeswax (to keep the dye from running). Characters with Courtier will remember the incident Kaagi relates in his journal, about the Crane duelist who nearly died from obuno poisoning. Characters with Poison or Herbalism will know different information. If they succeed with their first roll, they may make a second roll at TN 15 to know that mixing it with ginseng will cause the ginseng to bubble.

Then, there's the window sill. The disturbance is very new, from just a few moments ago. This came from Hiroru leaping through the window at the very last moment. If they take a peek out the window, they'll see the long, sheer drop. There's no evidence of anyone climbing up the walls. The latch on the window is old and worn, and may possibly have come loose in last night's rain and winds.

The obuno oil is not commonly used as a poison because it is an obvious death. The slightest touch of the dye against perspiration will leave a clear black mark, and too much will permanently stain the skin. The beeswax was used to make the obuno oil more solid and easier to paint with. Amai, unaware of the slow poison in the obuno oil, painted the symbol onto his chest at night, then would wipe away the beeswax when she was done. This was the stain on Maouri's chest, and on Amai's fingers. If the characters demand to see Amai after searching Maouri's rooms, she still dies from the poison just moments before they arrive.

ENTRY 12

Hakenka is not mourning his father's death. He never liked his father (he's convinced his mother died of a broken heart). If anyone dares question his lack of emotion, he says, "A Lion grieves privately."

He's busy looking over tactical maps of the area when he sends for the characters and tells

them to keep things brief. He is easily bored with the 'evidence', and urges them to get to the point. He is very interested in any news that someone may be attempting to block his ascension to power.

Hakenka is a Lion. He is brief, brash and quick to take insult. He is also a very skilled bushi, and not a man to take lightly. He is the lord of this house, and every single bushi under his command (nearly 80) will fight and die for him without hesitation. He has three bushi in the room with. Each of them is a typical Ichime samurai.

Don't forget that Nari is in the room with Hakenka. He'll pay close attention to what the characters are saying and try to maneuver them away from any revelations that he doesn't want Hakenka to hear. He's already prepped Hakenka for the characters. He's told them that he'll deal with them so Hakenka can go on planning the re-acquisition of the lands his father lost to the Crane. If Hakenka becomes frustrated or loses his patience, he gives Nari the signal, and Nari sweeps the characters out into an adjacent hallway to listen to what they have to say, promising he'll pass it on to Hakenka when the lord has the patience to listen.

Then, he'll thank the characters for their efforts and ask them if there's anything else he can do for them. Nari wants the characters on his side. The more they trust him, and think that he's doing what he can to help them, the better.

ENTRY 13

Some time in the early morning after the characters' arrival, Amai finally succumbs to the poison in her system. When her body is found, it is lying on a futon, half on her side and half on her back. Her make-up is smeared (she's been crying) and the soles of her shoes are muddy. In her obi is a small ceramic jar filled with white make-up. On her low table is a book of very bad love poems (think of dime novel romances), a testimony to her character. It is worn and there are many turned pages. Other servants will comment that it was her favorite book. The cover is stained with fingerprints from her make-up.

She's been using the makeup to cover the obvious black stains on her fingers. Characters who wash off her hand will discover this. The characters now have even clearer evidence of Amai's involvement. Unfortunately, the motive is still unclear.



It is no secret that Hakenka did not like Amai. Rumors around the castle maintain that he would throw the concubine and her bastard son out of the castle if he thought he could get away with it.

If Nari is there when the body is found (and he should be), he will remind the characters of these facts. Now that she's dead, he can say anything he wants without fear of her giving away his identity. He can say she poisoned Maouri to plant the curse theory in the minds of the castle. He can also say that he knew she was a Scorpion-trained geisha, but respected his lord's request to keep her secret. He will not say the characters are no longer necessary, however. That makes it look like he's brushing them off and ignoring their information. Instead, he will go to Hakenka and convince the daimyo to have the characters ushered out, blaming any minor discourtesy on the daimyo's grief and distress.

ENTRIES 14 AND 15

Essentially, the characters now have a choice. The 'family curse' has been exposed as murder, and the characters have identified the culprit. There's really nothing left for them to do here, and Hakenka (and possibly Temoru) publicly thanks them for solving the case.

The problem is, they haven't figured it out yet. Not all of it, at least. Kaagi's been able to see the whole picture, but your characters may not have been able to do it just yet. Here's how Kaagi put it together.

At first, Amai's motive makes sense, but once you start looking beyond the surface, it falls apart. She loved Maouri. What's more, she was completely devoted to him. She would only betray him if she was coerced or convinced. That means there's somebody else involved. Somebody who wants Hakenka out of the way.

Kaagi decides to make himself look scarce in order to draw out the master assassin. Obviously, somebody else wants to put Sokoi on the throne. Amai never seemed to have the desire to be more than she was, or to usurp Hakenka's rightful position, and her son is far too young to have engineered his rise to power in such a way. Who else could be involved? Obviously, someone with a knowledge of poison, and someone who would directly benefit from Sokoi's inheritance. If Sokoi was named heir, who would have direct control of the province? Someone would have to be governor over the young boy until he was old enough to rule himself.

There's only one person in the castle in that position, and it's Nari. By the end of the adventure, Nari's nominal control over Hakenka, and the great respect which the samurai of Ichime castle give him should make it clear that they would willingly obey him, if he were placed in charge – however temporarily (until Sokoi is old enough, of course). Nari is trusted, respected and ready to seize power. He simply needs a pawn of the proper bloodline. Sokoi.

The characters don't have to come to the Nari conclusion to know that there's another person involved in the conspiracy. All they have to figure out is that they have to let the assassin make a move. If they follow in Kaagi's footsteps and make themselves appear to leave, then come back under cover of darkness and wait, the events will unfold as they do with Kaagi and Mei. Nari will show up and try to kill Hakenka. He's even got a good portion of the dye to paint on another mark. If he succeeds, he can just paint on the mark and let somebody find him in the morning.

This was his plan when he saw Kaagi and Mei leave. Nobody trusts Kitsuki evidence anyway. A simple lie is easier to swallow than the complicated truth Kaagi wanted everyone to believe.

The Traits and Skills for Nari are located in the sidebar, along with the rules for his Ninja equipment – including smoke bombs. Nari has spent a good deal of time becoming accustomed to it, so it doesn't affect him as strongly as it will the PCs.

By the way, Mei wasn't affected by the smoke bombs, either.

ENTRY 16

Characters who successfully thwart Nari's plans are up for 3 Experience Points and a hearty congratulations. Those who don't are only eligible for 1.

In addition to those rewards, Akodo Tamoru gives each character a gift. As mentioned above, this gift adds 2 points to the character's Glory. Hakenka thanks the characters for saving his position and rewards them with life-long travel papers through his province. The characters will also find that they have earned a bit of favor with the Lion Clan once word of their actions spreads. Game Masters can add this to their campaign as they see fit.

MATSU NARI (SHOSURO GERU)

EARTH: 2 Willpower 4
WATER: 2 Perception 4
FIRE: 4
AIR: 5
VOID: 3
School/Rank: Shosuro

Actor 3

Honor: 0.7

Glory: 5.6

Shadow: 1 (Stealth)

Disadvantages: None

Skills: Acting 4, Defense

3, Etiquette 2, Forgery 2,
Locksmith 4, Ninjutsu 3
(Nageteppo 3, Ninja-to 2),
Poison 4, Stealth 5

Skills as Matsu Nari:

Archery 2, Defense 4,
Kenjutsu 4, Battle 2, Bard 3,
History 4, Courtier 2

Shadow points: 1

(Gift: Speed)

TN to be hit: 15

(+5 Shadow bonus)

Wounds: 8: -1; 12: -2;

16: -3; 20: -4; 32: Dead

Primary Weapons:

Throwing knives (1k1):
Poisoned with a variant of
fugu. Anyone affected must
make Stamina at TN 25 or
die in 2 hours. The attack
must hit skin (add a +5 to
be hit for non-armored, +10
for armored).

Nageteppo (smoke
grenade): Affected PCs must
roll Stamina at TN 50 or
fall to the ground from
smoke inhalation.

On the road from Ichime Castle

We are about two days away from Ichime castle. I've been following the trail of the man who called himself Matsu Nari. So far, he appears to be heading directly for Scorpion lands. Tracking him hasn't been particularly difficult, I suspect because of his wounded state. Still, considering his condition, he has been more subtle than I would have expected. What is more surprising is that a second trail has appeared, overlapping his. Had I not been tracking Nari, I would have missed the less obvious track that has several times crossed it.

I've been able to ascertain so far only that the individual is between five feet ten inches and six feet tall, weighs 130 to 150 pounds, and has an unusual talent for discretion.

This second trail first appeared about half a day's journey from Ichime castle and has reappeared with some regularity since then. So far, we have met with no additional incident.

As best I can tell, I've made a full recovery from the effects of the substance we were exposed to while fighting Nari. I'm guessing that it was a low grade poison, delivered in a limited dose. Our opponent had probably developed an immunity to it. Mei seems to be naturally unaffected by the stuff. She suffered no illness at the time and was able to assist Hakenka and myself from the room. More mysteries from Mei.

Entry 19

We have been on the road for three and a half days without incident. I have just discovered a deliberate marking of the road before us. Some twigs which appear to have fallen by chance have actually been placed into a crude arrow formation, indicating the trees to the left of the main road. Proceeding with caution, Mei and I begin to explore further into the tree line. It is midday and the woods are conveniently bright. Once off the main road, there is a much clearer trail through the brush. Twigs have been broken, small plants pushed aside and the undergrowth disturbed.

Several yards into the tree line I hear Mei gasp. The body of the man I know only as Matsu Nari dangles by a cord around his feet from a tree limb. His eyes are nearly level with mine and have filmed over with a thick glaze. His throat has been cut with a clean precision. Judging from the flies gathering in his nostrils and slightly open mouth, I can estimate that he has been here for the better part of a day. I need to vomit. The stench on this pleasantly warm day is suddenly overwhelming as the wind shifts toward us.

As Mei and I stand there in front of the grisly body, a particularly bold raven comes down from the branches, startling the flies, and begins to whittle a piece out of his cheek.

"I don't want to search him," says Mei, a little behind me.

"I think that he may have had more enemies than we suspected."

"Possibly more than he knew."

"Mei. He may very well be carrying devices, equipment that could tell us a great deal more about their methods."

She moves forward wordlessly. As she nears the body, the raven gives one indignant squawk before lifting into the air. It only retreats a little, unwilling to forsake its prize. Mei clambers up the tree, then out on the branch holding Nari's body.

"Did you want to catch this as it comes down?" she smiles at me. "No? I didn't suppose so."

There's a sickening thud as the body falls to the ground. The raven squawks again, angry perhaps that it will now have to share its booty with ground predators. Mei jumps down a moment later and

begins a quick perusal of the body.

She removes two daggers from the right leg. There are two empty sheaths on the left. Nari's clothes are all black, a soft fabric that doesn't rustle when Mei moves it. From bindings around the right and left wrists, she removes two shuriken. She pauses at the waist. The folds of his upper garment hang from his body, held only by a loosely bound thin black cord.

"If he had another belt, or any pouches, his killer must have taken them," Mei says, getting up.

"Wait." I'm suddenly remembering something from our last night at Ichime. "Cut open his right sleeve, from the wrist to the shoulder."

Mei pauses for only a moment, then does so. The body is lying face down, and there's one, clear red spot on the back of its arm, about four inches below the shoulder. Very clearly in my mind's eye, I see that same arm upraised with a katana falling towards Hakenka before something struck it from behind. I had assumed it was one of Mei's knives. But just a moment ago, I'd realized the sleeve was untorn.

"What did you injure him with?" I suddenly feel as disconcerted as I do curious.

Mei gives me a considering look. Then she reaches into her belt and removes the segmented device we found on Maouri's floor.

"It's a blowgun," she says. "There was one dart loaded when you found it. So I took advantage of it when then need arose."

"Why didn't you tell me that you knew what it was?"

She looks directly at me and says, very seriously, "I must have been distracted, and then it slipped my mind." She rises and begins to walk toward the road.

"What about the body?" I call after her. I feel confused, out of sorts about the whole incident.

"Did you want to burn it?" she says with a sneer. "It's more fitting, I think, that he be left to the birds. They won't leave much."

As if in agreement, the raven flaps back down onto the dead man and begins nipping around at the back of his neck. I follow Mei back to the road.

"What now?" she asks with a smile. Her good humor seems to have returned. Somehow, I'm loath to speak anymore about the curious device that I place now in a deep pocket of my kimono. I make a mental note to discuss it later in greater detail.

"I think we had best follow the second trail. See there, those scuffs in the dirt up ahead, at the same distance we've been finding them?"

"On the trail of a killer's killer, eh? Sounds like pillow book stories to me. Let's go," she says, standing aside so I can take the lead.

Entry 20

It's been several days since we found Nari's body. We've followed the killer's trail past several villages, but it always passes without entering. Mei and I have stopped a few times for supplies and comfort. Tonight we'll be sleeping out of doors. My provincial map tells me we're still several miles from the next post or village.

Mei's gone to gather firewood while I sort our belongings for the night. I'm laying out my bedroll when I hear a steady clacking of wood against the ground, coming from the thoroughfare. Peering out between the trees I can see a figure coming from the direction we've been headed. His back is stooped, and his step is slow. He's an old man, from the look of him, with a gnarled walking stick.

"Oja-san," I call, using the honorable term for 'Grandfather'. "Where do you head?"

He stops, startled, and looks around, turning in a slow, nervous circle. His head jerks toward me as I approach.

"What are you?" he calls a little sharply, holding his stick in front of him in a warding gesture.

"A man," I reply, holding my hands out to my sides and smiling to reassure him.

"Let me see your feet then," he says in an authoritative voice. "Or else I'll think you a ghost, come to haunt honest folk!"

I raise my kimono up to the ankles, and he relaxes, lowering his stick to the ground.

"I am Kitsuki Kaagi," I tell him. "A Magistrate of the Divine Emperor."

"I thought you might not be natural," he says. "Coming out of the woods like that, an old man can't be certain, you know."

"I understand, Oja-san. But where are you headed? The sun is already almost down, and there is no village for some ways in that direction."

"Or from the direction I've come," he says, nodding. "I'm going to see my granddaughter. She's getting married, and I don't want to be late. So I'm traveling through the night, unless I get too tired. And then I'll just roll up," he says, tugging at a corner of the blanket on his back.

"My companion is just back with some wood," I say, hearing rustling in the trees behind me. "Won't you join us for some tea and dinner?"

"Well, I suppose I could stop for a little while. Just to rest my feet, you know," he says, as if to reassure me. He walks forward and, taking his arm, I lead him back toward our little camp.

Mei is there, starting the fire without looking at it. Her eyes are on us as the old man and I come into the clearing. I know without looking that there's a knife on the ground in front of her. For cutting the bread, she'd insist, if I asked.

"What is your name, grandfather?" I ask as I help him to sit.

"Seru Haka," he replies.

"Haka-san, this is my companion, Meilekki."

She smiles warmly at him, and he nods his head with a smile of his own. When she wants to be charming, Mei has the perfect manner for pleasing old men and small kittens.

"Would you like some bread, Haka-sama?" she says, offering him a small loaf.

"Thank you." He takes it with an eager hand and begins to eat while she boils water for the tea.

The three of us share a modest meal of rice and dried fish. Then the old man settles back with his tea cupped in both hands for warmth.

"I must repay your kind hospitality," he says. And then, over my beginnings of an objection, he continues, "A story perhaps?"

"That would be delightful!" says Mei, still charming and gracious. I nod my agreement.

"Hm. Let me see," says the old man as he sits back against a tree and lets his gaze wander upwards toward the stars.

He smiles a little mischievously. "Many folk know," he begins, "of how Mother Sun and Father Moon created the world. How they went together, hand in hand through the newly made mists and gave names to all that they beheld. That which flew, they called birds. That which swam, they called fish. And that which thought and tried to serve them with honor, they called man. But what not so many know, is that when Mother Sun and Father Moon gave names to all that they beheld, something, a little slip of something, did not want a name. And that little thing, slid away behind a newly-named rock, and it covered itself over with the newly-named 'shadow'.

"And it said to shadow, 'Hide me now from the Naming, for it would hold me in and make me be but one thing. Hide me now, and I will remember you. I will ally with you. And in all the forms which I will be able take since I have no name, I will serve you and help you to become great.'

"And shadow heard its request, and it thought on it, for shadow was a weak thing. It had no solid shape of its own, only imitating those around it, like rock. And it fled from the great and arrogant 'light' easily. So shadow thought that a friend would not be a bad thing, and it agreed to hide its companion until Mother Sun and Father Moon had done with their naming and returned to the high heavens.

"And shadow and the thing it had hidden had their alliance, and they helped each other. Because they were so close the nameless thing often chose to look much like shadow. It did this so well that many have since chosen to call it deep shadow, like a little cousin. But this was only a nickname, not a real one, and so this 'deep shadow' was not bound. And to this day it is still about. Perhaps you've seen it before, when you've shined your lantern on a patch of dark that did not slip away as it should. Or perhaps you've looked at a friend and seen what you thought was a shadow in their face, and that they did not seem themselves. Or perhaps when you were young, there was a shadow that lay by your futon, or under your window, and it moved when nothing else did. Perhaps it talked to you late in the night and knew your name though you did not know its own. For that is the one thing that to this very day escapes naming, however hard men try. It resists it just as their darkest fears do. And so it is free to change, and change again."

We're silent then, the three of us, at the end of the old man's story. I feel the chill of the night seeping into me. It is colder than I expected it to be. I glance toward Mei, but she's looking at the fire, or perhaps at the shadows near to it.

The old man puts his stick end to the ground and pulls himself up. Placing his empty cup next to the fire he shakes off the blanket on which he's been sitting. "Thank you again for your hospitality," he says with a jovial smile. "I'd best be off now. I've a good distance still to travel, and I don't want to be late."

"Oja-san, won't you stay awhile?" I ask, rising with him. I feel somehow flustered. "It's late. You could sleep here and continue in the morning."

"No, I'm not so tired now," he says. "I'll be on my way. Thank you again." And then he's off through the trees and onto the road. "Good journey," he calls out as he goes.

Minutes pass by filled only with the sounds of crickets singing their songs, unconcerned by the trials of men.

"I feel like a child who's been left all alone in the dark after the grown-ups have gone," says Mei softly as she rolls into her blankets.

I understand just what she means.

Investigation Two:
The Haunting
of Hida Dasan



Entry 21

The trail we follow continues to take us down main roads. Occasionally, it vanishes. Then, just as I expect to have to go back and try to retrace the way, a new sign appears. We've been traveling through Scorpion territory and are nearly to the border they share with the Crab. The guards at the last post were in an especially outgoing mood, and we've recently passed a unit of samurai heading in the opposite direction. They too looked to be in high spirits, despite being worn and battered. We have one more Scorpion post to pass, and I've determined to ask them what is going on.

Our travels have been uneventful. I've questioned Mei further about the blowgun, and how it was that she knew its use. She explained that while working as a servant at the geisha house, a visiting Shosuro had left behind a similar object. One of the women there, a Scorpion, had been familiar with it. She had explained its use to some of the other girls, Mei included, for amusement's sake. She assures me that they are extremely simple and accurate, which is why she chose it as her first recourse in the smoke-filled room. For some reason, I find myself not wholly convinced. When I pointed this out to her, she replied only that if she were lying, I would not know. Since then, we have let the matter rest.

The next post is just in sight as we top a low hill. We draw closer and I can hear the faint chorus of a cheerful song coming from the low building where the guards are stationed.

When we get nearer, a guard hails us. I present my papers, and he examines them closely before handing them back with a happy smile.

"Going to see the Crab, are you?" he laughs. "You'll find them in a poor mood, I'll wager!"

"Wretched is more likely," puts in one of the man's companions. "Join us for some sake before you go into that dismal place." He passes cups to me and to Mei with a grin.

"I assume that your good mood and their poor one are related?" I ask, accepting the cup.

"A good guess," he returns. "For months, the oafs have been disputing some land that is clearly ours. They put together a fighting force to try to take it, and a day ago they failed – miserably. We routed them all the way home!" He pours himself more sake as he recounts the events, then checks to see if our cups are empty. Seeing they're not, he puts down the bottle.

Mei and I take time to rest our pack ponies. Our provisions are already well stocked and so, waving farewell to the sentries, we continue on our way. A little while later, we pass one more unit returning from the battle. They carry one of their comrades on a makeshift litter, but otherwise seem in good shape. They greet us pleasantly as we pass. The sentries were right. That's the last bit of cheerfulness we see.

Entry 22

The land has been fields and plains for the last few days. But passing into Crab lands, we enter a brief stretch of forest. It's harder now to see the tracks in the dim lighting that filters through the canopy. More difficult still, the road is greatly disturbed by the passing of fighting men. It's been two hours since the last sign, and darkness is creeping up. I begin to despair that we may have lost our quarry after all this way, when a sudden motion in the trees catches my attention.

"Don't move," says a harsh voice as I turn to see what we've stumbled into. The noise increases as four armored Crab step out. "What business do you have here?" demands the one in the lead.

"We're simply passing through." I keep my voice even, despite the imminent threat in his.

"Passing to where? On what business?" he growls.

The three samurai behind him press in closer, menace in their postures.

"I'm here in my capacity as a magistrate of the Kitsuki family. That is all that need concern you."

"I think they're spies," grumbles one of the men to the leader's left.

"I think they're trouble," echoes another.

"We have enough trouble here," responds the man in the front, nodding slowly. "We don't need more."

His right hand moves an inch, and we draw our katanas at the same time. The other three Crab form a circle, keeping Mei on the outside. They don't interfere, but I can feel them close at my back, a hamper to my movement. This has gone wrong very quickly. I'm looking directly into my opponent's eyes, and there's something there besides a bully's meanness. There's fear, down deep at the core, and rage. I feel the air move before I see him coming; I step to my right so that his first strike passes me and his side is briefly exposed. I cut down and in, but he turns faster than I had expected, blocking my stroke. What makes matters worse is that I cannot tell if he means only to challenge my ability or to do me harm.

"Stop!" The bellow almost deafens me. It comes from somewhere to my right, though from the volume I think the speaker must be right by my side. My opponent steps back with respect, obediently falling to one knee. The other three samurai do the same, lowering their heads. Standing before me as I turn is an older man, still in his prime. His armor and ornaments declare him to be a general. He steps forward, and I bow from the waist in respect to his station. He lowers his head at me, then addresses the Crab whom I fought with.

"What is this?" he asks. "Do you dishonor us all by attacking travelers on the public roads now?"

"No, my lord," says the samurai, still with his head lowered.

"What provoked you then to this action?" The general has the look of a man who is almost, but not quite, weary beyond anger. "For what reason do you draw your blade on a lone man and his servant?"

"My lord, we thought they might be Scorpion spies," spits one of the other men.

The general's gaze falls on him, and there's a blaze in those eyes that could sear a man's soul. "And yet," he says, his voice low, "You left the girl at your backs. A dangerous risk if she is what you suspect."

They look shamefaced. The man whom I fought turns to me and bows very low. "I am sorry," he says in his gruff voice, but it is thick now with humility.

"Our relief has come," the general says. "Gather the others and head back to the village." Then he turns that gaze on me and, even without the fury in it I find myself uncomfortable. Like a child called suddenly to attention, I find myself trying to remember if I've done anything for which I could be brought to task.

"I am Hida Misogi. I hope you will accept my apologies. Please accept also the hospitality of our village. I understand that it cannot recompense your trouble, but I hope you will allow me to make amends."

"My name is Kitsuki Kaagi, and I am honored by your generosity, Misogi-san. In truth, I would welcome the comfort of a roof and walls for the evening."

The general's offer is more convenient than he realizes, for as he was speaking, I noticed the first sign of our quarry's trail in a long while. In the soft earth to the side of the path is the slight, smaller print of the soft shoe that I have been following all this while.

I'm so preoccupied with this for a moment, that I almost miss the interested raise of the general's eyebrow as I give him my name. The general is a large man. Broad across the shoulders and substantial of girth, he has a wide face and features comprised mostly of hard angles. His posture is dignified despite his obvious exhaustion. His armor is well worn, but equally well cared for.

"Kitsuki, eh?" he asks as we follow. "Are you trained in the strange sciences of your family?"

"I am a magistrate, if that is what you mean."

"It may be fortune indeed that has brought you to us then, Kaagi-san. We've fallen prey to odd

circumstances of late, and a man of your unique abilities may be precisely what we need."

"How may I be of assistance?" I ask, my curiosity aroused.

"I'll explain in time," he says. "It is a long story, and not a pleasant one. It will wait until after dinner."

We walk a ways further before he says, "I ask again that you forgive my men. They are tired, exhausted from a recent skirmish with the Scorpion. And they are somewhat affected by the other matter I've mentioned to you. To top it all off," he says with a weary tone in his voice, "there is talk of this forest being haunted by a wandering ghost."

"Really?" I say, trying to withhold the skepticism from my voice.

From the look he casts me, I think I must have failed. "They say that a white figure has been seen flitting through the trees at a speed no mortal man could muster. They say that it disappears into nothing at the first strong breeze or if any man tries to intercept it. I fear the matter has preyed terribly on their minds, so that when they found you, a solid antagonist, they were more bound to their aggressions than is seemly in men of honor."

"I think I understand, Misogi-san," I say.

Entry 23

We reach the village in about a quarter hour. I see one more trace of the trail we follow as we go, then nothing more. When we arrive, we are greeted in the general's home with food and drink. The warmth of the fire is welcome after the chill and damp of the evening. I suspect rain will be coming tonight, making it doubly fortunate that we've somewhere sheltered to spend the night. I'm afraid, however, that it will erase all trace of the man we've been following. After dinner, we relax a time in the front room of the general's home. Eventually, my curiosity gets the better of me. "Misogi-san, about the matter we discussed earlier..."

The general seems shaken out of a mild reverie. "Yes, I suppose it is time for that. I told you the story is long, and it is, though I will attempt to keep it concise. I did not tell you that it is also grisly, a dark story all around." He settles comfortably, cradling his sake cup, and takes a slow sip.

"We've recently had trouble with the Scorpion over land that has long been in dispute. It was part of Scorpion territory originally, but was ceded to the Crab as a boon for some assistance we granted them in years past. Only recently have we stressed the old agreement, but they've denied our claim. It was agreed to settle the matter by force of arms, yesterday at dawn. It should have been little contest. The Scorpion had the advantage of territory, but we had better warriors. Also, one of our best generals recently returned from a duty in the Shadowlands with his unit. Few knew of their return. We planned to place them in a location from which they could arrive at a critical point in the battle."

"No one knew anything was amiss until the unit failed to arrive. Without them to hold an open area in the Scorpion lines, two of our groups were cut off from the rest. The others were confused, trying to regroup. It was a mess. The Scorpion, with their hold on the land, cut us down. When it was over, we sent men to find our key force. We found a bloody mess. It was a massacre. Only four men of twenty-five lived. Two, including the general, were wounded badly. Another samurai was battered. The only one unscathed was a young bushi, almost a boy, still in training. He was fortunate enough to be out bringing water when it happened."

"From the accounts of the survivors, they were just finishing dinner and planning to turn in for the evening. One of the men, Hida Boti, went to check on another, Hida Dasan. Dasan had eaten little and

had been quiet all evening. Boti was probably concerned that he was ill and might not be able to fight the next day. Dasan rounded on him, katana drawn, cutting the other man down before he had any chance to act. Then, katana in one hand and wakizashi in the other, he proceeded to hack his way through his companions, men he'd fought beside for years. He killed sixteen men before he could be put down. Five more died of their injuries before help arrived."

He looks at me, and I suspect that some in that party may have been dear to him. "Dasan and the rest of his unit were checked when they came out of the Shadowlands to see if they bore the Taint. The shugenja at the wall said they did not. Perhaps the horror of the place preyed on his mind and finally took it, but Dasan lost his green long ago. He'd served three tours in the Shadowlands, including this last one, and never showed any signs of having Crane legs. There's a third notion that's come to me though. And it is for this that I ask your assistance." He pauses to eye me with that deep, deep gaze.

"I have heard," he continues, "that the Scorpion have drugs that provoke a man to to rage. And I have heard that the Kitsuki magistrates have a similar knowledge of such things, but more honor than to use them. Can you tell if such a thing was done to Hida Dasan? And how it might have been accomplished?"

I pause a moment to gather my thoughts. "I might be able to tell such a thing," I begin, "if I could see the body, and depending on what was used. Herbs have a mercurial quality. Some vanish shortly after ingestion, leaving no trace. Others leave signs. I have not heard of one that acts quite as you have described, but I will use my knowledge and training to see what I can find, if that is your wish."

"It is. There is a problem with the body, though. As I said, the shugenja at the wall looked for the Taint and found none, but after what has happened, that is not enough for folk here. Therefore, other shugenja have come and are holding a ritual that will reveal a deeper view into the heart and mind of Dasan. The body is a part of the ritual, and they will not be finished for two more days. I understand that I have no right to ask this, Kitsuki Kaagi-san, but will you stay until then, and look into the matter?"

I cast a glance at Mei as the first rumble of thunder comes from overhead. Her eyebrows raise and she tilts her head at the window, beyond which the rain pours down. It looks to be a long storm.

"Misogi-san, I will."

Entry 24

"So was it your idea, or his, for us to stay in the lunatic's home until it's time to review his body?" questions Mei pleasantly as we carry our things into the outer room of Hida Dasan's home.

"It seemed like the best place to start. Perhaps if there was poison, it was administered here. Or perhaps there's something else. Would you rather be sleeping under the trees?"

Mei opens her mouth to answer, then stops as the two female servants of Hida Kohi, Dasan's wife, re-enter the chamber. One motions eagerly for me to follow, presumably to the guest room, while the other leads Mei off to the servants quarters.

"I'm very sorry," mumbles the woman I'm following. "I bring my lady's many apologies for not greeting you herself. She is not well."

"I understand," I say, smiling. The woman looks so nervous that she may hurt herself with her anxiety.

"Here," she says, "is the guest room. Is there anything I can bring you?"

"Are there towels in the bath?" I ask.

"Yes! Absolutely. Towels and soap. Would you like tea brought to you there?"

"No thank you, I'll be all right." Then, because she's still standing at the door: "Thank you, I'm fine." She hovers a moment longer, then bows her way out of the doorway, sliding the panel shut behind her.

I take my time bathing, enjoying the hot water all the more for the cool air that filters in between the boards of the wall. When I retire, I find myself reluctant to sleep. I rested on my futon, listening to the rain and watching the shadows cast by the flicker of my candle. The rain still patters on the roof, and on the dirt outside. As my fatigue falls upon me, the sound fades to a low hiss.

The shadows seem to move more fluidly than before, and in the back of my mind, I'm reminded of a shadow play I saw, back when I was a child. Traveling performers visited my father's house and performed a story for us in which the shadows cast from paper cutouts danced upon a curtain and acted out little scenes. My eyes are nearly shut with sleep when I see them pool about the window on the wall left of my bed. They mass there, swirling to and fro, like a woman dancing.

I jolt awake at the sound of a young boy's voice, crying out sharply. My katana is already in my hand, but nothing besides me seems to be stirring. I listen again. No voice. Nor do I hear movement anywhere else in the house. Surely someone else, Mei at least, should have heard, unless my mind is playing tricks on me. I move to the window and stare out, trying to see in the darkness. The only movement is the falling rain. Reluctantly, I return to my bed. I put the katana away and, for a moment, feel strangely nostalgic looking at the candle flame. I recall that our nurse always used to leave a candle burning in the room where my brother and I slept. A cold wind sweeps through the room suddenly and the light is gone.

Entry 25

In my dream, for I am sure it is a dream, I see my brother climb through the narrow window of my bed chamber. He sits on the floor by my bed and I wait a long time for him to speak. Finally he says, "I'm sorry to have left you, Kaagi. It wasn't right. We were both too young. I thought I could make it better, what happened to our family. And if I could, then you wouldn't have to."

I feel a twinge of old guilt. "I never really tried," I say, my voice tight.

"I know," he says. "It's probably better that way."

I'm looking at the space where he was, but there's only shadows and darkness there. I look around and see that I am sitting on a fallen tree, across from a man I am somehow certain is Hida Dasan. Around us are the fallen bodies of the rest of his company. We regard each other solemnly for a while, and then he says, "I am sorry you have come."

"Will I prove that you were poisoned?" I ask.

"Not in body. Not in any way you will recognize. Yet. And so I am sorry, for..." and he hesitates, then waves an arm at the carnage around us, "...for all of this," he finishes, shaking his head slowly.

"Will you go home now?" I ask him.

"None of us go home after a point," he replies. "You and I have come too far."

He looks sad, this bloody ruin of a man. He is covered in the gore of his friends, but his regret looks deeper than any of his wounds, as if he sees a lifetime of grief rather than a moment of tragedy. He is calm as he sits here speaking with me in quiet tones, and so am I.

"The madness leaves you sometimes, after death." He's nodding at me, answering my thoughts. "I fear it will return, though. I cannot seem to find my way out of here. I look for my mother and my father to lead me to where I must go now, but I can only find my wife."

"They'll burn you soon," I say, trying to be reassuring. "Maybe that will help."

"I hope so," he says, nodding. "You have to go now. I think it's coming back. My madness, my life."

I rise and begin to walk down the path that I know will take me to my bed. Behind me, he begins to rage incoherently, like a beast in pain. I think about the window in my room and I am there. Sometime

later, I open my eyes and the sun is shining in through the window. The light is grayish, but the rain has stopped.

Entry 26

I get up and dress, then go out to the main room. Mei is already there, talking to a young samurai. "This is Hida Kurusu," says Mei, smiling as she nods toward her companion. She's dressed like a proper girl as opposed to the peasant's kimono she wears when we travel. The young samurai rises as I approach and bows respectfully. His face has the eager hopefulness of youth, but his eyes, when he raises them, are shadowed like one who has seen too much, too soon.

"I am Kitsuki Kaagi," I say, returning his bow.

"Kurusu-san was training under Hida (Dasan)," Mei says conversationally. But her glance to me is not trivial in the least. I nod slightly as Kurusu looks away toward his tea.

"Do you stay here, Kurusu-san?" I ask, noting his pack in the far corner of the room.

"I do. I was (Dasan-san's pupil, and I will not leave his house and wife defenseless now that he is gone." There's a fierceness to his gaze, a bitter determination.

"Were there others who stayed here as well?"

"Four other men, yes. But they have all gone," he replies. The house of a man dishonored is not a popular place for young samurai looking to make their names. For a moment, I wonder if Kurusu understands the harm he does to himself by staying here, but looking at the determined set of his jaw and shoulders, I realize that he understands precisely.

"Kurusu-san, there are questions I would ask, but not in this house. Will you walk with me?" I ask.

"Certainly," he responds. "Would you like to eat first?"

"No, thank you. I'm not really hungry." And it's true.

We rise, passing through the house's small entryway. In front is a narrow porch, three steps up from the ground. The pathways are still muddy from last night. Kurusu takes the lead, and Mei and I follow him to a small stone bridge that crosses the thin river which divides the village from the adjacent rice fields. The bridge, at least, is not covered in mud. We stop there and Kurusu turns to me.

"I come here often," he says. "Will this do for your talk?" He looks wary, but mostly tired.

"It's very nice," I say, moving to stand beside him. Mei moves to the opposite side where she perches inconspicuously on the rail. You'd hardly know she was there if you weren't looking for her. Mei is especially good at that. "I take it that you were close to Hida (Dasan?"

Kurusu sighs deeply. "My father," he begins, "is stationed at the Kaiu Wall. He has been since my mother died. I don't think he wants to be around anything civilized now that she's gone. He sent me here to learn bushido because he felt that the Wall was not for a young man my age. And so I've stayed here with (Dasan-sama, learning from him the ways of honor and men."

"This thing that has happened." In my most diplomatic tone, "In hindsight, were you forewarned?"

He laughs again, not pleasantly. "You try to speak delicately of a brutal thing, my lord. But no, I did not for a moment think that (Dasan-sama was so troubled as to do such a thing. I would never have thought him capable. If I had not seen it, I would not have believed it. Even if the source was the Emperor himself."

"Was he troubled? Not so much as to predict his action, but troubled nonetheless?"

"Yes. He was fine when he first returned from the Shadowlands. He was solemn, as most men are. Instead of growing merrier though, he seemed to become more apprehensive. He confided to me that

he felt discomfort, almost fear, at parts of the day and night. He had been plagued with bad dreams. He couldn't recall them, but he said he woke as many as six times a night, feeling that he had only narrowly escaped.

"As time went by, he seemed to grow increasingly tormented. His appetite lessened. His temper grew shorter, I think because of his lack of rest. He would lash out with harsh words at members of his household. Kohi-san bore it all with great dignity. She would only smile and endure. But the maids were a wreck and even some of the men had begun to be affected by his mood.

"A few days ago, we came here to talk, he and I. He was disturbed by something. 'There is a great madness in me.' That is what he said."

"I think it's coming back," the Dasan in my dream had said, "My madness, my life." Or had Dasan said "My wife?" Suddenly, I couldn't remember.

"Dasan said to me, 'Last night I went to bed. Kohi was there and we exchanged words. I was sitting on the bed, and I told her harshly that I did not like the way her maids behaved, always skulking about, as if they were rats listening at doors. I said she should control them better. She said they were only attentive, trying to see to my needs. I was angry and told her I would see to my own needs and her women should keep to themselves. She agreed pleasantly, and then I turned to her. She had no face as she stood above me, looking down. No face. And then, the no face smiled at me. I can't explain, but it was the most horrible thing I've ever seen. I thought I ran from the room as if in mortal terror. But the next thing I remember, I awoke in my own bed and it was morning. I don't know what to do. I cannot bring myself to look at her now, for I fear that I will see her again faceless.'"

Kurusu looked up at me, an imploring sadness in his eyes. "He was shaking and sweating like a man with the fever. But when I touched him, his skin was cold. When the call came for us to prepare for battle, I told him that he should remain there, but he said he would not stay in that house. He said that he would go to battle and be a man, not stay at home, frightened like a child. I thought to go to the general with my news. I was afraid that in his state, he would do something reckless in battle. But my loyalty to him was too strong. I couldn't shame him by telling what he had told me in confidence to another. I never suspected what would happen.

"I cannot leave," he says, staring at me with eyes full of pain. "I am torn. She is my lady, my lord's wife, and I cannot leave her. But I fear what Dasan said. I fear she is a *tsukai*. Do you understand?"

"I understand," I say gravely. If he goes to someone and reports that he suspects her a *tsukai*, and then he is wrong, he has committed a mortal offense. He'll have betrayed both her and his lord.

Entry 27

After we leave Hida Kurusu to his thoughts, Mei and I inquire after Dasan's general. We find him in his home, resting under the care of his granddaughter. We're allowed to see him but warned that he is under the influence of potent herbs being used to keep the pain bearable.

"Nakai-sama," I say bowing low. "My name is Kaagi. I am a magistrate of the Kitsuki family and have been asked by Hida Misogi to help investigate what happened to you and your men. If you are feeling well enough, I'd like to ask you about that night."

For a long time, he looks at me, his eyes glazed. Then his lips part and with a slight gurgle he begins to speak. "What... do you... want?"

His voice is slurred, either from the drugs or the deep gash that trails along the side of his face. His body is concealed by a blanket, but I can see the bulk of many wrappings. Both of his eyes are swollen

and the skin is a mottled purple-yellow.

"Misogi thinks that Dasan may have been Tainted, or that the Scorpion may have used some potion to drive him mad. The shugenja are checking for the first. I am here to investigate the second."

"A demon," he rasps. "A demon was in his eyes. It... crawled like a serpent... but so fast, I've never seen... anything... so fast. It made me cold."

"How did it..." I begin. But he breaks in.

"They fell so quickly, like saplings in a monsoon, broken and bleeding. My best men never drew their blades. I taught them to be cautious, to see death in everything, a pool of water, the darkness between two rocks, a maiden's gaze. But I never taught them to fear their brother. Not here." He's writhing under the sheet. I look to see if the girl is about, not sure if I should try to restrain him. His right arm comes loose, what's left of it. The bandaged limb is too short to be whole.

"He was screaming. That was the worst... the voice was his and it was sane. But he howled that we were demons. He said he knew, that he saw our faces. And then at the end as they cut him down, he said he had saved us. That it couldn't find us now." His voice drifts, the lucidity fades from his expression and his eyes slip shut.

I gesture to Mei and we leave the house quietly.

Entry 28

"What do you make of that?" asks Mei as we cross through the village.

"He's delirious, of course," I respond. "I don't know what to make of the rest of it. From what he says, and what we know, Dasan must have been incredibly fast to do the kind of damage he did."

"Do you think he was possessed?" Her cheerfulness is suddenly gone. "It's a bad way to die, at the hand of someone you trust."

"Is this the voice of experience?" I ask with a laugh. I suddenly want to add some levity to the day. But Mei looks at me, then turns her attention back to the road. "I don't know what made him do it," I sigh. "The shugenja will finish their ritual tomorrow. They'll know if it was the Taint."

"Will they know if he was under a *tsukai's* spell?" she mutters distantly, turning her eyes up towards the darkening sky.

"I don't know. I guess I'll have to think of a roundabout way of asking."

Mei and I return to Dasan's house. We arrive just ahead of the rain. The maids have already prepared dinner and serve it with the anxious attitude of mice watching for the cat to return. Once again, Hida Kohi does not join us. Her women apologize profusely for her as they pour the tea.

Kurusu arrives halfway through the meal, grim and wet. The women are more relaxed as they serve him. Familiarity, I suppose. His face is dark and he pushes his food around without eating. The house has all the cheer of a funeral barge. After the meal is cleared away, Kurusu goes out on the low porch and sits facing the rain, as if watching for something to come out of the blackness.

I stop Mei as she heads towards the servants' room. "Tomorrow we'll know something. We won't stay another night if all goes well." I see from her expression that the mood weighs on her as well.

"I wouldn't be too hopeful," she says with a resigned shake of her head. "Nothing seems to go very well in this place." Some of the hair around her face has fallen, and she hasn't bothered to pin it back. Distinctly Mei. "We'll see what we can find tomorrow." She nods, then turns and heads down the hall.

"Mei," I call after her. She stops. "I forgot to ask. How do you like sharing a room with our lady friends?" I tilt my head back toward the kitchen indicating Kohi's maids.

"Like living with squirrels in the walls," she says wryly. "I'm going to take a very long bath and hope they've gone to sleep before I come back."

We part then. I sit awhile in my room, recording this journal, caring for my blades. Eventually, I hear Mei in the hall, returning from the bath. Her step is familiar, quiet and deft.

Entry 29

I put away my things and head to the bathing chamber. It takes a while to get the stubborn mud from where it's splattered onto my feet and legs. Afterwards, I recline in the tub. The water is hot, steam rising into the air. I can feel myself beginning to drift off. Kurusu's words come back to me, recounting Dasan's story about feeling mad, about looking at his wife and seeing her faceless, part of the greater darkness. Then I recall Dasan's voice from my dream. 'It's coming back. My madness, my life.' Or had he said 'my wife'? Why can't I remember, even to record it? That isn't right, I should be able to recall even my dreams with enough effort.

'She had no face.' This time it isn't Kurusu's or my dream-Dasan's voice. It's the battered general, and I wonder what happened to his arm. If they found the rest of it. Had they buried it, or was it lying still out in the woods, in the mud and the rain. Were there spiders crawling over it even now...

Something moves over my leg in the water.

I'm sitting bolt upright before I even realize it. I leap from the tub, spilling water over the sides. There's nothing on my leg, but I can't see past the surface of the water in the dark room. The only light comes from one lamp on the wall and the candle I brought with me. My katana is back in my room. Stupid, in a place I don't even begin to trust. I don't know how I could have been so careless.

The door bursts in and I grab the only thing at hand, the taper candle, spinning to meet the shape in the doorway. The shoulders are broad and I can see no features on the face.

"What is it?" comes Hida Kurusu's voice, quick with exertion.

For a long moment I feel something like vertigo, as the room seems to spin once all around me, then comes to rest, slowly settling into place. Kurusu's face is there, just obscured in the wavering light. His features are concerned. "I heard you yell," he says.

I don't remember crying out, but I might have done so. "I felt something, in the tub," I say. "It was large and moved across my leg, like a serpent."

To his credit, Kurusu doesn't question me. He just goes to the tub and peers in cautiously, ignoring my nudity. He has been trained well. Kurusu reaches down and pulls the stopper from the side. The water pours away across the floor and over our feet. It drains out quickly, and we both watch as the dark wood of the bottom appears. The tub is empty. The slow exhalation Kurusu lets out mirrors my own. He turns to me, about to speak and stops. "Your hand," he says.

I look down and realize that I'm holding the still-burning candle, the wax dropping down over my fingers. I set it down quickly, but I can feel the sting of the burning wax. Kurusu comes over with the pitcher of cold water from the table and pours it over my hand, cooling the last of the wax. With my good hand, I pull my kimono on. I flex my other hand, feeling the wax crack and break. I begin to peel off the pieces, wincing. "There was something in the tub," I say without looking at Kurusu.

"I don't doubt it," he says in a humorless voice. "I don't doubt that anything can happen in this house."

I follow him out into the hall. "May I?" he says when we arrive at the door of my room.

"Of course," I reply. We both enter and he slides the panel shut behind us.

"After we parted today, I stayed awhile by the bridge," he says. He's not looking at me as he speaks,

but at the candlelight reflecting on the blade of my wakizashi. "I don't know how long I stayed there, before something fluttering down between the rocks on the bank below caught my eye. It struck my wandering fancy, so I went down to have a look."

He stops now, turning up toward the ceiling. There's a look of such pain in his eyes that it makes my breath stick in my throat. "Lady Kohi had a nightingale that Dasan brought back from court as a wedding gift. I had not seen it in days, or thought on it until today. But it was there, dead between the rocks, its head bent all wrong." He's looking at me now with a desperation I cannot console. "How can it be except sorcery? Magistrate, did I sit by as a witch slew my master and my friend?"

"I do not know, Kurusu-san," I shake my head slowly. "I think that witchcraft is rare, more so than men believe. And I think that it is easy to blame what we do not know on what we do not understand. Perhaps, the bird escaped and, being unused to the wild, met with some mishap."

"And just a moment ago? Did you meet with some mishap in the bath?" There's no humor in this boy's voice or face, both of which have aged too rapidly.

"I do not know. I'll see Dasan's body tomorrow. Tonight, I think we must wait."

"You are a man of wisdom, Kaagi-sama," he says. "I do not know what other explanation there may be, but I will wait until tomorrow if you say that I should. But by tomorrow night, I will know what is truth and what is not, or I will act. It is all that I know how to do."

He slides the panel shut quietly, leaving. I feel as if I've failed him, but I do not know what else to do.

Entry 30

I don't know how long I've been asleep when I hear the door to my room slide open again. I lie very still for a few moments, waiting for my eyes to adjust to the slight starlight coming through the window. The form by my door is not tall, and I can see the curve of a woman's body under the draping kimono. In my sleep-filled mind, I think I can see her smile, but it's too dark for that.

"Mei? What is it?" I say, sitting up.

"Squirrels," she replies, "in the walls."

"Won't the maids wonder where you've gone?"

"No. They chatter in their sleep. Chitter, chatter, chit." She moves closer to my futon, past where the dim light of the window touches her. "I thought maybe you couldn't sleep either." There's a strange tone to her voice, as if she's laughing at a joke I don't understand. She sits down, moving very slowly. Her hair is down, and it brushes my burned hand, silken and cool like water.

"I was asleep," I say, and I feel like a dullard.

"Are you asleep now?" Her hand reaches out, and brushes along my leg.

It feels just like the thing in the bath.

I leap up, shoving her away from the bed and grabbing my wakizashi from where it lies on the low table. I can feel her laughing, but she doesn't make a sound. I want more light, but I'm not about to put down my blade to light a candle. The illumination from outside is slight, but I can see now that the silhouette before me is all wrong to be Mei. The hair is too long, the body too tall, more slender.

"I only came out of hospitality, to be certain you were comfortable," she says. Her voice is sibilant. It makes me think of serpents, and I can still see spiders crawling on a severed arm, the hand clutching the hilt of a katana. I see the wings of a nightingale in flight, and then Dasan is looming in front of me. A gaping hole in the top left side of his head leaks blood and grayish fluid down into his eyes; and his features contort in rage and anguished grief, the two expressions warring on the battlefield of his face. "I'm glad

you've met my husband," says the woman. "I think the two of you could be friends."

I feel a rush of air, followed by an absolute stillness, as if I were standing in the eye of a fierce storm. Directly before me, Hida Dasan stands ready, his katana before him, still dripping with the blood and gore of his companions. A quick glance confirms that we are standing in the corpse-filled clearing of Dasan's slaughter. The stink of the bodies rises about us and the air is growing thick with flies. Then, I shut out all of that and focus on the man ahead of me.

Dasan has been hacked, sliced, wounded too badly to stand, or so my sane mind tells me. But his stance is solid and his blade unwavering. His remaining eye looks out with grim determination and absolutely no reason. My katana is in my hand and I realize that I'm poised to fight. As we stare at each other, the buzzing of flies and the smell fades. I can hear my own heart beating quickly, but evenly. And I can sense his own pumping a hard but sluggish rhythm. His body heaves up and down with his labored breathing, and a liquid sound comes from somewhere deep in his throat with each inhalation.

The space between us crackles with energy, setting my nerves on edge. I try to focus past it, keeping my attention on Dasan. Then, just when I'm certain that I have to strike or flee from the tension, Dasan utters an unintelligible scream and swings his blade at me with a force that splits the rock where I was standing a moment ago. I throw myself to the side an instant before it hits. Dasan swings up and toward me again and I block his blade barely in time. My shoulder goes numb from the impact.

Ignoring the pain, I bring my own blade around in the same motion. He makes no move to block or move out of my way and the katana opens a clean line across his chest. Thick blood pours from the gap, but the wound doesn't slow his next strike. I have to throw myself aside again to keep from being sliced in two. I almost stumble when my foot turns on a loose rock. My blade flails wildly as I try to block his next strike. Again it cuts through his unresisting flesh, and again he shows no care. He stalks forward, his outstretched left hand grasping the front of my kimono. Instinctively, I cut upward and his hand is severed from his body.

For a moment, he pauses as if puzzled. His hand still dangles from the cloth in its grip until I pull it off and fling it away, my skin crawling. My moment of inattention is all it takes for Dasan to move forward again, swinging down with his katana. Suddenly, I have a plan, and this time when I sidestep, I move deliberately to my left, bringing my katana up high. I slice down at his neck and once again he makes no move to stop me. Instead, he raises his katana for another strike. I cut across, cleaving through Dasan's neck. The headless body takes one more lumbering step forward, then stumbles and collapses. The stink of the place rises again in another rush. The world spins again, and I'm surrounded by the darkness of my empty room with only the faintest traces of laughter teasing my ears. Then the darkness grows thick, so that I'm drowning in it, and I feel myself falling forever...

Entry 31

"Kaagi, are you all right?"

Mei is calling me from somewhere.

"Speak if you're alive, damnit!"

Mei's voice isn't as deep as that, and she isn't strong enough to be lifting me up like this.

I open my eyes very slowly. At first I'm blinded by the brightness. As my senses return one after the other, as if sneaking in from a night of debauchery, I find myself face to face with Kurusu. He has a hand wrapped in my sleeping kimono and is holding me up. It takes me a breath or two to take a mental account of all the pieces of my body and put them together. Kurusu's eyes are full of worry as

are Mei's. I can see her over his shoulder, kneeling behind him on the floor.

"I'm all right," I sputter hoarsely. My throat is dry and tight, and I reach for the cup on my table.

"We were worried when you didn't come to breakfast," she explains. "And here you were, collapsed on the floor with a wakizashi by your side. For a minute, I was afraid you'd gotten so bored with all of this that you'd decided to take your own life." Her voice is light, but her eyes are worried.

"What happened after I left you last night?" says Kurusu. His voice has a frantic edge to it. I reach up and loosen his grip on my clothing. He blinks, then lets go, sits back and lets out a deep, shuddering breath. "What must I do?" he asks.

He's not asking me, I'm certain, but I answer anyway. "Nothing yet," I say, rising to my feet. My legs and back ache. "I'm going now to speak to the shugenja. Do nothing until my return. Let's see if we can get some notion of what we have before we decide what to do about it. In the meantime, get out of this house. Go walking, spend time with friends, anything but stay here. I'll come and find you."

He looks at me with the numb expression of a man pulled in too many directions, but nods. The two of them wait outside the door while I dress. Then three of us walk out together into the gray daylight.

"Remember," I say to him as we part, "I'll come and find you."

Entry 32

As Mei and I walk to the house of General Misogi, I explain last night's events to her, up until consciousness and I parted company.

"So she is a *tsukai*," says Mei. "What's the problem? Let's have someone burn her."

I stumble, forgetting sometimes how blunt she can be. "What if we're wrong?" I argue. "What if there's something else in the house, something that doesn't have anything to do with her? For that matter, what if I'm having hysterical episodes? Do we burn a woman for that, with no proof?"

"Do you think you're having hysterical episodes?" asks Mei, very seriously.

"No," I answer honestly.

"I don't understand you," she says. "Most of the time you can be so damned practical, then with some things, it's as if you hit a wall where your common sense should be. Just because testimony is sometimes less accurate than evidence, you can't invalidate it. But you... you won't even listen to your own testimony! What do your eyes see, your ears hear; isn't that the point?"

"It's superstition, Mei," I begin.

"That doesn't mean it's not so!" she nearly shouts in frustration.

Partly, she's right. But so many wrong decisions have been made in the name of superstition, I can't escape the feeling that I somehow need more evidence to confirm it than I do to disapprove it.

We arrive at Misogi's house in a mutual silence.

"I'm glad you're here early," Misogi says. Even relaxed, his voice resonates though his house. "I was just preparing to meet with the shugenja."

The three of us walk together to a large hut near the edge of the village. The building, Misogi explains, doubles as a home and workshop for the village shugenja, as well as a small shrine to local *kami*. Misogi knocks on the door three times. We wait a while before a young boy answers. He bows low, averting his eyes, and opens the door further, affording us room to pass. Then he leaves us in the small, round front room. Candles burn in niches all along the walls. The boy looks to be no more than ten, perhaps eleven. I wonder if he is the shugenja's son, or on loan from some household eager to please the *kami*. My thoughts are called back to the business at hand by the sound of footsteps approaching.

Kuni Yanaka, the resident shugenja, appears in the doorway. Misogi greets him by name and introduces us. Yanaka has the air of one perpetually distracted by something far more interesting than us. He is mild to look at, but his eyes have a fevered intensity. He takes us down a short corridor to another room. I can smell the acrid odor of sulfur mixed with some other noxious chemicals coming from the doorway, and I find myself thinking that the candles in the fore-room, with their delicate scent of jasmine, are to help cope with this harsher odor.

As I reach the doorway, I have to make an effort to continue into the chamber. In the center of the room is a man's body, impaled on a great jade spike. At first, that is all I can see. For several seconds my eyes, as if of their own accord, refuse to focus on any other detail, allowing me only a vague suggestion of form and color. Then, my sight begins to clear. The man's body rests on a stone slab higher than my waist, six feet long, two and a half feet wide. A jade cone, the base of which presumably rests on the slab, sprouts from the man's distended torso. The jade is run through with thin veins of black; the body has been slashed open in numerous places. The largest wounds have been stitched closed with coarse black twine. These include a long incision running the length of the torso and another across the belly going from hip to hip. There are also long lines from shoulder to wrist and from upper thigh to mid calf. And there are other abrasions, presumably received in the battle. These include a crushing blow to the upper left leg and another to the right side of the head. As I gaze down at the dead man's face, I recognize without surprise the face of Hida Dasan as it appeared to me the last two nights.

Slowly, the rest of the room comes into focus. Like the entry, it is round. The walls are lined with shelves holding scrolls, boxes, jars and implements I cannot identify. Besides the general, myself, Mei (who is examining the body at a distance, but with great fascination) and Yanaka, there are two other men in the room. One is a round fellow who looks like he who was at one time athletic, but whose appetite eventually outpaced his exercise. His face has a gentle quality to it, unremarkable except for the smallness of his nose and the breadth of his toothy grin. The other man is vaguely familiar, broad of shoulder, but otherwise gaunt the rest of the way through. His eyebrows are thick and his eyes set deep. His robes are those of a shugenja, but I would not like to cross blades with him.

"This is Kuni Kabai," Yanaka gestures to the round fellow, "and Kuni Inoba. They have come to assist me in the ritual." I know the name of Kuni Inoba. Stories of the fiercely reputed witch-hunters frightened me even in my older days as a student, and the tales of Dark Inoba had been among the most impressive. He came once to visit us at the school, to learn about what we did there. He spoke to us as a class about the signs we might observe when encountering dark, unknown forces.

"So what have you decided?" Misogi's voice commands even when he asks a question.

The smiling fellow steps forward and begins. "We have, as you can see," he gestures to the body, "searched for any sign that he was infected by the Shadowlands. Nothing was left unexamined." I'm both amused and appalled by his grim sense of humor. "There is no trace of Taint."

"I am sorry, lord," says Yanaka, glancing at his companion. "But nothing we have found here has given us any idea what might have caused his actions. We can only assume that he must have been mad."

Misogi releases a long sigh, then turns to me. "Magistrate," he says quietly, "prove if you can that this is not so. Tell me if this man was a victim of his own mind or of Scorpion poisons."

I nod once, then approach the body. Mei steps forward with me without being asked. "My eta will check the soft tissue of his nose and throat," I say, "and the interior of the mouth."

She probes with her fingers, taking her time to be thorough. Then, glancing at me for approval, she checks the eyes, lifting the lids, and we both peer closely at the clouding orbs. "Given that it's been several

days, there's nothing unusual in the texture, color or consistency," she murmurs. Then, looking at Yanaka, she asks, "May I?" as she lays a finger along the rough stitches holding the torso shut. He nods. Faint surprise perches on his face like an odd-looking bird.

Removing her knife, she slices carefully through the thread. As she does so, the folds of skin fall to either side, revealing Dasan's innards. "This is easier than usual," Mei says. She's already distracted. The organs are intact, with the exception of the heart and lungs, which have been ruptured by the great jade spike. The coloring is regular. The blood has congealed as it should, sinking downward to the back of the corpse. I lean forward a little, inhaling slightly. At my gesture, Mei opens the stomach.

We continue in this manner for a time before I nod to Mei that we are finished. Yanaka thoughtfully steps forward and hands her a clean cloth to wipe her hands. She smiles and thanks him. I begin to wonder if I've missed my guess all this time at Mei's family origins. The resemblance is uncanny.

Turning to Misogi, I take a deep breath. I can feel Mei's eyes on me. I've stalled as long as I can before voicing my suspicions. "It has been several days, which makes it difficult for me to be certain, but I can find no poison here. "However," I turn my eyes to Kuni Inoba as I speak the rest, "I have reason to think that we may be searching in the wrong place for evidence of Shadowlands sorcery."

"What does your evidence suggest?" Inoba asks quietly.

"Dasan's wife, Hida Kohi. I wonder if she may have contributed to her husband's madness." I recount, standing in that dreadful room, my strange encounters of the last few days, as well as the suspicions voiced by Hida Kurusu. All the while, a sensation of dread fills my stomach. This closed room with its reek of death seems a strangely appropriate setting for my grim tale.

Entry 33

It's raining again as we leave. The six of us walk in a line through the thickening muck. Misogi is in the lead, the three shugenja behind him, myself and Mei last. We arrive at Dasan's house and are admitted by one of the nervous maids. She protests feebly when Misogi tells her that we are here to see the lady Kohi and that she must appear. The maid claims her mistress is still ill, still grieving. Misogi, with his voice that has guided armies, commands her to fetch her mistress, and she flees the room.

For what seems a very long time, we wait. Then, the absolute silence is broken by soft, shuffling steps, approaching slowly from the middle corridor. Hida Kohi emerges from the hall, and my feeling of unease seems for a moment as if it will overwhelm me. This is wrong, but for all that I am certain of it, I cannot say why.

This is, without question, the woman who stood in my room last night. She is taller than most women. Her hair is long and heavy, falling to the back of her knees, and is gathered loosely at the middle of her back. Her features are regal, but so very tired, the eyes sunk deep in exhaustion. Her posture is rigidly straight but it looks as if she keeps it so mainly by sheer force of will. Her voice is the deep tone of last night, but so hard it is almost brittle. "You have come to tell me of my husband." It's a statement, flat, devoid of emotion.

"No, lady," says Misogi, rigidly. "We have come to test whether you are guilty of practicing maho."

Only her eyes change, flaring briefly with rage. "I am not."

Inoba steps forward. His face is impassive, his voice empty, like sound coming back up a well. He takes the jade pendant from around his neck and holds it out to her by the cord. "Take the pendant," he says. She raises her hand without hesitation and grasps it. Their eyes lock; his are stone, hers defiant. "There," she says, letting it go and holding up her palm for us to see that there are no burns. "Are you satisfied?"

"No," says Inoba. From the folds of his robes he draws out a slick, polished disc of stone. I don't recognize the material, but it is gray with a metallic sheen. It is wider across than the palm of a man's hand. Stepping behind Kohi, Inoba holds the disc in front of her face where they can both see it. "If her true form is other than it appears to be, then I will force it to manifest," he says glancing at the rock mirror. He intones what sounds like a prayer, but the syllables are unfamiliar to me. There's an expectant pause and I can see Misogi and the other shugenja lean forward in anticipation. Inoba shakes his head.

"She looks as she seems," he says. "She's no foxwife or hengoyokai. It is possible her outer form is true and uncorrupted while her inner self is possessed of an evil force." Again Inoba reaches into his robes. This time what he takes out is small, the size of a large seed. As it catches the light, I can see it is a pebble of polished jade. "You will swallow this, and if you are pure it will not harm you and will help protect you from future harm. If you are a demon in this woman's body, your spirit will be burned."

Kohi gives him a look of disgust. She turns her head, slowly looking over the rest of us. I feel a mix of apprehension and guilt as her eyes touch me, but she shows no sign of recognition. I want to look away as she takes the stone and places it in her mouth. She swallows hard, then opens her mouth and lifts her tongue for Inoba to inspect.

I want to say this is enough, that it is foolishness. But my mouth is full of ashes. She is a woman, who is only grieving for her lost husband. There is no witchery, only my own foolishness. Kurusu and I have been telling each other children's stories around the campfire. I've had bad dreams, and he's seen a dead bird. What made me think that this was reason enough to submit a woman to the superstitious trials of a people determined to live in fear of what they do not know?

"There is one last test," cites Inoba. He remains as calm as a lake on a windless day. "A tsukai cannot stand to be bound," he says, pulling two cords from his belt. "I will tie her hands and feet. If she is a practitioner of witchcraft, she will go mad." Misogi steps back, one hand on his katana.

I think it must be Kohi's pride alone that keeps her still and upright as, in her own house, before the eyes of men she has lived with for years, she is tied like a bundle of rice for market. Inoba ties the last knot, then stands back. All eyes are on Hida Kohi as she stands rigidly in place. Not a hair on her head moves. "I am quite sane," she says after several moments. "My only madness is in my mourning."

Inoba nods and steps forward to undo the ropes. A change comes over the room. There is an air of embarrassed relief mixed with disappointment as the men look about the room and each other, as long as they do not watch what is happening right before them.

"Lady Kohi," Misogi steps forward and inclines his head. "You have my apologies for this. We had to be sure, and there was testimony. Please call on me if there is anything that I or my household can do for you in this difficult time." For a moment I think that she will spit in his face. Then she nods stiffly but stands unmoving as we file out of her home. I glance back from several yards away and can see her through the open doorway standing there still.

Entry 34

At Misogi's house we part company with the shugenja. Misogi orders tea brought as he, Mei and I settle ourselves into the warmth of his sitting room.

"You have my profound apologies, Misogi-sama," I say, my eyes locked on the floor. "I should not have spoken so rashly."

"You reported what you saw and experienced. The rest of us judged that it was witchery. If it was not true, so much the better. Dasan simply broke; his mind was too weak to stand against the atrocities it

saw. It's tragic, but it's not the first time such a thing has happened. In truth, I am glad that Kohi is not a witch. She is an admirable woman."

I nod at his words. "May my companion and I remain in your house tonight? We'll be setting out in the morning, but it's getting late now and I would prefer not to trouble Lady Kohi further tonight."

"Of course," Misogi appears distracted, his forehead creased with thought.

"Is something the matter, Misogi-sama?" I ask.

"I just wish my concerns were more easily allayed than they are," he says, gazing at the fire. "The dreams you had, seeing the faces of people you could not yet have known... It is an ill omen, I think. Such things cannot come from nowhere."

Dinner is brought then, and we eat in silence. It is late when we finish, and later still by the time I have finished a cup of shochu, particularly strong sake, with the general. Mei sits by the fire like a lazy cat. "I had best go and retrieve our belongings from the other house," I tell her.

"Mmmm," she murmurs, turning her sake cup slowly in her hand. She's emptied it more than once. "Do we really have to go out in that?" She gestures at the storm outside. "Maybe we could just fetch our things in the morning?"

"I require my journal," I say, shaking my head. "You don't need to come if your things are packed up. I'll just ask one of the maids to bring them out."

"Don't you want my sunny company to drive the rain clouds away?" she's smiling very broadly.

"I should take you along to let the rain wash the shochu out of you." I can't help laughing at the face she makes. "Stay here. I could use the time to think, anyway."

"Maybe the rain will wash away some of your solemn face," she says with a wry smile.

Entry 35

I'm seeing the wisdom of Mei's decision by the time I reach Dasan's house. I'm soaked to the skin as I climb the three steps to the porch. The door is ajar, so I enter without knocking. The front room is empty. I hadn't really expected to see Kurusu here, but I wish he were. I haven't seen him since we parted company this morning, and I wonder how much about what transpired today.

I call out a greeting, softly. I don't want to startle the maids, and I'm loath to disturb Hida Kohi. No one answers. Lighting a lantern from the front room, I proceed into the house. The kitchen is empty as I pass it on the way to my chamber. I gather a couple of my belongings, then shoulder my pack. Re-entering the hall, there's still no noise. Perhaps everyone has retired, but I don't know why they would have done so with the door still open.

"It's to let the smell of the rain in," says a voice close behind me. "I love the smell of rain at night."

I whirl around, my hand going to the hilt of my katana. Lady Kohi is standing in the hall. She smiles slowly. "I was just coming from the bath," she says. "I didn't realize you'd come back."

"I'm not as easily tricked as that," I reply carefully. My voice is steadier than my hand, so I keep a tight grip on the katana, and I keep enough room between her and myself to draw. "I don't speak to myself aloud, but you answered the question in my thoughts. What are you?"

"Are you certain you didn't speak aloud?" she asks, smiling. The last two words sound like my own voice.

"Very certain," I say, setting the lantern down on the floor and drawing my katana slowly. I keep my eyes on the shadowy form of the woman before me. "Who are you?" I repeat.

"Your hostess?" She takes a step closer. "The dark you guard against with that?" She casts a glance at the lantern. She's smiling still, and takes another step forward. "It won't help you. It's only the illusion

of light." She pauses. "We've been watching you a long time, Kitsuki Kaagi-san. And you've been watching us. It makes me think you may want to be friends."

She moves closer, her hands resting on her obi. I hold the drawn katana before me. She walks forward until the point lies against her belly. "I have a gift for you." Her voice is the whisper of a laugh. "Don't you want to see it? You'll have to let me by; it's in my chamber."

She passes me slowly. There's just enough room for the two of us with my blade in between. When she stands right across from me, I'm almost overcome by the urge to push the katana forward, through her, but the confident look in her eyes makes me afraid that she wouldn't care. She turns her back to me and continues to walk down the hall toward her chamber.

"I think you've been lonely, Kaagi. I think you've been very alone. Do you miss having a family?" A cold chill runs through me. "How long have you been watching?" My palms on the hilt are slick. "You are my guest. If I don't watch carefully, how am I to know what you need? What you desire? We've been waiting since before you were born." Her head tilts as she speaks and I think she's smiling. She passes through the doorway into her room and I follow, not wanting to let her out of my sight. The only illumination is the lantern light in the hall and the starlight coming in from a window. "My gift is sanctuary, Kaagi. It's never having to be lonely, or afraid of the dark."

The lightning flashes then and I see three bodies lying across the futon. Two are the maidservants, and the third... is Lady Kohi. I turn back toward the woman I've followed here. She stands with her arms folded, shoulders shaking with laughter, but where her face should be is a darkness greater than the blackest corner of shadow. In that empty place I can see the madness of Hida (Dasan grinning out at me.

"You see, Kaagi, it's all superficial. A man of your calling can see how meaningless appearances are." The voice is Hida Kurusu's. I have the impression of a smile but there's no mouth. I can feel the world spinning out from under me and with all the strength I have, I throw myself into the hall, racing for the front room and the door. "Don't go," she calls after me, "We have so much to talk about!" The rain is like ice, as if I'm burning with fever. I don't know where I'm running, and I only half notice when my feet slide out from under me in the mud. In the falling of the rain, I think I can hear laughter.

Entry 36

I wake to the smell of jasmine and death. I try to sit up quickly, only to find myself hampered by heavy blankets. Looking around, I see Mei staring at me from across the small room. Her eyes are red, her skin looks ashen and there's dirt on her face and clothes.

Her voice trembles a little when she speaks. "I'm never letting you go anywhere alone again. You look a wreck. What are our hosts going to think?"

"Are we at Yanaka's house?" I ask, looking around at the bed chamber, wincing at the pain in my head. The walls are covered in silk and parchment hangings. "What happened?"

"They found you in the street, covered in mud. You almost drowned in rainwater. You were holding your katana, and your things were on your back. Of course you left my stuff behind..." she pauses and snuffles into a well used rag.

"You're crying," I say, sitting up on one elbow.

"Don't be stupid," she responds, throwing the rag at me. "I've probably caught my death of cold hauling you in out of the rain." She punctuates this with a sneeze. "You were muttering something

about Kohi not really being her and having no face. Well, that was enough for Kurusu. He and Misogi led a group with torches to raze Dasan's house to the ground. With my pack still inside of course."

"Misogi wasn't convinced that Kohi wasn't a *tsukai*," she continues through her fatigue. "And, as if she wanted to confirm it, there she was, whirling around, dancing as the house burned down around her."

"Did Kurusu watch as the house burned?" I ask. The cold is spreading through me again.

"I assume so. I didn't see him after they set the torches."

"But you never saw him while you saw the dancing figure, did you?"

"No." She shakes her head slowly. "And I didn't see him the rest of the night. Why?"

I recount the night's events to Mei. "I know what I saw, but I don't know what any of it means yet," I finish. "I think we should get what supplies we need and get out of here. I need to clear my thoughts."

It takes very little time for us to say thank you and farewell to Yanaka. I can tell he has questions for me, and I don't want to answer them. I explain that I'm in a great hurry, and he's only barely polite enough not to press the matter. We gather the supplies we need to replace what was lost in the fire, and set out for the road.

We pass the remains of Dasan's house on the way out of the village. Inoba is there, poking through the wreckage. There's little left besides ashes. The fire appears to have burned hot despite the rain.

"Kaagi-san," the witch hunter greets me as we draw near. "A hard night, no?"

I nod. "Were you here when they started this?" I ask him.

"No, Yanaka and I arrived late. Kabai had already departed. By the time we got here, things were well underway." He looks troubled. "Is it clear then that, despite the tests, she was a witch? It would be grave news if she was burned otherwise, but you understand, it is grave news for me if my tests were not enough to detect her corruption."

"I do not think that it was Kohi, or that it was just a witch, Inoba-san. I know the tales of what they are capable of, and I fear that this was something else, something worse. I saw Kohi beside me, and at the same time, saw her lying unconscious, perhaps dead, with her maids. She spoke to me of things she should not have known, and she used other voices... and now Kurusu is nowhere to be found."

"Ah, well then, that explains it," he says nodding his head soberly. "Kohi was not the witch then, you see? The woman I tested was human, and so the tests worked. But an Oni wearing her shape spoke to you, and perhaps it caused Dasan's troubles as well. It may have been Kurusu all along. Probably it was destroyed in the fire, but I will stay a few days. To be certain." He looks preoccupied as he speaks. "There is of course no need to mention any of this to the villagers directly. It would only cause them grief to know that they burned the wrong women. Perhaps they were dead already anyhow. No, I don't think there's any need to cause further grief or embarrassment."

"Inoba, this was like nothing I have ever encountered, in person or in my studies." My frustration is growing as he continues. "I fear that this is a thing we do not know."

"It was a Shadowlands creature," he says bluntly. I can see that he will continue to believe this, despite anything I say. He will not believe that there is a threat greater than those he already lives among.

I nod to him. "Perhaps you are right, Inoba-san. Your experience is greater than mine. I wish you luck."

"And good traveling to you Kaagi-san," he replies with a smile. He is poking through the ash again before we have taken three steps.



CRAB SAMURAI

EARTH: 3
WATER: 2 Strength 4
FIRE: 2
AIR: 2
VOID: 2
School/Rank: Hida

Bushi 1

Honor: 2.5

Glory: 1.5

Advantages: Large

Disadvantages: Brash

Skills: Archery 3, Battle
1, Defense 3, Hand-to-Hand
(Jujutsu) 4, Kenjutsu 3, Lore:
Shadowlands 2, Tetsubo 3

Wounds: 6: -0; 12: -1;
18: -2; 24: -3; 30: -4; 36:
Down; 42: Out; 48: Dead

SCORPION SAMURAI

EARTH: 2
WATER: 2 Perception 3
FIRE: 2
AIR: 3 Awareness 4
VOID: 2

School/Rank: Bayushi

Bushi 1

Honor: 1.5

Glory: 1

Advantages: Perfect

Balance

Skills: Archery 3,
Defense 3, Hand-to-Hand 3,
Jujutsu 2, Kenjutsu 3,
Poison 1, Sincerity 2, Stealth
3

Wounds: 4: -0; 8: -1;
12: -2; 16: -3; 20: -4; 24:
Down; 28: Out; 32: Dead

GM Notes: The Haunting of Hida Dasan

The second investigation gives your players the opportunity to get their first clear look at the Living Darkness. The framework for this investigation can be as simple or complex as you choose. You can run the second investigation as a story unto itself, as filler in between episodes of your regular campaign or simultaneously with another adventure. If you opt for this latter course, try running a scenario that takes place in or near the village in the daytime. Then, fill in your characters' evenings with Kaagi's second investigation. After all, characters seldom expect to be attacked in the proverbial 'inn'.

Setting up the adventure is easy. Arrange for your PCs to travel through Crab lands on their way to another adventure. The offer of a dry place to sleep when the storm hits is a strong incentive to stay at Utokii village. Once they arrive, Misogi, the head of the village, asks them to stay and help him determine what went wrong with Dasan. He also asks them to watch Hida Kohi. He is afraid that Kohi may do something unwise if left alone, and that he fears to leave her house unguarded in a time of such upheaval. In addition to this, Misogi already harbors suspicions that Kohi is involved in *maho* and an accomplice in her husband's death. By placing the PCs near her, he gains unbiased observers.

In any case, it is important that the characters end up staying at Dasan's house. By now, the Living Darkness has already taken an interest in one or more of your PCs. This may have started at Ichime Castle or, depending on the character's backgrounds (such as shadowbrands), it may have begun long ago. The trick is to unnerve the characters in the dark of night, then make them feel foolish in the light of day.

Scenes

ENTRY 21 - MID-MORNING, DAY 1

While traveling through Scorpion lands, on their way to the Crab territories, your PCs encounter some uncharacteristically jovial Scorpion, both at the guard post and on the road. Remember, just because the Scorpion have a reputation for slyness doesn't mean they don't know how to have fun. Their foot soldiers aren't very different from any other young men filled with the exuberance of a well-won battle.

In short, unless your PCs go out of their way to cause trouble, there isn't a fight to be had. If they're amenable, they'll even be invited to the party. If there are any Crabs in your party, the Scorpion ease up on their gloating out of courtesy, but they also tease a bit. If your Crab PC is a serious hot-head, things could get ugly, but he's going to have to really provoke a fight. If your PCs do end up in a fight, the Scorpion will refuse to take a duel beyond first blood. They have strict instructions to take on only one opponent at a time (in this case, the Crab from the village). In other words, they'll be harshly disciplined for getting into brawls while on duty.

Assuming your PCs are pleasant and courteous they'll be allowed to stock up on any basic supplies they need.

ENTRY 22 - AFTERNOON, DAY 1

Once the PCs are in Crab country, things are different. The Crabs aren't nearly as amused as their neighbors. Your players are going to have to do some impressive maneuvering to avoid a fight, because the Crab are spoiling for one.

Shortly after crossing the border, the PCs enter a thick forest. Storm clouds are beginning to gather overhead, making the shadows grow longer. A little before dusk, they encounter the Crab. The patrol consists of eight bushi, plus one captain. They're positioned in the trees off the path.

Ask your PCs to roll their Perception + Stealth, against a TN of 15. Anyone who succeeds notices the relatively unsubtle patrol of Crab bushi 'hiding' a few yards off the road. If the Crab are addressed by the party, they come out of the trees and make a direct challenge. If they go unnoticed, they maneuver until they surround the PCs. The captain makes the first move. He'll pick a fight with whichever of the PC's he feels to be

in charge, unless of course there's a Scorpion in the group, in which case that character will take the brunt of the aggressor's anger.

If any of the PCs are interested in trying to talk the angry Crab out of violence, they have to make an Awareness + Sincerity roll against a TN of 30. If they succeed, the Crab will be grumpy, but mollified enough not to attack. If the characters can't or won't try to work things out diplomatically, let things proceed to the verge of combat. Then, just before the first blow, bring in the irate Misogi.

The general reprimands his men and apologize to the PCs. In order to make amends, he invites them to dine at his house and stay in the village for the night.

Note: If you're running the investigations straight through, and the characters are tracking Hiroru as Kaagi is, the general should also make a disgusted comment about talk of a ghost in the forest - a figure all in white that appears or disappears in plain sight, flitting among the trees.



HIDA DASAN (THE GHOST)

EARTH: 4

WATER: 3 Strength 5

FIRE: 3 Agility 4

AIR: 2 Reflexes 4

VOID: 3

School/Rank: Crab

Bushi 3

Honor: 2.5

Glory: 4.5

Advantages: Crab

Hands

Skills: Battle 4, Hand-to-

Hand (Jiu-jutsu) 5, Lore;

Shadowlands 4, Ikebana 3,

Kenjutsu 4, Shintao 4, Tea

Ceremony 3, Tetsubo 5

HIDA KURUSU

EARTH: 2 Stamina 3

WATER: 3 Perception 4

FIRE: 2

AIR: 2 Reflexes 3

VOID: 2

School/Rank: Hida

Bushi 2

Honor: 0

Glory: 2.4

Advantages: Large,

Hands of Stone

Disadvantages: None

Skills: Archery 3,

Defense 3, Hand to Hand

(Jiu-jutsu) 2, Kenjutsu 3, Lore

Shadowlands 3, Tetsubo 4



DISADVANTAGE: NIGHTMARES

(2 POINTS)

While the characters are in Dasan's house, they will be attacked by the Living Darkness within their dreams. The Darkness is seeking a foothold, and will be attempting to terrorize them as they sleep. (See rules for dream manifestations, page 145.)

Further, if they leave the house and do not complete the adventure, these nightmares will continue indefinitely.

PCs are plagued with terrible dreams for the duration of this adventure. The Darkness may choose one character each night, subtly attempting to influence them through developing a sense of horror and fear. A PC thus influenced will not recover Void points or spells as a result of sleeping. Instead, they must Meditate (using the appropriate skill) in order to regain them.

If they do not meditate to regain their Void points, the Darkness will receive a +10 to its TN, once the PC has expended all of his or her Void.

ENTRY 23

At Misogi's house, the characters are well fed and made as comfortable as possible. Misogi brings them up to date on recent events.

- The Crab have just lost what should have been an easy victory to the Scorpion, and with it, a valued piece of land.

- The battle was lost when the key force didn't show up as planned.

- The company in question, a group of seasoned veterans recently returned from the Shadowlands, were later found slaughtered by one of their own men, Hida Dasan.

- There are four survivors of the slaughter – Nakai, the badly wounded general; Aboko, who lies unconscious and near death from his wounds; Iaku, who has since left the village to return to his family, and Kurusu, Dasan's student.

- All of the members of the company were checked at the Wall for Shadowlands Taint and appeared to be fine.

Misogi then asks for the characters' assistance. He inquires whether any of them have the ability to detect Scorpion poison (skills: Poison or Herbalism), or if they have supernatural means of determining what may have gone wrong (for instance, if one of them is a Kitsu, able to speak with the ghost – not knowing that Dasan is not in Jigoku, and cannot be spoken to in that way. As GM, you know what your PCs' specialties are. Consider in advance a way in which they can be called on to help.

The catch, of course, is that the body won't be available for examination for another two days. Misogi apologizes for the inconvenience of delaying them in their trip and will express again



ramón pérez - 1996

how pleased he would be if they could help. Also, he'll explain that although there is a travelers' inn, he'd be grateful if they would stay at Dasan's house. He's concerned about Kohi being alone.

The PCs could say 'no,' at this point, but if they do, remind them just how poorly that refusal will reflect on them and the lord(s) they serve.

ENTRIES 24 - 25, NIGHT 1

The PCs should be encouraged, and even coerced, to stay at Dasan's house. To refuse Misogi's request is an insult. If one or more of the players have decided to stay somewhere else in the village, geography won't really discourage the Living Darkness. PCs who choose to stay at the inn, or to depose one of the local peasant families, have experiences identical to those who stay at Dasan's house. Also, if the PCs leave the village, the dreams of the slain Dasan follow them, calling them back. If the characters decide to leave the village and not return, they permanently take on the disadvantage Nightmares and receive no points for it.

On their first night at Dasan's house, keep things calm until the characters are ready to go to bed.

Dasan's house has two guest rooms, plus the front room where Kurusu sleeps. Characters are spread out across these three rooms. Female characters have the option of sleeping in the women's quarters, but the maids will not force the issue. (though if the samurai-ko choose to sleep in the same room as their male companions, there will be rampant gossip, and possibly a 1 point Honor loss). Once your characters are bedded down, don't let them rest. Start with strange sounds, the kind that rouse you out of a sound sleep, but leave you unsure what it was that woke you. If several characters are sharing a room, wake one, then a little while later, another. Only one at a time will hear any unusual noises.

They may hear screeches, the crying of wild birds, loud thumps, familiar voices whispering, the howl of fierce winds, the sound of a katana whisking from its scabbard, or anything else that strikes you as effective. Do not repeat the same sound, do not let anyone else hear it, and if the PCs get up to investigate, assure them that nothing seems out of the ordinary.

The maids never admit to hearing or noticing anything. If roused, they are sleepy and confused. If female characters are sharing a room with them, they notice the maids don't wake up unless

the PCs disturb them. By contrast, Hida Kurusu does not sleep. He lays very still in his bedroll with his eyes open all night. If the PCs ask him about it, he'll tell them that he didn't hear anything. If asked why he isn't sleeping, he'll reply that he hasn't slept well since the battle.

Should the PCs inquire after Hida Kohi at any point, the maids will explain that she is grieving and does not wish to leave her chambers or speak with anyone. She has instructed the maids to provide them with whatever they desire.

Characters who remain awake may hear the singing of Kohi's nightingale or Kohi's mournful humming. Hida Kohi (or at least, they can assume it is Hida Kohi since the voice is deeper than that of the maids) can be heard walking the halls of her house, humming a sad song to herself. If, however, any of the PCs go into the dark halls to try to meet her, they catch only a glimpse of her kimono trailing around the door to her room before the screen slides shut.

Any PCs who hear her and have skill in music or poetry may make a Perception + Bard, Music or Poetry at a TN of 15, or Perception + Courtier at TN 20, to remember the song's title (*Death to Love*) and words. The song is a very old one, no longer in style. The words tell of a dutiful wife who waits for years for her husband to come back from a war. When he finally does, it is to take her (an old woman now) with him into the land of the dead. In an alternate ending, the samurai returns years later and, seeing his wife, shrieks in terror, for it is she who has been dead and her ghost has waited patiently.

Sometime after two or three in the morning, the PCs meet Hida Dasan. All of them realize that they are in the woods surrounding the village. The PCs can see and speak to one another, but if any of them try to touch, they find each other insubstantial. The clearing is littered with the decaying remains of Dasan's slaughter. The Crab warrior will appear to the PCs as he does to Kaagi. He will speak to them conversationally, even though he bears wounds that are clearly mortal. PCs should roll their Willpower against a TN of 20 while speaking with Dasan. Any characters who don't roll successfully are unable to leave the scene or the dream until it is finished. Those who are successful may choose to awaken by spending a Void point. They will find their companions in a deep slumber from which they can not be awakened. For the remainder of the



MISOGI (HEAD-MAN)

EARTH: 3
WATER: 3 Perception 4
FIRE: 2
AIR: 2 Awareness 4
VOID: 3
School/Rank: Hida

Bushi 3

Honor: 3.1
Glory: 5.4
Advantages: Clear

Thinker, Voice

Disadvantages: None
Skills: Archery 3, Battle

4, Defense 2, Jiu-jitsu 4,
Hunting 4, Kenjutsu 4, Law
2, Lore: Shadowlands 4,
Sincerity 3, Tetsubo 4,
Wrestling 4

HIDA NAKAI (THE GENERAL)

EARTH: 4
WATER: 2 Strength 4
FIRE: 2 Agility 4
AIR: 4
VOID: 3
School/Rank: Hida

Bushi 4

Honor: 2.8
Glory: 4.6
Advantages: Crab

Hands, Large

Disadvantages: None
Skills: Archery 4, Battle

4, Defense 4, Hunting 4,
Jiu-jitsu 4, Kenjutsu 4,
Shadowlands Lore 4,
Tetsubo 5



KUNI INOBA, WITCH-HUNTER

EARTH: 4
WATER: 3
FIRE: 3 Intelligence 4
AIR: 3
VOID: 3

School/Rank: Kuni
Witch-Hunter 3

Honor: 2.8

Glory: 5.4

Advantages: Crab
Hands, Hands of Stone,
Large

Disadvantages: Benten's
Curse

Skills: Archery 2,
Athletics 3, Defense 4,
Hand-to-Hand (Jujutsu) 4,
Herbalism 3, Hunting 4,
Lore: Shadowlands 5,
Kenjutsu 5, Shintao 4, Tanto
4, Tetsubo 3

adventure, the sleeping characters are unable to use Void points to assist in their rolls.

Dasan is calm and remorseful at what he has done. He tells the PCs he is sorry that they have come. He answers questions ambiguously, but will not lie. Also, he will hint that the PCs will eventually be more acquainted with his troubles than they would like. After a time, Dasan begins to grow agitated. He gets up, paces around, and talks about madness. Then he tells the PCs to get away from him as quickly as they can. The PCs find themselves suddenly able to leave the dream. As soon as they do so, they awake in the hazy morning.

ENTRY 26 - 27, DAY 2

The village rests on the edge of a forest that stands on the border between the Crab and Scorpion territories. It's about six hours' walk from the Scorpion border. A well-traveled road is another three hours beyond the village. Other towns are scattered along the main road.

Utokii is a town meant to guard against any threat from the forest road. In the center of the village rests a garrison which houses five and fifteen bushi at any given point. A watch-tower is

attached to the garrison. Nearby is Misogi's house and that of Hida Yanaka, the resident shugenja. On the north side of town is a one story inn with a large front room where visitors can eat during the day and rest in the evening. The innkeeper lives in the back room.

The houses of the bushi with families are on the south side of town. One belongs to Dasan, another to Hida Nakai, Dasan's gravely wounded general. The other two belong to men who were slain. Peasants' homes make up the west part of the village. Beyond these smaller buildings are scattered rice fields. A small stream runs out of the forest and through the fields.

If you are running another adventure alongside this one, let it progress normally through the day. If the PCs do not question Kurusu, he will seek them out, desperate to talk to someone about his troubling observations. He may do this during the day or in the evening after they return to the house.

Kurusu tells them about Dasan's growing unease, his talk of madness, and his fears regarding his wife. Kurusu will also confess his own fears that Kohi is a *maho-tsukai*. (You can take Kurusu's words straight from the fiction text.)

He begs them to be careful, but not to publicly report his suspicions until more information can be found.

If the PCs try to speak with Misogi, they find he is engaged all day in private. If pressed, his servants hint that the general is spending time with his mistress. The general has no wife. She passed away some years ago.

The local shugenja will be working on Dasan's body for another day. If the PCs go to his home, a young servant boy will explain that Yanaka is doing important work and cannot be distracted. The house smells heavily of jasmine. Under the smell is the thicker odor of death.

Dasan's general, Hida Nakai, is barely coherent, as in Kaagi's accounts. (See the fiction for a detailed description). His granddaughter is there to tend his wounds. She has come from another village, and the local



shugenja has left her instructions on what to do to keep him as comfortable as possible. Nakai has no other family. The girl, Hikuko, arrived after the tragedy. She is young, with tight-set features and a too strong chin. Her long hair is pulled back in a thick, severe braid, and she sits in the corner of the room while the PCs speak with the old man. She will not tell them to leave, but she watches with disapproval. If the old man begins to grow agitated, she comes over to tend him; while her lips do not move, her eyes speak volumes. 'You're making him worse,' she'll tell the PCs without speaking a word.

The rest of the village is pretty desolate. Several families are in mourning for the men that Dasan killed. The rest are disconsolate both because of the tragedy and the loss of the land they were unable to reclaim from the Scorpion.

There are twelve bushi living in the barracks. Nine of them, the PCs met on the road. None were part of Dasan's group. They're more polite than during the last encounter, but they're still suspicious of the PCs. If any of the characters are Crab, the men will speak more freely. The gossip around late night fires is that Dasan was insane, but that he didn't become so until after he returned home from his last duty in the Shadowlands. Others argue it wasn't Dasan that returned at all, but a monster that wore his skin, something the shugenja don't know about yet.

They're almost right. But it wasn't Dasan who was taken by the Darkness in the Shadowlands. It was Kurusu. The Living Darkness found him there and is wearing him like a well-cut coat.

If your PCs investigate the site where the slaughter occurred, they will find it less wretched than they did in their dream. The ground isn't really littered with bits of bodies. All



TESTS FOR MAHO

Here are some common witch-hunter tests. Not all of them work, but some of them do. (GM's discretion)

A *maho-tsukai* cannot stand to be bound.

If a *maho-tsukai* touches jade, it will burn her.

Maho-tsukai cannot cross running water.

If a *maho-tsukai* swallows jade, she will be consumed by fire.

Pounding an iron nail in a *maho-tsukai*'s footprint will hold her in place.

A *maho-tsukai* cannot stand to be dirty.

A *maho-tsukai* cannot walk true east (toward Otosan Uchi).

Maho-tsukai are compulsive creatures: if you place a puzzle before them, they must try to complete it. Also, if you spill a bowl of rice on the floor, they must count out every grain.



the remains that the Crab could find have been gathered and taken to the village for a proper burning. There is still the matter of General Nakai's missing arm. A roll of 40 or higher using Perception + Investigation turns it up several yards away from the site, mostly buried in the muck. If the characters make a roll of 25 or better they'll find a set of methodical carvings in the trunk of a fallen tree, near the edge of the camp. Presumably this is where Dasan was seated before the killing began. Carved into the wood over and over are the same words: *"My face is my own. My face is my own."*

Kaagi has prejudices against superstition which keep him from taking any direct action regarding Kohi. Your characters probably don't share his strange views. If they choose to try tests to see if Kohi is other than a woman (mind you, she still hasn't come out of her room) the results will be negative, but fuzzy, as if something in the house itself may be difficult to read.

Remember, there isn't anything actually wrong with Kohi. She's just what you'd expect: a grieving widow. But her absence and the circumstances make her a perfect target for suspicions, especially with a nudge from the Darkness-in the form of Kurusu.

ENTRY 28, DAY 2, EVENING

The second evening at Hida Dasan's house is much the same as the first. Hida Kohi is still feeling too unwell to come out for dinner. The maids serve dried fish on a bed of rice, flavored with some local herb that is a bit too pungent for the casual diner. If the characters haven't already spoken to Kurusu, he seeks them out at this point and tell them his fears about Hida Kohi and the strange words of Dasan in the days before his rampage. Again, the real fun begins when the characters try to get some sleep.



ENTRY 29 – 30, NIGHT 2

The Living Darkness may take the form of local hauntings, but it is not limited by their rules. If the PCs cast any spells to search for Shadowlands Taint, they won't find it. If they try to make contact with Dasan, they won't succeed. Anyone really perceptive may feel an impression of extreme grief and general misfortune.

At this point, you may want to take each player aside. In Kaagi's version of the story, he thinks that Mei has come to his room. Instead, he realizes that it is the woman he assumes to be Hida Kohi. From there, bad takes a sharp turn to worse. Take time in advance to tailor something special for each of your characters. Let them be visited by another PC, someone that they're close to, or better yet, someone they don't particularly like or trust. Perhaps the visitor is someone who shouldn't be there at all: sister, parent or spouse, maybe one who's already dead. This is a great opportunity to make your players role-play that stuff they put on their character sheets but haven't pulled out of the closet in awhile.

When everyone has reached the same point in the story – the realization that their hostess is outright creepy, coupled with the appearance of their very dead host – pick them all up again in the same place, the battle with Hida Dasan.

If you have very few or very patient players, you may choose to let them all fight the phantom Dasan individually. If you're feeling kind, or if you just want to finish the adventure sometime this weekend, make it a group brawl.

Like the Dasan that Kaagi faces, he won't be slowed or affected by wound damage from normal weapons. Enchanted weapons hurt him, but still don't dispel or destroy him. The only ways really to stop the phantom are to behead him, as Kaagi does (requiring a called shot to the head, with a TN raised by 10). If any of your players are resourceful enough to have a spirit banishing spell on hand, and have the wherewithal to execute it, that sends the grateful Dasan out of reach of the Living Darkness. Once either of these conditions is met, the PCs fall into a deep slumber, waking a couple of hours after dawn. They recover faster if either their Stamina or Willpower are exceptional (4 or better).

Dasan is dead, but the Darkness maintains a hold on his spirit unless he's properly banished. In his undead state, the bushi is still a formidable opponent. The only difference is that now he can

only be of use to the Darkness in his non-corporeal state, in dreams.

If the PCs fail to behead Dasan he pursues them until each of the PCs is defeated. Characters slain in this manner will still awaken in the morning, but they will be unable to spend Void points for the rest of the adventure. Also, the character will pick up Phobia: Undead, causing –1 die to roll and keep on future rolls with Dasan.

ENTRIES 31–34, DAY 3

The characters will awaken the next day at least a little worse for wear. Their evening's exertions will leave them at –1 die to all physical actions for the rest of the day. The course of the day's events will depend on the format you've chosen for this investigation. The key things that need to happen are as follows:

- The Crab shugenja finish examining Dasan's body and come to the conclusion that there is no Shadowlands Taint.

- The witch hunter, Kuni Inoba, pays a visit to Hida Kohi (if the PCs don't voice suspicions, Kurusu, overcome with his concerns, will.) and Kohi is officially cleared of practicing maho.

If you've been running a separate daytime adventure along with the second investigation, you may choose to have the PCs present for any or all of these events. Whatever they're not around for, they hear about, probably from Misogi keeping them up to date.

If your players have been actively pursuing the matter; or if they wait and perform a separate investigation of Dasan's body, then they should be present for both the shugenja's report and Kohi's questioning. Once the question of Taint or Kohi's practice of *maho* have been put to rest, Misogi and the rest of the village will be content to put the entire affair off as a sickness in Dasan's mind. The players may or may not buy this. They're welcome to perform whatever investigations or tests of their own they feel are appropriate. In fact, Inoba will be interested in any new techniques they can show him.

ENTRIES 35–36, DAY 3 – EVENING

By evening, your characters will probably be restless from all the fun they've been having. They may elect not to stay another night in Dasan's house, or they may choose to investigate in a more covert fashion. Distance will not hinder



HIDA KOHI

EARTH: 2 Willpower 4

WATER: 2 Perception 4

FIRE: 3

AIR: 2 Awareness 4

VOID: 2

Honor: 2.9

Glory: 5.6

Advantages: Large,
Benten's Blessing

Disadvantages: Brash

Skills: Etiquette 3,
Courtier 3, Hand-to-Hand 2,
Medicine 4, Music 4, Tea
Ceremony 4, Archery 2,
Armorer 3, Commerce 4



KOHI'S MAIDS (2)

EARTH: 2

WATER: 1 Perception 2

FIRE: 1 Agility 2

AIR: 2 Awareness 3

VOID: 2

Honor: 2.5

Glory: 0.5

Advantages: Benten's
Blessing

Disadvantages:

Weakness (-1 Intelligence)

Skills: Cooking 3,

Cleaning 3, Etiquette 3,

Stealth 1

the Living Darkness. This is its final night in the village. It's caused trouble, learned a few things, and is now ready to move on. If your PCs are not staying in Dasan's home, lure them there, perhaps with a desperate message from Kurusu saying that he has something to show them.

When the characters arrive everything should seem normal except for the door being ajar. Kurusu is nowhere to be found. Once past the open door of the front room, the house is entirely black. If the characters are carrying any lights, they go out abruptly.

Kohi appears to the characters, but she is the only thing they can see in the darkness. Their surroundings and their companions have vanished into the shadows. Kohi speaks to them intimately and individually. *"We've been watching you, following you, and we want you to join us."* It's not necessary to take each player aside for this; in fact, it's more fun if you don't. Tell your players that each of them feels as if the voice is speaking just to them.

If any of the characters have chosen to stay outside, they see and hear nothing. If they enter, it will be to the same absolute darkness the rest of the group has already encountered.

The players can see each other clearly, but their characters are lost in their surroundings. They can call out to one another, but their voices are distorted as if by dense fog. They can reach out, but what they find may not be what they expect. For instance, one character may tell another to reach out their hand and then grab onto it. But moments later, that hand begins to twist and coil in their grip. The air in the hallway turns chill and damp, and the smell of battlefield carnage is thick. The ground underfoot slurps like thick mud. But the lights are still out.

Any characters that choose to strike at Kohi in the darkness may strike one of their companions by mistake: If they roll more 1's than any other number, they strike an ally. After several moments, the dim light of the moon begins to filter in, and the characters find themselves staring at the scene in Kohi's bedroom. The maids and Kohi herself lie brokenly on the bed. The figure speaking to them has become faceless. The characters need to make a fear roll to keep them from fleeing blindly. 'Kohi' has a fear rank of 3, and players must roll Willpower against a TN of 15 or the PCs run. The terrifying thing isn't just that she doesn't have a face, but that where her face should be is an absence of identity that sane

minds cannot grasp. If they fail, they may suffer some mild injury (1 Wound Rank or less) on their way out.

Characters who make their fear roll can find their way out safely if they choose. 'Kohi' will not stop them. However, they may choose to stay and fight. When the first strike is made, it passes through Kohi as if she were a shadow, and the blow strikes a lantern behind her. The lantern is unlit, but upon striking the ground, it bursts into blue flame, turning rapidly to crimson. The rest of the house catches like kindling. The three women on the bed are already dead.

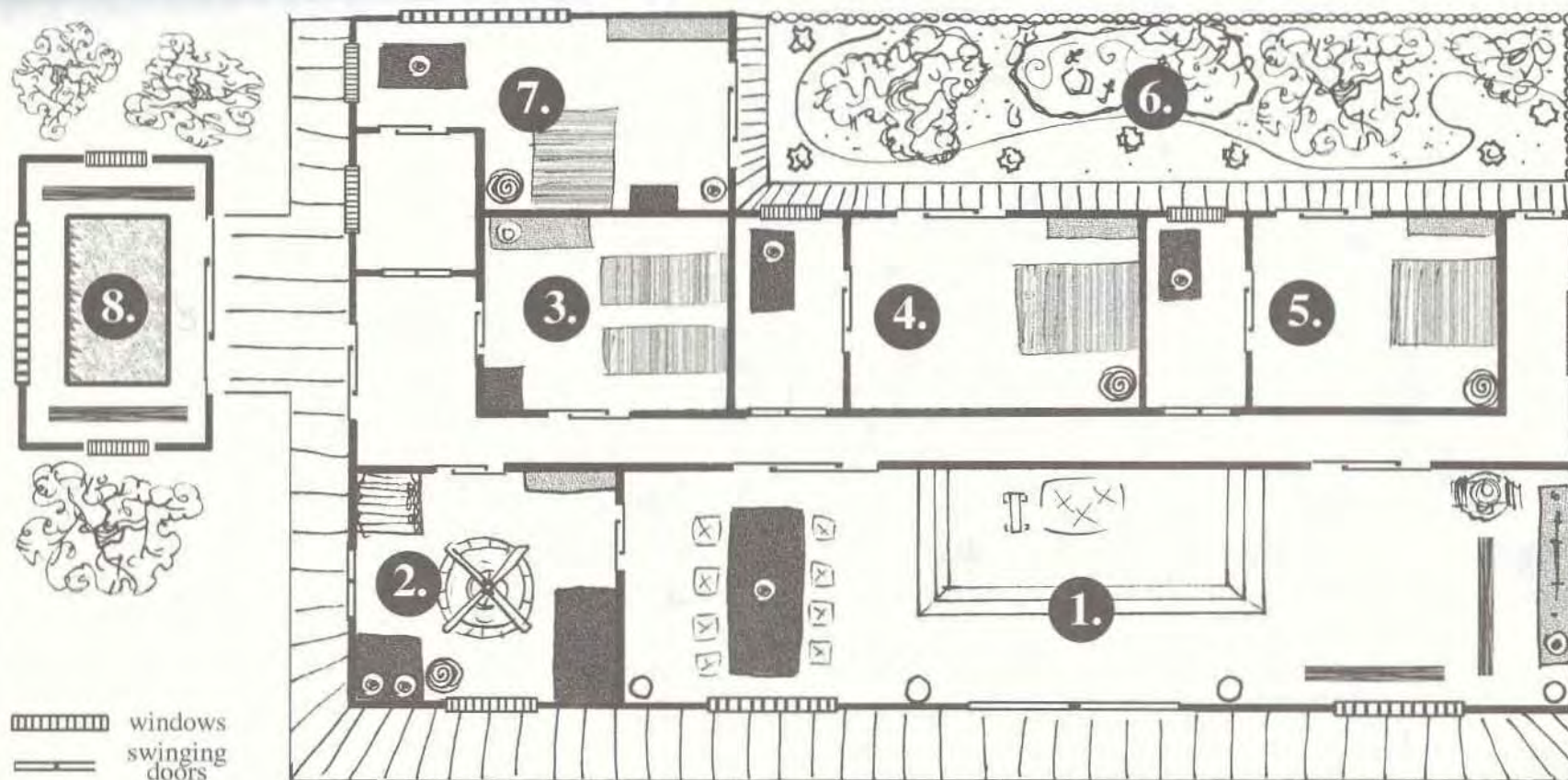
At this point, even if the house has not gone up in flames, the commotion will be obvious to those outside. Misogi and Inoba will rush to the scene along with much of the rest of the village. Inoba listens to what the characters say, and decides *maho* is afoot. He calls for the place to be razed to the ground. Misogi seconds him, and if the house isn't blazing already, it won't take long.

By morning, the evidence and Dasan's home will be gone. If the bodies of the women have been pulled from the building before the fire, anyone investigating them finds no marks on the maids. The body of Kohi, however, bears signs of a fierce struggle (she was, after all, a Crab and a warrior's wife). There are dark bruises on her throat and torso. If called to examine the corpses, Inoba insists that it is the work of some obscure Shadowlands denizen. He will not, however, be able to name which one.

HIDA KURUSU

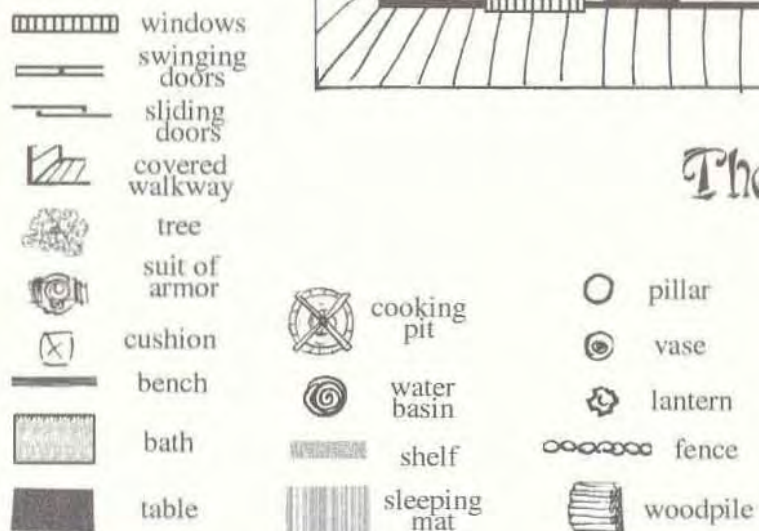
No one has seen Hida Kurusu since the previous afternoon. Strange, since it was his note that brought the PCs back to the house. There are no tracks matching his leaving the village. Kurusu does not reappear.

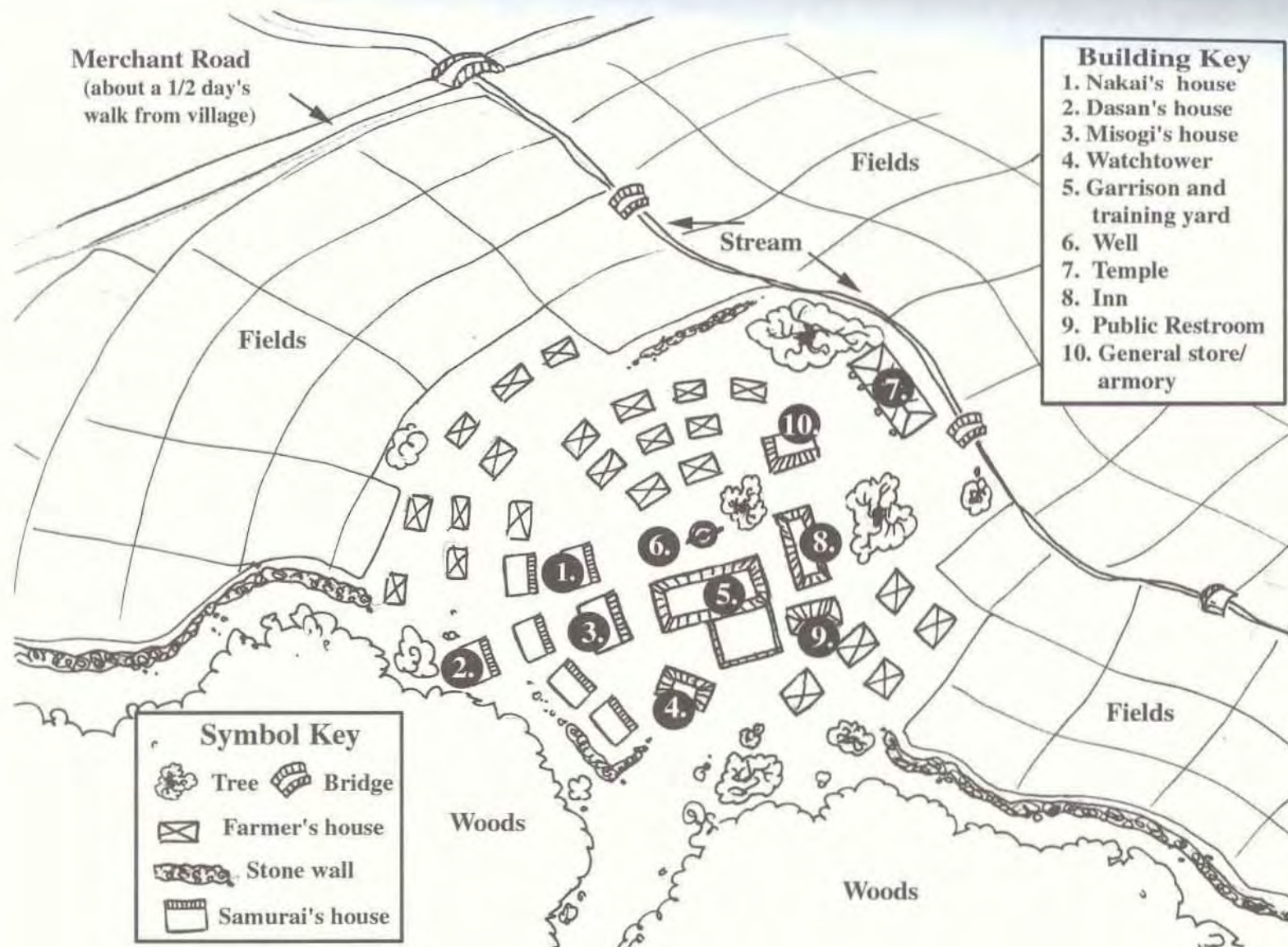
Once Misogi and Inoba realize that Kurusu has disappeared, they assume that he was also a *maho-tsukai*, possibly using Kohi to keep suspicion away from himself. They aren't far wrong, except that Kurusu wasn't a *tsukai*, but part of the Living Darkness. The figure that appeared to be Kohi at the end was the same entity as the one wearing Kurusu's shape. Considering the matter closed, Misogi thanks the PCs for their help and, assuming that any other business the PCs are involved in is finished, he offers to provide any supplies they may want before setting back out on the road.



The House of Hida Dasan

1. Main room
2. Kitchen
3. Maid's room
4. Guest room 1
5. Guest room 2
6. Garden
7. Dasan's room
8. Bathhouse





Area surrounding Dasan's house

Investigation Three:

*The
Disappearance
of Lady Minube*



Entry 42

I am presently residing near Kyuden Tonbo at the Inn of Perpetual Comfort. The name of the place is optimistic, but on the whole, the quality of the rooms and service has been satisfying. I stopped here on my way back to Kitsuki Castle to spend a few days in rest and reflection.

I have argued with myself since leaving the Hida village, trying to decipher what it was I saw there. I have been tempted to dismiss the happenings as a trick of Shadowlands magic, but the whole encounter leaves me unsettled. In the heart of my understanding, I believe that I have found something more significant, something unrecorded. I cannot define it, but I find myself experiencing a sensation of lingering dread when I try to recall the specific details.

Even now, I awaken, troubled, from dreams which I do not remember. This is extremely unusual, further evidence that more is going on than is immediately apparent.

The last three days have been spent in a state of relative idleness. Besides having completed the accounts of this journal, I have paid my respects to the Dragonfly Daimyo, visited the apothecary to replenish my supply of chemicals, and spent time walking through the streets in the company of men and women. It is good to be out, surrounded by people preoccupied with the daily business of life. I have given my money to Mei, trusting her to resupply us for the rest of our trip. Tomorrow we will leave this city and travel the subtle route to Kitsuki castle.

Entry 43

The door opens quietly. As there is no knock nor any effort to conceal the sound of steps, I assume that it is Mei.

"The pony has new tackle," she says. "The old stuff was worn and wouldn't have lasted much longer. Our food stores are full, I picked up new shoes and such to replace the rest of the things I lost in the fire. And I brought you a new kimono with lilac blossoms and frolicking ponies on the front and an indisposed geisha on the back. Are you listening to me at all?"

"I leave such matters to your discretion because I have such a profound reliance on your good judgment." I turn from the work of oiling my blade to see if she's really purchased the hideous garment she's threatening me with. My trust extends only so far, after all. There is a kimono, but it's a suitably subtle shade of blue with gold thread woven throughout. The pattern is entirely unremarkable. "Very nice. I knew I could trust you."

Mei tosses down the rest of her prizes in a corner, then proceeds to unwrap them one at a time. "The weather looks fine," she says. "Tomorrow should be a good day to travel. I'm looking forward to it. I'm determined to remember the way this time."

"Has it occurred to you that if you can't, perhaps there's a reason?" The path to Kitsuki Castle, like the roads to the rest of the Dragon strongholds, is not known for its ease. "I thought we might go out if you're not too tired. I want to enjoy the rest of the day. What do you think of having dinner at one of the other inns? Perhaps they'll have something besides rice and fish cakes."

"I don't think we really need to do that," Mei says in an offhand manner. "I think the food here is refreshing – not too rich, not overly prepared ... Why go out at all? It looks like it might rain, and with all the traffic the streets will be a swamp in minutes."

Mei must be genuinely upset to lie to me so poorly. "I thought you said the weather was fine. Perfect for traveling," I watch her back very closely as she pauses, then continues to pack.

"I like traveling in the rain." She says it flatly.

"Why don't you want to go out again?"

"I don't want you to go out. For that matter, you don't really want to go out." She gets up slowly and turns around. "I want to go home, and so do you." She looks at me seriously. "There's a man in the streets, the karo of a Crane Castle just a few miles southeast of here. He's looking for 'the Great Kaagi of legend and story, to enlist his aid in a matter most dire.' You know how they talk." She tosses herself onto the bedding and looks up at me with comical earnestness. "He's going to slow us down. I think if we just hide up here, he may get discouraged and go away."

I shake my head as I get up, tucking my blades into my obi. "You know I can't do that. I'd best go see what's the matter." She picks herself up as I walk toward the door. She's grumbling something too quiet to make out, but she follows me down the narrow staircase.

She takes the lead when we reach the street, making a right at the end of the row, a left onto a lane of teahouses, finally passing onto the tradesman's way, the main street of the city. It isn't difficult to spot the blue-clad, well-dressed figure in the center of the lane, waving a rolled-up scroll over his head and trying to talk above the sound of traffic. The folk around him look as if they're attempting to help him, but he doesn't seem to be communicating very effectively.

He spots us as we approach and a look of relieved excitement comes over his features. "Kitsuki Kaagi-san?" he asks as he walks past Mei. "I am Doji Sanju, karo to Doji Mikara, daimyo of Ukara Castle. I heard you were in this region and have sought you out because my lord is in most desperate need of assistance. Will you help us?" He asks the question as if it is only a formality. I suppose in his way he is correct.

"Of course I will aid you. But what is the trouble?" As I reply I can see Mei shake her head.

"My lord's daughter is missing," he says casting his eyes about as if she may yet appear from behind some nearby shrub. "She left almost two weeks ago to go to the home of the Phoenix lord she will marry. She never arrived; neither she nor any member of her retinue have been seen since. My lord has sent to Ootosan Uchi for assistance, but I knew you were closer and your reputation is spoken of very highly. If you don't mind, I would prefer to give you the rest of the details as we travel. I know my lord is very anxious and I'd like to lose as little time as possible."

"Of course," I reply. It takes only a little time to gather our belongings from the inn, retrieve the pony and set out toward to Ukara castle. As we travel, Sanju continues with his story.

"My lord's daughter, Minube is an accomplished girl, versed in the arts of poetry, song, dance and rhetoric. She is his only child, and her marriage into the Isawa family has brought him and his wife great joy. Her intended is Isawa Ujina, a fine young man who is like a son to my lord and lady. Two weeks ago, Minube left to visit the family of her betrothed. The marriage is not until spring, but Minube was to spend the winter learning the ways of the house of her husband.

"One week ago, Ujina arrived in a state of concern at my lord's castle. Minube had not arrived yet, and he feared that she was ill or some mischance had befallen her. Once both parties realized that the girl was missing, they took immediate action.

"Fortunately, or so we thought at the time, a group of Imperial magistrates, on their way from Ootosan Uchi, had stopped to partake of my lord's hospitality and were still present. They set off immediately to look for Minube. But now they have not returned either, and another week has passed." Sanju recites the account as if it has been well rehearsed. Of course, he has had his whole journey here to practice it. I attribute his care to a normal concern for phrasing and formality rather than a practiced deception.

He continues, "People have begun to talk. It started with the servants, but now the lower nobility are speculating as well." He looks embarrassed. "They say that there are shadows in the hills and in the forest that do not move with the light. They say that there are Ninja about." He glances toward me, then away. "That's why I came. You are rumored to understand these matters."

We reach Ukara castle in less than a day. It is late when we arrive, but lights still burn through the windows like fireflies. The castle has the look of a lord's summer house. The gardens in the front are astonishing, even in the dark of midnight. Ponds and waterways link together, catching the light of the stars and tossing it lightly across their shifting surfaces. The beauty of the flowers is apparent even with the buds closed.

Guards standing at attention at the gate step aside as Sanju approaches, letting us into the entry hall. My initial impression is of tall ceilings and delicate silks. Ornate tapestries cover the walls and detailed carvings line the hall. I follow Sanju down several similarly appointed corridors to a set of great doors. Two more guards move as we approach, and light pours out, blinding me for a moment. As my sight returns, I can see the room before me is filled with brightly colored paper lanterns. They hang in every corner, rest on every table, even on the floor. What I assume are minor nobility pace the room in a state of energetic anxiety. Maps are spread out on tables that appear from their mismatched arrangement to have been brought in specially for the occasion. No one, however, seems to be looking at them. The place has the look of a war room full of children, a great deal of buzzing coming to no resolution. Mei whispers from my right shoulder, "It's as if he tried to put together a crisis room, but had only party favors to fill it with." As if in answer, a bright yellow lantern spins slowly in the wake of Sanju's passing. The karo moves hurriedly to the side of a seated man in the center of the chaos. I assume this to be Doji Mikara from the impatiently worried look on his face and the quality of his kimono.

"Mikara-sama," says Sanju bowing low, "I have brought Kaagi-san."

I bow to the seated man. "I am pleased to be of service."

Mikara straightens. "I am glad to have your help, Kitsuki Kaagi-san," he says with a gracious nod. "I have heard much of your exploits, tracking a Ninja assassin through deadly wastelands, forcing dishonest men to doom themselves with the truth; you are by all accounts a man to be reckoned with."

"My lord, I fear some of the reports you've heard may be somewhat more colorful than the actual events. But as I have said, I am entirely at your disposal." As I speak, I take the time to examine Mikara. He looks old enough to have retired and must have had his daughter late in life if she is only just now a suitable age for marriage. His speech is polite, but I can see the tension that draws his features taut. He is greatly concerned by his daughter's absence. He looks on the edge of panic, and I suspect it is only a lifetime of honor that keeps his voice level and his words slow. I find myself feeling a great sympathy for this old man, out of his bed at so late an hour. "Your karo has acquainted me with the recent events. If you and I could go over things briefly, I will begin my preparations and can most likely begin to look for your daughter immediately upon sunrise."

His face loses its tension. "That would be most appreciated," he says with a tired smile.

"I understand already that your daughter left two weeks ago, disappeared somewhere between here and the Phoenix house she was traveling to, and has not been seen since. You sent a party of Imperial magistrates after her almost a week ago, and have heard nothing since then. Is that correct?" He nods. "When Isawa Ujina-san, your daughter's betrothed, arrived, did he say if the

guards at the edge of Phoenix lands had reported her passing?"

"They had not. He asked, when he passed them, on the chance that he had missed her somehow on the road. But she did cross the river. I sent runners to the guardpost there, and they reported that she and her retinue had passed about a day after they left here." His eyes are eager, but resolute. "The magistrates also passed that point. But no one heard from them afterwards."

"Very good," I tell him. "I will need a map of her intended route. Where is Isawa Ujina-san now?"

"He is probably in the interior garden. He has spent most of his time trying to focus himself and perhaps learn something through his meditations. So far he has been unsuccessful. He wanted to go out himself and look for Minube again, but I persuaded him to wait until you arrived. He's a fine young man, but I don't know how much good he would do himself or my daughter alone if a threat arose. And..." he looks down towards the floor, "...I love my daughter. But I cannot afford the repercussions from Ujina's family if I lose their eldest son." He looks up and the conflict of paternal and lordly duty is easy to see on his face. "Ujina will want to go with you. And so will the Scorpion magistrate, I suspect. If his health allows."

"Who?" I say, trying not to frown. I suddenly wonder what else they have forgotten to mention.

"I'm sorry," says Mikara. "I assumed you knew, but that was foolish. When the Imperial magistrates left to look for Minube, one of them, a magistrate from the Bayushi family, stayed behind because he was unwell. He has remained here since then."

Entry 44

I retire for the remainder of the evening. Sleep is a long time coming. In my mind's eye I see the Crane daughter from the old Matsu general's tale. The girl never arrived for her wedding, massacred by Lions, guided by the manipulative hand of a Scorpion. It makes no sense for history to repeat itself, but the coincidence leaves me feeling unsettled. When morning comes, I feel I have hardly closed my eyes. My body is sore from last night's traveling and so little rest. Still, I rise early as I had planned. Mei is loitering in the hall when I open the door of the lavishly appointed guest room.

"The Bayushi first, or the Phoenix?" she asks without preamble. From her poor humor, I conclude that Mei's sleep was no better than my own.

"It makes little difference," I reply. "I suppose I will speak to the Scorpion first, and have it done. If you could procure us a copy of the map of Doji Minube's route, and track down her husband-to-be, it would save us time. I still want to be out of here as early as possible."

"Should I try to discourage him from joining us?" she asks as we set out down the corridor.

"No. From what Mikara said last night, I doubt you could. Besides, it might not do us harm to have a shugenja about, especially if our enemy is something that could pose a threat to a group of Imperial Magistrates."

"I'm glad you're thinking along those lines too," Mei says with a half smile. "I was concerned that I might be the only one with a proper dose of self-preservation. A bit of advice, though," she says, turning just as we're about to part ways. "Eat something before you talk to the Scorpion. There's no use trying to be patient and cunning on an empty stomach."

Entry 45

As I sit across from Bayushi Baka, I find myself recalling Mei's last words and wishing I'd taken them more seriously.

Baka is a tall, slender man whose heavy hair is pulled back from fine features and attentive eyes. A half mask of black wood covers the top portion of his face and nose. Although pale, he doesn't look particularly unwell. Still, who in the Doji house would want to accuse him of lying?

"Truly, I wish I could be of more assistance to you, Kaagi-san," he says with a sincere smile. "But I don't think I have any knowledge you do not already possess."

"I would understand, of course, Baka-san, if you wanted to accompany us on this journey, since the search is now as much for your missing companions as it is for Mikara-sama's daughter." I return his smile with equal sincerity. Knowledge can, in its way, be as much a mask as cunning.

"And, I of course, would be delighted to do so," he says with a tone of genuine regret. "But as it turns out, I have just received communication from my family informing me that I am needed at Bayushi castle on a matter of the utmost urgency."

"More urgent than the well-being of your companions?" I raise my eyebrows in feigned shock.

"That, alas, is not for me to decide." He shakes his head ruefully. "The message is from Bayushi Shoji-sama himself. I cannot refuse."

We look at each other for long moments. No words are spoken, but something is communicated silently. He is lying, and we both know it. All that remains to be seen is whether I will breach protocol by telling him so.

A shift occurs in Baka's features. His eyes and mouth harden, and his veneer slips away, replaced by something more honest than sincerity. It is outright dislike. That he shows this to me is a sign of respect. "Your kind and mine are enemies, Kitsuki." His smile is grim. "We are spiders and you are ants. Our webs can catch you, and we will dine well. But enough of you might, by industry, tear down our webs. Do not forget there are not yet so many of you in the world."

"I did not go with my companions because I knew that they were doomed. My presence would not have helped them, but my absence has done me a world of good. That they should go was as inevitable as your following them. You will find on your journey that which has already found you." I feel a chill run through me. In Baka's eyes I see a recognition of the fear that I feel in my heart. Somewhere in the back of my mind, Dasan's wife is dancing in the flames that devour her.

"You may be a fool," I hear Baka saying. "I do not know for certain. But I know that you have caught the eye of something you wish you had not. And it is waiting for you on the road out there. I will give you these warnings. Do not let yourself or any of your companions travel separately for any space of time. You may trust what you feel, especially if it is fear. But do not put too much faith in what you see or hear. And trust yourself above all others. For by the time you can no longer trust yourself, you will no longer care. That is all I can do to help you."

"(Did you warn your friends?" My voice sounds hollow.

"I would have, if I'd thought they would understand or heed them. But they had not seen it yet. How much attention would you have paid to me if you had not seen for yourself what waits in the shadows?" He rises from his chair abruptly. "I have to pack my things now," he says brusquely. "I'll be leaving soon, down the opposite road. Good luck." There's no humor in his smile.

I rise and walk to the doorway on legs grown rapidly stiff. I turn back to him as I go. "There will be one fewer ant if I do not return." I watch to see if Baka will look at me when he replies. He does not. Instead he says, "You are right."

Entry 46

I find Mei in the courtyard. She stands beside a tall fountain made of intricately overlapping dishes, each pouring delicate streams of water into more dishes below. Beside her is a young man. He's tall like the fountain, and when he moves there is a fluidity reminiscent of the flow of water.

"Kaaqi-san," he greets me. He bows in a crisp motion, and smiles with a genuineness that is entirely refreshing after the 'sincerity' of the Scorpion. "I am Isawa Ujina," he says. "I thank you for your assistance in finding Minube. I hope you will accept my company on your journey."

"Doji Mikara-sama told me you'd be anxious," I reply, returning his smile. "Your help will be welcome." His smile does little to mask his fear and tension. He's young, but I can see lines etched deeply into his countenance, and my guess is that they were not there a month ago. He wears his hair long, pulled back in an unruly braid. His clothes are fine under the dirt. From the placement, I can guess that he has been kneeling here in the garden for a long time.

I look again at Ujina's face, his eyes. I'm surprised not to find the traces of red in them I expect to see in a man who has gone without sleep.

"Is something the matter, Kaaqi-san?" he asks, taken aback by my scrutiny.

"How long has it been since you slept, Ujina-san?" I step aside and gesture for him to join me in heading back to the building. "An exhausted man will only be an impediment on the road."

He laughs as he steps onto the path beside me. "I had forgotten just how observant men of your school are," he says, brushing at his kimono. "You're correct. I have been here in the gardens for some time, and I have not been sleeping. I am quite refreshed, however. I have been in a state of meditation, trying to gain some feeling of where my betrothed has gone. I have had little success so far, but my close communion with the world has sustained me as well as any sleep could."

"You say you've had little success. Has there been any?" I find myself extremely curious about this communion he refers to. I've heard stories about Phoenix shugenja who are able to surpass the more common ability to question specific elements of the natural world. One of my teachers, a man who spent time at Isawa castle, spoke of their being able to expand their awareness, like ripples in water, until they could sense the state of things far from their actual person. What impressed my teacher the most was an ability of the same men to understand to a profound degree the feelings and motives of other men. He described the ability as uncannily similar to our own approach in discerning the way men tell truth and lies. I had long wondered if such an ability might actually be the result of a level of observation so acute that it had become subconscious.

"I have not had any feeling of Minube, not from the land, or from her spirit." His tone is bitter, but when he looks up, his expression is inquisitive. "That's wrong. Even if she were dead, at the bottom of some chasm, I should have a sensation of absence. The fact that I feel nothing leads me to think this is more complex." The boy looks curious in spite of himself.

In less than an hour we are ready to leave. Mikara wishes us well as we mount the sturdy and well-bred ponies he has provided. It looks as if he has not yet been to bed. A fourth pony carries provisions fit for nobler men than myself, and more of them than I hope to need. The sun is barely up when we start down the path. The sky still clouded with sleep and morning mists gives the scene a peaceful beauty that I hope will be a good omen for the rest of our trip.

We ride in silence for most of the morning. I think at first that Ujina is lost in his thoughts, or perhaps resting after his long night. But when I look more carefully, I can see that though his eyes are closed his posture is straight. His body sways with the movement of the pony as if it were

entirely natural to him. When I glance toward Mei with curiosity she only smiles and shrugs before turning her attention back to the scenery.

Doji Mikara's maps show small farms and a village that we should pass by mid-or late afternoon. The hills will give way to steeper, rockier land as we approach the mountains between here and the Isawa lands. After that, there will be no more company of men until we have crossed the mountains and emerged in Phoenix territory. The path is too well traveled to track Minube's party and the magistrates, but I'm not concerned. Mikara's reports say that both passed the village ahead. Once there, I'll begin to search for tracks in earnest.

Toward noon we break for a light meal. Ujina rouses himself without my having to say a word. We settle off the road and take our lunch as the sun rises higher in the sky.

"I've spoken to Kitsuki before," says Ujina in a friendly way. "At Isawa castle, Kitsuki and Togashi scholars come to visit. They were interested in our technique, as we were in theirs."

"That's an interest I share," I reply, leaning back to stretch. I'm not used to riding, and I can feel my back and legs stiffening. By tonight, they'll protest more strenuously, I suspect. "I was wondering if what you call 'meditation' might not have something in common with the state of mind we Kitsuki learn to employ."

"You're not the first to think so." Ujina leans on his elbows in the grass, wholly unconcerned with the effect on the freshly cleaned kimono. "A man named Kitsuki Tubo spent some time at my family's home. He thought much the same thing."

"I know Kitsuki Tubo. He was one of my teachers. In fact, I was thinking of him this morning." Tubo is a round man, not very tall and not very tidy. But for all his appearance, his mind is one of the sharpest I have ever encountered.

"He was brilliant," Ujina responds in an agreeable tone. "I'd never met anyone quite like him."

A chill runs down my spine despite the warmth of the day. I look quickly at Ujina, but he is gazing out across the field. His words, so close to my own thoughts, take me back for a moment to the hall of Dasan's house and my encounter with the thing that looked like his wife. In the bright light of day it seems a foolish thought, but it lingers nonetheless.

"Is something the matter?" asks Ujina. My expression must betray my sense of foreboding because he sits up straight and turns his body toward me, his head cocked to one side. "It's the meditation," he says, "the one you think is like your own technique. I don't have to see you or hear you to have a sense of you in the scheme of things."

It takes a moment for me to understand. He can feel my alarm the way a dog smells fear in a hunted hare. It makes sense that he might have a similar sense of my feelings toward Tubo, and that he responded. Now that I think about it, I recall Tubo describing something similar.

As I relax, I can see him do the same. "That's fascinating," I say, genuinely impressed. His perception is like nothing I've ever come across. His awareness is astonishing, and I can't help but wonder if our two methods might not be compatible after all.

Entry 47

By mid-afternoon we reach the village of Arika, the last really populated area before the foothills of Nemui Kaminari Yama, the mountains that stand between Crane and Phoenix lands. The village headman is courteous and offers us tea and food. He also offers us the hospitality of his home if we should like to stay the night and continue fresh in the morning.

"There have been rumors, my lords," the headman says in his most polite tone. "Strange riders have been seen at the edge of the hills. I fear they may be bandits. Some say," he lowers his voice, "they are not bandits, but something darker. Some say there are Ninja in the hills." He looks at us anxiously. "Forgive me. It is peasant gossip." He ducks his head low and bows out of the room.

Ujina and I exchange glances. "Have you heard any rumors?" I ask when the headman has gone.

"Not on my side of the pass," he shakes his head. "As for bandits, it wouldn't be the first time landless men made a temporary home in these hills. But Ninja? Skulking in the trees in an empty pass? Unlikely. Do you suppose that could be what happened to Minube?"

"You know the land better than I," I reply. "But there are worse ways to try to make a fortune. If they are bandits," I reassure him, "they'd most likely keep her well. She'd be worth more as ransom than anything else." He looks calmer. I know he could see if he wanted to that I don't really believe my own words. But right now Ujina wants very much to believe me, and so he does.

"It will be more dangerous to travel into the hills as the day wanes," I suggest. "If we stayed here and begin our trip before dawn, we could take full advantage of the daylight."

"Forgive my selfishness, Kaagi-san," he says with a slow shake of his head. "I cannot bear to spend another night in leisure while my betrothed is somewhere in the wilderness."

"I understand." And I do. A man's mind must be practical because his heart will never learn it.

After a brief rest we continue. We cross the river which runs past Arika, the last point where Minube and her people, and the magistrates, were seen. The rest of the day passes quietly and, as Ujina predicted, when darkness falls, the land turns rockier. By twilight, we find ourselves on a path steadily growing steeper. Caution dictates that we dismount.

"Let's go a little farther," Ujina says when I ask him if he thinks it wise to camp for the night. "There's still an hour or so of half-light before night comes, and I think there's a clearing, a flat place, not too far up ahead. I noticed it when I passed this way before."

He's lying, of course. Not deliberately, but as a hungry man will lie to himself, promising he'll eat soon when he knows no food is forthcoming. I sympathize with his anxiety, and we continue on. I glance now and again toward Mei. She's been silent most of the day, as she often is when we're in company. I know she does it to maintain our relationship as servant and lord, but with Ujina so quiet, I find myself missing her conversation. For her part, Mei pays attention to our surroundings, watching the trees to either side of the road. As darkness falls, she grows more attentive.

The shadows across the path have grown deeper. Soon Ujina will have to admit that it is night and we'll camp. I can't escape the sensation that the darkness is closing together behind us, herding us forward. A foolish notion. Still, it's a nervous feeling and I find myself thinking of the laughter of Hida (Dasan's wife).

I can see the hills ahead rising into the highlands. The path we're on seems to lead to a pass through the mountains. The way is traveled occasionally, but not enough to merit better care. Large rocks have been cleared, but smaller stones, some as big as a fist, still litter the road.

The feeling that I'm falling is over almost before I realize it's begun. I taste dust, and there's a moment of pure physical confusion as I try to free my arms and legs from the tangle of my kimono.

"Are you all right?" asks Mei, just to my right. "What happened?"

"A rat hole perhaps," says Ujina. His voice comes from somewhere near my feet. "No, a snake." He says it with certainty. Then he turns toward me. "How are you?"

"I'm fine." I'm lying to her again. I feel ridiculous. My balance is still off, the fall having knocked

the breath from me. I take Ujina's offered hand and pull myself up, but a sudden pain in my left foot almost knocks me back down. "I think I've done some damage," I say with a wince. Leaning on Mei, I test the foot with weight, and there's pain.

Ujina bends to look. "You've twisted it," he says with a look of regret. "I'm sorry. We should have stopped while it was light."

I nod. To say anything would be petty. "Is that clearing still ahead?" I smile in spite of myself.

"I think so," he says, returning my smile with a smaller one. And in fact he's right. Another ten minutes ahead, with me on horseback, we come to a level place just a few yards off the path. We tether the horses and make a small camp under the trees. I watch with blatant interest as Ujina gathers a bit of kindling in the center of the clearing. He bends over it and speaks too low for me to make out more than the suggestion of syllables. He seems to be in conversation with the twigs. Then, as if in answer, a faint light emerges in the center, growing steadily brighter until the conversation is a full-blown oratory blazing merrily before us. "Tea?" Ujina asks matter-of-factly.

Mikara's provisions are, not surprisingly, exceptional. In the packs on our fourth pony we find expertly dried and subtly spiced fish, fresh sea greens, rice, sake, and a magnificent blend of tea leaves. Ujina smiles when he notices my appreciation. "Mikara-sama has food brought to him from the river we crossed a few hours ago. And of course he has the best chefs to prepare it."

"You're marrying into a fine family," says Mei with conviction as she settles back from her meal. A satisfied appetite always makes her more congenial.

After some time spent in quiet digestion, I pull the map tracing Minube's intended route from a fold in my obi. "It looks as if we'll be entering the main pass early tomorrow, correct?" I inquire of Ujina. "How much further before the road gets really unfriendly?"

"By tomorrow afternoon, the trail will be at least twice as steep. But that's the worst of it." Ujina is trying not to look at my injured foot, propped up on our packs. "The horses should be able to carry you. Unless you want to head back, that is." He looks away with that last statement.

I can feel Mei's eyes on me. Perhaps I have a little of Ujina's ability at perception after all. "Would you turn back with us?" I ask the question even though I know the answer.

"No." He looks out toward the trees.

"You don't know how to track them." I point out. Ujina doesn't respond. In all fairness, there isn't much for him to say. "We'll go on." As I say the words I look toward Mei. She's staring at me with a look of intense sadness. She shakes her head and looks away before I can ask her why.

Silence falls over the camp after that. I play out little scenarios in my imagination, trying to guess what could have happened to make Minube and all her followers disappear. Nothing I can think of really makes sense. I'm beginning to doze off when the scream slices through the stillness.

Jarred into sudden wakefulness, I see Mei already on her feet with a knife. Ujina stares blankly, obviously startled. A second cry, a woman's voice, comes from somewhere in the trees.

Ujina jumps up, fumbling for his sword, and begins to dash for the tree line.

"No!" I shout after him, not really thinking clearly. In my sleep-fogged brain, I hear Baka's warning not to let anyone be alone. "We can't split up," I say, hauling myself up on my good foot.

"That's the brightest thing you've said yet," Mei mutters, coming to help me stand.

"We all have to go," I tell Ujina who stands anxiously, poised to dash into the night. "I can't explain, but I'm certain that any of us who go out alone are in great danger."

It takes a visible effort for Ujina to restrain himself. "Can you make it?" he asks.

"I'll help him," Mei says, positioning herself as a crutch. We begin at a slow lope, into the forest. There's no light except for the torches Mei and Ujina carry with them. The flame throws shadows wildly around us turning the forest into a labyrinth of passages between the trees. I'm half-running on one foot, the rest of my weight leaned on Mei, madly trying to keep pace with Ujina. The young Isawa dashes ahead, staying just barely within sight at all times.

At first we're only rushing forward in the dark. Then another cry turns up eastward. The voice is undoubtedly a woman's and I have to call Ujina back again from running ahead without us. The look he throws back to us is wild and desperate. "It could be Minube!" he says, his voice strained. But he slows just enough for us to keep pace with him. I try to see where we're going as best I can, but the ground rises and falls under our feet, and I have to keep my head low to protect myself from the reaching branches that whip past our faces. I hear Mei curse softly next to my ear.

"Are you all right?" It's difficult to get the breath to ask.

"Just caught my arm," she spits. "This is stupid. We're going to get ourselves killed."

Since I haven't anything optimistic to say, I am quiet, concentrating on hopping as fast as I can.

"This way," Ujina calls from a few yards ahead of us. "Can you hear? Someone's crying. It's Minube, I'm sure of it." He dashes left as he finishes speaking.

Mei and I follow as she holds the torch to try to light our way. We almost tumble into a sudden gully that opens up before us, nearly two feet across and too deep to see the bottom. We clear it, barely, in a quick leap, but the landing is jolting and I nearly collapse at the numbing pain that shoots up from my injured foot.

"Can you keep going?" asks Mei. "Maybe we should stop and wait here."

"No." Gritting my teeth against the pain, I shake my head trying to keep Ujina still in my sight as he dodges through the trees. "Ujina," I shout, "wait for us!" But he doesn't heed this time. "Let's go," I tell Mei. "We can't lose him, for our sake as much as his." She doesn't question, just shifts her shoulder back under my arm and lets me set our new pace.

For a moment, I'm afraid we've lost him, then I see his torch ahead, unmoving in the wavering shadows. In a few yards, we draw up beside him.

"I've lost her," he turns a desperate look to us as we approach, "I could hear her crying, sobbing right here! And now it's gone." His head drops, eyes squeezed tight shut, his whole body heaving as it struggles to take in air. "I can't feel her anywhere." His voice breaks for a moment.

The three of us stand in silence. The whole night has gone still. The wind has stopped. Even the fire fails to crackle at the end of our burning sticks. The quiet isn't natural. My ears feel stopped up and when I look at Mei, I see the same unnerved expression.

Then, from right beside us, comes the sound of a woman crying weakly. Ujina's head snaps up. All three of us turn toward the sound, and just as we do it stops. A light breeze passes us, turning my sweat cold. And with it, come all of the normal sounds of the night.

"Where is she?" whispers Ujina. As we watch, something stirs in the darkness. It takes a moment to become clear to my eyes, and another to realize I'm looking at a great black owl. Its wing span must be as long as a naginata's handle. It sits on a branch in the darkness, and in its talons, it grasps a golden pendant, swinging slowly back and forth, glittering in the fire light.

"That's Minube's," Ujina says and takes a step toward it. With a sudden rush of air and movement, the bird takes off, straight upward, carrying its bauble with it. As it rises, from somewhere overhead comes the sound of a woman's crying.

"I don't understand." Ujina is stunned, his hand outstretched toward the owl's perch. "That bird wasn't there. I stood here looking right at it, but I had no sense of it. And the pendant, I gave that to Minube over a year ago. She," his voice falters just for a moment at his own words. "She doesn't ever take it off. Is it *maho*?" he asks turning toward me.

I can only shake my head. "Not like any I've ever encountered."

The three of us turn back toward camp, moving slowly this time. I've no good idea of where we're going at first, but with the help of the torches, we're able to follow our own trail of broken branches and disturbed undergrowth. It looks more like an army charged through than three half-mad people.

It's nearly two hours before we can see moonlight reflecting on the road ahead of us. We walk more swiftly, our destination in sight. Then the wind changes, coming toward us from the road and the scent on it is death. Mei's hand tightens hard on my arm, and I can feel her nails pressing deep. I draw my katana and know without looking that her knife is back in her hand.

"What is that," Ujina asks, sniffing the air. "The smell..."

"It's blood," Mei replies, her voice low. "And a lot of it." We move forward cautiously now.

I know what to expect from the smell, but I'm still not prepared for what lies before us. As we come in sight of the camp, the stench becomes suffocating. The fabric of our bedrolls lies in shreds through the clearing. Our packs are torn open, the contents strewn about. And the four ponies we left lie slaughtered on the ground. The reek isn't just that of blood, but the thick smell of entrails. The animals have all been eviscerated, their bowels spilled across the ground, hanging from the branches of the nearest trees, and mixed in with the contents of our packs.

I'm vaguely aware of Ujina gagging, trying to control himself. Mei places my hand on a nearby tree. Then, with knives in her hands, she moves at a cautious run around the camp, then onto the road, checking both directions. She stays clearly in sight of us all the while.

"What could have done this?" Ujina asks, coming up beside me.

"I don't know." It's a half truth. I have my suspicions.

"Is it safe for her to be out there?" he asks, his eyes following Mei.

"Mei's able to take care of herself," I reply. "More so than myself right now I suspect."

"There's no one in sight," Mei reports as she comes back, picking her way through the wreckage. "And there's no fresh trace of tracks besides our own, not on the road, or near the camp."

"What do we do now?" Ujina asks gazing around at the carnage before us.

"We go back." With those words, she turns back toward our belongings. "I think I can salvage a little of this. Some of our clothes and the food is just lying in the dirt, not in what's left of the horses. But we'd have to be mad to go forward."

"But we can't just leave." Ujina's desperation has returned. He turns to me, eyes bright. "That's what they want, whoever did this. They lured us away so they could wreck our camp."

"No," I correct him as gently as I can. "They tried to lure some of us away so they could do this..." I gesture toward the clearing behind me, "...to whomever stayed behind." I wait, hoping my words will sink in. But although he turns paler, the determination stays in his eyes.

"That's all the more reason to go on. Whatever did this has Minube; they must. I can't go back knowing that she's in the hands of something that could have done this." He shakes his head, his eyes on the ground now. "No. You can go back if you want to. I suppose it even makes sense. But I'm going to find Minube." He looks back up at me again, and this time the reason in his eyes is so clear it's almost painful. "I have to," he says in a low voice.

We stand there for a while, looking at nothing in particular. Then I walk, painfully, to where Mei is packing whatever belongings she can find that remain unsoiled.

"It's a stupid idea," she says without looking up.

"He'll go either way. And I made a promise to Mikara to try to keep him safe. And to find his daughter." I bend in the dirt and start gathering some small tools that have scattered out of our bags.

"She's dead." Mei's voice is very quiet. "And if she's not, it would be better if she were. Just look at this. Bandits didn't do this."

"I know that. And so does Ujina. It still doesn't make it easier for him to turn back."

"Sometimes it's the hardest choices that keep us alive." Mei stands back up, then reaches out a hand to help me back to my feet. "The herbs are mostly intact. Their jars didn't break. I can make a poultice for your foot, and we can find you something to lean on, but it won't be easy for you with the horses gone. Staying on it may make it worse."

I nod my head. "We'll do what we can."

Entry 48

We spend the night further up the road, upwind of our last site. We take turns guarding each other's sleep, and in the morning no one is really rested.

"Hold still. This may be hot at first, but the herbs need the heat to make them potent." Mei lays one end of the steaming bandage across the arch of my foot, and I have to bite my tongue to keep from scowling. She wraps the cloth quickly and tightly over the rest of my foot, and up the bottom part of the ankle. Then, tying it off, she wraps another, larger cloth over the top of it and pins that one in place. "That should hold the steam in," she says, fastening the last pin. "Once the steam has dissipated, we'll take the top cloth off, but you need to keep the other one on so the medicine will seep in."

"Does this really work?" I try to flex the foot, but the wrapping's too tight.

"It helps horses." Mei gets up and goes back to the small fire where Ujina is preparing a modest breakfast from the remnants of our supplies. It doesn't take long for us to eat and get started back on the road. Ujina has brought me a staff trimmed from one of the nearby trees. It is a convenient height and I lean on it heavily as we set out at a painfully slow pace. As we start walking further into the hills, I catch Mei looking back toward the way we've come. Then she shakes her head and turns back toward the road ahead of us.

In broad daylight it's no difficult thing to find the tracks of Ninube's party. Hoof prints sunk deep in the dirt indicate a group of perhaps fifteen, traveling mounted. Most of the horses carried armored riders or heavy packs, consistent with the ones we ourselves left Mikara's house with. The even spacing of the prints tells me that the riders were in no particular hurry, but neither did they deviate from their course. The trail is old, but it's been disturbed very little. Another set of prints, mostly on foot and fresher, looks to be that of the magistrates dispatched later.

By mid-afternoon we're further into the mountains and the ground is little more than soil over stone. I find parts of a print at occasional intervals. The wind is also harsher, stirring the earth.

"I can't find any clear trail," I yell to Ujina over the howl of a sudden gust of wind. He's standing out on the edge of a rock at the side of the path. Below him is a long, straight drop with nothing but the tops of trees spreading out far below him.

"Think he'll jump?" Mei inquires casually, coming up beside me. "Just joking," she says when I turn toward her. "He's not really the type. It's just such a poetic picture, him perched there searching high and low for his true love. Besides, maybe he'd just grow wings and soar off in search of her. You never can be certain with a Phoenix." She holds a short stick plucked from one of the nearby bushes. She's plucking small dark berries off and eating them one by one.

"Supplemental diet?" I ask, turning away. It makes me nervous to watch him. "How can you eat constantly?"

"I'm stocking up," she says with a frown. "You never know what might happen. Want some?"

They're surprisingly good. Not too sweet, not too bitter. Ujina is walking toward us, having abandoned his perch. He looks apprehensive. "What now?" I ask, not really wanting to know.

"I still can't find her, but there's something else." He frowns. "I can't quite place it, but something near here feels very unsettled."

"It's probably me," shorts Mei, wrapping her kimono about her as a sharp wind picks up.

We're only about a couple hundred feet further when I spot the broken tree branch to the left of the path, the forested side. I'm half-heartedly looking for more berries when the branch catches my attention, and then the ground near it, trampled nearly flat. Several persons passed this way.

"Here," I call after Mei and Ujina, both ahead of me again. "They left the trail here."

"Is it Minube?" Ujina's voice is tight with anxiety as he crouches beside me.

"I don't think so," I reply softly, looking at the undergrowth with care. It's softer, showing more of the tracks that have passed through. "The tracks are wrong for that, and I don't see any hoof prints. I think the magistrates may have come this way."

Moving cautiously ahead, with me in the lead we proceed into the tree line. In the shadow of the dense growth, the temperature drops from chilly to outright cold. We leave most of the sunlight behind as well. Only the muted light filtering through the canopy above us lights our way. Still, the tracks we're following now have been sheltered from the wind by the same trees, keeping them clear. We're maybe a quarter mile off the road when I first notice the smell. It's faint this time, enough that I want to believe it's a trick of my memory. But then I hear Mei's breath catch, and I know she smells it too. We proceed, but slower. We're far beyond ignoring all of this, however tempting the idea may be.

Still, when I push aside the branches, I wish I had been wrong. The horses were fresh. These bodies are not. It's hard to tell at first glance, but they are bodies, or at least what remains of them. Bits of brightly colored cloth flutter in the little breeze. The corpses are too torn to make out features, but the mon on their clothing are enough to give them identity. The two most intact lie on the ground. One is on his back, empty eye sockets gazing upwards. The birds and rats have long since removed their contents. There are deep gashes in his lower torso, large enough to see the cavity of his ribs. His mon marks him as a Crane from the Doji house. His nearest companion, a Crab, looks to have been a huge man when he was standing. He lies on his stomach, the side of his face buried in the dirt. It appears to have sunken in when the dirt was soft, made muddy by his own blood. The ground beneath his head and upper torso is stained a deep red brown, and what remains of his face is scarred with numerous small incisions. Those may have been made later by the local wildlife, but I'm not certain.

"Fortunes have mercy." Ujina's voice brings me back to the here and now. He stands a few yards to my side. He's staring at the body of what used to be an Asahina woman. Her feet dangle several

feet off the ground, and her body is suspended by the thick tree limb emerging from her stomach. Her hands hang by her sides, fingers still clenched with the shock of her death. In one hand dangles the shredded remains of a scroll.

"What could have done this?" asks Ujina, his voice hoarse, his eyes wide.

I can only shake my head. A fourth body lies behind the tree where the woman hangs. He's curled up in an almost fetal position, his hands covered in his own intestines where they've fallen through a great rent in his belly. From the colors he wears, bright orange and gold, I can guess he may have been a Lion, but his mon is too torn for me to be certain.

I turn, looking for Mei, and find her standing over the fifth magistrate. The body is headless. "The rest is over there," she says with a nod. It would have been easy to miss in the tall grass.

"Do you think it was whatever got the horses?" Mei asks. "The methods seem pretty similar." Her tone is even, but there's a shadow in her eyes that mirrors the one I feel in my heart.

"I'd hate to think that there's more than one of whatever or whoever did this. Are you all right?" I ask Ujina. He looks pale and his eyes are too wide.

"I can still feel it." His voice is barely audible. "What happened here, I can almost see it, hear it, like an echo. There's so much terror here and surprise." He looks up at us. "I don't think they expected whatever happened. I don't think they had any warning."

"Can you tell what it was?"

"It's strange," he murmurs. His eyes are far away and he seems distracted, as if hearing my questions from another room. "It's not as if the place were haunted, there's no sense of that. But the trees, the ground, even the sky here holds a sense of the event. They don't understand it. I've been trying to see it through them, but nothing is clear. It's as if this was beyond the comprehension of the elements. Something outside nature." He shakes his head, and his eyes focus again.

"Kaagi-san." Mei's voice is grim. I turn and see her a few yards away, stooping down. Her gaze is on the ground in front of her. She doesn't look up as I approach.

I see immediately what's caught her attention. Sheltered from the wind and elements, the tracks of a large party of people and horses are painfully clear. Ujina comes up behind my left shoulder.

"It's her, isn't it?" His tone is quiet, filled with tension. "She came into these woods with whatever did that." He makes a sharp gesture back toward the bodies.

Entry 49

The trail isn't difficult to follow. We trace it further into the woods, winding between the trees for nearly half a mile. We're traveling at an angle from the road, still climbing upwards, but moving deeper into the trees. Soon, the all-too-familiar smell of death reaches us.

Ujina is running forward before I can stop him. I hobble forward on my makeshift crutch as quickly as I can, Mei at my side. We stumble to a halt only a few yards ahead. Before us lies the gruesome remains of what I assume to be Minube's retinue.

The bodies lie heaped one on top of the other. There's more than a dozen at first glance, some in armor, others in fine silk. All of them have been here for more than a week from the look and smell. Ujina leaps toward the corpses, terror and distress warring in his face.

I hurl myself toward him, grabbing his shoulders. "Ujina-san!"

"Minube! Minube might be in there!" Mei moves toward the corpses quickly, cutting Ujina off. Soon, she is knee-deep in bodies, turning over one after another, staring at their faces, tossing them aside.

"There are no noble women," she says, turning to face us. Her hands are bloody, stained with brown filth, and her kimono is ruined. "Only a maid, wearing the *Daidoji mon*."

Ujina's eyes are wide with too much white showing, and his face has no color. He looks down then, at the bodies, and a visible tremor runs through him. His love for the girl must be overwhelming, to make him lose himself in that manner. "I had to know if she was there," he says, staring at me, his eyes still wide.

"I understand," I tell him, keeping my voice absolutely calm. "Mei, are you certain that she's not?" She nods her head sharply up and down. "How many are here?"

"Fourteen," Mei says, wiping her own hands absently on her obi. "It looks like everyone's here except for the guest of honor. Their throats are slit."

"Is that all?" I ask. I can feel myself frowning.

"I realize it's anticlimactic compared with recent events, but yes, that's all. A couple of the bushi have other marks, minor cuts, but nothing else that looks like it could have been fatal." She looks back toward the heap, and her hands unconsciously check to be sure all of her knives are where they should be. "It's not right, I know. It doesn't make sense."

"Exactly. There are what, ten bushi?" She nods. "Did they all wait patiently to have their throats cut, one after another?" I shake my head. "It's too clean. There are no signs of a struggle, and there's nothing to indicate that the bodies were carried from anywhere else."

"Have I told you recently how much I don't like this?" Mei mutters.

Ujina sits heavily on a nearby rock, staring at the corpses. "The horse prints keep going. And it looks like there are at least three sets of human footprints as well. Take a look," I instruct Mei as I repack my bag, "and see if any of them are small enough to be a woman's."

"Definitely not," she replies after a moment. "She's probably riding one of the horses. The problem is that we don't know how many 'companions' she may have. Bandits after all?"

"You look hopeful," I can't keep from smiling in spite of myself. "Personally, I'm not looking forward to meeting the bandits that killed six bushi without a struggle."

"Ever the pessimist," says Ujina. He's smiling, albeit shakily and with a visible effort. "Thank you," he says, "for your understanding. I'm afraid I lost control for a moment." He looks nervous, but his posture is straight, and his hands aren't shaking. "It's likely that they would have recognized Minube. Perhaps they're holding her for ransom." He's speaking slowly, carefully, to make certain his voice doesn't betray him.

Although it's possible that whatever assaulted Minube's party is unrelated to the force that slaughtered the magistrates and our horses, the possibility is ludicrously slim. But if it helps Ujina to believe that his betrothed may be held in relative safety, I see no benefit in disillusioning him. Especially when I am unable to make proper sense out of what we've encountered.

Entry 50

We follow the remainder of the trail further. The ground rises more steeply as we go, and the trees become sparse as the land turns rocky. After another half hour's walking we hear a horse's whinny. Drawing our blades, we approach the next rise cautiously. Ahead of us, a dozen ponies, very like the ones Doji Mikara gave us, graze peacefully near the edge of a cavern mouth.

"Can you tell if there are any scouts?" I ask Ujina. "Or how many are inside?" I hate to ask, to rely on this force I don't properly understand, but any knowledge we can glean of what awaits

us could be critical at this point. Given what we've encountered so far, I have little optimism for our chances against the forces that may lie ahead.

Ujina takes several even breaths, and slowly his eyes lose focus. His pupils dilate, leaving little color in his eyes, and for the first time in days, the lines creasing his face relax. His body also relaxes, enough to look comfortable, not slouched. I begin to count my breaths; one, two, three... As I'm exhaling for the fifty-seventh time, Ujina blinks twice and takes a deep breath.

"The horses are fine," he says, his voice very calm. "They're on long tethers that allow them to graze. There's running water, just inside the mouth of the cave, cool and fresh. They haven't seen anyone for a long time. Not since the new riders left. They miss the smell of their old riders. They miss being combed." He shakes his head again. "I don't feel anything in the cave, and all I can sense of it is what the horses have found. But the riders went in, and they haven't come out."

"(Do you have a sudden craving for grass?" asks Mei, her face deadly serious.

Ujina almost laughs, then covers his mouth, to stay silent. "They were all I could find, besides a couple of ground squirrels who didn't know anything helpful." Mei smiles back at him.

It's fascinating really. Ujina's humor isn't the nervous release of a man under great stress. It's genuine. It's as if his exercise has left him refreshed, relaxed. I've encountered meditations that can alter a man's state of mind, but never anything so effective. Thinking back, I realize that the man in front of me now is again the curious, calm one from Mikara's garden, and how much of a change had come over him since we'd been on the road.

"Ujina, I want to ask you one more time. We're not on an even footing with whatever is in there. We should return to the village, send word to Mikara-sama and wait." I watch carefully for some sign that his new calm will move Ujina to greater caution.

"You can return, Kaagi-san," he replies. His voice is even, but there's a seriousness, in his eyes. "I have to go. I have no choice. Besides, anyone we ask to help, we put at risk from a danger we do not understand." He has an earnest look that I cannot deny. In truth, I'd had the same thought. I nod. "Let's go then."

"Wait," says Mei. She pulls a cloth from her pack, a tattered polishing rag. "Let me see your stick." She wraps the bottom end in the rag. "That should muffle the sound on the rock floor," she says, looking over her work. "It won't help to announce ourselves by rapping at their door."

Checking one more time for movement or life in the caverns, we approach the entrance. The mouth is the height of a tall man, its width twice that. We enter with caution, pausing a small way inside to let our eyes adjust to the dark. A narrow stream flows forward from somewhere deeper in. It curves to the side a few yards from the entrance, bubbling through a small opening in the rock. From the hollow sound, it must drop downward from there.

"I have a light," Ujina whispers. He draws a narrow rod from somewhere in his robe and breathes softly on the end. A dim glow spreads slowly from the rod. At first, our vision doesn't improve. Then, slowly, our eyes adjust, taking in more of our surroundings. The cavern opens up to about double the size of the entrance. After the first curve to the left, which takes us out of range of the last sunlight, the passageway begins a slow downhill slope. The floor is rock, covered by some loose dirt and stones. The walls are rough and slightly damp. Along with the one main stream, it appears as if there may be a multitude of smaller waterways running through the cave. Not a bad place to live if you don't want to be found.

We follow the tunnel to the left. It's difficult to keep my balance as the incline gets steeper. Mei takes the lead by about two yards. Ujina is behind me and to the right. The tunnel curves down and to the right, narrowing to a space big enough for two men to walk comfortably abreast. The ground is less even here, with rocks and large stones scattered along the floor. Looking at the wall to my left, I can see that most of the stone is damp, and a fine fungus seems to travel up it in spiderweb-like lattices.

Without warning, I hear Mei curse, and in the same instant, something barrels into me. I'm aware of a rush of air, and then, a near-deafening CRACK sounds all around me, echoing down the corridor. "What happened? What is it?" Ujina's voice.

"A trap," spits Mei. "I never saw the rope, just felt the resistance against my ankle. Damn! They set it on the slope deliberately, so you'd hit it when you had momentum from walking down hill.

Looking up, I can see clearly the slab of wood, set with thick metal spikes, driven into the cavern wall to our right. It sits on the end of a bamboo arm, five feet long. It operates on a pivot of some kind so that once the rope has been tripped, the arm snaps forward, sweeping across the cavern at chest level. If Mei hadn't knocked me down, I'd be impaled between the spikes and the cavern wall.

"I think we just announced ourselves," Mei says, disentangling herself from me. "Sorry. I should have seen it."

"Never mind your eyesight. I'm just glad of your reflexes." Ujina picks himself up off the floor behind me, then offers me a hand up.

"Do we keep going?" Mei asks me. "We've lost the advantage of surprise if we ever had it."

"Not necessarily," I reply. "They don't know whether we survived their trap, only that it went off. Let's move forward as fast as we can. Maybe we can get ahead of where they expect us to be and get back a bit of an edge."

With Mei leading again, keeping a sharper eye to the way, we take several more turns, keeping left. After the first few turns, the ground evens out once again.

Fifteen minutes after our encounter with the trap, we hear footsteps from further up the tunnel. The last turn is too far back to be of any help. A few feet ahead, the tunnel curves to the right. The three of us move to the right-hand wall, weapons ready. Ujina places his light on the ground against the wall so that the illumination allows us to make out shapes in this section of the cavern. Then he steps to the front. The footsteps grow louder, making no attempt at stealth. Within moments, three figures run from around the curve. Ujina strikes the first one with absolute precision. The cut cleaves through the man's collar bone, nearly decapitating him. He spins around with the impact and falls without a cry. The other two skid to a halt on the loose rock, whirling to face us. One of Mei's knives thuds into a man's shoulder, another clatters off the rocks behind him.

Knowing that I won't move fast enough on my wounded foot, I hold my ground, keeping my back to the wall as the third opponent closes on me. I have encountered Ninja before and they've never looked like this. These men are dressed in black, but their clothes are ragged, their flesh unwashed, and they have mismatched bits of armor and weapons. The man facing me swings a katana at least a half foot too long for him. The blow is easy to avoid, but I have to plant my bad foot to keep my balance. It holds my weight, but pain shoots up my leg. My opponent is slow to recover, drawing his blade back and raising it high for another strike. I shift my own blade and cut his belly, but not deep enough to do any serious damage. He screams, a shrill wheezing sound, and falls back. As he does so, his face looks contorted from more than just pain. It's hard to tell in the shifting light, but

something seems wrong with the proportions of his features.

A glance to the side shows Mei fighting the man her knife stuck. She's moved too close for him to use his katana. Instead they're grappling, bodies inches apart. Mei has a long knife in each hand, and she's whittling away at her opponent, maneuvering for a good strike. The man still holds his useless blade in one hand, while his other hand, now a bloody mess, tries to block Mei's knives. Ujina stands to one side, looking for a way to help, but unable to get a clear strike.

I pivot my own blade back into position as my opponent makes another charge. He comes in from my left this time and I move to block, unthinkingly putting my left foot forward. Under most of my weight, it gives, and I stumble, nearly missing my block. My opponent grins, sensing the weakness, and retreats a couple of steps, out of range. His smile looks too wide for his face and lopsided. Instead of another clean strike, he begins poking toward me with the blade, keeping his body out of proper range. I'm forced to fight a haphazard defensive. His incompetence makes him unpredictable, actually making him more dangerous.

I curse as a wild stroke slices my arm, catching the fabric for a moment before it tears loose.

A sharp cry, cut off by a liquid gurgle, marks the second attacker's demise. My own opponent jerks his head up sharply. If I were able to lunge, I could finish him while he's distracted. Instead he spins and runs, lurching down the tunnel in the direction we came from. Ujina is ready to follow him.

"No." I say it as sharply as I can while I try to catch my breath. "Don't separate."

Ujina looks hesitant for a moment, then nods. Picking up my staff, I limp toward the body of the second bandit. "Bring the light," I say quietly, bending over the man's still body. Someone hands me the rod, and I hold it close to the dead man's face.

"I thought that was my imagination," Mei whispers. The sweat on my body has gone cold, and I shiver in the damp of the cave. The man's face is distorted. The forehead slopes too far, rises too high. His lips are thick and his eyes are small, set above puffy cheeks. Worst of all, the left half of his face is clearly narrower than the right, by nearly two inches. The features on that side are scrunched up to fit, the lips thicker and the nose crooked, bent at the end toward the right.

I move to the body of the first man. He too, looks to have suffered deformity. A purplish bulge runs along the right side of his face, the discoloration spreading in patches. His eyes are liquid with a thick, yellowish fluid and he reeks of more than the lack of a recent bath.

"Do they have some kind of disease?" Ujina's trying to stay neutral, but I can hear his curiosity.

"None that I've encountered," I say shaking my head. "I think they may be bandits after all. No ninja I've ever heard of fights as sloppily as this."

"Which way do we go now?" asks Mei, wiping her blades on the dead man's clothes. "Further in, or after our frightened friend?"

I weigh the possibilities. "Let's keep going. That's where they came from. Do you recognize the workmanship on any of the katanas?" I ask Ujina. "Could they have belonged to Hinube's guards?"

"I don't think so. There are markings on the weapons and armor, but I don't recognize them. Besides, these blades are dull." He nudges the fallen man's katana with his toe. "Too dull to have gotten that way in only a week. Mikara's men would never have kept their blades in such condition." I nod. Ujina's observations match my own. It's interesting to know that his techniques and mine are not so very different. Stepping around the bodies, we proceed down the tunnel.

The further and deeper we travel, the damper the air becomes. Rivulets of water run freely down the walls making the floor a gritty mire. There must be an underground river nearby. The muddy

floor makes it difficult to be quiet, but easier to tell which paths have been traveled. We pass several openings to other caverns, retracing the route of the 'bandits'. Mei stays in the lead, looking for more trip wires and any sign of people. I follow, watching the trail for signs that might indicate Minube passed here. Ujina guards our back. Having seen him demonstrate his competence with a blade, I feel more at ease. We've been walking for perhaps ten or fifteen minutes when I hear a woman crying. It's coming from a side tunnel. Ujina looks up at the same time.

"It's Minube," he says, eyes bright. "I know the sound of her voice."

I catch at his arm as he passes me, heading into the cavern. "The way you recognized her in the forest?" I ask him sharply. He looks ready to object, but then the doubt settles in his eyes.

The three of us take the new turn, Ujina stepping to the front. I don't object, since his katana will probably be more effective against a sudden attack than Mei's knives.

This cave is smaller than the one we've been traveling in, only big enough for one man to pass at a time. It winds in a slow spiral to the right, curving back on itself, then in. We follow the sound of weeping until there's no doubt that the source is directly around the next bend. In a remarkable show of discipline, Ujina pauses, glancing my way. I nod and he dashes around the wall. I'm only a moment behind him, Mei at my heels. We're in time to see Ujina put aside his sword and grab a disheveled young girl's hands. The curving tunnel ends in a round chamber about five guards across. A rough straw pallet lies on the far side with an earthen cup and bowl.

"Minube, this is Kitsuki Kaagi-san and his eta, Mei," Ujina says, pulling away from the girl. "They've come to help me bring you out of here."

"Thank you!" Minube says, smiling through her tears. Her face and clothes are dirty, and her hair hangs in matted tangles, but underneath the grime she's quite pretty and I can see the training of a Crane lord's daughter as she bows her head low. "We have to get out before the bandits come back." Her voice is strained with fear. "I never know when they'll come. Sometimes they bring food, sometimes they just come and stand and look at me. They killed everyone else. And there's something monstrous about them, something wrong." She speaks rapidly, eyes wide.

Ujina embraces her quickly, then helps her to her feet. "Let's get out of this place," he says to me. Then, addressing the girl, "I'll get you home safe, I promise."

"Are you hurt?" I ask looking her quickly up and down. She shakes her head and although she looks nervous, she appears uninjured. She's probably in better shape for a dash to safety than I am at the moment. We start back the way we came at as fast a pace as we can manage.

Behind me I hear Minube speaking softly to Ujina. "I was afraid to leave," she's saying. "I was afraid I'd get lost trying to find my way out, or that they'd do something awful if they caught me." He murmurs something to her in a reassuring tone. As best I can tell, we're only a couple of turns away from the main passage, when the noise starts. At first, I don't notice it, losing the sound in the shuffle of our feet on the gritty ground. But it is persistent, a buzzing, humming coming from somewhere nearby. Realizing the source of the sound, I look up.

At first, there's nothing but noise. Then in a rush of air, something descends from the cavern ceiling above us. Instinctively I grab Mei, a pace behind me, and pull her away from it. I can see Ujina doing the same with Minube, but whatever's descended separates us from them.

It's as if night descended in that instant, darker than the rest of the cavern. Ujina's light seems to slide off the new presence. It's a swarm of some kind, hovering in the air. The individual bodies are almost indecipherable, too large to be insects, but hovering in a way that birds do not. Mei

cries out in pain, and a moment later, I feel a sharp, stinging sensation in my left arm, then another at my neck. Minube is screaming, and I hear Ujina roar.

"Get back!" I yell to Ujina, hauling Mei down the passage with me, back toward the first tunnel. Minube's scream is shrill, echoing through the caves.

"No!" Ujina's voice is desperate and suddenly, the air goes still, like the dead calm in the center of a violent storm. I can't hear the swarm anymore. The air is too thick. Looking across the passage at Ujina I can see his arm extended past Minube, toward the blackness. His gaze is focused somewhere in its depths. Time seems to stop and I feel an intense calm. Then, like a glass shattering, the pieces of the blackness start to break apart. The balance of the calmness crumbles. The blackness floods past Minube, and Ujina is lost in the dark. Muffled screams tear from him one after the other. Minube stumbles forward, away from the buzzing mass.

Looking at Ujina, I have the impression of beating wings and sharp tearing points like stingers or beaks. "Get down," Mei barks at the terrified Minube. Suddenly an eruption of thick, oily smoke fills the passage. Unable to breathe, I fall back further toward the main tunnel, hauling Minube with me by the arm. The smoke doesn't follow us, hovering where it is. I wrap my kimono collar up around my lower face and start to head back into the tunnel. Ujina's dim light has now disappeared entirely and everything is dark as pitch.

"Get a light!" Mei's voice, choking, echoes my own thought. She's back in the central tunnel. It takes long seconds of fumbling for flint before I find it and manage to get a spark.

Light, too bright for our dark-adjusted eyes, floods the area and for a moment, I'm as blind as I was in the darkness. I manage to tear a piece of fabric from my robe and set it burning on the stone floor. Blinking, trying to focus, the world is sharp contrasts of bright and dark. Ujina lies unmoving. Mei kneels by him, a hand shielding her own eyes from the light. Minube sits with her back against the wall, hands clenched over her mouth. Knowing the fast-burning cloth won't last long, I dig into my pack, pulling out a small pitch torch. It fizzles at first, then catches. Bringing the light, I lean over Ujina and wonder if it would have been better not to. His face is covered in blood, long thin strips of flesh peeled away to reveal the shine of muscle and the bright glint of bone beneath. Most of the damage is to the right side of his face, the side of his body that was facing the attack. The smell of blood is thick.

"He's still breathing," Mei says softly. "But I don't know why." She leans back, and without her shadow falling over him, I can see Ujina's right arm. Most of the flesh and muscle have been stripped from it. Only the bone and some sinew remain with bits of soft tissue hanging loosely. "He can't possibly live long enough to get to the nearest village," Mei says, keeping her voice low.

"We can't leave him. Can you stop the bleeding?" Even if we can keep him alive, I'm in no shape to carry him, and Mei isn't strong enough. She pulls out more of the wrappings she used on my foot. "What happened?" I ask, keeping one eye on Minube where she sits against the wall.

"It was a guess," Mei replies, tying the first bandage tight around the flesh below Ujina's shoulder. "I took it from the Ninja we found in the tree. I thought it might come in handy. Then, just now, I thought that most birds and bugs don't like smoke, so it was worth a try." I don't bother to argue that she shouldn't have kept the device from me. It seems pointless.

Mei wraps the bandage over the remnants of the arm, binding the bones and bits of muscle together. She ties it off where his hand should be. Most of the fingers are missing. Then, with a glance toward the girl in the corner, she begins wrapping the bandage around his head, covering

the right side entirely. "Here, lift his head," she instructs. Then, "How do you want to manage this?"

"I've been trying to figure that out. Do you think we could get one of the horses from outside?"

"No. Even if one of us made it out and back without encountering any more trouble, you couldn't convince the horse it was a good idea. They've got more sense than we have." She sits back on her heels. "We could try to rig some way to drag him. Maybe the pallet that Minube was sleeping on."

"Minube..." Ujina's voice is almost too faint to hear.

A broken sob comes from the girl behind me.

"She's all right," I say, bending down. His breathing is shallow against my cheek, but steady.

"You saved her," Mei puts in. Her face looks strained and her hands are clenched in her lap. "Lie still. You'll be all right. You just took a couple of bad bug bites."

I'm glad she's said it. Mei lies much better than I do. I lay my hand lightly on his chest, over his heart. The beat is like his breath. Far from that of a healthy man, but nowhere near what it should be for someone with his injuries. "How do you feel?" I ask with hesitation.

"Weak, dizzy. My right side hurts." He winces with the words, but his voice is stronger than it was a moment ago. "How badly am I hurt? My arm... burns. What's the matter with me?" I look at Mei, glad he can't see my face clearly in the flickering light.

"Whatever those things were, they had stingers. Your arm is swollen from them, but it should be all right. I've bandaged it to keep it free of infection. There are some deep scratches on the side of your face." She pauses, then asks, "Can you sit up?" She places her hand under his shoulders.

It's amazing, but with a deep breath, he does. Then, as I sit still in astonishment, he gathers his feet and, shakily, stands up. Mei guides him, moving to put herself under his sound shoulder to help him rise. "Can you walk?" she asks. "We need to get out of here, to get Minube to safety."

He closes his eyes and all the pain slowly goes out of his face. He straightens a bit more, and his shoulders relax. Mei, standing close to me now, whispers into my ear. "It's the magic. It's letting him draw strength from somewhere, from everywhere, to sustain himself. We have to keep him from realizing how badly he's hurt, at least until we can get out of here."

"It's amazing," I say. And I mean it. That anyone should endure what he has and be able to stand and speak is beyond me. The gap between our shared results in observation and our actual abilities yawns again before me.

Ujina opens his eyes and there's a deep, deep calm in them. I look into his eyes and I see, as clear as daylight, that he understands exactly how badly he's hurt. Somehow, he's keeping the realization of that from himself. "I can walk," he says in an eerily steady voice.

Minube moves from the wall, laying her head against his uninjured shoulder. "I thought I'd lost you," she murmurs. He strokes her hair, then gently pushes her away and urges her forward.

We begin the ascent back toward the mouth of the cave. It seems to take much longer this time. I've lost my crutch, so I have to lean heavily on Mei instead. The way back seems steeper than it did when we were coming down. Ujina moves slowly. Every second that passes seems to bring some foreign sound to my strained hearing. If more bandits attack us now, however few or incompetent, it will be the end for us.

I whisper to Mei, "If anything else goes wrong, you have to take the girl and get out of here. Run as fast as you ever have and don't stop until you've reached Mikara castle."

She looks at me very seriously and I've no idea what she's thinking as her eyes settle on mine.

"Just watch me," she says. "I'll stop when I've reached Otosan Uchi."

I lose track of how far we've come. I hear my own breathing and the pounding of my heart too loudly to listen for anything else. In my mouth I can taste the bitter sourness of bile, and my kimono sticks to my skin, drenched in my own sweat. My foot throbs in time with my heart beating as if both will burst from the force of the blood there. Mei holds our only torch in her left hand. The heat from the fire bakes against my face, sending more lines of sweat trailing into my eyes and down my neck, making me half blind.

I feel no warning before the voice echoes ahead of us. "A long way to come for nothing." It's a man's voice, deep and thick. Mei catches her breath beside me, coming to a sharp stop. I raise my right hand to wipe the sweat from my eyes and blink hard. Only a few feet ahead of us stands what I assume to be the bandit leader. He's slight of build but tall. Lanky hair dangles in clumps around his face which is long and gaunt. A torn rag tied about his head keeps it back from his face. His clothes are torn and filthy. Along the left side of his face is a fluid design from the forehead to the chin. At first I mistake it for a tattoo like the Togashi have. Then, as the light flickers again, I realize it's a brand. He carries no weapons I can see in his hands or on his body.

The hilt of my katana is slippery under my sweat-covered palm as I start to draw it forth. "Get out of our way. Now," I say as firmly as I can, shifting away from Mei.

He laughs, and the sound is like the baying of feral dogs, sending a chill through me. He walks forward and as he does, his face changes, the chin getting bigger, the cheekbones wider, unnaturally so. The sweat on my body goes suddenly cold. He looks straight in my eyes as he draws up even with me and in them I see the dark that falls between stars. "Do you have any idea how old I am?" His voice is like the ringing of steel on steel, so sharp it hurts. I blink and realize he's passed me already and is almost to Minube and Ujina.

I try to move forward, but the echoing sound of his voice fills my ears and I suddenly can't remember how to take a step. Ujina steps in front of Minube, drawing his katana in his left hand, holding it awkwardly. "I won't let you take her again," His voice is steadier than his hand.

The tall man smiles. I can only see half his face. At first, I think my eyes are playing tricks like my ears, then I realize that his already distorted face is actually changing in front of me. As I watch, his face takes on the aspect of Ujina. "Is this familiar?" he asks, speaking to the Phoenix. "It won't be any more."

I can only see the left side of his face, and it doesn't appear to change. But the expression on Ujina's does. His jaw goes slack with horror and I know without seeing what the thing is showing him. "Do you see?" says the voice, like a swarm of bees. "It's useless for you to have come, useless to try to go back to your life with her." His voice changes again and it's the worst yet because it's Ujina's own. "I can be you better than you can now." He turns back toward me, smiling with Ujina's whole and healthy face. Behind him, the real Ujina's blade slides to the floor with a clatter and the man himself falls to his knees. The creature turns back to the shuddering Minube and offers his hand to her.

Then a second clatter comes from somewhere near to him. Mei's voice curses, off to my side, further down the tunnel. And her second knife takes him in the throat. He stands there, perfectly still, the hilt sticking from the front of his neck, the blade from the back, his hand still outstretched. Instead of blood, a thick, black smoke rises into the air from his wound. Then, with no warning, he stiffens, arms falling down and body as rigid as a board. As we watch, his body

rises slowly, about two feet off the ground, still upright. Then, it shakes like a child rattling a toy, and crumples to the ground in a heap like a marionette that's lost its strings.

"Come on," Mei says, grabbing Minube's elbow and shoving her toward me. "It's well past time to get out of here." She grabs Ujina under his good arm, pulling him upward. "Too late to stop now, my lord. We have to get your lady home."

"She won't want me now." His voice is weak again, like when he first awoke, and he sways on his feet.

"If that's so, you should have left her in here," Mei says, her voice harsh. He staggers forward. Minube takes Mei's place as my support and we turn the next few corners in a daze before light floods my eyes and I realize we've come to the entrance.

The horses look up startled from their grass as we emerge. The morning air, fresh and cool, fills my lungs and I want to cry for the pleasure of it. I collapse onto a low rock and tilt my head back to look at the sky. It's filled with clouds and the dawn shines brightly on the horizon. I look down. The sight in front of me is almost as surreal as what's passed in the caves. Mei is cooing softly at one of the horses and, as I watch, it goes down obediently onto its knees and waits patiently, while she lays the nearly unconscious Ujina across its back. Then, with a word, it very carefully rises back up.

Minube approaches another horse and it shies from her. She reaches out, suddenly bold, and grabs its mane. My vision is blurred, but I think I see her lock gazes with the horse. Then the beast's head drops and it waits obediently while she climbs up.

I pick myself up, knowing the folly of staying here longer than we have to, and approach another horse. It looks at me and I at it, but it doesn't seem about to do any favors. With a deep breath and a jump from my good foot, I haul myself up. Barely.

Mei picks a mount and cuts the tethers of the rest, keeping them in her hand along with the tie to Ujina's. At my questioning look, she shakes her head. "They'll die if we leave them." She looks very sincere. Then, "Besides, this way if we get hungry on the way down, we can eat one."

Entry 51

It's a long way back to the Crane village. We stay there for a day, the village healer tending to Ujina as best he can. Word is sent to Mikara castle and a full guard rides down to escort us the rest of the way back to the castle. Once there, we spend the next few days doing little more than eating and sleeping. Minube spends almost all of her time in Ujina's bed chamber, but leaves as soon as anyone else enters.

Doji Mikara and his wife are so delighted to have their daughter back, they don't seem to notice, but in the days that follow our return, I grow wary of our rescued lady. The servants look nervous in her presence, much the way the horse outside the cave did. I take to following her from a distance, watching her day's activities. It gives me something to do while I wait for my foot to finish healing. She still spends long hours with Ujina. She goes to meals with her parents and is the picture of an obedient daughter with them. The rest of the time she spends in her rooms.

After several days of this, I happen to bump into one of her serving women in the hall. The woman is nervous, dropping the heap of clothes she carries.

"How is your mistress?" I ask, blocking her way and ignoring her mumbled apologies.

"She is well." Her voice is low and she keeps her head down as she gathers the laundry. As she

does so, I notice the dark stains on one of the fine silk kimonos. I recognize the patterns as Minube's. Taking the cloth away from the feebly protesting servant, I lay it out flat. The dirt is thick and caked on the hem and grass stains mar the rest. I let the woman take the robe away from me and hurry on about her business.

That night, I follow Minube when she leaves her rooms past midnight. She goes out to the central garden, and once there, dances with a frightful abandon. Her robes swirl around her, stirring the grasses. I can only stare in horror as the shadows of the trees around her, the very darkness of the night itself seems to come alive, moving with her in her mad spinning.

The next morning I go to see Ujina, before Minube arrives. He smiles weakly when he sees me. The left side of his face is healing, but the right remains bandaged, mostly as a kindness. It will not mend any more than his arm will grow back, and he knows it.

"How are you?" I ask, approaching his bedside.

"Better." He gives a soft laugh. His spirits seem remarkably high for a man who has endured so much. "Minube and I will leave for my family's home at the end of the month."

"Ujina." I search for the right words. "I need to talk to you about Minube. Have you noticed her to be different since we've returned, different from the girl you knew?"

My spirits lift as he nods. "I think she's stronger now." His smile is almost serene. "She's come through it all so well."

"Ujina, what if she hasn't?" I hate myself for it, but I tell him everything I've witnessed. I can't let him go on without knowing. But when, I've finished, he only shakes his head.

"What are you saying?" He looks angry, but also afraid. "She's fine, perfectly fine. If you think otherwise, you're wrong." He looks suddenly exhausted. "She's going to be my wife and I'll challenge any man who questions her honor." He falls back on the bed, his face clenched tight in a spasm of pain.

There's nothing for me to do but to say soft words and excuse myself. The next morning, Mei and I take our leave of Mikara castle. I cannot watch Ujina go through with his marriage, and I cannot prove my fears to him or her family. The household turns out to wish us well as we go, a hero's farewell. Minube smiles demurely behind her fan and there's a foul taste in my mouth.



BAYUSHI BAKA

EARTH: 2

WATER: 3

FIRE: 3 Agility 4

AIR: 4 Awareness 5

VOID: 4

School/Rank: Bayushi
Courtier 4

Honor: 3.7

Glory: 4.9

Advantages: Allies (Lion
Clan), Benten's Blessing,
Read Lips, Voice

Disadvantages: *Junshin*,
Reputation (Honest), Soft-
Hearted, Unluck (3 Points)

Skills: Courtier 4,
Etiquette 3, Investigation 3,
Law 2, Sincerity 4, Seduction
3, Poison 2

GM Notes: The Disappearance of Lady Ninube

Doji Sanju's daughter is kidnapped by Ninja on the way to her wedding and its up to the characters (with a young and idealistic Isawa Ujina) to get her back. A routine kidnapping and rescue? Hardly. They're about to learn more about the Living Darkness than anyone should ever know. By now your characters should already have a healthy dose of skepticism about Ninja from their previous encounters, and perhaps a bit of confusion as well.

Good.

The adventure begins earnestly enough. The characters are asked to rescue a kidnapped princess. They are treated to the company and skills of the Novice of Void, and while they chase down the Goju Ninja, they are haunted by phenomenon which might invoke some *deja vu*. By this time, they should recognize what they're dealing with, but not to know exactly what it is. This power has something to do with Ninja, that's for sure, but they still haven't been told how to deal with it.

This adventure could be played in a single evening or could be stretched over a couple sessions, depending on how deeply you invoke the atmosphere of the hunt. The entire adventure is only three scenes. The first involves the characters being asked to help retrieve the girl. The second is the hunt itself. The final scene involves the malformed kidnappers in their cavernous lair.

The Goju, Ninja minions of the Shadow from their birth, are twisted, deteriorated fanatics who will stop at nothing to obey the Shadow. As Goju, they have only one responsibility, one desire: to serve to the best of their ability, until death or Release (absorption into the Living Darkness). Its what they were 'created' to do.

Scenes

PART ONE: DOJI MIKARA (ENTRIES 42 - 46)

This scene can go many different directions, depending on your group. If they happen to have a reputation (like Kaagi), they can be approached in a manner identical to the one presented in the journal. Mikara's castle is many days from Otsan Uchi, and he doesn't want to wait.

Mikara has a small retinue of Daidoji bushi under his command, and Daidoji Sanju, Mikara's *karo*, has come to fetch the characters. When they are approached by Mikara's men, they are polite, but a successful Awareness roll (TN 10) reveals that each of them have storms brewing in their stomachs. Something is wrong in Crane lands, and these Daidoji aren't skillful enough to hide it.

Daidoji Sanju leads the characters to the Crane lord's palace, surrounded by his best soldiers and advisors. The throne room is filled with tables, scrolls and maps of the area. Any character with an Awareness roll at TN of 15 will know that something is wrong - these men do not know the first thing about war, rescue parties or possible sabotage. The advisors bicker, the soldiers call for mobilization, and Mikara listens to them all wearily. Doji Mikara, cousin of Doji Satsume, is a powerful Lord, though he is aging and tired. His men obey him with honor and loyalty born of true compassion, and his reputation as an honest man stretches across the Empire.

When the PCs enter the room, characters with successful Perception rolls (TN 15) will notice that Mikara's drinking tea with his left hand. His right is twitching. Very calmly, he tells them of his predicament: his daughter has been kidnapped. She's set to marry the future Phoenix Clan Master of Void, an admirable match that will bring great prosperity to both the Crane and the Phoenix. Unless there is a Scorpion in the party, he will confess that he's certain Scorpions - and their shadowy allies - are behind the kidnapping, intent on sabotaging the marriage. Characters who make a Contested Awareness check (TN 30, this time) will be able to tell the Crane daimyo isn't so certain of his story.

If the characters ask him why he doesn't send someone else, he will reply that he has... and he hasn't heard from them in days. He's already lost six magistrates to the woods; six faithful Imperial

magistrates, at that. Anyone with the Courtier Skill realizes that by asking the characters, Mikara is intimating that his own men aren't good enough for the job. The a subtle message can have repercussions throughout the rest of the adventure, if you choose to use them.

The Novice

When he's finished telling them the details, he offers the party a place to stay for the evening, hoping that they will accept his request for their assistance. In the morning, he says, the group may choose to speak to the two gentlemen who know the most about the 'kidnapping' - Isawa Ujina, Doji Ninube's betrothed, and Bayushi Baka, a traveling magistrate.

The Novice of Void, Isawa Ujina, can be found in the gardens of Ukara Palace. He is a quiet and solemn man, preparing to take his Master's place as a representative on the Elemental Council (an event which occurs two years in the future. See *Way of the Phoenix* for more details). Behind his eyes is a power the characters can only respect without understanding. His voice is smooth as tumbled stones and as distant as a sunrise.

Ujina insists that the characters allow him to take him along on the journey. Obviously his skills will come in handy, and those who presume to tell Ujina that his emotions may interfere with rescuing the girl also presume to tell one of the most powerful shugenja in Rokugan that he isn't objective enough to keep love from getting in the way of saving a political marriage - a grave insult. If the characters suggest this, let the consequences fall where they may.

The Scorpion

Also in the castle is Bayushi Baka, the last surviving Magistrate from the group that agreed to search for Lady Ninube. At the last minute, he backed out, claiming illness. The only reason Baka survived was because he never left.

To question Baka's word is to question the word of the Scorpion *daimyo*, and even the Emperor himself. Baka is not only a Scorpion, but an Emerald Magistrate. When he is introduced to the characters - if they ask to see him - he avoids all direct questions.

Baka knows a little about the Living Darkness, but he has only scratched the surface. He believes it is an Element, like Fire, Earth or Water, but he also believes it is a false element. He believes it is a subtle corruption from the Shadowlands, a weapon of Fu Leng. He knows it strikes a samurai when he is alone, and he also suspects that his own Clan has a bargain with it.



ISAWA UJINA

EARTH: 1 Willpower 2

WATER: 2

FIRE: 3

AIR: 5 Awareness: 6

VOID: 6

School/Rank: Isawa-Ishi

4

Honor: 3.8

Glory: 3.0

Advantages: *Ishiken-do*

Disadvantages: True

Love, Weakness (Stamina)

Skills: Calligraphy 2,

History 2, Meditation 4,

Shintao 3, Lore (Myth &

Legend) 2, Lore

(Shadowlands) 2, Lore (Void)

4, Theology 1

Spells: All Void spells listed in *The Way of the Phoenix*, and a few more, plus any spells in the Core RPG and those that the GM sees fit to assign or design

Ujina's abilities and traits are somewhat lower than listed in *Way of the Phoenix*. The events which happen in *Way of Shadow* occur more than a decade before the rest of the RPG, and Ujina has grown and matured considerably in the interim.



GOJU NINJA

EARTH: 2

WATER: 3

FIRE: 2 Agility 4

AIR: 2

VOID: 0

School/Rank: None

Honor: 0

Glory: 0

Shadow: 2 (Stealth, Swiftiness)

Disadvantages: See Below

Shadow points: 2 - 3

Skills: Athletics 4,

Defense 4, Kenjutsu 3,

Poison 2, Stealth 4, Ninja-to

3, Shuriken 2

Wounds: 12: -1; 24: Dead

These Goju, a secret 'family' of the Living Darkness, have been given certain abilities and powers (see chart, page 153). They do not know much of their 'master' and cannot reveal anything, if questioned - the

Darkness will simply dissipate them in a shrieking, agonized, bloody mass.

That's what it means to be a Goju.

Baka does not share this information freely. He makes an Awareness + Sincerity roll against the characters (a Contested roll, if they so choose, or a simple TN of 15), to determine their integrity and loyalty to each other. If the characters are proven to have loyalty (Scorpions with a Loyalty List, for instance), he shares what he knows, but only if the characters understand the consequences of betraying trust. He warns them to stay within sight of each other, not to wander off alone. He will tell only other Scorpions of his concern for their Clan, however. Baka believes in keeping his worries 'in the family.'

Characters who treat Baka with disrespect get a completely different reaction. Baka does not appreciate those who spit on the *mon* of his Clan. He will keep his advice to himself, and do his best to misdirect the characters. Then, at an early opportunity, he seeks out the Novice of Void in front of the characters, and smiles. "You know, don't you?" he says. "You know what took her.

And you're still going to encourage them to follow her? You are no *junshin*. You have some Scorpion blood in that Phoenix heart of yours." He then asks to speak to Ujina alone, and gives him the only advice he can: stay home and try to forget her. Ujina ignores the Scorpion, of course. He's a man in love, and not about to listen to anyone about matters of the heart - especially a Scorpion.

PART TWO: THE HUNT (ENTRIES 47 - 49)

Part Two begins with the characters leaving the safety of Ukara Palace. The Crane lord has provided them with fine (Rokugani) horses, provisions, a map of the area and his best wishes.

The characters' search will eventually lead them to the cave described in Kaagi's journal, but the journey there provides you with an opportunity to use Kaagi's experiences as a setup. This part of the adventure is an ideal time to get your characters in the right frame of mind for their confrontation with the Living Darkness.

You can use all of Kaagi's encounters, a few of them, or none at all (inventing your own) to set the mood, but the intent is to shake up the characters' confidence. Since the beginning of this campaign, we've played with their expectations; tonight we expand that more. The first adventure introduced them to a Ninja, but also gave them a taste of the Living Darkness. In the second adventure, they encountered a 'ghost' and a 'witch' that seemed a lot like the hints they got in the first adventure. This time around, even though everyone tells them they're dealing with Ninja, they'll sense that they're dealing with something else, something familiar.

When you use the encounters listed below, use the same tone of voice, the same language, the same gestures as you did when they encountered the ghostly child from the first adventure and



the 'witch' from the second. That will give them the clue that the thing they're dealing with here is the same thing they've dealt with before. Their expectations will tell them, "This isn't Ninja, it's something else."

Of course, they're only half right, but that's exactly what we want them to think.

THE ENCOUNTERS

These encounters can be used in almost any order, although the order Kaagi moves through them seems to be the most coherent. Feel free to add more, especially those that fit your characters. Remember, the Darkness wants to reveal itself to the characters. The more intimate they become with it, the more of a hold it has on them. Use the encounters below, modify them to fit your characters. The more personal the Living Darkness is, the more terrifying it can be.

Stumbling through Urban Myths

On their journey, the characters move through a small village, filled with rumors of Ninja. The villagers are convinced they've seen them, dressed in black, moving through shadow as if it were their ally. They use all the traditional descriptions of Ninja, but when asked for details, that's when their stories start to sound strange. They tell the characters that the 'Ninja' were misshapen beasts with hunches, twisted fingers and faces. Any Scorpion in your party should laugh out loud.

They also tell the characters that the Ninja left in a definite direction (north), and will even show them the road. Any characters able to track fleeing horses will be able to follow the tracks; a roll isn't necessary (they've been pointed out, after all). But looking at the tracks will give him a strange sensation down his spine. The tracks the horses left behind aren't quite... natural.

Crab characters – or anyone else with Shadowlands Lore – will recognize a faint hint of something resembling the Shadowlands Taint... but that's not exactly what's wrong. Allow your characters to believe this at first (the strange-looking hoofprints, twisted and circular, or chipped and serrated, certainly appear to be the marks of Fu Leng's steeds). The horses have been Tainted, but by the Living Darkness, not the corruptive powers of the Shadowlands. A high enough Shadowlands Lore roll (TN 30 or better) will tell the character that this is not Shadowlands Taint (it widens the hooves in a particular way, and these hoof prints don't match), but don't offer

them the roll. Let them make it on their own. That'll teach them to rely on their first impression.

The characters can stay overnight at the village, but their dreams are haunted with visions from their previous experiences with the Living Darkness. One of the characters may have a dream of running, tripping and falling in a dark forest. He calls out to his friends – who are all three steps ahead of him – and they turn to him ... but they don't have faces. And somehow, he can tell that they're all smiling.

The character who receives the dream should be the one with the lowest Void, the character with the lowest Honor, or the character you determine to be the least trustworthy of the other characters. Remember who has the dream, because it will be important for the next night.

Camping out for the night

Sooner or later, the characters will want to stop to rest. They may choose to sleep during the day, thinking such forethought will spare them from further nightmares.

Let them think that. They'll still have nightmares during the day, and they'll be traveling through the forest at night – not exactly the safest course of action.

During their journey, the character who had the nightmare is going to stumble, fall, and twist his ankle. If you can arrange this without die rolls, that's perfect. If you can't, arrange it with a character who will fail a demanding Reflex or Agility roll. Or make them all roll, and choose the one with the lowest result. Either way, somebody is going to trip, fall and twist an ankle, even if it's Ujina. If the rolls still all run high, have a PC awaken from the dream-chase with a sharp pain in their ankle. That gives a supernatural reason for the injury, a pill which is easier for many players to swallow.

Later that night, the hauntings begin.

Once more, use the same words and body language to describe the hauntings. The characters will know that they've dealt with this before, and, if you're good, may even not associate it with the Ninja. They might believe that this is an isolated incident, a moment from their past come back to haunt them.

The hauntings which the Darkness uses should be tailored for your characters. The design is to divide them, to get them to wander into the forest individually, so the Darkness can get a better look at them. Of course, it uses Ninube to



TOUCHED BY DARKNESS

Kuoni cast one more glance around the encampment. His companions lay asleep in their bedrolls, the firelight casting dancing shadows across their quiet faces. Kuoni set out through the forest.

He emerged in a small clearing where the dim light of the moon shone on the remains of the abandoned shrine. Kuoni had tried to master the sorcerous arts as his brother had, and his father and grandfather before him, but it never seemed to come. But this evening, he had heard the voice of his ancestor, Hatsume, speaking out to him. "Come back tonight and I will give you the birthright that should have been yours."

Now, Kuoni's heart pounded in anticipation as the cloaked figure emerged from the darkness. As Kuoni approached, he could make out more clearly the tall brow, long nose and broad jaw that he had seen in paintings in his family's home.

(Continued)



TOUCHED BY DARKNESS (CONTINUED)

Kuoni approached Hatsume and knelt in the damp grass. He bowed low.

"Are you my servant, Kuoni?" The voice was deep and dry like wind rustling dry leaves. "Will you be loyal, obeying me in all things?"

"I will, Hatsume-sama," Kuoni replied, full of joy.

Kuoni reached his left hand toward Hatsume and felt a touch like a hard, thin finger. It traced lines on his palm, a pattern he didn't recognize. Then, like a burning brand, the lines seemed to sink into his skin, and something flowed over his hand, embracing it like a glove.

Biting back a scream, Kuoni looked up to find Hatsume's face running like melted wax, leaving behind a blank shell. He let go of the scream, and the sound echoed through the trees. It was the last sound Kuoni heard as consciousness slipped from him in a haze of terror and pain.

(Continued)

lure Ujina, but the Darkness uses equally compelling haunts for your characters.

Show them their Lost Loves, held by the Darkness like ghosts chained to dark mirrors. Show them resentful parents, begging for forgiveness, if only the characters will follow them. Show them wives and children, pleading for their help while their faces melt. Show them characters from previous investigations, whispering offers of truth, if only the characters will follow. Taunt them with everything at your disposal. Force them to make Honor rolls. Hit them where their armor can't protect them. The Darkness doesn't know the meaning of mercy, and neither should you.

Sooner or later, you'll get one of them (even if it's Ujina) to chase the shadows. Once you've got them running from the cozy light of the fire, the rest will probably follow. The purpose of giving someone a twisted ankle is to help you divide up your adventuring group. We want a few of them

to get lost, and at least one of them to get isolated. Not everyone has the Hunting Skill (and they should all roll Perception + Hunting at a TN of 20) which means that somebody is going to get lost. As soon as they do, take them aside to another room, and ask them to sit down and not come back until you've called for them. You can also suggest to the player to act strangely when they return. This is a judgement call on your part. After all, too many samurai are more than willing to kill a companion who suddenly seems untrustworthy. You know your players. You know how they'll respond. We want them to wonder about our missing friend, not kill him.

Separate them for a good, long time (of course, 'a good, long time' is completely dependent upon the patience of your players). Then, when you feel their discomfort is about to turn into impatience, call the player back. He'll be acting a bit out of sorts (Tell him to say: "I don't know where I was. I remember talking to my father...") which





should keep the characters off balance. Now they've got an internal problem as well as an external one. In other words, things just got more complicated.

When the characters finally make it back to their campsite, they find the whole place thrashed. Packs are torn, food thrown into the fire and horses ripped to shreds. In Kaagi's journal, no one stayed behind to guard the camp. If one of the characters does, here's a couple of suggestions.

He can be found asleep in the middle of the ruined camp, covered in horse blood, flesh and innards, but that may be a bit gruesome for your taste. You can also have them find him in shock, shivering, muttering nonsense about his grandfather ("never loved me... never loved me...").

The whole incident should be enough to convince your characters that they're up against the thing from Investigation Two (and Investigation One, if they've put that together). It's not just a bunch of guys dressed up in black pajamas. It's something entirely different, and more dangerous.

Finding Some Old Friends

Stumbling across the two groups of dead bodies is a gruesome but effective way of showing the characters that what they're dealing with isn't entirely supernatural. The first group they find is the company of magistrates Baka bowed out of at the last moment. The second are the Crane girl's original bodyguards.

The magistrates have been torn to shreds. Literally. Internal organs are spread from tree branch to tree branch like party streamers. One magistrate has been torn in half, his torso on one side of the clearing and his legs on the other. His innards have been stretched between them. One magistrate's head has been twisted completely around and set up against a tree, his ligaments pulled out of his arms and tied to the limbs, like a distorted marionette.

In addition to the brutality of the scene, the characters should recognize the magistrates. They won't recognize them personally (although that could add a very eerie touch, and if possible, should be the case), but they do recognize them on a personal level. Match the magistrates by Clan with the characters. If your group has two Cranes, a Crab and a Dragon, then that's what the magistrates were: two Cranes, a Crab and a Dragon.

No goblin, troll or ogre has ever been so deliberate or diligent with their carnage. Whatever did this was intelligent and malicious, and did it to a group of magistrates. A group of capable, intelligent and resourceful magistrates.

If that doesn't get them thinking that they're in serious trouble, nothing will.

The second group of corpses is in a ditch at the side of the road, piled up in a neat little bunch. Each and every one of them has a slice across their throats, in almost exactly the same place. The yojimbo's faces are all calm. One of them is even smiling. They've been dead for a couple of days, but the bodies have only begun to rot. Anyone who knows anything about forensics (Kitsuki magistrates, Kuni and Asako shugenja) will recognize this as odd. A Crab may make a Shadowlands Lore skill roll against a TN of 15 to know that bodies decompose faster in the Shadowlands, not slower. The characters will be happy to find the girl is not with the bodies.

The characters just might not notice the tracks leading away from the sight toward the small mountains to the west. If they do (Perception + Hunting at a TN 15), they'll be able to follow them to the lair of the creatures that did this. If not, they'll need to spend as long as three hours before they find the tracks.

It's time to get personal with the Goju.

PART THREE: SERVANTS OF DARKNESS (ENTRIES 50 - 51)

The final confrontation with the 'Ninja' who stole Ninube takes place in a small cave just on the other side of the forest. The low hills show above the treeline, giving a hint of what's in store.

Infiltrating the caves is no easy task. The Goju have the place rigged with traps that will kill any reckless (or Brash) samurai in a heartbeat. Also, the place is surrounded with deep shadows, prime territory for shadow-tainted ninja. Not so much for spooked samurai. The caves are separated into *Areas*. Each Area contains a brief description, any dangers lurking in the shadows, and any available exits - including hidden ones.

Area One

The entry to the caverns is wider than it is tall. The entrance itself is only six feet tall but twelve feet wide. The cavern itself is twelve feet high and twenty-four feet wide. Inside it is dark and damp. A little daylight spills in through the entrance.

TOUCHED BY DARKNESS (CONTINUED)

Kuoni woke in the dull light of dawn. Raising himself up, he felt an intense pain in his left hand. A wave of nausea swept over him, and it was several minutes before he could open his eyes.

At first nothing looked amiss, but as he stared, the skin seemed to shift, raising as if the pattern were traced inside his hand and was trying to rise to the surface. The lines shifted, then faded. Kuoni felt a deep sense of shame at his folly, but as guilt twisted his stomach, he could feel a strange power in him.

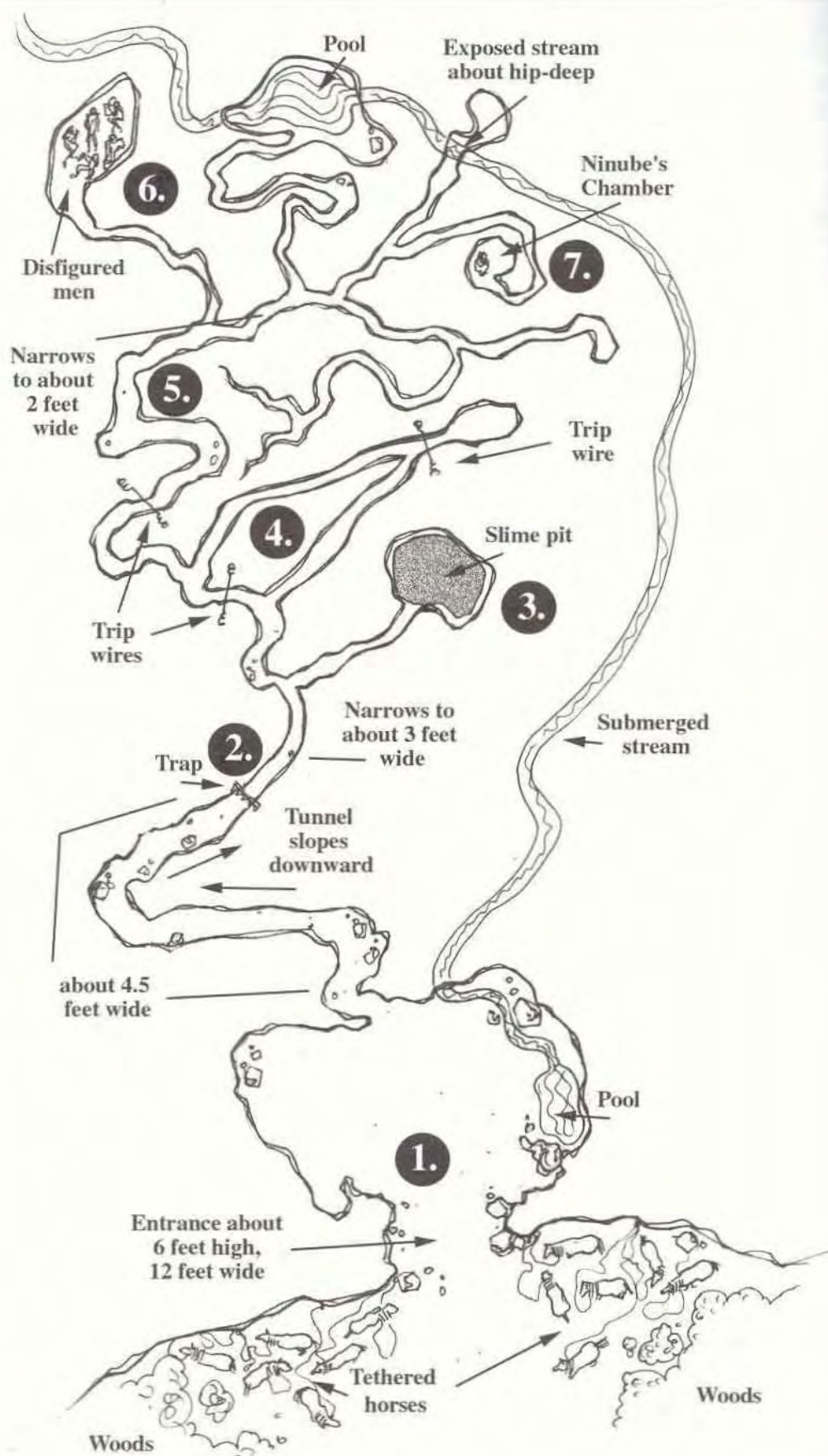
Emerging into the clearing where he and his companions had camped, he found them still asleep. When his companions awoke, nothing seemed to be amiss.

Kuoni felt so strong now, so confident. Surely he was of more use to them now than he had been yesterday. And over time, as he came to understand what had happened, he would tell them. One day, they would understand...



MAP OF NINUBE'S CAVERNS

The numbered areas on the map correspond to the areas described in the surrounding text.





GOJU SANADO

EARTH: 3

WATER: 3 Strength 4

FIRE: 4

AIR: 2 Reflexes 4

VOID: 0

School/Rank: Shosuro

Assassin 4

Honor: 0

Glory: 0

Shadow: 3 (Stealth, Swift, Insubstantial)

Disadvantages: None

Skills: Athletics 5,

Defense 5, Explosives 4,

Hunting 3, Poison 2, Stealth

5, Ninja-to 4, Shuriken 4

Shadow Points: 4

Wounds: 32: Dead

This foe is only on the verge of being wholly consumed by the Darkness. He possesses 3 Shadow points, allowing him heightened stealth, swiftness, and the power to take only half damage from weapons other than those made of crystal.

The cavern slopes down steeply from the entrance. The cave walls are wet and a trickle of water comes from the north wall. Slick muck grows on the walls and an opening in the north slopes downward, deeper into the mountains. There are no signs of struggle.

Area Two

The cavern that leads from the main entryway is eight feet wide, just enough for two men to walk abreast. It slopes downward at a steady pace, forcing characters with a Reflexes less than 3 to make regular Simple Rolls against a TN 10 in order not to slip, fall and slide downward.

After turning west, then east again, the characters stumble onto a mancatcher trap. It's about ten minutes after the curve to the east and requires a successful Perception (plus Investigation Skill, if anyone has it) roll at TN 25 to find the tripwire that activates the trap.

If the characters fail to see the tripwire, the trap springs into action, cutting 6k3 Wounds into anyone and everyone in its way (that's the first three ranks of characters - six of them to be exact). Characters may try to dodge, but they have to spend a Void point. If they do, they get to roll Reflexes + Defense to beat a TN 25. If they fail, they take full damage. If they succeed, they sidestep the trap.

The corridor goes beyond the trap to another curve to the north. It continues to slope downward, but the incline is more severe. Characters must roll reflexes at TN 15 in order to not slip.

Area Three

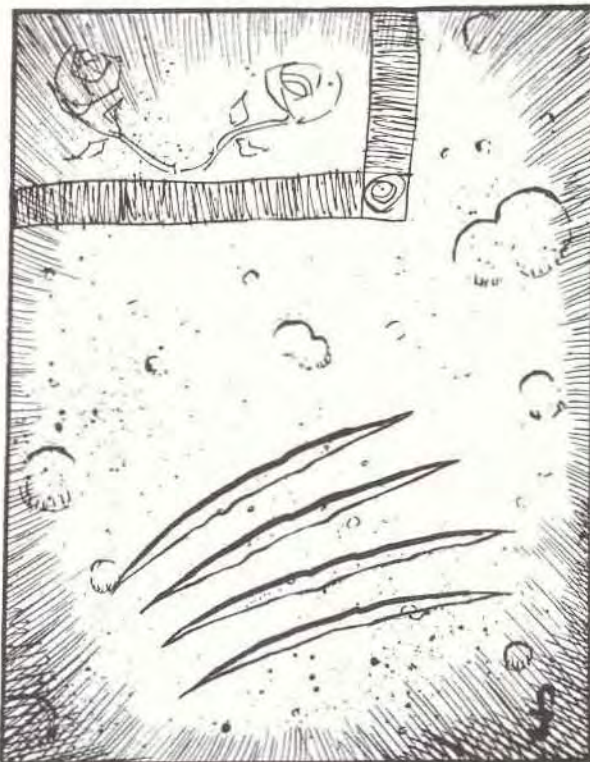
This is another trap, but not an artificial one. The floor is slippery here, even more dangerous than before. Characters must make Reflex rolls at a TN 25 or slip and slide downward. The angle is dangerous, with nearly forty-five degrees of slope. The corridor ends in a pit filled with heavy slime. Characters who fall downward into the slime get sucked under within a matter of moments, and will die of suffocation in a number of rounds equal to their Stamina.

Characters who slip can be caught by other characters, but only with a successful Contested Reflexes roll

against the sliding character's Strength (which represents their relative size; characters with the Large Advantage roll and drop two additional dice). The slipping character *must* keep their highest dice. If the grabbing character rolls higher than the slipping character, he grabs hold. If he fails, the grasping character loses his grip and watches his ally slide into the waiting muck.

Quick-thinking shugenja will Commune with the muck (Earth or Water), but they're in for a surprise. The elements in this cave have been corrupted, making them less friendly than they ought to be. The shugenja will be able to Commune, but at a price. He has to sacrifice a Void Point for every round, and the spirits are belligerent, insulting and unhelpful. All effects of the Commune otherwise is normal, but only if the shugenja is willing (and able) to sacrifice the Void Points. During and after the Commune spell, the shugenja hears thousands of voices screaming at him or her. The messages will be mixed. Some scream for him to let go of the Darkness, while others urge him to step forward and embrace it.

By communing, the shugenja has completely exposed himself to the Shadow. He is using Commune, which makes him one with the target element which is, in this case, the Living Darkness itself. The shugenja is in terrible danger.





DOJI NINUBE (GOJU NINUBE)

EARTH: 1

WATER: 2

FIRE: 2

AIR: 3

VOID: 0

School/Rank: Crane

Courtier 2

Honor: 0

Glory: 6.4

Advantages: Banten's
Blessing, Voice

Disadvantages: None

Skills: Courtier 4,
Sincerity 3, Etiquette 4,
Heraldry 4, Manipulation 3,
Oratory 4, Tea Ceremony 4

Shadow Points: 5

Alone and afraid, Ninube was easy prey for the Living Darkness. It consumed her quickly. The girl known as Doji Ninube is now Goju Ninube, an extension of Shadow possessing the full powers described in Chapter 5. However, she will not use these abilities openly. If attacked, she relies on Ujina to protect her, and he will gladly do so, despite any evidence rendered against her.

If Ujina is killed, only then will Ninube reveal herself, using her full powers as a new Goju, servant of the Living Darkness.

and he may sense that. Only his Void protects him from being devoured. From this moment on, if the character spends his last Void Point while he is in complete darkness, it will be there, ready for him. (See the final chapter for further details on the lingering effects of the Living Darkness.)

Area Four

The twin corridors that lead toward Area Four have tripwires under the thick muck that lines the floor (Perception roll at TN 20 to find). The tripwires are hooked to bells in the ceilings that ring loud, drawing the attention of the Goju.

There are two ways out of this corridor, which means that the Goju have two access points from which to hit the characters.

Area Five

In the middle of the corridor, all characters make a Simple Perception roll against a TN 15. Those that succeed hear weeping from somewhere deeper in the caverns. They also hear footsteps rushing away from them, heading in the direction of the weeping.

Isawa Ujina recognizes the voice as Ninube's and will rush forward. The characters can try to

hold him back (Contested Strength rolls), but he yells her name, screaming that he's on his way.

Those who feel they can hold back the Phoenix Novice of Void are welcome to try. He is not thinking at this moment, only reacting. Holding him back is troublesome, and if handled improperly, dangerous. Ujina will use all the powers at his disposal to find his lost Ninube, even if it means using them against his allies.

Once the characters are running after Ujina, they'll be in the right mindset to get hit by the Ninja. The Goju thugs fall from the ceiling onto the characters, doing their best to separate them from Ujina. After all, the primary target of this whole expedition is to get a hold of Ujina. The player characters are secondary.

Area Six

The corridor leads into a dark room. Characters notice that any artificial light begins to fade, the deeper they go. Any flames fade to flickers as they enter the cavern, leaving them with only deep shadows and faint hints of movement.

The room has five figures in it, each curled up in a tiny, quivering ball, hiding their faces from the light the characters brought with them. These figures have been embraced by the Darkness, but their transformations are not quite complete. Their faces are distorted, their bodies bubbling and twisting, even as the characters watch. Mercifully, the characters can only make out suggestions of shapes from their dimmed light sources. If they come closer, the figures squeal and shudder, and the party should roll their Willpower at a TN of 10. Those who fail will flee the cavern. Even characters who make the roll will feel that something is wrong in this cavern, something that may be better off left alone.

The figures will not fight if attacked, and they bleed an inky black substance. If struck, they spill into the shadows and disappear. Characters will hear footsteps from the mouth of the cavern. Shadows dart across the walls, but the characters will not find any source of the shadows.



Area Seven

After a twisting, tight corridor that the characters must walk single file, the walls open to a small chamber lit by a single candle. A straw pallet, a rough bowl and a starved Ninube are there. If Ujina has escaped the characters, he is there as well, comforting his bride-to-be.

The characters can linger as long as they like in the cave, but as soon as they decide to leave, the cloud Kaagi details in his journal hits them, and it hits them hard. It is a swarm of bees possessed by the Darkness, and when it descends, it cuts the group in half. While in the swarm, all characters take one die worth of Wounds (do not re-roll tens) each round. This lasts three turns until Ujina draws the bees to his arm. He urges characters to set his arm on fire while he has the bees in one place. If they hesitate (for two turns), Ujina will lose control of the swarm, and it will attack the characters again.

If the characters do set his arm on fire, it disconnects the bees from the Darkness. They scatter in one round, leaving an incapacitated Ujina. The characters will have to carry the Novice of Void out of the cave.

Return to Area One

As the characters approach the exit to the caverns, they meet one final obstacle, Goju Sanado. He taunts the PCs as he does Kaagi's group. He will also wear each of their faces in turn, creating a Fear Effect of 3. Any PC who fails to overcome the fear cannot strike at the creature.

The Ninja leader (for Sanado is losing his name, his identity, becoming more and more a minion of the Darkness) takes damage normally when hit, but his wounds do not affect his Traits or Skills. He has one Wound level: Dead.

When struck, black smoky ooze spills from him instead of blood. If he is killed, the Darkness discards him like an old doll, and his body unravels into slithering oily tentacles and smoke. Within minutes, there will be nothing left.

CONCLUSION

Once the characters are out of the cave with Ninube and Ujina, they're free to rush back to the Crane lands, carrying their prize.

They receive grateful thanks from Mikara (in the shape of a Major Favor (see *Way of the Crane* for details), as well as a total of 6 Experience Points (3 for the approach and 3 for the expedition into the cave).



On the road from Mikara castle (Entry 54)

On the road away from Mikara castle, I try to collect my thoughts. The evidence is too much for coincidence. I no longer doubt what I experienced in the Hida village. There was a power there that drove Hida Dasan mad. It wore the face of his wife when it spoke to me, but in the end it was not the thing that burned with Dasan's house.

The same force took Hinube to the caves in the hills between the Crane and Phoenix lands. And it replaced or became her before we arrived. Never in all my studies of the Shadowlands have I come across something capable of taking another's face, voice and manners so that those closest to them do not even notice.

There was nothing I could do to convince Ujina. I believe that had I voiced my fears to the parents, their hospitality would have turned to hostility. Their desire for their daughter's safe return would have blinded them as surely as Ujina's devotion. All that could come of it was a duel between two men with no reason to fight. And I would convince very few people lying dead on the ground. Mei knows. We've talked around it a few times since leaving, and I noticed the special care she took to stay apart from the Crane girl when we departed.

I do not know if I am more disturbed by the notion that this new threat is so prevalent that I have encountered it twice in as many months, or the idea that I have been guided to it. Truly, I am afraid that it is like the roads to the Dragon castles, and I, having learned to see it once, will know it in all its forms.

Entry 55

Lady Sun is still only considering her daily ascent. We're camped off the road on the way back to Kitsuki castle. I do not know where to go next or what to do, so I have decided to rest and consult with minds I trust, although I don't know what they will think of my latest adventures. Mei has gone down to bathe in a river. When she returns, I will do the same. The early morning chill makes me reluctant to walk. My foot has healed, but it still aches in the cold.

I'm rewinding it by the low fire when I hear the leaves behind me whisper against one another as if the trees themselves had given a soft sigh. I turn and freeze, my hand on my katana. The sight before me doesn't make sense at first. A figure stands between the trees. I know that it's a man, but somehow, my eyes don't want to stay on him. He's dressed all in white garments gathered at the knee and forearm. His hair is covered by a loose wrap and the lower half of his face is hidden by another. His presence here seems so unlikely, and the urge not to look at him is so strong, I think at first that I have drifted back to sleep.

But when I rise carefully to my feet, keeping my eye on him, my foot aches sharply and I know it is no dream. The man walks forward at an easy pace. When he is only two sword lengths away, he points with his right hand at my belt. "That's mine." His voice is easy, unhurried, and it seems to slide around his words, the way my vision wants to slide around him. I have to remind myself constantly to not look away. With my left hand, I reach down to my belt, feeling for a moment. He nods when my hand comes to the cylindrical object I found in Akodo Maouri's chamber.

"Who are you?" I ask, and can hear the disbelief in my own voice. "Were you at Ichima Castle? Was it you that killed Hari?"

He nods. "May I rest?" he asks, indicating a place by the fire. "I've been waiting for a long time for an opportunity to speak with you."

I nod and we both sit. The unreal quality of the whole scene washes back over me for a moment and I almost laugh out loud. "My name," he says evenly, "is Hiroru. And you and I have much in common." He sees my doubt, but continues. "We are both shadow hunters, Kaagi-san." My hand tightens on the hilt of my katana at his words. He has deliberately seated himself further than either of our swords could reach, but I don't trust him any more for it.

"I was at Ichime Castle, for the same reason you were. Maouri died before his time and what I knew of the matter made me suspect the hand of the ninja. You just found them more quickly than I." He smiles at this last statement, although I don't see the humor.

"You were in Maouri's room the morning I searched there?" My mind is turning back, looking at every detail again in my memory. I see myself going to the unlatched window, looking out and down the long way to the bottom of the chasm. "I looked out," I say, realizing it aloud, "but never up."

"Very good," Hiroru says. "You came in when I wasn't expecting anyone. I had to leave quickly and so I made mistakes." He points again at the device on my belt.

"You killed Hari, and your trail led me to the Hida." He nods again.

"After you flushed him out and wounded him, he wasn't difficult to eliminate. And yes, I led you to the Hida. After what I'd seen, I hoped you would see something there that others would not."

"Something saw me, I think." I suppress a shudder at the memory.

"Yes. They knew you already. You caught their interest at Ichime, but I think they knew you even before that. You must have encountered them somewhere before and not realized it." It's easier to see him now. The strange sliding effect seems to have passed, so that now he's only a man dressed in bright white clothing, strangely out of place in the beginning light of dawn.

"What are they?" I ask, settling back to listen.

"I told you once, don't you remember?" He smiles ironically. "I was the old man that you were kind enough to feed. And in return, I told you a story." I know it's true as he says it. All the little inconsistencies have begun to add up and I wonder if any part of my travels has been by chance.

"They're shadows that have taken a life of their own," he continues. "As best I can tell, they are descended from something else... a thing which was never given a name by the Sun or Moon. And because of that, they're not held to any single shape." There's no smile on his face now. Only a tired earnestness. "I've been following them a long time, trying to hunt them, the way I was trained. I think the Scorpion, the Shosuro at least, know of them. Ninja, the ones that are men beneath the clothes, are trained to emulate the shadows and it brings them a kind of kinship."

"Trained?" He ignores the question, so I ask another. "What do they want, these shadows?" My own voice is grim as well, and I'm cold all over.

What he says next is so appalling I don't grasp it at first. "I think," he says after a considering pause, "when they steal something's name, it becomes as formless as they are. If they can take enough names, they may undo all that Lord Moon and Lady Sun have wrought. I've watched them, followed them for a long time. There's a few of us, like myself and your companion, that have a kind of natural resistance to them. For whatever reason, they can't take us as easily as they do others. I watched them try at Ichime, but your friend resisted them."

"They were at Ichime?" I still feel stunned. "The assassin you followed, was he one of them?"

Hiroru shakes his head. "Not him. The boy, young Sokoi. They replaced the real Sokoi a year ago

when he had his supposed accident in the pond. He was the one I came to watch at first. But then you found the real assassin, and the Shadows found you. They lost interest in what they could gain from the boy, so they abandoned him. That left me free to follow the killer."

My thinking feels blurred, as if I were trying to see through a haze. "Did they impersonate the boy? Or possess him? I don't understand what so young a child could be to them."

"It's not uncommon," Hiroru says, picking at the grass in front of him. He looks like a man completely at ease. He either trusts me or he feels I pose no threat to him. The latter possibility makes me feel uneasy. "No one pays much attention to children and what they hear. Much of what the Shadows do, I don't understand. But I know that they grasp the worth of knowledge. And so they put themselves in positions to learn the ways of men. They call themselves 'Goju', at least, the ones who still have some identity of their own. They aren't political, but they've learned from the mistakes the Dark One made. I think they're spreading like rot through a tree. Eventually, they'll infest so much of the world that the spaces in between will crumble away."

"It's easier to take a weak man's name than a strong one's. They demoralize, break down men's will. The more they unsettle you, the easier it is. And so they attack the sources of men's confidence, their security."

"I have to go now," Hiroru says, suddenly rising to his feet in a liquid movement. "Your friend is coming back, and it's better if she doesn't know of me." He looks at me seriously. "You have to send the girl away. They want to use her to get near you, but if they can't succeed in that, they'll hurt her, kill her to make you flinch." He reaches out and takes his weapon from my belt. I notice it the way you notice the din of conversation in a crowded marketplace, neither here nor there.

"Send her away," he repeats. "Then take this road west. You'll find a group of Unicorns. They'll be able to tell you more. Good luck." And he's gone. In the silence he leaves behind, I hear Mei's footsteps approaching.

Entry 56

Last night I had another dream. I am asleep at our campsite of two nights ago. I wake and turn to face Sokoi. He stands in the darkness at the side of the road, still dripping stagnant pond water from his clothes and hair. The stench of mildew almost overwhelms me as he walks forward, passing me, continuing until he stands over Meilekki, still asleep by the guttering fire. As I watch, the heat of the fire makes steam rise from the soaking wet boy. But as the steam rises, it turns black, like the smoke that seeped from the wounded bandit's cut throat. The boy turns to face me and his face has changed. The features are almost gone, as if his face were a pebble at the bottom of a stream bed, worn smooth by time and the wash.

"What are you?" I ask, my dream voice strange in my ears. I try to move, but I cannot.

"You know already more than you'd like," laughs the voice of Hida Dasan's wife. "What good has the knowledge done you?"

The boy turns back and bends over Mei. I try to yell a warning but I cannot. In my memory I hear her telling me, "I was talking with Sokoi. I don't remember what about."

I wake up stiff and sore under a sun too bright for comfort and not warm enough to do any real good. Mei's bedroll is empty and it takes me a moment to see the sign she has left; three sticks lean together on her blanket. A fourth shows me the way she has gone to get more firewood. It's a while before she returns.

We treat ourselves to hot tea with breakfast, but my appetite is gone. I watch as Mei sits, and I take a deep breath before speaking. "I think we should take opposite roads from here." The silence lasts so long that I begin to wonder whether I spoke the words at all.

"That's a stupid idea," Mei says finally, her fingers never faltering at their work. "When did you become so self-destructive? Or was Ujina's blindness somehow contagious?"

"Listen to me, Mei." I try to keep my tone reasonable but authoritative. "It's important that the Kitsuki know what is out there. If we both go looking for it, there's no way to guarantee that we won't both disappear, and no one else will know." She still doesn't look up, but shakes her head slowly, eyes still on her work.

"Your people are notorious for their lack in faith in testimony. What evidence do I bring? And who am I that they should listen to me, your eta servant? Whatever we're following has been very careful not to leave any evidence you could carry. Just the sights you see and the things you hear. What good will your fellow investigators do?" Her voice is rising now, the anger plain on her face.

Looking at the dirt in front of me, I give her the only answer I have. "We have to try. Whatever is out there, it's not Shadowlands, or anything else we know. We have to give them a chance to prepare. Besides, anything you tell them, they'll write down and record, whether they believe it or not. At least they'll have that much when they need it." I know how weak the reasoning is, and I don't want to meet her eyes as I say it. "Ask for Kitsuki Yasu, my teacher. Tell it all to him."

"You'd never know if I followed you," she points out in a perfectly reasonable voice.

"I will when you've given me your word to go back."

"To let you kill yourself?" A pause... "I don't even know the way back to Kitsuki castle."

I know then that I've won. She's grasping at straws. Mei's never let such a reasonable thing stop her from doing anything. "I'll tell you the way. You'll be fine. Now promise me you'll go."

Her eyes look too dark against the paleness of her face. Her mouth is tight as she says, "I promise to go."

For a long time we stay there by the fire, not speaking. Then, at the same time, both of us move, beginning the familiar ritual of breaking camp.

When we've done, I take Mei further up the road and point through the trees. "You see that narrow stream, flowing beside the shadow of the great tree?" She narrows her eyes in puzzlement, then blinks several times, leaning forward. I know she's seen it.

"It's nearly invisible the way the shadows play." Her voice is low, like someone not wanting to tell a secret.

I nod. "Follow it through the forest and up to the hills. As long as you follow the trails of the living things here, you'll find your way to Kitsuki Castle."

She shoulders her pack and turns to look at me again. "Be very safe," she says softly, not to me so much as the air around me, like a prayer. Then she reaches out and touches the tips of her fingers to my chin, looking straight into my eyes. I feel as if the world is sinking under me, and I'm seeing my last familiar sight. Then she turns and makes her way through the forest, to where the little stream runs, and begins to follow it away. For two heartbeats I watch her, then turn and head back down the road, knowing that in another two, all the discipline in the world won't keep me from following her. From going home.

Investigation Four:

The Chase



Entry 57

I've spent all of today walking in the direction recommended by the mysterious Hiroru. I am making good time despite my limp, but the way seems longer without Mei. I hope that she can warn my fellow Kitsuki what is happening. Even if they do not take her at her word to begin with, and I suspect that they won't, they will undoubtedly record what she says. I hope by this venture to procure some more solid evidence of what I've seen, something to corroborate Mei's testimony and my own. At the very worst, if I do not return, her words will be recorded so that any future appearances of these 'Shadows' will have something to be referenced against. Over time, I suspect enough incidental reports will be collated to form a proper record of these things. I hope there will be sufficient time.

The afternoon has begun to wane. The wind is turning stronger and getting colder. The sharp smell of pine fills my nose. By now, Mei should have reached the castle and be warm and comfortable for the both of us. I regret that it's been so long since I've gone home.

The sun is just starting to sink low in the sky when I hear the sound of horses and men's voices up ahead. The terrain here in the foothills is rocky, making it hard to see more than a few yards up the path. I try to move more quickly and soon I can see the Unicorns that Hiroru told me to expect. The group looks to be twenty, mostly men, although three that I can see are female. A large group of horses stands untethered nearby, perfectly obedient. I'm surprised to see the only standing tent suddenly collapse as two of the women begin to pack it away. Apparently they're breaking camp, not setting it, despite the twilight. A crowd has gathered near the horses, and several of the men have already mounted.

I start forward down the path, looking for a central authority figure. I go only a few yards before I am struck from behind. The air goes out of me when I hit the ground. Something large pins me from behind, and I taste dirt in my mouth. A pair of booted feet come into view. I can't turn my head more than a few inches.

"Who are you?" The accent is clearly Unicorn. The sharpness in my ribs pushes harder.

"My name is Kitsuki Kaagi and I am a Magistrate of the Emerald Champion. You have no reason to hold me." It's difficult to muster dignity with my face in the dirt, but I try.

"Uari," a voice calls over my head. "Here." The weight on my back doesn't grow lighter, but I hear quick footsteps coming from the crowded area. The voices there have all gone silent. Smaller feet come into view and the weight on my back shifts so that I can turn my head. The man who's already spoken is young, perhaps eighteen. He's dressed in the garb of a bushi and his sword is drawn. Beside him is a girl, probably a couple of years younger. Her features are small and close in a broad face. In one hand, she holds a burning torch. In the other, she has a crystal pendant nearly as large as child's fist. It is cut crudely, but the torch light casts bright prisms.

She bends forward, holding the pendant close to my face. I'm blinded briefly by the cascade of color and the brightness.

"He's a man," pronounces the girl. Her voice is startlingly melodic.

"Let him up," the bushi says, nodding his head slowly.

The pressure on my back shifts, then disappears. The bushi offers me his hand. I rise to my feet with a little difficulty, stumbling a little when I put my weight back on my bad foot. The young samurai bows very low. "My apologies, Kaagi-san. We meant no offense. It is only that we have had a long journey and did not know you." He bows again. "I am Shinjo Renari."

His eyes have a direct but shielded quality to them that make me think what he has told me is the truth, but not all of it. He has sharp features and a wide mouth. His eyes are a little close-set, like the girl's. I think they may be family. Turning to look around me, I see the force that struck me from behind. A very large bushi stands only a few feet from me. His shoulders are nearly as broad as a horse, and he stands two heads taller than I. Looking at him, I'm surprised he didn't break me under his weight. He must have been using restraint.

I turn back to Renari. "Who leads you?" I ask. "Do you have a daimyo here?" A slight shadow passes over his face and he glances toward the setting sun.

"We do," he replies, a bit of tension in his voice. "But we're preparing to leave and we're in a great hurry. Is it important, what you need to say?"

Interesting. He looks nervous to be questioning my authority, but more nervous when he looks at the sun going down. "I won't take much of your time," I assure him. "But it is important."

"Come then." He turns without further ceremony and heads for the group at a quick pace. The other Unicorn stop what they are doing as I arrive. I follow him to a thin old man sitting on a pile of bags.

He looks up and I realize that it isn't a man, but a very old woman. She wears simple clothes, practical for traveling, and I'm reminded of Mei for a moment. Braids and charms are woven into the strands of her long white hair. Her eyes are deep-set and dark and they look straight at me with no care for courtesy.

"Oba-sama, this is Kitsuki Kaagi-san, a man who has chanced on us and wishes to speak with you." Renari's words are so rapid, I almost don't catch them.

The old woman looks me up and down. "See to the others," she tells Renari over her shoulder. "Make certain that all is prepared." Then she looks back at me. "We are anxious to be traveling soon. What is it you would have of me?"

I take a deep breath, feeling that I'm about to step onto a whole new path. "A man told me to come here, Oba-sama," I say, taking my cue from Renari. "He gave me this and told me to show it to you." I withdraw the crystal carefully from the folds of my belt and hold it out.

Surprise makes her old eyes bright for a moment. "Are you here to accompany us, then?" she asks, eyebrows raised inquisitively. "As I said, we're in a great hurry. It would speed us through the way posts, I suspect, to have you with us. We're very bad at handling the papers they want and it's caused us trouble." Her accent is much thicker than Renari's. It sometimes is so with the very old ones. Most likely she learned her speech from her grandmother, who may have been old enough to remember the deserts.

"I can make your passage easier," I say nodding. "Will you, as a favor to me, tell me more about this?" I hold the crystal up a bit. "And the reason for your hurry as we travel?"

"Not while we travel," she shakes her head. "There will be no time. But tomorrow when we camp, I will try to explain. Get him a horse," she says to Renari, who has just returned. "He's coming along." She doesn't even acknowledge the cross expression on his face. "Give him Tempu's steed. That one is fast, but gentle." She says this last to me with a reassuring smile.

Renari takes me to a large gray stallion and helps me mount. I want to ask where Tempu is that he doesn't need his horse, but I hold my tongue. Within moments, a harsh command is

barked out. Then we begin to move. Fortunately the horse seems to know where to go, settling in pace with the other steeds.

The pace is ambitious but steady. I ride near the back of the party. Behind me are the girl I suspect is Renari's sister, the big bushi, and another warrior I don't recognize. Renari rides forward and back with regularity, checking to be sure no one is straggling.

We ride on for an interminable length of time. It's been dark for hours before we take our first break, stopping beside a small bubbling stream. I get down slowly, stiff from recent nights of unrest coupled with the motion of the horse. A tight knot of riders has stayed in the front center of the band. I try to spot those riders now and find them ahead of me, tending their beasts. Three of the men remain mounted, staying very close together. I can't tell much about them at this distance and in the dark.

The stop is brief and before I've stretched the knots out of my body, it's already time to remount and continue. I look to either side of me. I had hoped to begin a conversation with the girl when we stopped, but she wasn't anywhere to be seen. Now that we're on the road again, it's as the old woman predicted. We're traveling too fast to engage in conversation.

The moon has reached its full height and my mind has begun to drift when I'm startled into alertness by a sharp call from Renari. As I look up, he comes galloping toward the rear of the party, pointing behind us. A liquid flow of syllables comes from his mouth and the horses move faster. My own speeds up with no encouragement from me.

At first, it takes all my concentration to keep balanced. Once I feel a little more confident, I try to turn my body in the saddle. At first all I can see is the darkness of night. Then, slowly, I begin to make out what looks like a low cloud perhaps a mile or more behind us. It takes my sleep-fogged mind a little longer to recognize that there are riders behind us. This must be what we've been trying to stay ahead of.

For a while we keep our pace. Everyone continues, more or less in formation. It's all I can do to hold on at the new, faster pace. Time is vague to me now, and I'm not sure how much longer we've been riding when I hear another yell, this one from behind me. Looking back, I see the third warrior. He's pointing back at the riders and Renari has fallen in beside him. I can see that several of the other riders have broken off and are riding toward us at a much faster pace, gaining steadily.

One more time, Renari yells and the other Unicorn take up the cry. It's a high, whooping sound, like a bird, and the horses run even faster. I grip my animal's mane, holding tight with both hands, and duck my head low to keep the dirt and wind from my eyes. I trust the steed to find its own way. It hasn't needed any help from me yet. The ride is worse with my eyes closed. Every moment I'm certain we'll run into a tree or I'll be flung off.

Gradually, I become aware of a change in the sound of the horses' hooves. My own mount and the ones behind it have kept a pattern until now. But the rhythm has changed, become more rushed, like the sea pounding on the rocks.

Bracing myself, I turn my head as much as I dare, trying to see behind me. The dark riders have caught up to us. I can't tell how many, perhaps four or five. It's hard to tell with the jolting. They weave between the horses of the four Unicorns behind me. As I cling for dear life to my own mount's neck, I watch Renari and the other bushi stand in their stirrups. They

slice at the attackers with their katanas. The girl and the big man have drawn other weapons, and are swinging fiercely.

I have to turn forward again for fear I'll lose my grip. The motion has made me dizzy. When I've regained my balance, I turn again. The girl and the big fellow have put away their weapons and are a little closer behind me. The other bushi is further back and it looks as if four of the strangers have surrounded him. They ride dangerously close to the front of his own, forcing it to slow.

A sudden jolt throws me off balance and for an endless moment, I think I'm already falling. Then I realize that I still have one hand in the horse's mane, and my other leg partly over the saddle. With all my strength, I pull myself back upright, hugging the thing's neck. I hear a sharp whinny and a great crashing sound behind me. The samurai is down. His horse has fallen and lies screaming on the ground, probably with a broken leg. The man looks crippled too, dragging himself up on his sword, the point planted to the ground. He drags one leg as if it were useless and as the riders close on him, he slashes at them with his wakizashi in his free hand. I can see him yelling at them, but I can't hear what he says.

Horrible as the samurai's plight is, it isn't that which turns my stomach cold. As the bushi made his last cut, one of the figures turned and, clear as the moon on a bright night, I could see the face, as distorted as those of the bandits in the cave.

Hours seem to stretch into days. We slow our pace eventually, and an eternity later we stop again to rest the horses. My body is too numb to move and so I stay mounted, watching the unicorn dismount. No one speaks. We ride on. When the first light of morning begins to creep across the sky, the sun spreads crimson like a slow stain. When the last darkness has faded, but the fog of morning is still thick, someone gives a call to halt and dismount.

Bracing myself, I slide one leg over the horse's back and slip down. My legs half give underneath me and I have to grab the horse to keep myself from falling. Slowly sensation begins to fight its way back into me. After the first pricks of feeling returning to my legs the aching comes and it's all I can do to hobble to a nearby rock and lower myself with dignity. Not that anyone's looking. Around me a camp has sprung up in minutes. Tents have leaped full grown from tightly wrapped packs. A handful of fires have been started and some already have pots set over them. People are brushing down horses and setting them to graze on the low scrub that acts as grass here.

As I continue to sit dumbfounded, I'm distantly aware of someone beside me. The girl who looks so much like Renari stoops down. "How are you feeling?" she asks, cocking her head to one side and looking closely at my face. The girl has no sense of propriety. She reminds me of Mei and I feel a small pang. It's been a long time since I was entirely alone.

I realize that she's still waiting for an answer. "I'm not accustomed to riding." It's an understatement, but any other explanation would take more words than I have energy.

The girl smiles. "I'll take care of Keo. The horse," she adds. "And I'll find you something warm to eat." Then she's gone. I sit looking at the horse, Keo. It looks back at me with only slightly more interest. I suspect it's waiting for breakfast. A few more minutes pass before Keo walks casually over to me, lowers his or her head until the muzzle rests against my chest and, with a snort, pushes hard against me. I almost fall back over the rock, barely catching myself.

Behind me I hear laughter. My ill-mannered young friend has returned. She hands me a bowl of something thick and hot when I've righted myself again. Then she takes a brush from a loose bag over her shoulder and begins to rub down the horse.

As the food settles in me I begin to feel a little better. Some of the numbness fades, and I begin to grow curious again. For a while I thought I might be too tired and cold to ever be properly curious again. "What are they, the riders that followed us last night?" I ask.

The girl turns, putting away her rag. She reaches into her satchel and brings out an apple which she feeds to Keo. "They are why we run," she says. "They're also why we camp during the day and ride at night. They're faster at night, and we've never seen them at all in day-light. But if we rode all day long today, they'd still be just as close behind us at nightfall. So we take the rest we can."

"How is that possible?" I ask, putting down my bowl. "Who are they?"

"That's not what you asked before," she reminds me. "You asked 'what are they.' But really, I can't answer either question. Get some sleep," she says, cutting off my next question. "Then go see Oba-sama. Ask her your questions. I'd probably just muddle the answers." She starts to walk away, then turns. "My name is Hotaiko," she says smiling. Then she heads back to join the rest of the camp. As much as I want to argue, I can feel the exhaustion creeping up on me. I find blankets tied to Keo's saddle and put them to good use.

Entry 58

I wake up hot. It looks to be only a few hours before evening begins. I kick my way loose of the tangle of blankets I went to sleep in and sit up slowly. The world weaves a little at first. Around me, many Unicorn are still asleep. Most of them have erected small lean-tos to block the sun. Others are moving about, tending horses or cooking over fires. Looking around, I see a couple of larger tents near the center of the camp, including the one where I met 'Oba-sama' last evening. Picking myself up, I head toward it.

As I walk through the camp I can feel the eyes of the Unicorn following me. Some of them whisper, but it's too faint for me to make out the words. Two women by one of the fires giggle, and I'm suddenly conscious of how I must look, disheveled, dirt on my hair and clothes, and still limping from my recovering foot and the long ride. My face grows hot.

By then I've reached the old woman's tent, and I try to clear my head of distractions. It's difficult, mostly because the dirt makes my skin itch. When I approach the doorway, I'm struck by the scent of something sweet and a little familiar. My nose tickles and I recognize that there is incense burning in the tent, the slight smoke drifting from inside. "Oba-sama," I call softly. "It is Kaagi. You said that we should talk today."

"Yes I did," returns the accented voice. There's a sing-song quality to her speech. "Please, come in."

I duck my head down low and step through the opening. The inside of the tent is sparse, a bedroll and a couple of packs, one open with clothing spilling out of it. The old woman sits on a pallet of thick blankets. In front of her a small metal pot emits fragrant smoke. The smell is strong here and I remember suddenly why it's familiar. Mei has worn the scent before, when circumstances dictated we make our best appearance in one court or another.

"We should start at the beginning," she says, looking at me in the same direct way as the girl, Hotaiko. "Why have you come to join us?"

I'm at a loss. For some reason, I expected, wanted, for this woman to make everything clear to me. Instead, she begins with a question. It reminds me of the Togashi. "Someone told me to come to you," I say slowly, considering my words. "He said you would understand what I did not. He said you would have answers that I have been seeking."

"And he gave you the crystal?" she asks. "But he did not tell you what to do with it." She nods then. "What questions do you seek the answers to? What has sent you searching?"

I sit across from her, thinking. As precisely as I can, I tell her what I encountered in the Crab village. I tell her my suspicions that the woman burned for maho may not have been the woman who spoke to me, however close the resemblance. And then, with little regard to caution, I describe my experiences about the girl Hinube, and my suspicions about her nature. It's dangerous, I know, to speak so, especially of those in positions of power. That I continue is a sign of how desperate I feel. Finally, I relate my encounter with the elusive Hiroru.

She nods as I describe him. "I have not met him," she says. "But I know of him. And I know of the Darkness. I think he sent you to benefit us both. I can tell you something of what you have seen. And you can help us to travel through the outposts. You see", she looks up at me very seriously, "You see, we have one of them with us, and they want to take him back."

I have to fight to keep myself seated where I am with my katana still sheathed. Something of my feelings must be visible, because she smiles gently. "We have it bound, in ways even its kind cannot break. We mistook it once and it nearly escaped."

Another image springs to mind. I see the stranded samurai clearly, standing alone as the last of his companions rode away. "Why was that man left behind?" I ask without thinking.

The old woman doesn't look offended. "It was a ploy of the Darkness. They pick one man, and they ride him down until he cannot fight. It's their way of trying to slow us down." She picks up a stick and slowly stirs the ashes. "That's why we couldn't go back. If we had, the rest of the pack would have closed on us and we would have lost our charge. We're taking him back to our homeland now so that our shugenja can examine him and learn." She pauses then, and she looks terribly sad for a moment.

"I'll tell my story as you told yours - directly," she tells me. "Years ago my people went into the desert. They encountered many things, wondrous and terrifying, sometimes at the same time. But it wasn't until they were riding back to Rokugan that they met the Darkness."

"My Oba-sama gave me the story that her mother told. After many days of journeying in unfamiliar lands, they encountered a man. He came to them at dusk, as they were beginning to camp and they were amazed to see that he looked just as they did. After lifetimes of being strangers, they had finally come across one of their own. They were filled with joy, and welcomed him in. They asked him where he had come from, and how far away that land was."

"The stranger was courteous, even though his customs were unfamiliar. He did not eat their meat and he would not come too near to the fires. He gave his name as Togashi Ginave. He said he was traveling for the sake of curiosity. And he said that the land they sought was very near. My people celebrated their near homecoming, and the stranger celebrated with them. But in the morning, three men were dead. One of them was the stranger."

"The bodies had no mark on them to explain the death, and confusion broke out. They thought the man may have been cursed. Others argued that he was sick, or that their two bloods made sickness together. But cooler heads won the day. They burned the dead and continued on their journey. A few days later, one of the men went to the girl he planned to marry and brought her a gift: a necklace made of cut crystals, like these." The old woman runs her gnarled hand along her long hair and I can see in the pale light the glimmer of the polished stones woven into her braids. "The crystals, in our stories, are the tears of Mother Sun, untainted by the blood of the Moon. They hold the light of Amaterasu. Perhaps that is why it hurts them.

"When the warrior put the necklace on her throat, the light through the crystal shone right through her body. Seeing its deception revealed, the darkness abandoned its false form. As the horrified man watched, his beloved unraveled like smoke, slipping away on the night air. Raving at what he'd seen, the man was thought mad at first. But his family protested and went through the camp with their son's crystal necklace, holding it up before everyone they passed. They found three more who disappeared, screaming, when confronted, all men and women they knew well. And they found one empty one, a body that the light passed through but which did not or could not disappear. It was said to have been a young girl, perhaps fifteen. The elders ordered her throat cut and her body burned, and it was done."

The old woman stretches and reaches for a bag of water nearby. She takes her time drinking, and when she's finished she looks at me again. "Needless to say, they were suspicious when they finally reached Rokugan. But the first people they met and told their story to showed no sign of understanding. And, fortunately, they didn't vanish through the tears of Lady Sun. Eventually my people came to believe that what they had seen did not exist in Rokugan, that it was a demon sent to trick them, to make them afraid and keep them from their home. Or perhaps the stranger had been a vessel, and they had all been destroyed. They believed that for almost a generation, before they encountered them again.

"Some of us have seen, Kaagi-san, what you have seen. The Lying Darkness is clever and usually takes its home in those with power. It only shows itself to those who can do nothing. That's why our prisoner is important enough to leave our own behind. We'll take it back to our daimyo. If we can convince him, his testimony may sway the rest."

I'm too stunned to find words. Knowing that I'm not alone in what I've seen lifts a vast weight from me. But knowing that the threat is real makes madness seem a preferable option. "How can you hold it?" I ask, finally. Every other question seems to lead to hundreds more.

"Some of them dissipate. Others drift out of their bodies and let the shell drop when it ceases to be useful." In my mind's eye, I see the bandit captain, crumpling to the floor like a worn-out garment. "The crystal lets you see through their deception. It also binds them. Some of them at least." She shakes her head. "We don't know enough about them to know what works, or why. But this one we've been able to keep by binding it in crystal charms."

"Your help here is appreciated, Kaagi-san. If you will help us pass as far as the Unicorn borders, we can travel the rest of the way easily."

"I'll do all I can to help," I say to her, rising slowly. "Thank you Oba-sama, for sharing your story. But tell me one more thing. Hotaiko and the bushi, Renari, are they brother and sister?"

"Hear enough," she says with a smile. "Hotaiko is my granddaughter, Renari is my nephew. Everyone else calls me Eniki." I feel my face growing hot again, and she laughs. "But you may call me Oba-sama."

I feel foolish as I walk to where Keo waits patiently. But I do not feel bad about it.

Entry 59

The camp is awake by the time I finish talking with Eniki. Hotaiko comes by as I'm replacing the blankets I slept on. She brings food and tea which I accept eagerly. Within a short time, riders everywhere are mounting up. A little less than an hour before sunset, we set out again. The ride is ambitious, but not so fierce as last night's. The rolling of Keo's body feels almost natural, and the smell of horse is familiar now.

The formation of the group makes sense. Bushi stay along the outer edge of the party. A small number of unarmored figures ride inside, mostly women, but a couple of young men as well. They were the ones awake earlier than the others. They break the camp and prepare food. In the center ride the three figures I saw last night, still close together. The one in the center is too far from me to make out details, but it rides stiffly, I suspect because it is bound, the prisoner. On either side, fully armored guards ride very close. Once again, I'm near the rear of the group but not on the outside edge. Renari rides up and down the lines again, keeping track.

The remaining light fades slowly, tingeing the landscape orange. The clouds are thin, and the heat of the day slips away with the sun. I've learned from last night, and left one of the blankets loose when I tied them to Keo's pack. As the wind gets colder, I pull it free and wrap it around myself to block the wind. I've ridden horses before, but I've never seen the land go by so quickly. I understand now the things I've heard about the Unicorn's steeds. They really are remarkable, going on and on without tiring. The ground we're traveling over is still flat and even, but up ahead in the distance, I can see low hills rising again. I let my mind drift. In another hour or so, we'll reach the watch post that stands between the Dragon and Unicorn lands. I don't have fears about getting the party through. As a Imperial Magistrate, the guards won't question my authority. Instead, what turns around in my mind are the old woman's words. I try to reconcile the things she described and the things I have seen.

The 'Lying Darkness' she called it, and that sounds as accurate as anything I can think of. I have heard stories about Ninja that take the form of familiar men and women to get close to their targets. I've always thought those stories were foolishness, made up by careless guards and superstitious servants. But now I find myself wondering. I think back through all the other investigations I've undertaken, all the stories I've put aside as fireside tales. And I wonder, when else I may have been close to this thing, shared a room with it, or tea. Thinking about it makes me cold. If Hiroru is correct, I've probably encountered them before. I wonder if I'll know them if I find them again. I feel a sharp sting in the palm of my right hand and realize that it's clenched around the crystal Hiroru gave me. I can feel a thin flow of blood.

Keo's stride slows and I look up. We've reached the outpost sooner than I expected. Or, from the placement of the moon, perhaps I spent longer in my own thoughts than I'd planned. Renari is riding up to me from the front of the group. I guide Keo to meet him and the horse obeys considerately. Renari and I go to the front of the group, where the sentries stand waiting. "Here

he is." Renari says bluntly, gesturing toward me. I see one of the guards squint to see me in the light of his torch, erratic in the wind.

"My lord," he says, approaching. His voice sounds doubtful. I let the blanket fall and sit up straight, handing my papers to the man to peer at in the darkness. "My lord," he says it again, this time with respect in his voice and posture. He hands the papers back with a deep bow. "Are these people with you, sir?" His gaze encompasses the group.

"They are," I reply. "And we are in a hurry to get to our destination."

He nods briskly and steps back, waving to his companion, several yards further along. Both men move out of our way, giving the horses plenty of room to pass. "Is there anything you require, sir?" he asks.

"No. I have all I wish. Your watchfulness is to be commended," I tell him, nodding slightly. Then I glance to Renari and he gives a call that starts the horses moving again.

The guard house fades behind us. Soon we're well into the hills, following a narrower path that twists between them. Renari is behind me now, at the back of the group. The pass is too narrow to ride back and forth. When I glance back, he winks at me. I think that, having proved myself at least moderately useful, my presence is more acceptable to him now.

When the attack comes, it's completely without warning. I hear a heavy whuft from behind me and as I'm turning to see what it is, one of the samurai two horses ahead of me collapses under a dark form. Within moments more than a dozen figures drop from the rocks. Even though I can not see their faces, I recognize the movements of the bandits from the cave.

I draw my katana and prepare to strike the first enemy that comes within range. It's awkward to position the blade in such close quarters and on horseback. The samurai to my left, a man I don't know, curses and I spin around to see him grappling with one of the bandits. The samurai raises his sword to block the blade of the bandit and, at the same time, I see his left arm jerk. The bandit falls to the ground with a gurgle and the samurai turns back to me, a clean katana in one hand and a bloodied knife in the other. He offers me the knife hilt-first.

"Take this, I have another." I take the knife without hesitation. When the samurai turns away, I shake the thing sharply so that the blood won't drip down it. Up and down the line, small scuffling fights are erupting. Like the ones in the caves, these bandits aren't particularly adept, but there are a lot of them. They leap down from the cliff a few at a time, fighting whomever they can. It seems a foolish strategy until I hear the first horse scream. The bandits' fallen bodies are littering the floor of the narrow pass. Soon it will be impossible for the horses to get through over them. The attackers keep throwing themselves down like fodder. Looking around desperately, I catch Renari's eye. He's still behind me, at the rear of the party, in the thickest fighting. He's already dispatched several bandits.

"They'll block us in!" I yell, hoping my voice will carry over the din. He stares for a moment, then I see realization dawn. He nods and with a sharp strike at one more bandit, gives a sharp, echoing cry. At first nothing happens. Then slowly, the front of the line begins to move, forcing itself through the mire of bodies. Just as slowly, the rest of the line begins to follow.

Just as I'm turning to get a better seat, I feel the bite of steel against my left leg. Without thinking, I turn, thrusting down with the samurai's knife. It plunges deep into the shoulder, of the man there and his head snaps up. For a long moment I can't breathe. As much as my

mind screams that what I'm seeing can't be real, my eyes stay wide, locked onto a face as familiar as my own. The figure standing at my knee is my brother—not as he should be, a man in his late twenties, but as a boy of fourteen. The knife falls from my open hand and I reach to catch hold of him. As my fingers brush the cloth of his shirt, Keo jolts forward. I nearly lose my seat, but I can't turn from that too-small figure. I see him fall back against the cliff, staring after me. Then Renari's horse moves between us and I lose sight of him in the bodies and the darkness.

We move faster and faster, pulling away from the corpse-cluttered pass into clearer ground. Just as my horse passes the densest pile of bodies, a shrill cry echoes all around us. Like the howl of a pack of wild dogs, the shriek is picked up by one after another of the bandits. They line the cliffs above us, making the silhouette of the hills come alive against the soft glow of the moon. It sets my nerves on edge and I'm certain that the rocks will plunge down on us in thundering rush. Then suddenly the air around me goes still. The sound is replaced by a tightness, too much pressure in the air, and the only thing I can hear is Eniki chanting. Her voice is old but firm. Just as the pressure becomes unbearable, it gives way in a rush and I have to cling to Keo's neck with both arms. We suddenly move forward with a speed that I'm certain is much more than natural. The wind moving past me is a hurricane and it's all I can do to hang on. I'm falling forward, down from an endless height. I have no idea how long we ride like this, but when the world comes back from itself, the first rays of daylight gleam through the clouds.

Entry 60

We're in open country. The grass is tall and green and it blows in the cool breeze of early morning. Riders are scattered through the field as if the force that brought us so far, so quickly, had flung us haphazardly about. I've ridden with shugenja before, but none of those occasions held a candle's flame to this. At first, nothing moves. Then, toward the center of that scattered gathering, someone gives a startled cry. I turn in time to see Eniki slip from her horse and tumble to the ground. Immediately, other riders rush to her, blocking her from view. Renari speeds past me, Hotaiko just behind him.

Not sure what to do, I look about. Most of the riders are dismounting slowly, milling around. As I watch, a few begin the preparations for setting up camp. Taking my cue, I get down slowly, not trusting my legs entirely. There's nothing else for me to do. From the lay of the land, I can guess that we're in Unicorn lands, but I don't know where. I untie my blankets and sit quietly, trying to gather my thoughts. The sun rises slowly and the day begins to warm. A woman brings me some food, but it is not Hotaiko.

By late morning, I grow tired of my thoughts and I investigate the rest of the camp. In the center, Eniki's tent has been assembled. As I approach, I can hear the sound of low voices inside. I hesitate at the entry, unsure what to do. Then the flap opens and Renari emerges.

"She's dying." His voice is thick. "She used the last of her life last night to bring us this far. It's nearly over now." He gestures for me to follow as he heads away. Hotaiko is with her. When she passes away, Hotaiko will take up her staff and her duties.

The two of us find a quiet place to wait. The sun reaches its zenith before the tent flap ripples and Hotaiko emerges. As Renari said, she holds Eniki's staff. She stands in front of the

tent while the Unicorn gather before her. Renari and I join them. Hotaiko raises her voice and it's calm and strong. The wind picks up all around us and I feel a distant heat. Then the tent bursts into blazing flames. We stand there until the fire has consumed itself and only ashes remain. Then little by little, the group disperses.

"Where will you go now?" I ask Renari as we walk away.

"To Shiro Juchi. The shugenja may be able to learn something from what we've brought them." He turns to look at me. "Thank you for your help. You'll be welcome at Shiro Juchi when we arrive. I hope you'll stay awhile and enjoy our hospitality."

I glance toward the remaining large tent, the one that hides the prisoner. The thought of relaxing in a castle where that thing lies somewhere nearby, even bound, makes my skin crawl. "Thank you very much for your offer, Renari-san. I'll give it some thought."

After the night's chaos, I half expect to be too jumpy to sleep. But when I lie down, I feel the drowsiness slipping around me like warm water in a bath. Then, nothing at all.

Entry 61

In my dream I'm in my room in Kitsuki castle, the one I occupied as a young boy. It's dark and I'm lying very still, pretending to be asleep. The wind blows softly in through the window near the foot of my bed. As I watch, someone is climbing through that window. I'm afraid, waiting for the monsters to arrive. But when the figure is far enough in for me to make out the specifics, I can see that it's Iyekao, my brother. For some reason, that frightens me more.

"Kaagi." His voice is soft but familiar and I feel a sharp pang, all these years later. "I never should have gone the way I did," he says, sitting down on the edge of my bed. "I felt like I had to do something after what the Crane did to us. None of the Phoenix would help me. I think they were afraid." He looks down at the floor while he speaks, not meeting my eyes. "I thought I could make it better, make it right." He turns to face me then and it is still that of the fourteen-year-old boy I remember, but his eyes are so much older now. "I didn't want you to have to be involved. But now I need you. It's ironic, but I need you to help me get out of something even worse."

His face is strained, desperate. "Please help me. I don't know how to find my way back anymore. It's like I've been lost for years."

"Come to me at the temple near Firefly River. I'll meet you there. Hurry, Kaagi, I don't know how long I have." Then he gets up and slides back out the window. I lay alone in the dark for awhile, then sit up in bed. The sun comes streaming in from the clear afternoon sky.

I feel dizzy, my head swimming from sitting up too quickly. Then I hear the choking sounds beside me. I turn to find Renari, only a few feet away, still wrapped in his blankets. His head is thrown back and one hand clutches his throat. The other claws at his chest. His eyes are shut and his breathing is harsh, ragged. I reach out and, gripping his shoulders, I shake him hard, but he makes no response. "Help! Something's wrong!" I yell, grappling with Renari, trying to pry his fingers from his own throat. He's stronger than I am, and I can't get hold of him. He begins to thrash violently. I let go, but he keeps convulsing, his body flopping like a rag doll. Then, as others arrive, he becomes abruptly, absolutely still.

Hotaiko pushes her way forward, the crowd moving away for her. The two of us kneel over the body for long minutes before speaking. Renari hasn't breathed since his last convulsion.

Hotaiko sends away the others, then turns to me. "What happened?" she asks. There are tears streaming down her face, but her voice is steady.

"I woke up and he was moving, struggling with someone. But no one was there." I sit back on my heels, looking over the body. "He was grasping at his throat and chest as if suffocating. But I couldn't see anything..." I stop in mid-sentence, staring at Renari's throat.

"What is it?" Hotaiko asks, following my gaze. I don't have to respond. She can see it as clearly as I can, and it's clear on her face that she understands. Standing out clearly on Renari's neck are purplish bruises as if from a man's fingers. I'd assumed at first that they were from his own hand, but looking at them now, I realize that they're wrong. Renari had his right hand at his throat. But the bruises are clear. The impression has the fingers facing the correct way to have been the right hand, but the thumb is below the palm. It looks for all the world as if the hand that killed Renari was pressing up from inside his throat.

"What does it mean?" I have to work hard to pull my gaze away from those marks. I look at Hotaiko when she doesn't answer.

"He was holding his chest?" she asks. At my nod she looks grim. "I need to see," she says looking up and meeting my eyes in that very direct fashion. "Will you help me?"

I hold my breath, and in my mind's eye I remember Mei standing across a body, saying, "You realize I'm not always going to be around to do this." Gritting my teeth, I reach out and pull aside the blankets that cover Renari. Working together, Hotaiko and I carefully remove the lightweight armor Renari favored. Taking a deep breath, I use a tanto to lift his shirt up to his neck. Long, thin marks run vertically along his chest. Blood wells along each of the lines, but the skin on the surface is uncut.

"Oba-sama said she thought they could do this, but we both hoped she was wrong." Hotaiko is crying again, but her gaze is still clear. "I can't risk this happening to anyone else," she says, rising. "I'm going to move the camp before the Darkness gets any closer. I can use a spell like the one Oba-sama did to move us quickly. It's a lesser version, but we'll still be in Shiro Iuchi before midnight." She looks at me as if trying to read my face. "Thank you for your help," she says. "Once we've reached the city..." Her words trail off as she seems to find what she was searching for in my expression. "You don't plan to finish the journey with us."

"There are no more guard posts between here and where you're going. I have to go and meet someone important to me." Even as I speak the words I know how wrong this all is.

The skeptical look Hotaiko gives me only mirrors my own. "You know we call them the Lying Darkness for a reason." She shakes her head. "Be careful, Kaagi-san. Take some provisions, whatever you need. And thank you again for your help." She glances toward Renari's body as she says it. Then she walks off toward the center of camp, calling out orders as she goes, preparing to start traveling again. "Wake everyone up," I hear her yell.

Moving slowly, I gather my blankets. I return to where Keo waits patiently. He pushes against my shoulder as I pick up the rest of my belongings, arranging my pack. I pat the horse goodbye. Then I stop by one of the still-burning fires for a last meal of warm food and directions to the temple by Firefly River. It's an abandoned place, according to the woman who gives me directions, only a few hours' walk.

I head that direction, hoping to arrive before it gets dark again.



HOW TO USE THE CHASE

The adventure described in this chapter can be converted to use by many different campaigns, in many ways. If the PCs are Unicorns, they may have met this traveling band before.

Other examples of a 'chase' might include a desperate attempt to hide in an abandoned palace (such as Morikage Toshi, a stronghold of the Darkness), or an advance of the minions of Darkness through a peaceful village area. If the characters are burdened by children or peasants, fleeing their homes in terror, how swiftly can they run?

GM Notes: The Chase

All too often, getting from here to there is skipped over by the Game Master. After all, players are in a hurry to get to the adventure, and don't want anything to get in their way. This section is less of an investigation of the Living Darkness and more of an encounter with it. It is a rigorous chase scene that can take place over a few hours or even a few days. What's more, you don't have to put it away after you've used it; you can throw it at your characters more than once, allowing them to experience the relentless terror expressed in Kaagi's journal.

Like everything else in this book, this encounter is designed to show you how to use the Darkness to scare the kimonos off your PCs. The first investigation was a murder mystery with a creepy backdrop. The second investigation was a classic haunted house, with bumps and creaks. The third was a grisly bloodfest that showed the characters exactly what the Darkness is capable of doing to them. With that in mind, they should be able to visualize what could happen to them if they fall behind during these chase scenes. If they are having a problem remembering, feel free to remind them of the magistrates they found just a few short weeks ago, or vividly describe the Unicorn who falls behind. That should get them moving.

How to Use This Investigation

As we said above, this episode is less an investigation, and more an encounter. However, that doesn't mean it's any less integral to Kaagi's search – or to the PCs. In fact, it is more

important, because it gives the first and only explanation which they are likely to receive. It's intended to add a sense of danger, and to remind the characters that the Darkness hasn't forgotten them.

Try throwing this scenario at them in the middle of another adventure. With their minds on capturing a renegade ronin or delivering their lord's daughter to her husband-to-be, the last thing in the world they'll expect is the Darkness. It's also the last thing they'll be prepared for.

This encounter really has three purposes. The first is to let the players discover the Unicorns are aware of the Darkness, the second is to introduce the power of crystal, and the last is to remind them how deadly the Darkness can be. It is divided into five parts: The Unicorn; The First Night; The First Day; The Second Night; and the Second Day.

If you want, you can condense these five scenes into a single night. All you need to do is make the First and Second Night a single evening, with all events crammed into a short eight hours. This puts things at an even higher pace, rushing the whole adventure together into one big blur.

Before you run this encounter, it's important to go back and read the story again. Become intimate with its language and descriptions, but don't use the scenes verbatim. Translate them to best suit your own party. These are chase scenes, after all, and the more familiar you are with the material, the quicker and more cleanly you can run the scenes. Ideally, you shouldn't need to look at the book to run a chase scene. The more referencing you have to do, the more the pace of the scene suffers. Make a sheet of notes for the words and phrases you want to use. Practice a couple of times before your players show up to get the feel of it. The more prepared you are, the faster and more frantic the scenes will be.

Be sure that your characters have the feeling that it is a relentless pursuer, and that it cannot be evaded, hidden from, or met head-on. Combating the Darkness is more than drawing a handy katana and chopping a bandit. The Darkness gets inside your mind... and worse. It gets inside your soul. If a character stops to fight, be sure the bandit they choose to kill has the face of their wife. Or sister.

Or their *daimyo*.

Scenes

ENTRY 57: THE UNICORN

If the PCs are magistrates, it's entirely possible to preface the adventure with a daimyo's request to seek out a group of nomadic Unicorn who have been seen wandering through the provinces. As these Unicorn are obviously armed for war, and only seem to ride at night, any sensible daimyo will assume that they are bandits or brigands. Further, as both Eniki and Renari are unfamiliar with travel papers, it is possible that they were stopped at a guard post, and have been refused passage – and if the characters don't arrive soon, there's going to be innocent blood shed, either by the Unicorn, or their pursuers.

When the characters stumble across the Unicorns, they respond exactly as they do with Kaagi. They are taking no chances. They know the Darkness can mimic humanity, but they also know that crystal will reveal the Darkness' real nature.

Kaagi is alone, but your characters may not be. Remember, the Unicorn are hunters, experts at isolating something they want and trapping it. Unless your characters have a skilled hunter with them, they'll be outmatched. If the characters do have an experienced woodsman with them, an Intelligence + Hunting roll at a TN of 15 allows him to notice that the party is being stalked and put in a position to be ambushed.

The Unicorn aren't interested in killing the characters. They are interested in isolating and capturing them so they can determine if they are human or Shadow. Once they've determined your characters are what they seem, the Unicorn will be wary, but otherwise friendly.

There are twenty Unicorn. The leader is Shinjo Eniki, an elderly shugenja and the matriarch of the group. Her young granddaughter, Notaiko, is also a shugenja. There are also twelve bushi of varying school rank, including Shinjo Renari, Eniki's nephew. While the old woman may have social rank over Renari, there is no doubt who is really in charge of the combat potential of this group. The remaining six Unicorns are peasants who prepare the food, take care of the horses, and set up and break down camp.

The Unicorns are visibly shaken – no Awareness roll needed – and constantly looking over their shoulders. The PCs may also notice

they never separate into groups smaller than three, or venture far from their camp.

When they capture the characters, they subject them to the same test Kaagi underwent: a look into the shining crystal. Specifically, the Unicorns shine light through the crystal onto the subject. If the light shines on the character's skin, he is untainted. On the other hand, if the light shines through him, he has been touched by the Shadow.

If any of the characters has been tainted by the Shadow (such as by Shosuro shadow brands, or a deal with the Living Darkness from another adventure), it will be revealed by the Unicorn's test. At that point, the character will have a great deal of explaining to do – and the Unicorn may very well take him into custody, as well, guarding





THE LYING DARKNESS

The Lying Darkness. The Shadow. The Dark Madness. Ninja. The Living Darkness. Walking Nightmares. Insanity's Maw. The Enemy. The Word. The Deep Nothing.

The Shadow has many names in Rokugani folklore, and anyone who speaks of it may use a new term.

These Unicorn, remembering the name their forefathers gave it long ago, choose to refer to it as the "Lying Darkness" although Kaagi consistently calls it simply the Shadow. It has no name of its own, and no mortal being can give it one. In fact, it has become so strong that even the Sun and Moon may be unable to name it if they tried. The namelessness of the entity Kaagi (and your PCs) are investigating reveals its greatest strength....

It is nothing at all.

him with the same diligence that they guard their current 'prisoner.'

If all the characters prove clean to the Unicorn, they are questioned thoroughly. Although Eniki is in a great hurry, she has no intention of defying the Emperor (if the PCs are magistrates) or making new enemies (if they are not), and so sends Renari and Notaiko to speak to them. If possible, they encourage the PCs to leave them alone, hoping to save their lives. However, if they are questioned, they will be forthright, and will not lie – and the story they have to tell should prove interesting enough for any PC.

Any PC who wishes should be able to follow them or even join them on their mad romp toward Unicorn territory. The children of Shinjo encourage them to join, and – depending on the mood and attitude of your characters – may even insist. After all, every one of them who gets eaten by the Shadow will only strengthen it.

The First Night

The most important part of this scene is when one of the Unicorn falls behind and is swallowed by the Darkness. Read through the text again and pick out the words and phrases that hit you, that stay in your memory. Then, think about each of your characters. Who would be most traumatized by seeing a strong bushi next to them wrenched off their horse by an inky black cloud of Living Darkness, and seeing that bushi towed away, screaming for help?

There are a lot of ways to run this scene, altering it for the weaknesses of each character. Is one of them notoriously greedy? Perhaps the bushi who fell had his horse's travel pack rip open, spilling golden koku. Is your courtier proud of her Benten's Blessing? Perhaps the person beside them begins to have their face melt – the features dripping like wax as they scream, while the blackness swallows them from behind. You can use it over and over again, altering just a little each time, to hit different characters in different ways. Here's another way to run the exact same scene with just a small change to give it a new flavor.

Find one character, and make him the guy riding next to the Unicorn who gets eaten. Have him feel the ice cold of the black tendrils against his own skin as he watches the Unicorn's neck twist backwards as he's pulled off his horse. Describe in detail the sound of his bones breaking as he hits the ground. Scream out curses

he's dragged away into the blackness behind them. Get in the player's face – yes, the *player's* face – as you describe all these things. Then, quite calmly, ask him if he's going to turn around and help the Unicorn. If he says, "No," have his character meet the desperate eyes of the Unicorn, just as he falls from sight.

Then tell him that he'll see that face a thousand more times before he dies. He'll see it in every nightmare, every time he closes his eyes and tries to remember *anything* else, he'll see that Unicorn's face, twisted in pain and terror, begging for help.

If he says yes, take the player out of the room. When he comes back (in the next attack against the Unicorn), he'll be on the pursuing side.

You can do this repeatedly, the Darkness claiming a new victim each time. Not only are there plenty of Unicorn, but the Darkness is probably using illusions of shadow to influence the characters' thoughts, forcing them to see what they truly fear in the same way it forced Hida Dasan to believe that his men in the Crab unit were infected with the Shadowlands Taint. The Darkness is particularly good at encouraging insanity, no matter how carefully it hides.

Each time it claims a new victim, it takes him in a more sinister way. The first time may be phantom riders (like in Kaagi's journal), the second time could be inky black tendrils. The third and fourth time are up to you, but each one should be unique and terrifying. And if your characters aren't frightened enough, have the Darkness eat one of *their* horses and see who stops to come back for *them*.

ENTRY 58: THE FIRST DAY

The most important scene in the first day (other than resting from last night's ride) is Eniki's revelation. It's very important that she tells the characters the story about the desert and the darkness. It's also important that they discover the myth of Lady Sun's tears, about crystal and its apparent power over the Darkness. (If you choose to run the adventure as a single night event, Notaiko can tell them the story in lieu of her Obasama's death in the morning.)

Once again, read through the text and learn the story. You don't have to tell it in her voice, but make sure you stress the important part: The old woman's story of the wedding gift of crystal may or may not be apocryphal, but it certainly works. Holding crystal up to someone and letting light

shine through is indeed a valid test for the Living Darkness. The characters should also learn how quickly (nearly instantaneously) the infection can spread and how clever the Lying Darkness is. It approached the Unicorn as a friend, dropped its shape as quickly as possible and infected many others with equal speed – and without being caught at it. It is not like the Shadowlands Taint; it is an intelligent, malignant and – most importantly – subtle enemy.

Ever since that first encounter, the Unicorn have been on the lookout for it. Almost all of them know of the Darkness in one way or

another, and almost all of them practice the ritual of holding up crystal to a traveler in order to test them for the Darkness. Many Unicorn daimyo even go the extent of giving crystal as a gift to diplomats, just in case.

One small detail we want to be sure you recognize: the Unicorns do not call it the 'Living Darkness', as others do. They call it the 'Lying Darkness.' A minor note, but an important one.

The old woman reveals one more detail to Kaagi at this time: their infected prisoner. The man has been totally corrupted by the Darkness, and they've bound him in chains and crystals to



IUCHI NOTAIKO

EARTH 3

WATER 3 Perception 4

FIRE 2

AIR 2

VOID 3

School/Rank: Iuchi

Shugenja 3

Honor: 2

Glory: 2.3

Advantages: Inheritance, Innate Ability (*), Innate Ability (*)

Disadvantages: Driven: Destroy the Darkness

Skills: Calligraphy 2, Defense 3, Herbalism 3, Meditation 2, Iaijutsu 2, Kenjutsu 2, Lore: Darkness 2, Naginata 3, Poetry 3

Spells: 3 Sympathetic Energies, Ties that Bind, Reflective Pool, Evil Ward, The Fury of Osano Wo*, Calling the Elements*, Roaming the Wide Plains, Ride Through the Night





SHINJO RENARI

EARTH 4

WATER 2

FIRE 3

AIR 2 Reflexes 3

VOID 2

School/Rank: Shinjo

Bushi 3

Honor: 3.5

Glory: 2.9

Advantages:

Irreproachable

Skills: Archery (Agility)

3, Defense 3, Hunting 4,

Kenjutsu 3, History 1,

Horsemanship 3, Lore:

Darkness 1, Naginata 3, Tea

Ceremony 2, Wrestling 1



keep him from escaping. He is the reason the Unicorns are moving so fast, and he is why the Darkness is chasing them. Characters may wish to leave the Unicorn to their own fate, but if they do, remind them of the faces of those who were captured last night. Then, one of the Unicorns shows them the face of the infected bandit, and let's them know this will be their fate if they break away now.

It's a choice. Not much of a choice, but still a choice. Let them make it of their own free will.

ENTRY 59: THE SECOND NIGHT

The Unicorn start their ride about an hour before sunset. About two hours before sunrise, they come across the last sign of civilization before Unicorn territory. They have a prisoner with them, but unfortunately, they don't have the proper papers to get by the outpost. Some characters may have permits to get them by the

gate, which will also save them some time.

Characters may also wish to make social rolls (Courtier, Bribery, etc.) to get through the outposts, but if they do not show any sign of progress, Renari will draw his sword, command his archers to nock their arrows and fight his way through the outpost. He's got living guards ahead of him and the Lying Darkness behind him. The longer they waste time here, the more ground the Darkness gains on them.

The ambush occurs almost two hours after they leave the outpost. The ground has become rocky (hard for horses to run) and the canyon is narrow (only enough for two at a time to pass). Characters with the Battle Skill recognize this as prime ambush territory.

The ambush occurs when everything is dark and silent and the closest

assistance is two hours away. The pass is almost one mile long. It twists and turns the way through. The walls are twelve to twenty feet tall with loose rock all along the top. When the Unicorns and the characters reach the middle, the Shadow-bandits drop on the party. The entire purpose of the shadow-bandits dropping from the walls is to create confusion and a pile of bodies to trip up the Unicorn horses. The ambush is designed to stop the caravan from moving and to hinder any further movement. As soon as Kaagi hears the first horse scream, tripping on one of the bandit bodies, he figures this out. Your characters may be as clever, but if they aren't, let the one with the highest Perception + Battle score figure it out first.

Characters using weapons longer than katana lose one die from their To Hit roll because of the confined space. Characters without the Horsemanship skill who do not get off their



THE SCHOOL OF FATAL SPELLCASTING

In fantastic literature across the globe, there is always that last spell that is so powerful, it takes the life of the spellcaster. Eniki's spell isn't any more powerful than any spell the characters may already know, but she's willing to give up her life to put enough energy into the spell that it gets her fellow Unicorn out of the canyon and away from danger.

In general, if a character is ever willing to lay down his or her life in order to cast a spell successfully, there should be no need for rolling. The spell is automatically successful with a number of raises equal to twice the character's Void.

horses lose two dice from their To Hit rolls. Once Renari figures out they are being wedged in, he orders his men to charge forward, disregarding the bodies. The horses are combat trained, so they can be encouraged to ride through the corpse-ridden canyon.

Remember that PC who said 'yes' in the earlier entry? Bring him out of the room now. He's standing beside one of the other PCs, in the twisted chasm. Encourage him to persuade the other PC to join him, to flee (into the Darkness, of course, although he doesn't have to mention that). He says the Darkness will let them go, if they run *now*. Of course, he's lying, even if the player doesn't know it. If that doesn't work, have him say (in a very different voice) that the Enemy will trade his life for the life of the Prisoner (the man the Unicorn have) and that the PC has only one night to decide... his friend's life, or the loss of a single prisoner, a man who means nothing to the PC. Of course, the Darkness is true to its word. If the prisoner is freed, it will return the 'captured' PC, corrupted by the Shadow, and also have gained a foothold into the PC who made the bargain. Efficient, isn't it?

The last important part of this scene is Eniki's spell. If any of the characters have a hasting spell they are welcome to aid Eniki's casting. Eniki is casting a Unicorn variation of the spell *Ride Through the Night*, which will move the characters miles toward the Unicorn lands, outdistancing the Darkness. Aiding Eniki (turning the spell into a ritual) requires a successful Air + School Rank roll at a TN of 20, or 30 if they do not have the Horsemanship skill. If no-one assists Eniki, the strain of casting the spell kills the old woman by the morning. If they assist her, she survives the experience (although both Eniki and any assistants immediately take half their total Wound Ranks in damage) and the characters earn a great favor from a very powerful and influential Unicorn shugenja.

ENTRY 60: THE SECOND DAY

Once the characters have successfully avoided the second attack of the Lying Darkness, they'll probably be sleeping on Unicorn ground. They've won the respect and gratitude of the clan, and made some allies. Unfortunately, two tragedies are about to occur.

The first may have been avoided the night before. If the characters assisted Eniki in casting her spell, she will not die in the morning from the

strain. If none of the characters were shugenja, or if they were simply unable to assist her, she expires in the first light of dawn as the spell fades. The scene is emotional (Unicorns do not understand why other Rokugani are so stingy with their emotions). The Unicorns gather around the old woman's tent; Notaiko stays with her until the end. Then, Notaiko emerges and chants quietly while the other Unicorns watch. Using Eniki's tent as a pyre, Notaiko casts a spell which will engulf the canvas in flames. When the canvas begins to burn, they weep openly and gladly. Their leader has gone on to another place, a better place.

The second tragedy cannot be avoided. The characters will be close enough to be awakened to the sound of choking. Some may recognize the voice as Renari's. If the characters rush into his tent, they will find him grasping at his throat and chest, his eyes bulging in pain. There is nothing they can do to save him. All they can do is watch as he dies, kicking and spasming. He expires in moments, his eyes staring at the roof of the tent.

An examination of the body (if anyone is present to do so) will find that his throat and chest are swollen from internal bleeding, as if something from *within* were clawing to get out. The suggestion is frightening: that something crawled into his body during the night and killed him from within.

The marks left on the body appear to be fingerprints, hands which pressed out against the throat and chest, and bruises against the chest region which appear to be marks of a large man's hand.

Conclusion

If they have been successful, the characters have earned a great favor from the Unicorn. While the children of Shinjo are not as 'respectable' as the other clans, they do recognize the importance of a favor. They are also willing to let a favor remain for much longer than another clan would. In a generation, if Kaagi's son came to Notaiko's children, they would remember, and return, the boon.

Every character receives one Experience Point for surviving to the Unicorn lands. The characters earn bonus Experience Points for getting through the outpost without fighting and helping cast the Call Upon the Wind spell (for a grand total of 3).

Conclusion



Entry 61

I've grown lazy spending so much time on horseback. After only a few hours of walking I'm tired enough that I want to sit down and stay the night. Tempting as the idea is, my curiosity simply won't allow it. I've been traveling east since leaving the Unicorn. I had been walking for less than half an hour before I heard the rush of their departure. Since then, I haven't seen anyone. The grass is tall, mixed with wildflowers I've never seen anywhere else, high-growing small budded purple things. By the time the sun has begun to set, I've crossed the bridge over Firefly River and find myself approaching the low hills the Unicorn woman described. It doesn't take me much longer to find the path she told me to look for. The path is the remnant of the old road that went to the temple. Apparently, it was a popular place for worship about twenty years ago, but since then has fallen out of use.

The road has kept its shape, even after all this time. The packed earth has kept it from being completely overgrown, but the local grasses have begun a serious attack, making the way much narrower than it once was. The sky has grown darker than usual at this time of day, due to some low gray clouds. In the distance, I hear the rumble of thunder, and I walk faster.

Tall rocks jut from the hillside in uneven places and in some areas I can see where grass has pressed into the dirt and shallow ravines have formed, presumably due to rainstorms. It's almost entirely dark by the time I first see the sloping roof of the temple. As I do so, the first drops of rain begin to fall, heavy and hard. I half run the last few yards to the shelter of the old building.

The roof has begun to leak in several places, most notably from a gaping hole near the south wall. The building is constructed of stone blocks, roughly square with the center area sunken two steps below the rest. In the middle of the room there is a low pit that I assume was used for fires. Ash and old wood remain there. To either side of the entryway are small, stylized stone lions, delicately carved but chipped and old. The wind whistles fiercely through the cracks in the walls and the occasional hole. The ancient temple is empty.

After standing around for several minutes, I decide to be as productive as possible. I gather wood from the east side of the building. The wind blows from the west, so the wood there is dry. I bring it inside to the pit and set about making a fire. It doesn't take long, and I find myself happier in the warmth although the light casts wild shadows on the walls.

For the first time since this afternoon, I allow myself to think about what I've done. Mei would laugh herself senseless if she knew I'd come up here on the say-so of a dream, especially when the man a yard to my side had found his own slumbers to be fatal. But the idea that Jyekao might still be alive, that he might be trapped, a prisoner of the things that have haunted me of late is too much to walk away from. And to be honest, I have to admit that my own curiosity as much as familial loyalty has brought me here.

A shadow moves in the darkness across the fire. I drop the piece of wood in my hand and have my katana half drawn before I've even registered the figure standing across the fire from me. It's a man, my height and nearly my build. We are both perfectly still. The reflection of firelight dances along my naked katana. The figure takes a step closer. I don't object because the fire pit still stands between us, and the movement brings him into the light.

I find myself looking at a strangely familiar face - one long lost to me. Jyekao, as solid as the blade in my hand. He's grown over the years, no longer the boy I remember, but the features

are unmistakable. His face is broader than my own, the dark hair shorter. His mouth is wide with the thin lips I remember calling me foolish names in childhood. His eyes are narrow and his nose broad. His hair is pulled back, revealing a long forehead and heavy eyebrows. He's smiling.

"Brother."

The word hangs in the air between us like the smoke coiling over the fire. He holds his hands out from his sides, showing me that they're empty. "I've missed you." He takes another step forward to the edge of the fire pit. When I do not move or speak he shrugs. "You've grown up to be a man." He lowers himself to the ground, resting comfortably on his knees.

I've begun to feel the fool despite my apprehension. I sit down as well, the katana on the ground before me. "How can you be here?" I ask him, and my voice sounds surprisingly normal to my ears. "And after all these years, why?"

"Have you come with patience, brother? I will tell you all of it if you will sit and listen." At my nod, he continues. I feel as if a missing half of my own life is slipping back into place.

"When our family was killed, you were only eight. Still a child. I was fourteen. In less than a year I would have had my *gempukku* and been a man. When I learned what had happened, I went to the head of my school and asked leave to hunt the Crane and seek vengeance. He forbade it. When I could pretend to be calm, I asked for permission to go to the Emperor's court and sue for justice. Again he refused. Looking back now, I realize that he must have known that both roads would bring me to the same destination: my death. I was young then and would not accept that nothing could be done to set things right. So I packed my things and, late in the night, slipped out of the castle and fled.

"I was determined to find some way to make our enemies pay. I vowed that I would not face you again until I could do so knowing that our family had been avenged and that you did not have to be a part of it. For a long time I searched. Eventually I realized that there were no regular means by which I could accomplish my goal. I was not trained or skilled to challenge their champion. I did not have the magical skills to bring disaster down on them. So I began to search for something else. When we were children we used to frighten each other with stories of monsters, of assassins in the dark that would come and go like smoke, bringing terror in the night. I thought that if I could become such as that, then I could make our enemies sorry that they ever dared to attack us. Honor and bushido were empty words to me. I would have done anything to gain the power to make things right."

His eyes have taken on a distant sadness. "It's easy to forget how long a lifetime is when you haven't yet lived one. I began to search for the monsters. I followed any tale I heard of Ninja coming in the night. Of strange happenings. Ironical, isn't it? You've been doing more or less the same." I'd been thinking this as well, but hearing him say it brings a chill.

"Eventually, I found what I'd been looking for, more or less. An old fisherman told me that every man eventually finds what he deserves, but it's a rare man who finds what he really wants. It's one of the least comforting things I've ever heard. I chased my shadow for so long that it finally let me catch up. The details aren't important, but I arrived in a compound, like a school. I was told that if I wanted to learn, the Masters there would teach me everything was to know about the darkness. I learned that the Ninja in the stories were only

the barest shadow of what really was. They said that by the end of my training, I would know everything, that all men would fear me, and none could ever harm me again.

"The school's buildings were all single-story, on the floor of a valley between three great mountains. On the fourth side, a fierce river ran with no bridge. In all the time I was there, I never saw a boat. There were three buildings for the students to sleep in, a handful more where we had our lessons. Another building at the far side of the compound was where the masters lived, I assume. But I never saw anyone enter or leave there. Everything was made of a slick black wood, like the trees that grew in that valley. But I've never seen it anywhere else.

"I don't know how long I was there. It was hard to keep track of time. We slept during the days and our lessons began each dusk. The only lights were candles. Each of us had one, a short tallow candle and a small round holder for it. When one burned almost out, a new one was in place by the next night when we awoke. There were nine of us in the building where I lived. Three arrived at nearly the same time and became fast friends. We'd sit up in the early morning, pretending we didn't miss the sun, and play at dice. No one ever told us explicitly not to go out into the sun, but there was an impression that the Masters would not be pleased. No one wanted to chance the Masters' disapproval.

"When we went to class we would sit six at a time in one of the smaller buildings. The Masters would come, dressed in dark robes that covered their faces. They never carried candles. There were no scrolls or rote work at our lessons. They were more like a series of meditations. The Masters would speak extensively in a language that I didn't understand, a strange dialect of Rokugani. We would memorize what the Masters said and repeat it back. Even when we spoke as a group, the Masters always knew if one of us had missed a syllable. None of us were allowed to leave until we had managed the words in unison.

"When I first arrived, I thought of you often, Kaagi. I thought how proud you would be when I returned after putting things right. But as time passed I found myself thinking of my past less and less. It became difficult at first to remember the face of my fellow students at the Phoenix school. Then it was hard to remember father's voice. Finally, the only one I could remember clearly was you. I would dream that I came to see you as you slept, sneaking in your window and telling you about where I'd gone."

Thunder rumbles outside as he says this and I feel chilled to the bone, remembering my childhood nightmares. In my dreams monsters came through my window. I have to force my hand to stay still and not creep to my katana. As if not noticing, Iyekao continues.

"I don't know how long I stayed there before I started to see the changes. It felt like months, but it may have been weeks, or years. Without daylight, time falls into itself. Once, when the sky was as black at noon as it was at midnight, and a storm worse than this one raged outside, I awoke to find my friends standing over me. I could see that something was wrong, but at first I didn't know what. Then I realized. Their faces had changed since I first met them. It wasn't just their expressions. As I lay there, I realized with a dull horror that the features that had made them distinct, the things that marked them as 'themselves,' were fading. They still had eyes, noses, mouths, but they could have belonged

to anyone. Their faces were like pebbles that had lain in the river so long that all their sharp edges had begun to smooth over.

"I didn't dare move. One of them spoke. He asked if I wanted to play at dice. I couldn't speak, so I shook my head no, and they went away. I couldn't sleep afterwards, but I could hear them a few playing yards away. The next day, I searched frantically for anything that would show a reflection. I'd never realized it before, but there were no mirrors, polished metal or anything else reflective in the compound. I couldn't see my own face. Even the river moved too swiftly. In the dark dormitory, I took to running my hands over my face, trying to feel if it had changed.

"I had never been so terrified in my life. I started looking for a way out of the compound, but I couldn't find one. I couldn't even remember how I had gotten there. Like so much of the rest of my past, it seemed like a distant dream. It was then that boys from my dorm began moving. A couple at a time, the older ones first, they'd move to one of the other dorms. On the nights they went, there would be no classes and we were instructed to stay inside. A few new boys had appeared since I'd gotten there, but they avoided me as I'd avoided the older boys when I first arrived. I had nothing to say to them. They couldn't help me. Finally my two friends began to gather their things. They were going to move that night.

"I waited after they left for perhaps an hour, then slipped out after them. The newer boys never noticed me going. I'd long since stopped needing the candle to see by. Once outside I could smell smoke, acrid and musty at the same time, coming from the far end of the compound, near the Masters' building. I crept toward the smell and as I peered around the corner of the last building, I could see a bonfire. It was made of black wood, and it burned a muted red black, not bright like this one." He gestures to the fire that burns between us.

"All around it slid shadows, but I couldn't see the figures that cast them. It was as if the shadows were the dancers, stretching impossibly long and turning at unnatural angles. As I watched, my friends stepped forward to one side of the fire. Unable to move or breathe, I saw them walk forward, past the waiting shadow-dancers and into the blazing fires. I couldn't do anything but sag against the building and stare. A low moaning began, like the wind howling over a field of reeds, and two more shadows appeared on the other side of the flames.

"I screamed then, screamed until there was no more breath in me. Then I ran. I ran across the compound, past the dormitories and, without a second's hesitation, into the roaring river on the other side. I thought I would drown, but I didn't. I think I'd learned too much by then to die like other men. Instead, I pulled myself from the river miles further along. I've been running from them since."

I sit very still across from Iyekao. There's nothing for me to say and my tongue feels thick in my mouth. Iyekao sits with his head down and his shoulders slumped. He looks very tired. I try to gather my wits. "Brother," I say slowly, not trusting my voice. "I've seen them. I believe your story. Come with me, back to Kitsuki castle. We will find a way to hide you, to help you." I stand and hold my hand out to him. He rises as well, still looking down.

"Your offer is a generous one, but I do not think you understand what you really deal with." He looks up then, and out of the fire's flickering shadows stares a face as clean as a slate. The mouth that isn't really there says, "I've missed you, Kaagi."

My arm is faster than my frozen thoughts. The katana that I didn't realize I held flashes out and through my shadow brother in one clean stroke, cutting deep through his chest. His body collapses in a rush of smoke and I do not wait to see if it will rise again.

I feel the rain on my face before I realize that I've run outside. The water pounds down on me, cold and real, and I skid down the hillside at a breakneck speed. Grass and weeds tug at my legs and branches slap my face and chest, and I have to put the katana away after the second time I lose my footing and nearly fall on it. Lightning flashes and I realize in the brief second of light that I've lost the path. I keep running. Eventually I'll have to reach the bottom either on my feet or on my back, but I can't slow down.

As I barrel downwards I see faces in every shadow. Sokoi looks out at me, still dripping, but smiling now. Dasan's wife laughs as I stumble past her and my feet go out from under me. I tumble downwards and a twig that whizzes past me looks like the sword of Hida Kurusu and there he is smiling right in front of me. I throw myself sideways and scramble back to my feet. The fourteen-year-old Iyekao looks at me desperately from a few feet away.

"Don't leave me alone!" he pleads, and I run onward. The bandits with their deformed faces lurch through the darkness with me, clutching at my clothes.

I stumble one more time, rolling downward. As I slide through the mud, caught in one of the now flooded ravines, I see Mei, her face full of sadness and worry reaching out to me, calling my name. Her hand brushes the collar of my kimono, but doesn't grip it. Then I lose track of everything else as a shock of icy water envelops me. I've fallen into the river at the hill's base, and I can't get to the shore. The river rushes by, pulling me with it until everything is lost in a wash of darkness.

Entry 62

I find myself in a room with a low ceiling. The place smells of fish. I struggle to sit up, but there are blankets tucked tight around me, keeping my arms at my sides. "Is someone there?" I call out and almost instantly a middle-aged woman appears from around a corner. She yells a name over her shoulder, then comes toward me. Sunlight streams through an open window on the far side of the room.

"Are you well?" she asks keeping her eyes politely downcast. She loosens the blankets. Just then a man comes around the corner. His clothes are well-cut but simple.

"I am Ashiki, headman of Shiro Kishi Mura. You are in my house, Sama, and have been for the last several days. You were found by the bank of White Shore Lake and have been suffering from fever since then." The woman, his wife I assume, offers me water. It's cool and fresh and I drink it down in grateful gulps. "Please stay here as long as you like, sir," Ashiki continues. "Is there somewhere we should send a message to?"

"No, thank you," I tell him. I sit up slowly, my head swimming and aching at the same time. "I'm going home." And I mean it. Ashiki provides me with plenty of food and tea for my trip. He also gives me a new set of clothes. I don't know where he might have gotten them. The quality is quite good. Most of my possessions were too badly soaked to salvage, but my journal is intact, although the box is heavily warped with water and I have to work the lid loose slowly. The interior pages have not been badly damaged.

Entry 63

For several days, I've been on the road, traveling to Kitsuki castle. I've stopped for a day at a small village near the border between Dragon and Unicorn lands. Another few days' walk and I should be home. I've been updating my journal as I travel. It is only after I read what I have written that I remember some of the details of my meeting with the thing that looked like Iyekao. My trip down the mountainside is still vague, like a bad dream. The worst is seeing Mei at the end of it all. Was it a trick of the shadows to make her appear? Was Hiroru wrong? Did they take her at Ichime castle? Did she ever reach the Kitsuki? My thoughts chase each other through my head and I know that I will not be at peace till I have gotten home and heard her voice again.

Pleased to be so near the end of my journey, I go for an easy walk out at the market. It is good to be in the sunlight again, and with people. I've been troubled with strange dreams on my travels. I suspect that the fever still lingers. In my sleep, I find myself in the compound that Iyekao described. I recite the words of the dark masters and walk through buildings made of slick, dark wood.

I nearly walk into a woman carrying a basket laden with cloth. I step aside and she passes, bowing her apologies. I realize I've been paying no attention to where I've been going. Looking around to get my bearings, I see a familiar figure step around the corner about a block ahead. The head turns and Iyekao smiles at me, nods, and then steps back behind the wall.

At first I can do nothing but try to breathe. Then, without a backward glance, I run full tilt back to my inn, grab my things and leave the village as quickly as possible.

Entry 64

Two days have passed since I saw Iyekao in the marketplace. I've been walking since then, stopping only when I have to sleep. The dreams have gotten worse. Each time I close my eyes I see the bonfire. And each time, I'm nearer to it than before. Last night as I slept, I stood so close to it that I could feel the flames. The shadows lurched around me, urging me forward.

Entry 65

I'm one day from Kitsuki castle, and I know that this is as near as I'll ever be allowed. I know what the dreams are. They aren't nightmares, and they aren't leftovers from the fever. They're initiating me somehow as I sleep. It was Iyekao in my nightmares as a child, not my brother Iyekao, but the monster he was becoming. He may have drawn them to me, I don't know, but somehow I've caught their attention and I can't seem to shake it.

I realized it yesterday. I was walking along the road when a peasant woman came in view from the other direction. As she approached I smiled and gave a polite greeting. She started to reply, but then she looked at me. She stopped in mid-word and mid-stride. Her eyes grew wide and her hand moved up to her face, running over it slowly as if making certain that

everything was as it should be. My own hand crept upward, moving over my mouth, my nose, my cheek, and a cold sweat broke out all along my body. I ran past her and she only stood still, staring after me. When I'd put some distance between us, I threw my pack to the ground, throwing things out of it. Finally I found the small metal mirror I keep for shaving.

Staring into it I could see the changes already. The face was a man's, but it wasn't mine. It could have been anyone's.

It could have been everyone's.

I think I know how they do it now. I've been learning in my sleep. After all this time chasing shadows, they've let me catch up, and now I can't get away. They're taking everything that is me, a piece at a time. They take it and make it a part of themselves. In turn, I am becoming a part of them. I'll grow indistinct until I have no identity of my own, no name, no face. Then I'll be one of them, able to take any shape, because I have none of my own. They could do it quicker, easier, like they did with Sokoi. They took what they wanted from his weak child's mind, then they sank him in the pond and took his form. I know because they've told me. But it's better if they have time. If they have the time to take you properly, they can keep all of you.

There's a boy traveling toward the castle, carrying rice. He's waiting now while I finish this last entry. Then I'll give him the journal and the rest of my money, and he'll take it to Kitsuki Castle. They have to know what has happened, that the threat exists.

The Shadow doesn't want me to do this. Already, I can feel their influence. But I can trick them. The state of meditation that I use to keep my journal blocks their sight for a moment. If I'm very careful I can still hide things from them...

Good luck to you, my fellow Kitsuki.

I only hope this helps you to protect yourselves.





FRIENDS FOREVER

The PCs meet with a magistrate named Shiba Tosuko, whom most of them are only aware of by reputation. They are assigned to assist Tosuko with a very delicate negotiation between the Crab and the Unicorn. Unknown to anyone, Tosuko has been replaced by the Darkness. One of the PCs does know Shiba Tosuko from their past (an old love affair, childhood playmates or companions at a bushi school). The two families are familiar with Tosuko, and will allow only her to perform the negotiation.

The Darkness will have try to remove the PCs or abandon Shiba Tosuko before the PCs uncover the switch. However, if there are any implications of *maho*, foul play, or misdeeds in the negotiations, the two families (Hida and Iuchi) will go to war, possibly dragging their clans with them. Although Tosuko has been replaced by a Goju, the Goju's current duty is to keep the clans from war - by any means. Is revealing the deception worth the lives which will be destroyed if Tosuko is lost?

GM Notes: Conclusion

The Beginning

When Mother Sun and Father Moon gave names to all that they beheld, something, a little slip of nothing, did not want a name.

- Goju's Celestial Agonies

The Living Darkness is literally as old as the world. In fact, it is the last remainder of the primordial stuff that made up the universe before form and shape gave definition and repetition to everything.

Because the Living Darkness never took a name, it was never bound to a shape. In its purest form, the Darkness has changed little in the passing millennia. It is a single entity. It is aware. And more recently, it is hungry. The Darkness has no shape of its own, but at some point in time, perhaps by accident, it stumbled into a formed, sentient entity. It no longer matters if that first consumption was man or animal. The darkness discovered that what it ate, it could be without losing its "nothingness". And by being, it could affect.

The Living Darkness has changed little in the scheme of things, but it has changed steadily. It absorbs all that it destroys, keeping and mingling the memories and minds, the victories and the vices of its prey. The individual personalities of its victims have no impact on the whole. Similar to dropping a coin into the ocean, the impact is too small to be noticed by any but the coin and its owner. But over time, the basic, consistent nature of its quarry has touched the Darkness.

In a very real sense, the prey has taught the hunter. The nature of the Darkness has shifted

with the ages in which it's fed. When men roamed in open fields of grass and faced each dawn with the single concern of seeking out sustenance and a safe place to sleep, the Darkness did the same. When men settled in villages and began to cultivate his fields and domesticate his animals, the Darkness learned contentment. Eventually, men's villages became cities, and he raised armies to defend them and to go out and take the lands of other men. From this age, the Darkness has learned ambition and the value of power.

The Darkness' hunger has grown specific. Like a hound, it scents power as if it were blood. This doesn't mean that the Living Darkness is out to devour every *daimyo* and *karo* in Rokugan. Real power doesn't always rest with those in positions of authority. It strikes one at a time, selectively taking targets that may have no apparent worth in and of themselves. Like a game of Go, a stone placed in the beginning of the game can win the day.

Some have speculated that the Darkness seeks the key to Rokugani magic, because that is where real power lies. Since it was never properly named, the Darkness remains outside the natural order, and so has no real connection to it. Fearful voices have whispered that it is raising armies of nameless legions to march on and enslave humanity. Still others fear that the Darkness seeks to steal so many names that it eventually undoes the act of creation performed by Lady Sun and Father Moon, returning everything to the primal state in which the Darkness itself exists.

Evidence can be found to support any and all of these claims. People in places of high office have been taken, but so have those who were apparently of no account. There are very few people in Rokugan who are even aware of the existence of the Darkness. And of those, fewer still have any real understanding of what it is doing. If the Darkness has a single, defined objective, no one has yet been able to determine what it might be. It may not even be possible for anyone who has lived out less than one life to comprehend the machinations of an entity with countless years and lifetimes behind it.

The Scorpion Connection

Not surprisingly, the ones who have the most knowledge of the nameless entity are the Scorpion. Specifically, there are those among the Shosuro family that know of a Shadow deeper than the one they walk in. First year Shosuro ninja cadets are all called for a special review at the end of each year. They stand in a line, shoulder to shoulder, no man touching another. They do this just at twilight. While the students wait, their teachers all stand before them, swathed in full cloaks, the same gray as the dusk. With them is another figure, dressed in the same cloak but seemingly darker, as if the fading light of day refuses to touch him. This stranger walks down the line and, reaching out with one long, dark hand, touches each of the recruits in turn.

To some, the touch is feather light, as if a mild breeze had slipped past them. Others experience a deep chill and afterwards find patches like frostbite on their skin where the fingers rested. On rare occasions, some have been known to go mad on the spot, frothing and convulsing on the ground. Their fellow students tell of their faces warping and their limbs twisting as if their bodies could no longer reconcile themselves to their own shape. The families of these students are sent polite letters explaining that their offspring did not survive the training process. But always one or two students do not return for exercises the next day. Their fellow students are informed that they have gone away for specialized schooling. The parents of these students also receive a

letter saying that their children will not be returning home.

The truth is that Darkness still remembers its old bargain with Shosuro. When the first Thunders walked into the Shadowlands to fight the dark might of Fu Leng, only Shosuro returned. Most Rokugani know the story of how Shosuro lived just long enough to pass on the black scrolls before succumbing to her wounds. But there are those among the Scorpion Clan who tell a different ending. They whisper that Shosuro returned changed, and that the day Shosuro was seen no more was the day that Soshi appeared with his shadow brands.



TYPICAL DREAM MANIFESTATION

EARTH: 4
WATER: 4
FIRE: 3 Intelligence 4
AIR: 3
VOID: 0
School/Rank: None
Honor: 0
Glory: 0
Shadow Points: 5

Skills: Defense 4,
Etiquette 3, Hand-to-Hand 3,
Kenjutsu 3, Lore:
Shadowlands 2, Sincerity 3,
Seduction 5

Typically, a Shadow manifestation within a dream will take the form of whatever will be most effective – a dreadful monster, a friend, a lover, or a daimyo or other authority figure.

If necessary, the Living Darkness will manifest skills to match those of the individual or creature it is representing in the dream (a troll, for example, would have a strength of 6 or more). However, as the purpose of the dream is to frighten or entice, the Shadow will do whatever is most likely to evoke an emotional reaction... and gain the Darkness a foothold.



KAAGI'S BROTHER

Kaagi's brother is a classic example of Shadow absorption. Determined to gain the strength to hurt his enemies, whatever the cost, Iyekao was a perfect choice for the Darkness. His obsession unbalanced him. The fact that he came looking for power made him even more willing.

What Iyekao didn't understand was that by the time he had the power to do what he wished, he would no longer belong to himself enough to remember what he had wanted to do. There is no way to know for certain how much, if any, of the individual is left after this process. The Darkness can call on the likeness of the pawn whenever it chooses. But does the likeness carry any of the character of the original, or is it only an illusion brought about by the close imitation?

(Continued)

SOSHI AND THE DARKNESS

After Shosuro's very public demise in the Emperor's palace, her body was carried back to Scorpion lands. Her clothes and mask were burned in a very private ceremony, attended only by Bayushi, a few of his closest advisors, and a young shugenja that had not previously appeared in Bayushi's court. However, there were no witnesses to the cremation of Shosuro's actual body.

As the badly wounded Shosuro was struggling on the long trip out of the Shadowlands, she realized she would not reach the lands of the Empire. But Shosuro had been aware for several days of a strange presence that had watched the entire battle with Fu Leng, and had never made itself known. Sensing it nearby, and knowing that the black scrolls must reach Rokugan, Shosuro called out to the presence.

The Living Darkness had followed Shosuro and the other Thunders since they entered the Shadowlands. Whether it was drawn by a strength previously unknown to it, or knew of their coming, the legends do not say. Shosuro is said to have claimed that it watched as they fought and defeated Fu Leng. When the last Thunder began to make her way back to where she'd come from, it followed her. The Darkness was hungry for so great a power, so painfully close. But it could sense that even at the moment of death and greatest pain, it was still too small to overtake them.

When Shosuro called for the Darkness to come, it went to her eagerly. Although Shosuro did not recognize what she had found, she knew that it may hold her only hope of escape. It spoke to her without words, and offered strength – in exchange for servitude.

"I will give you what you cannot take," Shosuro offered. "But it will be on my terms or not at all."

And so the Darkness gave itself to Shosuro, and she gave herself to it, and together, they re-entered Rokugan. Shosuro knew the danger of what she brought, but she also had seen the carnage wrought by the Evil Kami. If it were a choice between Fu Leng's return, or the slow invasion of Shadow, she preferred the Darkness.

She had no concept of the immensity of her decision. Although the Nameless Darkness seemed small and weak, she could not have conceived the strength to which it would grow...

over a thousand years, and a thousand nameless souls.

Shosuro placed her confidence in Rokugan's ability to find some way, over time, to fight back the Darkness. But even a Scorpion can't always strike the perfect bargain. In her desperation, Shosuro over-estimated her ability to control her shadow.

She returned as she'd planned, and delivered the black scrolls, but she also carried something more. In the bag with the scrolls, she carried an item which the Darkness coveted, a hand made of a blackness so deep it seemed made of shadow itself. Given to her by the Darkness, the Obsidian Hand held not only the flesh of a God, but a piece of the soul of the Shadow.

After her scene at Otsan Uchi, Shosuro playacted her own demise, the perfect way to keep her secrets within the Scorpion Clan. Bayushi, her most trusted ally, had her 'body' brought to Scorpion lands where Shosuro took on the identity of Soshi, a shugenja capable of a new kind of magic. The magic of Darkness. The brands which Shosuro/Soshi gave to her allies, her servants and her children is drawn from the very Shadow substance in Soshi's own body and spirit. Of the souls it touches, one in fifteen are taken by the Darkness... never to return. These nameless souls have been the price of Shosuro's bargain for a thousand years.

Soshi, now ensconced in his identity as Bayushi's new head shugenja, assisted his lord in the construction of Bayushi castle. But that was where the plan began to fade.

Soshi had intended to keep the Darkness subjugated to his will, using it as he had always used others. But Soshi now found himself becoming further and further lost from his old life. He began to suspect that the very idea of taking on a new identity was not his own, but the Darkness'. In this new identity, everything was less sure than it had been, and foothold was all the Darkness required. Suddenly, all of Soshi's identities began to muddle, each one trying to break away as the Darkness offered each in turn its own chance at power. The control that Soshi had mastered began to unravel as the distraught Bayushi watched helplessly.

Prowling ears could hear voices coming from Soshi's chambers late into the night. Bayushi's voice would ask questions, sometimes outlandish, other times bizarrely simple. He would ask after the nature of shadow, and how one could walk on

nothing. Then he would plead to know Soshi's favorite season, sounding as if his heart would break.

Sometimes it was Soshi's voice that answered, but other times, it might be any of a dozen other voices, men and women. And on occasion, the listener might even believe that it was the dead Shosuro's voice that answered.

Still, Soshi continued their ruse. He appeared in court regularly at the side of Bayushi, and introduced *Shinobi*, shadow magic, to the Scorpion. But Bayushi was never quite the same, seeming always a little sad, a little distracted.



Goju

The story of the lost family of Goju is unknown to the Empire, and even the Ikoma cannot tell the tale. Goju's singular work on the Darkness, the *Celestial Agonies*, was never shared with the Clans. The Scorpion have no record of it among their secrets, the Ikoma libraries do not know of it, and even the Emperor's records do not contain a copy of the Black Text.

Little is known of the Goju, save for small mentions of a mortal by that name, at the beginning of the world. (Even Hiroru knew next to nothing of them, as seen in Kaagi's journal.) When the *kami* chose their Great Clans, Goju fled in terror, hoping to escape the *kami*'s influence. Perhaps it was Goju's weakness that drew the Darkness to him, or perhaps it recognized Goju's fear as kin to its own. It is certain that the Goju are not a 'family,' at least, not anymore. Although they may have all once been descended from the original Goju, they are certainly no longer simply

composed of relatives. Instead, the Goju include his descendants, as well as those transformed by the Darkness who desperately seek to retain their name. Sorcerers of shadow, they are all that the Shosuro wish to be, but cannot attain. Where Shosuro had her Bayushi, the Goju had no such undying loyalty, nothing to keep them from turning fully to the Lying Darkness.

Their magic is not *maho*, nor is it the way of the Kami (both of which the lost minions of the Shadow are incapable of using). It is true *Shinobi*, the art of twisting reality by giving form to formlessness, and removing form to create substance. There are no members of the Goju family who are not Shadow corrupted, and they remain loyal to their dark ally through all its incarnations. They expect nothing more than to be taken by the Darkness (and thus, given a form of immortality) when they have served their use. This strange mutation of *bushido* serves the Lying Darkness well, and it uses its minions mercilessly.

The Goju allow the Shadow to take them as it pleases, and use their power for as long as the

KAAGI'S BROTHER (CONTINUED)

It is bad enough if Kaagi's brother is long dead and only his image appears to taunt his sibling. How much worse is it if he retains his memories, a phantom of himself, but is unable to do other than the Darkness directs?

Another victim of this technique is Ninube. In the third adventure, Ninube had too little ambition to go willingly to the Dark, but her fear proved her undoing. Terrified past rational thought, her own panic created a doorway for the very thing she feared. The Darkness had several weeks during which to make the girl its own.

Because the only information which the Kitsuki have on the Shadow minions is from Kaagi's journal, they have begun calling all twisted or sorcerous minions of the Darkness 'Goju,' and all ninja who practice shapeshifting or mimicry are known as 'Ninube.' Although their information isn't quite accurate (Ninube became a Goju), the appellation have become canon.



THE POWERS OF CRYSTAL

When the Unicorn were returning from the Burning Sands they encountered the Darkness for the first time.

(See the *Fourth Investigation*.) They determined that their own magic and charms did not affect it, but crystal did. Specifically, light from the sun, or from flame, refracted through the facets of the crystal would reveal the Darkness for what it was.

The other properties are as follows:

The Darkness cannot pass through Crystal as it can through other solid objects.

It has never been recorded, but conceivably a large enough burst of light through the crystal could effectively dispel a shadow manifestation if the majority of its mass were affected.

(Continued)

Shadow allows them to exist. In return, the Shadow has taught the Goju its deepest secrets and most powerful horrors. They are the masters of *shinobi*, but servants of the greater Shadow. The bandits which Kaagi met in the Unicorn Chase were most likely led by Goju, fanatic bushi completely willing to die to free their companion.

All true Goju have a Void of 0, representing their separation from the Sun and Moon, and the Darkness's theft of their innermost identity.

Ninja

It is important to note that not every ninja is a part of the Living Darkness. Nor is every Shosuro training facility a home to it. But there are places that few have seen where young men and women train in a stranger form of stealth than at most Shosuro schools.

The Living Darkness gives some of its substance to the Shosuro family; out of this they craft their Shadow Brands, calling on the formlessness of the Darkness itself. Shadow brands are a diluted form of the raw Shadow substance that the Darkness uses when it creates minions. Although the Shosuro claim the 'dye' is made from the leaves of a poisonous plant, the truth is that even they do not know what the 'brands' are created from. The leaves of the plant they use stain the skin, true, but easily washes away. When the brands are administered, during the *tejina* ceremonies, the *kage yakiin* is applied, first with the plant, and then... with Darkness.

Because the art of *kage-yakiin*, or *kage-do*, uses only a fraction of the Darkness, it takes longer for the branded individual to be affected. It requires two shadow brands to achieve one Shadow point (see pages 153-156). Once this occurs, the individual in question has the attention of the Living Darkness, and each subsequent brand equals one more Shadow point.

A messenger of Darkness comes every year and chooses a handful of Shosuro students to be its arms and legs, its eyes and ears. These students finish training in isolated compounds. The buildings, all one story, are built of a slick, black wood unlike that found anywhere else in Rokugan. The students live in a dormitory, sleeping through the days and attending classes at night. Their masters, all identical in appearance, teach them to become one with the dark. As the students learn of the Darkness, it

learns them as well, so that by the end of their 'training' they have become a part of the Darkness. It can then use their forms at will, wear their faces, know what they knew. This is the first of the three forms of Possession.

The Powers of the Darkness

The Darkness's best weapon is its very nature, being unbound to a single shape. It can look like anyone or anything, becoming solid in whatever form it chooses, familiar or bestial. Or it can take no shape at all, free to move through solid substances. In its natural un-form, regular weapons can't harm it, although if it is assuming a material shape and does not want to give up the ruse, it may feign injury. Jade and most conventional magics are also ineffectual. Despite its resemblance to shadows and its mimicry of them, the nature of the Darkness is not affected by normal light.

However, light reflected through the facets of crystal shines through any representation or manifestation of the Living Darkness, and injures its physical minions.

The Darkness is in a unique position of extreme power mixed with strict limitations. Because it exists outside the natural order of things, it can only directly affect those who invite it into themselves. However, over the years it has learned craft and through that, it knows a hundred ways to work its way through those openings. The Darkness will attempt to find a weak spot, a place where it can gain a hook in its intended prey. Once it has done so, it is free to attempt to use its powers. The greater the Darkness's hold, the easier it becomes to affect the individual in the future.

However, if the Darkness cannot gain some advantage with its intended prey, then it can affect them only through its minions, men and women that have allowed it in, and so have given it control over them. The Goju make the perfect weapons for the Darkness in cases such as these.

WHAT MAKES A CHARACTER VULNERABLE

The Darkness looks for things that are unbalanced in people. The best defense is a passive one. Having a high Void rank goes a long



way toward protecting a person from the Darkness. Characters with any obsessive qualities are more susceptible. Also, letting desire or ambition cloud their judgment, and accepting gifts from the Darkness, gives it a clear road in.

Another tool of the Living Darkness is fear. The fear that made it hide from the Sun and the Moon is the only legitimate feeling it has ever experienced. Everything else has been an imitation of the feelings and sensations it has witnessed in those around it. But it understands fear, and associates fear with power since its own terror of Sun and Moon keeps it hidden still. Through the years the Darkness has become expert at invoking the deep sense of horror that makes its victims more vulnerable.

There are three methods by which the Darkness grows. Each has its own strengths and weaknesses. And any one of these can be practiced on man or beast.

ABSORPTION

This is the most time-consuming, but also the most profitable course. Absorption is an intimate process by which the Darkness draws the victim in a piece at a time, slowly stealing away everything that makes him or her an individual. Sometimes this process is voluntary (as it is with

the Shosuro cadets), although the victim normally doesn't understand the enormity of what is occurring. The Darkness lures in the victim, either by giving them special abilities or by breaking down their barriers, emotionally and mentally.

The object of the Possession gradually finds that they do not remember certain things about their lives: their favorite color, the name of their sister, which knee they scarred as a child. Outwardly, they also become less and less themselves. Their features lose their distinctiveness until there is nothing that identifies them from any other face. Eventually, these features will slip away, leaving only a physical shell as smooth as a pebble. By the time this occurs, the Darkness has completely stolen their identity, taking it as its own.

After this has been accomplished, the Darkness may use any knowledge or ability that the victim possessed. (This does not include sorcerous abilities; being outside the laws of nature, the Living Darkness is unable to wield the raw elemental forces that constitute Rokugani magic.) It can also wear the form whenever it chooses. When the Shadow does this, the form is, for all intents, solid. It can be touched, smelled, etc. But it can also be unraveled whenever convenient. Rokugan is filled with stories of the ninja shape shifter, a creature able to wear any

THE POWERS OF CRYSTAL (CONTINUED)

Light projected in this manner on physical minions of the Darkness causes them harm. They suffer 1 die of Wounds for every round they are subjected to the light.

As near as anyone can tell, the light reflected through the faceted crystal gains a greater complexity than the Darkness can combat. It can fool the eye, but cannot compensate for so many variables, like a chameleon trying to blend into an ever changing pattern.

Another theory is that the Darkness mistakes the light for the eye of Lord Moon coming suddenly to focus on it, a fate it fears above all else.



© 1992 MCM Publications



TYPICAL GOJU

EARTH 3

WATER 3

Strength 4

FIRE 2

AIR 1

Reflexes 3

VOID 0

Shadow points: 1-5

Probable Skills:

Archery, Battle, Defense,
Etiquette, Hand-to-Hand,
History, Iaijutsu, Kenjutsu,

The two 'types' of Goju differ only in background and skills – a Goju who is born from their sorcerous family will be raised among the servants of the Darkness (those who are losing their identity), while a corrupted and converted minion will have the skills and rings which they attained during their previous existence, before their personality and distinctness began to be removed (such as Ninube).

All Goju have a Void of 0, reflecting the loss of their identity. At first, they have names as normal Rokugani, but as they fall further to the Darkness, these are lost, and they go by their personal name, and eventually only their profession. (such as Spy, Kidnapper, or Thief)

form of its choosing and to disappear like smoke. In actuality, there is no limit to the numbers of these beings because they are not separate entities at all, but extensions of the Living Darkness.

The best defense against this kind of attack is a passive one. The higher a character's Void ranking, the more difficult it will be for the Living Darkness to affect them. When Kaagi finds Mei in the garden during the first adventure she expresses confusion about where she's been and what she's been doing. This is typical of someone whom the Darkness has tried to gain a foothold in. Characters who spend time alone in the presence of the Darkness will experience similar confusion. Even if their Void is high enough to prevent their being taken, their minds will be fuddled as if waking from a deep sleep.

MIMICRY

The Darkness can also mimic any form it chooses. The individual being copied is not

affected in any way by this copying process. However, if the Darkness intends to keep the form for any length of time and does not want to chance interference, it may do away with the original, either destroying the body or leaving it somewhere it won't be found.

Although this method is much easier and requires almost no time, the Darkness does not receive any of the benefits of absorption. It cannot draw on the memories and abilities of the victim, and the copy is poorer, since the Darkness has only what it has observed to draw from. Intimate acquaintances will notice things awry. The eye color may not be exact. The copy may be left-handed instead of right. And it will have none of the victim's knowledge to draw on. However, if the *doppelgänger* is dealing only with those who did not know the original, the facade may hold up very well.

This is the case with young Sokoi in the first investigation. The real Sokoi actually did drown in the garden pond several years before the story begins. The Darkness, seeing that he might be useful in the future, took his form and did away with the child's body.

But it did so without taking the time for a full absorption. After all, the only one likely to notice any subtle difference is the boy's mother, a woman whose eyesight is fading already and who tends to ignore disturbing details rather than pursue them. When the Shadow is done, it simply vanishes, allowing Sokoi's real body (kept all this time under the water) to resurface, thus avoiding suspicion as to his whereabouts.

CORRUPTION

The Darkness also keeps physical minions. It imparts special abilities to a willing vessel, in return for the





target's service. However, the nature of the Darkness's formlessness is eventually incompatible with material forms. Physical side effects result after only a brief time in this kind of relationship. Much like the Shosuro cadets who were unable to withstand the touch of the Darkness, these vessels begin to shift. Their features do not fade, but they cease to fit, giving the faces an asymmetrical, deformed quality. The bodies respond in kind; one leg becomes too long, or the fingers on a hand no longer all bend the same direction. These minions are extensions of the Living Darkness, and as such, their forms are subject to its will. Initially, the Darkness can exert sufficient control over the minion's form to keep it from degrading very badly. Eventually maintaining the extension's integrity requires too much attention from the Darkness. When this happens, it withdraws its support entirely, leaving the minion to its fate in a body which no longer possesses enough cohesiveness to function. These creatures don't normally last more than a few hours or days before expiring horribly, their limbs and internal organs twisted and rearranged.

The Shadow bandits (Goju) in the third and fourth investigations are examples of Corruption. In exchange for their loyalty, the Darkness moves them at incredible speeds, using its influence on them to make them briefly less substantial. This allows them to attack and disappear at amazing rates. The Darkness also gave them fantastic powers of stealth, advanced bodily functions such as exceptional hearing or sight, and even limited *shinobi* abilities when they were prepared and had proven their loyalty. Most of the bandits have almost outlived their usefulness, and are moving into the last stages of cohesion.

THE DARKNESS IN DREAMS

The Darkness has learned that humans are more susceptible to suggestion while asleep. It is not an unusual tactic for it to visit its victims in dreams, offering them gifts that they might never accept in the waking world, or else bringing them such extreme nightmares that they are emotionally distraught after waking.

Any Void resistance rolls made to resist the Shadow while asleep are at TN + 10. Also, if the dreamer suffers from fear effects while under attack from the Darkness in their sleep, they will be unable to use Void the next day, giving the Darkness an advantage.

In the second adventure, the Darkness wears the form of the corrupted Hida Dasan to engage the PCs in combat while they sleep. It plays on the Rokugani fear of the dead, trying to do as much damage as it can to the character's psyches while they sleep.

In the fourth adventure, Shinjo Renari dies from the Darkness as it attacks him in a dream. If a manifestation of the Darkness 'physically' attacks someone in their dreams, and is successful in 'killing' them there, the character must make a Void roll at TN 5 (the player should make this roll without knowing what TN they are attempting to reach – it provides more suspense, and enhances the feeling of risk). If they fail, they will genuinely die, leaving marks such as the ones found on Renari – hand prints, bruises, claw marks from the inside. The Darkness rarely attempts this, as it is an obvious, clumsy and ineffective – the Shadow's ultimate goal is not to kill, but to absorb. Anything less is a waste of effort.

A more terrifying and insidious example of the Darkness's use of dreams comes at the end of the final entry of Kaagi's journal. The Kitsuki magistrate, trained all his life in extreme mental and emotional discipline, finds himself drawn through the Darkness's initiation rituals during his slumbers, when his defenses are removed, and his mind is functioning in its most primitive state.

Much as Ujina is vulnerable because of his relationship with Ninube, Kaagi's brother becomes a similar liability. By maintaining an emotional link with someone who already belongs to the Darkness, you leave yourself open to attack. When the Darkness wears the form of someone dear to you, you must make your Void resistance roll at a TN + 5.

SHADOW BOLTS

When the Darkness gives power to a minion, it spreads some of its own substance into the pawn. The receptacle's own body struggles to contain the darkness and keep its own form, but this can only be maintained for a limited period of time.

The Darkness uses a similar techniques as an attack. A fully corrupted minion (6 Shadow Points) can fling a solid bolt of its own material at a target, once per day. A physical creature struck by this attack experiences in an instant what takes weeks, months, or even years for a corrupted individual to undergo.

DISADVANTAGED?

The Living Darkness takes care to seek out those individuals who are already susceptible to its complex machinations. It finds people who are out of balance, whose spirits are weak because of their past experiences or their volatile personalities.

Several disadvantages in the L5R RPG reflect 'passions' which the Shadow uses to get into a character's soul. A character with these disadvantages is more likely to have the Shadow interfere in his or her life, and these weaknesses are targeted and exploited by the Darkness at any opportunity. As GM, you should be sure to target these characters with exceptional persistence... after all, that's why they got those free points.

Heart of Vengeance
Bad Health
Curse of the Kami
Momoku
Chemical Dependency
Compulsion
Driven
Frail Mind
Phobia
Forgotten



HIRORU'S KIMONO

Matsu Hiroru wears a *gi* made of pure crystal. It is an ancient item, claimed to date back to the time before the Kami. The item, woven by Lady Doji for her nephew, the son of Hantei, is said to be made of Lady Sun's hair, which she used to wipe away her tears while crying over her lost children. It is mentioned in folklore and legend as a sacred item, blessed by the Sun.

It raises its wearer's TN to be hit by 15. Further, if its wearer expends a Void point, it can shift, chameleon-like, to match its background perfectly so long as the user does not move faster than a slow walk.

If someone already knows the user is there, they may attempt to locate them with a simple Perception roll at a TN of 30, but cannot re-roll 10s for this attempt.

Lastly, its wearer cannot be seen at all by those with 3 or more Shadow points, and is more resistant (+10 to their Void roll) to their mental attacks.

A minion of the Living Darkness which creates shadow bolts rolls 5k5 against their chosen target's TN to be hit. If the bolt hits, their opponent must roll their Void against the Shadow's To-Hit roll. If they are unsuccessful in matching the number, they receive 3k3 Wounds as the shadow bolt enters their body, exploding with the raw stuff of nothing. Further shadow-bolts will continue to harm them, until they find themselves literally unforming where they stand, their features and limbs slipping out of place until they physically break into nothing.

A recipient of a shadow bolt who successfully resists the damaging effects of the attack is still injected with the Darkness. The Shadow will always know where the character is, and the character will be plagued by nightmares, manifestations and other attacks by the Darkness, as it attempts to complete the conversion. They will feel occasional hands within their body, pressing outward, and their vision will shift and change from time to time. In effect, they will never be rid of the Living Shadow, and it will never allow them to be free of its influence. Their body will begin a slow breakdown, resulting in a subtle shifting of features, and the rise of unusual marks or slightly shortened (or lengthened) fingers, toes, or limbs.

Because shadow bolts are not physical, they can not be removed with medicine or surgical skills, even if an entire limb is amputated. There is no physical sign of the infestation other than the faint 'twisting' of the body, and there is absolutely no sign of Shadowlands Taint.

Only a full manifestation of the actual Darkness can perform the shadow bolts. Minions, creatures with less than 6 shadow points, don't have the capacity.

THE SWARM AND OTHER PHYSICAL MANIFESTATIONS

The Darkness cannot create new ideas, but it can imitate anything it has observed, and since the world was created, it has had quite a lot of time. In the third investigation, the Darkness shows itself as an owl with Ninube's voice. Later it attacks Ujina as a swarm of flying, stinging creatures that partially devour him.

In both of these instances, it is reproducing creatures it has seen, but altering them slightly to suit itself. The swarm is similar to any mass of flying insects, but it performs as an extension of the Darkness' whole being.

The Lying Darkness can also create a pocket of blackness, the absence of light, by un-naming the things that the affected observer sees. This is a temporary process, lasting only a few moments. The Darkness is actually only borrowing the name briefly, but by doing so creates an isolated void, a small space of nothing. The intended effect is to unnerve the target, pushing for yet another opening through which to insinuate itself.

DARKER POSSIBILITIES

There are rumors of one more manifestation of the Living Darkness. Isawa Kaede's mother, Ninube was a manifestation of the Darkness, but her father was a human man. Kaede's father, the Master of Void, named her at birth, and seems to have banished the Shadows from her, leaving her entirely human. But this known incident leaves open the possibility of other similar occurrences. As of yet, there is no definitive understanding of what a child half human and half Shadow might be capable of. Perhaps Kaede, child of a Goju (Doji Ninube, mother of the recent Ninube line of *shinobi*) and a mortal, will know in time.

THE WEAKNESSES OF DARKNESS

Aside from avoiding the Living Darkness, maintaining a high Void ranking, and trying to stay clear of temptation, there is very little a player can do against a direct manifestation. The only defense which has been discovered so far came back from the Burning Sands with the Unicorn.

When her children were all devoured, Lady Sun cried, and her tears fell to earth. When Hantei cut open the Moon's stomach, drops of his blood fell and mixed with the tears, creating men. However, not all of Lady Sun's tears mixed with Lord Moon's blood. Those that fell to the ground and lay alone slowly hardened, until they were bright, clear stones... crystal. These remnants of the Sun still have enough of a kinship with their owner to affect the Darkness. They still possess a fragment of her True Sight. This is why light refracted through crystal can see through the Darkness. It's also why the Living Darkness can't pass through crystal. The substance is older even than the Darkness.

Characters may not be able to use this as a very potent weapon against the Darkness, but it may buy them a bit of time, or protect them from some of the minor manifestations. Even in small

doses, it is helpful in determining whether someone is a part of the Living Darkness.

In the fourth investigation, the Unicorn use it as a test to see if Kaagi is real or not. If the light strikes a creature corrupted by the darkness, it causes them 3k2 Wounds. Physical minions and those not fully converted can also be fought and destroyed by conventional means. Some attacks will be more effective than others depending on which abilities the Darkness has granted them.

There are several things that the Game Master must consider when using the Living Darkness in their game. It is more powerful than the characters. It is not a fair enemy. It is not something that can be foiled and defeated once and for all. The Darkness is a primal force. The PCs cannot stop typhoons from occurring. All they can do is weather any given storm.

In short, the PCs cannot completely defeat the Darkness as an entity, so don't put them in a position where they have to. The Darkness is a capricious enemy. Its motives are vague and its methods are obscure. The characters' exposure should therefore be limited to dealing with specific incidents.

The Darkness and Your PCs

It is critical to remember that having a PC absorbed by the Shadow is tantamount to killing the character. (You, the GM, take control of the character to use it as a pawn of the Darkness.) Therefore, the same cautions and considerations that apply to killing the PC need to apply here as well. When you're using the Darkness in your game, the characters should feel as if they are threatened in a very real way. There should be consequences to their actions and their inactions alike. However, before a character is devoured, they should have put their own foot into things.

The Darkness is an intimate enemy. For it to use many of its powers on an individual, the character needs to have given it an opportunity. Dangle carrots for your players. Give them the chance to open their own door to the enemy. If they do so, regularly, then the chances of the Darkness gaining a foothold is increased.

There are a number of ways to tempt your characters, some subtle, some not. In the third investigation, most of the things that really go awry do injury directly to Ujina. This happens because he already has a weak spot that allows the Darkness an opening. In Ujina's case, the weakness is his affection for Ninube, who has already become a pawn.

SHADOW POINTS	ABILITY	DESCRIPTION
1	Stealth	The PC receives a bonus of 2 dice, rolled and kept, to any actions which involve stealth.
2	Swiftiness	The PC can travel quickly across small or great distances (up to a number of feet equal to 100 x their total Shadow points) instantly, up to a number of times equal to their Shadow points. Their body moves as shadow; stepping into one patch of darkness and out another (both shadows must be large enough to encompass the character's normal form). They may not pass through solid objects with this ability (see below).
3	Insubstantiality	As the PC becomes increasingly attuned to the Darkness they can become less solid, allowing them to take half damage from normal weapons, but they receive twice normal damage from crystal weapons. Further, they may (with 1 round of concentration) pass through solid objects with a successful Stamina roll at TN of 5 (paper), 10 (wood), 20 (stone), 30 (metal or flesh) a number of times per day equal to their Shadow points.
4	Mimicry	This is the last stage at which the player still retains control of the character. They still have much of their minds, but are on the edge of losing control of their bodies, which are becoming twisted and obviously mutated. This less solid state allows them to duplicate the Darkness' trick of mimicry, appearing as anyone they have observed. The detail of the copy is exact, and can only be discovered with a successful Perception roll versus the Shadow minion's Intelligence x 5.





MATSU HIROU

EARTH: 2

WATER: 3

FIRE: 2 Agility 3

AIR: 4

VOID: 2

School/Rank: Matsu

Bushi 3

Honor: 0.6

Glory: 6.1

Advantages: Blackmail
(several), Crafty, Quick

Disadvantages: Bad
Reputation (Troublemaker)

Skills: Archery 3,
Athletics 2, Defense 2,
Etiquette 1, Hand-to-Hand 3,
Hunting 3, Iaijutsu 1, Kaze-
do 3, Kenjutsu 2, Locksmith
1, Lore: Kolat 2, Lore: Ninja
(Darkness) 2, Mimic 3,
Mizu-do 2, Ninjutsu 3,
Poison 1, Sincerity 3, Stealth
3

Matsu Hiroru, son of the
Matsu daimyo (Matsu
Yunaki and her husband,
Uniri) and brother of Matsu
Tsuko, is a young man just
past his *gempukku*. He is
the most favored student of
Akodo Kage, and serves as
an assistant to the Keeper of
the Lion Hall of Ancestors
(a position which, as the
first son of the Matsu
daimyo, he is destined to
inherit).

(Continued)

Let's assume that your players encounter the Darkness and it chooses to try to Possess them. The player must make a resistance roll, using their Void against a TN of 20, modified by the circumstances of the 'attack': using a loved one's face, or if the character has the remains of a shadow bolt inside them, raises the TN by 5. Other circumstances can raise this number even higher, as the GM dictates. Each time the character fails, the Darkness gains a point of influence with the character. When these points of influence become higher than the character's Void ring, the character has been completely absorbed by the Darkness, and can no longer be played as a PC. Every time your player accepts some boon from the Darkness, a power, a favor, an influence, etc. the TN is permanently raised by an additional 5.

Remember, even if the characters are unwilling to allow the Darkness in, or if they are strong enough to avoid contamination, they can still be affected by the physical minions.

Touched By The Darkness

Odds are that eventually one of your PCs may be corrupted by the Darkness. Whether this occurs inadvertently or deliberately on their part, it brings up several issues for you as the Game Master.

BAITING THE TRAP

In any good RPG session, the characters have at least some control over their fates. The things that they do should affect the outcome, even if the results aren't necessarily the ones they expect. It's important that at the end of a game session, your players be able to look back and say, "I can see that what I did in the beginning affected the end of the game."

This is especially true when the things that happen directly affect the player's character. For the purpose of infecting PCs with the Living Darkness, it is of the utmost importance that they have at least some choice in the matter. Before you introduce the Darkness into your existing game, take a bit of time, and develop a plan of attack for each of your players. Take into consideration the character's personality: a predisposition toward power, a revenge obsession,

etc. These things would attract the Darkness. Then, decide on a strategy to tempt them into giving the Darkness a doorway in.

Tailor each introduction to the characters' weak points, since this is how the Darkness would begin. A crude example might be to approach a PC known for their ambition and their lack of moral fortitude and offer them the opportunity to join outright. In exchange for swearing allegiance to a new master, they will be granted powers of increased stealth, etc. How much of the nature of their new master you reveal to them is up to you.

This is a great opportunity to play off of your PCs' disadvantages and backgrounds as well, the things that really make their characters unique. Offer your characters things they want, but with strings attached.

There's an old story called "The Monkey's Paw." In it, a family receives a magical item that allows them three wishes. At first, they're hesitant to use it, but eventually their greed overcomes them, and they wish for a large sum of money. They get the money, but it comes in the form of an insurance settlement when the eldest son is killed in an accident at work. The mother later wishes that the son were alive again, and he returns as a revenant. The last of the wishes is used to send him back. This is a fairy tale and so is meant to convey a moral lesson as opposed to an entirely pragmatic one.

The gamer in all of us says, why didn't they use the last wish to undo everything they had done, or to wish the son back as he was before death? But the essence of the story is what matters here, the idea that no good can come of this thing. The Living Darkness works on a similar principle. It's bigger and older than can be easily comprehended, and close association will destroy the fragile substance of men.

Offer your characters what they want. Put it on the table in front of them and let them look at it for a good long while. Let them think about it. For example, a character took the Dark Secret disadvantage. Give them the opportunity to get rid of it. Or perhaps they've got the misfortune of being under Benten's Curse. The Darkness can give them the illusion of beauty and charisma. It can get rid of the ghost that's haunting them. It can ease their craving *sake*. It can offer them the head of their Sworn Enemy on the proverbial platter. It can even bring back their lost love. And it all looks so easy. There may be a cost, but how

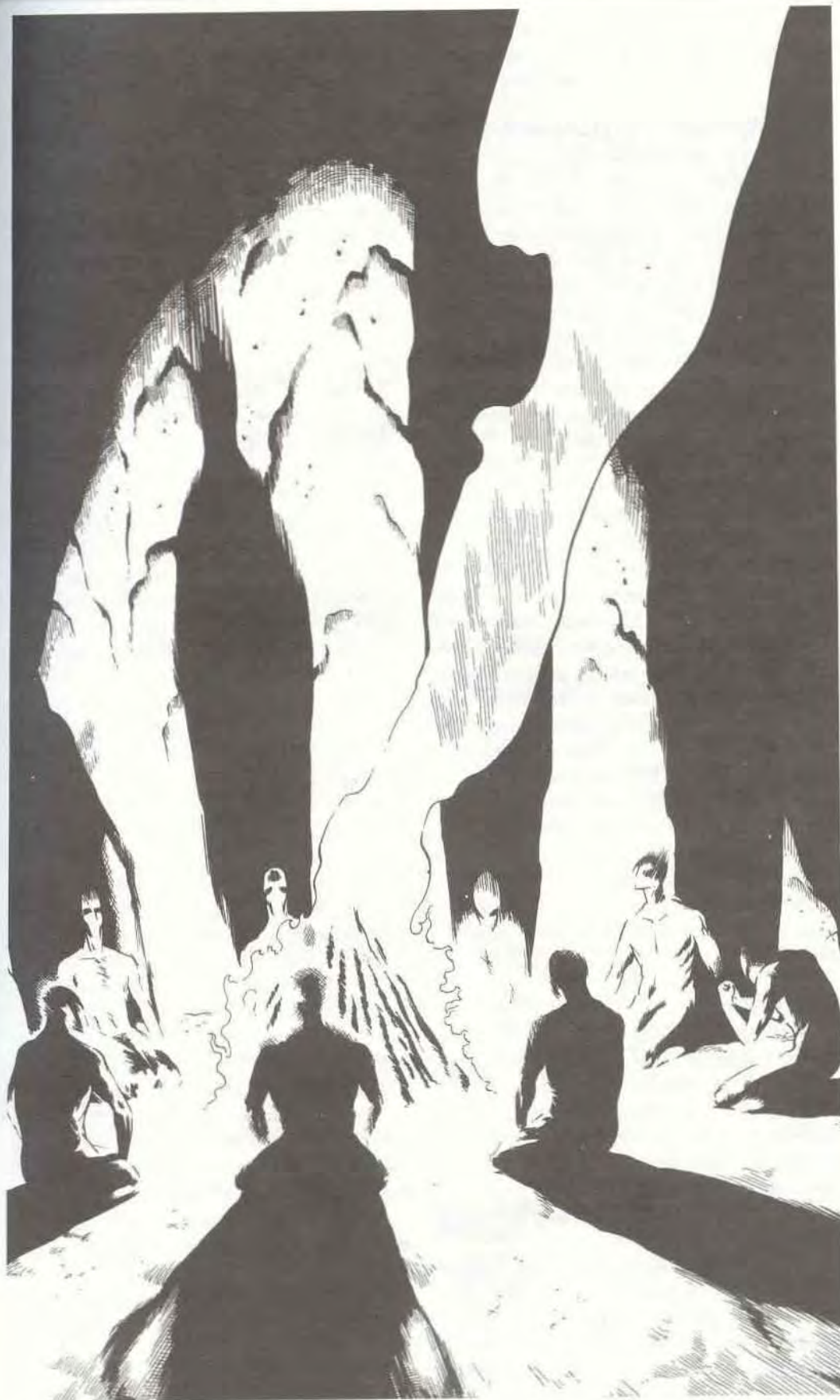


MATSU HIROU (CONTINUED)

Trained in several martial styles, stealth and other sinister arts by his master, Hiroru serves the interests of the mysterious Kolat. He knows much of the Darkness from them, as the Kolat have their own interests threatened by the Shadow. Since his *gempukku*, he is often sent to use his talents against the Goju and other minions of the Living Darkness.

Hiroru is still a young man, idealistic and completely devoted to his sensei. He believes that what he is doing, he does for the good of Rokugan. Kage has completely convinced him of his purpose, and instructed him that any dishonorable acts which he is forced to perform can be explained away as his rightful duty to the Lion, and through them, to the Emperor himself.

Hiroru lost his taste for honor as a child, when he faced the deaths of the Phoenix Champion's wife and daughter. Since then, he has lived only to serve Kage (and through him, the Kolat). If that strength of purpose is ever taken from him, he may well go mad.





MEETING KAAGI

The player characters are approached by a cloaked stranger who claims that he can tell them the truth about the Living Darkness... if they really want to know. The figure is Kaagi. It's up to you whether you want to use this as an opportunity to divulge information your players don't have yet, or if you want it to be a trick to corrupt the PCs as Kaagi himself was corrupted.

could it really compare with the satisfaction of your life's goal suddenly within your reach, or your most heartfelt desire in your grasp?

THE BENEFITS OF DARKNESS

There are unmistakable benefits for PCs who become entangled with the Darkness. Unfortunately, they are all relatively short-lived. See the mechanic for gradual possession. Still, in the interim, the PCs will have access to entirely new abilities. Unfortunately again, the strength of the benefit is directly linked to the progression of their dissolution. For every failed roll against the Darkness, the characters get one more Shadow point and one more ability. There is a direct link between these new powers and the amount of actual Darkness existing in the PC.

CONSEQUENCES

Whenever a PC becomes contaminated they are Marked by the Darkness. This Mark is similar to a Shadow Brand, but exists on the inside of the individual's skin. It becomes visible, rising to the surface, whenever the individual actively uses a power of the Darkness. The Mark becomes more visible each time they achieve another Shadow Point as well. Eventually it will become an obvious and permanently visible design. The design often appears in the form of twisted lines, similar to chains or dripping blood, but has no substance - the chains seem three-dimensional, but are flat against the skin, while the blood seems to run from the skin, but leaves no trail and no stain against clothing. The Mark always appears to have substance, but once touched or investigated, is no more than a stain upon the skin of the PC.

INFLUENCE

Once the Darkness has a hold on the character, it begins to exert influence as well. The strength of this influence increases as the PC accumulates Shadow points. Whenever it suits the storyline, the Darkness may try to exert influence on affected PCs. When you decide that the Darkness is going to take a hand in events, use the following mechanics to determine the success or failure of the process.

The Darkness rolls one die for each Shadow Point the character possesses. If the action is in line with the personality of the PC, the target number is the character's Willpower x 2. If it is somewhat out of character, the target number is

the character's Willpower x 5. If it is entirely against the PC's nature (such as turning and striking down another party member), the TN is the character's Willpower x 10.

As a PC accumulates more and more Shadow Points, they are likely to perform many out-of-character acts. Their features begin to fade, and other members of the party may start to notice the change. Other characters can roll their Air at a TN of 40 - (5 x the affected character's number of Shadow Points) to see if they notice something seriously amiss.

The Darkness in Your Game

Here's some tips on deciding how best to use the Living Darkness in your game. As has already been stated, the Darkness is a vast entity. Trying to destroy it would be like trying to march out and slay the Fire Dragon. Therefore, avoid games where the goal is to get rid of it. Here are some other goals that may be more reasonable:

- They may stumble into knowledge revealing some or all of the nature of the Darkness. They make it their mission to seek out proof of its existence and reveal it to the rest of Rokugan in an effort to warn them.

- One or more of the characters may be infected with the Darkness and on the lookout for for any other traces of Shadow in the hope that they can somehow find a way to reverse the process. Although there is no cure, it may be possible to slow the process for a while. The closest anyone has come is Isawa Ujina, the Master of Void. (See the Who's Who section in *Way of the Phoenix* for the end of Ujina's story.) After being struck with a bolt of pure Shadow substance, most would have succumbed immediately. But Ujina's affinity for Void and his immense will have allowed him to exist for years with the corruptive thorn still within him. It has warped his body obscenely, but has yet to claim him. He has been unable to remove it.

Another option is to not reveal the full nature of the Darkness to your players at all, but to have it appear at various points, mixed in with your more regular games. That way the characters can identify that something is amiss, but are unable to pin down the precise details.

The adventures in the first part of *Way of Shadow* are meant as a guideline to help you introduce this element of Rokugan gradually to your players.

The Epilogue

Years after Kitsuki Kaagi's journal was recovered by Kitsuki Yasu, the completed work remains unread. Yasu eventually received permission for one of his yojimbo to review the work. The yojimbo, Yasu's son Jusai, read far enough to realize that anyone who continued would become contaminated by the Darkness as Kaagi had. Kitsuki Jusai skimmed enough of the work to learn the usefulness of crystal, and before he fully succumbed to the Darkness, a room was constructed in the depths of Mirumoto castle (the most easily defensible location) with the walls, ceiling and floor constructed entirely of the only substance they had to keep this new enemy at bay. Yasu's yojimbo entered the room, taking the book with him and continued to read its pages and report his findings until it became apparent that his words were no longer his own.

As the days went by, the honored yojimbo became less and less substantial to the human eye. For weeks after he could no longer be seen, his voice echoed through the halls, begging to be saved laughing shrilly, and sometimes just screaming – long, endless cries that never paused for breath.

Since that time, two more Kitsuki, old men who had few years left to serve their Clan, have volunteered to go into the room and continue Yasu's work. Their fates were the same as his, but each one gained more insight into the nature of Rokugan's least understood enemy. No one has entered the room in the months since the last wails were heard from it, but the walls inside have continued to crack and darken as the corruption within persists.

Within that room, on a pedestal encased in crystal, Kaagi's journal waits for the next reader.



Below is a character description of Kitsuki Kaagi, for use as an NPC in further adventures, both involving the Shadow and with less supernatural difficulties. Three descriptions of his companion, Meilekki, are given, so that whichever one you find most appropriate can be his sidekick. Remember, the Darkness is clever – Mei may be any, all, or none of these.

It's up to you.

KITSUKI KAAGI

EARTH: 3

WATER: 2 Perception 4

FIRE: 3 Intelligence 4

AIR: 3 Awareness 5

VOID: 4

School/Rank: Kitsuki Magistrate 4

Honor: 3.1

Glory: 6.4

Advantages: Clear Thinker, Great Destiny, Kharmic Tie (Brother), Read Lips, True Friend

Disadvantages: Driven, Soft-Hearted

Skills: Athletics 2, Courtier 4, Defense 3, Etiquette 4, Forgery 4, Gambling 2, Heraldry 4, Herbalism 3, History 4, Hunting 3, Investigation 5, Kenjutsu 3, Knife 2, Law 5, Meditation 4, Nazodo 5, Ninja Lore 3, Poison 4, Shintao 3, Slight of Hand 3, Stealth 2

MEILEKKI: THE FALLEN BATTLE MAIDEN

EARTH: 3

WATER: 2 Perception 3

FIRE: 2 Agility 4

AIR: 3 Awareness 4

VOID: 3

MEETING MEI

A woman approaches the characters and asks them to please help her find her missing brother. She gives them a list of reports of places he's been seen, but says that he's possessed by a madness that keeps him from finding his way home. She asks the PCs to help her find him, but warns them that once they do, they must leave her alone. They are not to approach or attempt to intercept him under any circumstance.

The woman is of course, Mei. And the 'brother' she's looking for is Kaagi. Depending on the version of Mei you've chosen from the NPC options, she may be there as a representative of the Darkness, sent to bring him into the fold once and for all. Or she may be desperately trying to find him so that she can try to bring him back to himself.



RENEGADE NINJA

The player characters are asked by a Scorpion daimyo to hunt down one of his own men, a Shosuro assassin. The daimyo won't reveal this, but the assassin is actually a Ninja who has taken on four Shadow Points. He isn't one of those who the Darkness took away for training, but he's been slowly corrupted nonetheless. His initial Shadow Brands have opened him up to the Darkness and it's moved in.

He's on the verge of falling over the edge and into the grasp of the Shadow. His own people know this and intend to do away with him before he loses his autonomy and becomes a danger to them.

Afraid of dying, and terrified of succumbing to the darkness, within himself, he's decided to run.

The players have to find him and execute him while he still has a corporeal form to fight.

School/Rank: Otaku Battle Maiden 3

Honor: 0.0

Glory: 0.6

Advantages: Luck (3), Bente's Blessing

Disadvantages: Black Sheep, Dark Secret, Small, Social Disadvantage

Skills: Acting 4, Animal Husbandry 4, Athletics 3, Battle 1, Blacksmith 3, Defense 4, Etiquette 4, Hand to Hand 3, Herbalism 1, Horsemanship 5, Horse Archery 3, Investigation 2, Kenjutsu 2, Knife 1, Lore: Living Darkness 1, Medicine 3, Sincerity 4, Stealth 4

Raised on stories of the courage and valor of the Battle Maidens, Otaku Meilekki lived in anticipation of her thirteenth birthday when she would be fully initiated and bond with her own steed. Meilekki excelled at her training, and by the time she was sixteen, she was at the top of her class, having achieved the second technique of her school.

Late in the summer of Meilekki's sixteenth year a fire broke out near her village. Since the fire was still several miles away, Meilekki and the other battle maidens rode out to try to stop it. Wielding scythes, they cut down the grasses and hauled them clear of the fire's path. Her companions cried out for Meilekki to stay clear of the fire's edge, and to work from a safer distance, but the headstrong girl continued to cut down the grasses closest to the fire, sure that this was the kind of bravery legends were made from.

The Battle Maidens were successful. But as the riders let out a great cheer, Mei felt her horse give a shudder and fall, tumbling her onto the hard ground. Struggling, Mei dragged herself to where the horse lay sputtering on the ground. Its sides heaved and its nostrils flared, but it had taken in too much smoke. As Mei watched helplessly, the breaths came slower and shallower until the animal was finally dead.

Heartbroken, Mei packed her bags. She took only what was practical, carrying with her no reminders. Since that time, she has taken odd work, making no claim to her bushi heritage. She sees in Kaagi some of the idealism she has escaped, and tries when she can to protect him from his own notions.

Mei recalls tales of the Lying Darkness from her childhood, but never gave them much credence. She tries to steer Kaagi away from his pursuit of the Darkness, but she won't leave him.

The ties of loyalty she cut to her house have slowly bound themselves to Kaagi.

When he sends her away, she follows him instead, still hoping to keep him from harm. She doesn't dare reveal herself when he encounters the Unicorn for fear they'll recognize her. And shortly after that, she falls behind and Kaagi is left to his own devices. Unable to pick up his trail, she begins the journey back to Kitsuki Castle. On the road, she encounters a peasant boy carrying Kaagi's journal. She bribes the boy into giving up the papers and reads just enough to understand what's befallen Kaagi. Returning the journal to Kitsuki castle, she heads back out on the road to continue her search for him.

MEILEKKI: THE SCORPION ACTRESS

EARTH: 3

WATER: 2 Perception 3

FIRE: 2 Agility 4

AIR: 3 Awareness 4

VOID: 4

School/Rank: Shosuro Actor 4

Honor: 0.0

Glory: 0.5

Advantages: Luck (3), Bente's Blessing

Disadvantages: Dark Secret, Small

Skills: Acting 5, Defense 4, Etiquette 4, Forgery 5, Investigation 2, Locksmith 4, Medicine 3, Meditation 3, Poison 5, Seduction 5, Stealth 4, Slight of Hand 4, Sincerity 4, Knife 5

Geisha Persona Skills: Acting 5, Conversation 4, Dance 4, Etiquette 4, Music 3, Seduction 4, Sincerity 4, Tea Ceremony 3

Servant Persona Skills: Animal Husbandry (Horse) 4, Commerce 4, Etiquette 4, Heraldry 2, Medicine 4, Tea Ceremony 3, Herbalism 5

The friend and companion Kaagi knows as Meilekki is actually Shosuro Sashen, a skilled and formidable actor. Early on, Kaagi caught the attention of the higher powers of the Scorpion family. Rather than arouse undue suspicion by doing away with him entirely, they decided to control his findings instead, turning his quest for truth into a tool for their own deception. Sashen, in her trained guise as a resourceful peasant, slipped into the dedicated Kitsuki's life with hardly a ripple. Quiet, helpful, and friendly, she now travels with him, reporting his findings back to her house, and when necessary, redirecting the results of Kaagi's investigations.



Sashen also has an agenda. Sashen is high enough in the ranks of the Shosuro to know more than mere rumor about the Darkness; what she knows has convinced her that the centuries-old bargain between the Shadows and the Shosuro comes at too high a price.

She's aiding Kaagi in his search for truth with the hope that his unorthodox methods may shine some light on the ancient Darkness. After she 'leaves him' to go back to Kitsuki castle, she actually follows him, hiding successfully among the Unicorn. When he separates from them, she follows him to the Temple, but waits outside until she sees him flee in the storm. She offers him her hand, but he continues running, and she loses him in the river.

She finds him again on his route home, but follows at a distance, realizing that the Darkness has a hold on him. Disguised as a peasant boy, she takes his journal, and in her identity as Mei carries it back to Kitsuki castle, in the hope that they will learn enough from it to be a real threat to the Darkness.

MEILEKKI: SERVANT OF SHADOW

EARTH: 3

WATER: 2 Perception 3

FIRE: 3 Intelligence 4

AIR: 3 Awareness 4

VOID: 2

School/Rank: None

Honor: 0.0

Glory: None (Eta)

Advantages: Luck (3), Benten's Blessing

Disadvantages: Small, Social Disadvantage x3

Skills: Acting 4, Animal Husbandry (Horse) 4, Commerce 4, Defense 3, Etiquette 4, Heraldry 2, Herbalism 5, Hunting 3, Investigation 3, Knife 3, Medicine 3, Medicine 4, Sincerity 4, Tea Ceremony 3, Lockpick 3, Forgery 2, Gambling 2

Shadow: 3

Meilekki was born the daughter of a tea merchant. When her father displeased his lord and was executed, Meilekki found work cleaning a geisha house. A Scorpion geisha house. Only thirteen years old, and inquisitive in the extreme, Mei paid close attention to the women she served. Most of them found the girl charming and she endeared herself further by doing extra favors for them - helping with hair pieces, doing their shopping, delivering messages, etc. In return, the women taught her a few of their simpler tricks: how to appear sincere when she was anything

but, how to pretend to be someone of a higher station or a different profession, as well as a few of their more intimate trade secrets.

Eventually, Mei took the skills she'd learned to another house, in another village. This time she worked as an actual geisha. It didn't take long for her to grow restless again, and when one of her patrons, a handsome and vain Crane lord, showed more than a passing interest in her, she convinced him to purchase her contract. It was traveling with this lord that she met Kaagi during a visit at Kitsuki castle. Restless again, Mei turned her skills at manipulation to making the Crane lord believe that the favor of the Kitsuki was worth more than Mei's company. From that point forward, she traveled as a companion to the magistrate.

Kaagi is still uncertain what Mei's background is. He does know that her skills and powers of observation complement his own, and that her conversation makes the journey more pleasant. Unfortunately for Kaagi and Mei, her curiosity finally gets the better of her in the middle of Kaagi's investigation at Ichime castle. While sitting in the garden with Sokoi, Mei is overcome by the Living Darkness. Promising interesting places to see and fascinating people to meet, the Darkness gains its first foothold on Mei. From this point forward, she has one Shadow point and the increased stealth that goes with it. This is also what gives her the strange immunity she displays to Nari's poison at the end of the first investigation.

During the second investigation, Mei receives the second Mark (A second Shadow point). She can now move with the swiftness of Shadow. In the third investigation, Mei slips away from her companions during the night and uses this swiftness to speed ahead to the cave. Once there, she bargains for Kaagi's life (the Darkness agrees, since it has other plans for him anyway) and she takes the third Mark, insubstantiality.

Hiroru senses the growing Darkness in Mei, and so convinces Kaagi to send her away before continuing his journey. But by now, it's too late. Once Kaagi is gone, there is no further need for pretense. The Darkness absorbs Mei completely, using her knowledge and visage to its advantage in the last segments of the story. Wearing Mei's face, it delivers Kaagi's journal back to the Kitsuki castle so that the contamination can continue.

A POSSIBILITY OF SALVATION

There's a rumor that the Togashi may have a way to remove shadow brands, and possibly to exorcise the Living Darkness from a person entirely. Player characters afflicted with Shadow Points may want to investigate this rumor.

They may undertake a journey to find the elusive Togashi castle, or follow leads about a wandering monk, who possesses the ability.

There really is no known way to remove a taint from the Living Darkness, but that doesn't mean the players can't keep looking. The truth is that the rumor is confused. It springs from the Togashi having been able to remove corrupt tattoos, not Shadow Brands.



Legend of the Five Rings™

The Way of Shadow

"The blackness of night only conceals a greater Nothing. We hide in your nightmares, abandoned by the light. Do not fear the servants of shadow, but the Shadow itself..."

— Goju's Celestial Agonies

Over a decade ago, an Imperial Magistrate vanished on his way to the Dragon Lands. His eta servant carried his journal back to his Clan, but he has never been heard from again. His records mention strange figures in the night, shadows with no faces, and the deepest secrets of Rokugan's most dangerous enemy... the Ninja. Now, the lie is exposed: the mystery of the true Ninja is revealed. Adventures of horror and madness await you, and at the end, you and your players will look upon the lost face of the Goju, the truth behind the Ninja and their terrifying Master, the Immortal Shadow.

The Journal of Kitsuki Kaagi is the most mysterious manuscript in Rokugan, and the most heavily protected. Surrounded by crystal and buried within the depths of Mirumoto Castle, the few Kitsuki who have volunteered to be exposed to its secrets have become shadow...faceless and forever lost.

- **The Living Darkness:** The history of the Ninja, from the thin shred of Nothing that hid from the Sun and Moon, to the servants of Shadow.
- **The Goju:** Meet the minions of the Darkness, and discover those who have sacrificed their identities – their very souls – for power.
- **The Nameless One:** Delve into the history of Isawa Ujina, destined to become the Nameless One, his identity stolen by the Darkness that bore his only daughter.
- **Dreams and Night Horrors:** Learn how the Ninja initiate their members, the hidden connection between the Darkness and the Scorpion Shadow brands, and why a true Ninja has no face.



7 29220 30013 3

\$2 4830\$00 R.P



Alderac Entertainment Group