

The Shadow of Glory

By Annie VanderMeer Mitsoda

Kudaka slowly ran a thumb over her lips as if sealing in the smirk that threatened to emerge as she watched Yasuki Oguri frown at his cards, rearranging the few in his hand as though doing so might change what they were. “Any day now, cormorant,” she teased lazily, fanning herself with her own carefully folded hand.

“In good time,” the young man shot back, his tone uncharacteristically clipped. “How are you supposed to get a good look at the whole of your hand at once with these cards? They’re far bigger than any other type I’ve played with.”

“This ain’t *hanafuda*, you know,” she said, letting the grin slip onto her face. “The Islands of Spice and Silk do things a little differently. If this is too hard a game, maybe we can—”

“No, no, I have it. Here.” Oguri tossed a bamboo marker onto a pile on the table between them—Kudaka had suggested they play for fun rather than money, as she was certain that if they didn’t, before long she’d own half the Yasuki territory. It was fortunate, to his mind, that the Mantis also shared his family’s penchant for gambling. “I will bet.”

She nodded and tossed in two chips of her own. “I’d gladly bet you whatever food supplies you mighta got squirreled away somewhere.”

He sighed and shook his head. “No such luck.”

“You sure we shoulda thrown out the stuff what was in the larder?”

Three more chips entered the pile. “It was too risky to keep. Anything in the tower supplies while it was under Shadowlands control could have been Tainted by their presence. Waving jade around wouldn’t do enough to set my mind at ease.”

Kudaka raised an eyebrow as she tossed in another round of chips. “What about the sake, then?”

“This is the last bit.” He gestured to the bottle on the table and matched her bet.

“Fairly mercenary t’ take the final bottle for us,” she observed, then looked at her cards and nodded. “Right, I’m endin’ this. Reveal.”

To his credit, Oguri hadn’t done too badly: a set of three *bushi*, each from a different suit, were spread carefully upon the table. Kudaka nodded with approval and gave her opponent a moment to feel proud before she spread her own hand upon the table, fanning out her cards to reveal a run of lotus with a *shugenja* at its peak. Oguri, defeated, leaned back in his creaky chair, shaking his head. “Mercenary or no,” he sighed, “I would call that sake fairly necessary for being beaten so badly when I’m playing with you.” His face brightened. “Although I do have a *shōgi* board in hand, if you’d consider—”



“No chance.” Kudaka barked a laugh, sweeping the chips into her sizable pile before retrieving and carefully shuffling her cards. “I know better’n to play you at any game what involves strategizin’ and movin’ around units.” Oguri nodded, sighed again, and stood.

“Very well. Shall we walk the battlements a bit, then?” Kudaka nodded and slid her winnings into a pouch as she stood. She knew the sight of the two of them taking stock of the situation helped put the troops a bit more at ease—if that were at all possible. The strain on even the most stalwart of her sailors was beginning to show, and Oguri had needed to break up at least one fight in the last few days. They both tried to make their strolls seem more like those of leaders taking a walk than anything else, but their eyes had been regarding the horizon more intensely the longer they remained in the Watchtower of Sun’s Shadow.

She suddenly smirked and shook the pouch of chips at Oguri, who raised a curious eyebrow at her. “Feel like a race up there, cormorant?” she needled him gently. “Li’l somethin’ to lighten the mood, maybe. Not to mention maybe win back some pride.”

Oguri chuckled, and a look crossed his face that reminded her very much of his father’s calculating expression. “Double or nothing?”

“I dunno if we have any more chips than this, but sure, I’m game.”

“Good,” Oguri said and in a flash was running up the stairs, two by two. Kudaka cursed in surprise and dropped her cards in a pocket, beckoning quickly to the *kami* around them, boosting herself halfway up the stairs on a gust of air and taking off at a run. It was too little too late, however, and both leaders were soon out of breath atop the Wall, steadying themselves against the parapet.

“Cheeky trick, that.” Kudaka chuckled. “Think I might be a bad influence.”

“If you think that particular gambit came from you...” Oguri chuckled and straightened his clothes. “Then I don’t believe you really met my father.”

A sentry approached, and Oguri greeted her with a respectful incline of his head. “Pardon me, Yasuki-sama, Kudaka...sama,” she said. “There’s a dust cloud coming, but the source is too far away to see.”

Kudaka and Oguri shared a look, then shoved away whatever hope was in it like cards into a pocket as they followed the angle of the sentry’s outstretched arm, pointed toward the northeast. Oguri took out a spyglass, and Kudaka had her own moment to seethe in impatience, as she’d left her own back on the *Poison Tide*—which was hopefully safely docked at Kyūden Hida by now. In tense silence, the young Yasuki gazed through the glass, giving the brass tube the occasional twist to focus it, and then he let out a half laugh of relief.

“A small number of Crab troops on horseback.” He chuckled. “Flying the clan *mon* on their banners and everything. For a bit there I thought some other fresh disaster was upon us. I—” The young man cut himself off and leaned forward, as if that would help his view. After an extended look, he lowered the spyglass and snapped it shut, replaced it in his pocket, and turned to the guard. “Have the watch open up the far entrance and have water and extra hands



ready to help the newcomers. I'll be down shortly." The guard nodded hurriedly and began shouting orders, while Kudaka followed Oguri back down the steps to the table. She watched with curiosity as he poured the last of the sake into his cup and raised an eyebrow as he threw it back in a gulp.

"Not a thing I think I seen you do before, kick back a drink like that," she observed wryly. "Somethin' tells me this newcomer ain't gonna be the best of company."

Oguri sighed and stifled a cough. "Hida Etsuji is a perfectly capable warrior and commander," he said with a grimace, "and cousin to the *daimyō* besides. Trouble is..." He shook his head. "He's proud, and he'll almost certainly be wanting to take full control of the situation."

Kudaka frowned. "Ain't that what we were hopin' for? Replacements?"

Oguri sighed. "Unless he's got more troops following him, I don't think it'll be enough. There's also the fact that he's not terribly fond of other clans, especially when it comes to fighting the Shadowlands."

Kudaka snorted in disdain but caught the warning look in the young man's eye and turned it into an exasperated sigh. "I can't promise I'll swoon at his charm, but I'll do my best to play nice, yeah? He might not like Mantis, but neither me nor my troops came here to help *him*."

Oguri pursed his lips before nodding. "Fair enough," he declared, and he began to walk toward the far entrance of the keep, where several Crab soldiers were undoing the locks on the heavy iron-bound safety door. It was a precaution against overwhelming assault, so that at least one survivor could get out to warn other towers if the watchtower's fall was imminent: the door would be held open, the chosen one would escape, and the door would be shut behind them, leaving the rest to their honorable fate. Oguri had admitted to Kudaka that he'd checked it shortly after the battle and found it still locked—whatever had wiped out the watchtower's previous troops hadn't even given them time to begin an exit.

Kudaka gave a slight shudder at the thought, and at the shriek of the door's rusted iron bands as a soldier hauled it open. A moment later, a small force of troops came through, *sashimono* on their backs bobbing as they ducked to let the banners through the door—Kudaka squashed a smile at the thought of crabs scuttling carefully under a rock. The sight of the beasts crushed the smile further as she saw how the animals panted, foam built up at the sides of their mouths. She didn't know much about horses, but she could recognize something driven to its limit, and she was willing to bet a *koku* that this Etsuji fellow didn't care.



“Welcome, Hida-san,” Oguri said, giving a polite bow. “We thank you for responding to our summons, and with haste.” The Yasuki paused, his eyes taking in the dozen companions of the Hida commander, all dressed in similar heavy armor—albeit lacking the large brass crab claws that formed the *maedate* at the front of his helmet—and returned his attention to the leader. “Will we be expecting any more of your troops?”



“No more should be needed,” Etsuji said gruffly, handing the reins to a waiting Crab Clan soldier without taking his eyes off of Oguri. There was something about the man that reminded Kudaka of her own daimyō, Yoritomo—until he smiled widely and gave a nod that strode past confidence and into the territory of arrogance. “But we do have a cart of supplies following. It should be here before nightfall.”

“Any engineers or masons, perhaps? The breach may be rebuilt, but it isn’t fixed, and—”

Etsuji abruptly cut off Oguri with a firm shake of his head. “Your messenger spoke of a need for troops, and we are here to answer it. The Watchtower of the Iron Hammer fields warriors, not pilers of stone. I would say that is your job, Yasuki-san, but it is too bad you cannot talk the stone into doing what you want, eh?” His laugh was rough, and though Oguri did join him, Kudaka knew the young man well enough to see the subtle annoyance camouflaged in the tightness of his smile.

“Don’t believe the tales of Yasuki talking water into their vessels without needing to dip them into a spring.” He laughed, just barely too sharply. “My father is the better negotiator by far, and even he has yet to convince a wall to build itself.”

The big man nodded dismissively, and Kudaka tensed as his dark-eyed gaze landed on her. “Yet you do seem to have a *tenkinja* here—and the water witch has had no luck fixing things?” She ground her teeth on a retort, remembering her words to Oguri, and kept her mouth in a firm line as he continued. “And I thought there were supposed to be three here. Where are the other two?”

“On the way back to Kyūden Hida to report,” Kudaka interjected, doing her best to keep the acid out of her tone. “They was needed to speed the boat, fast as possible.”

Etsuji hardly looked convinced, adjusting the pair of swords at his belt. “Not surprising they couldn’t handle being out here—it is often too much for any who are not Crab. Besides, this is too far from the brine for their liking; they probably got too dried out. You should have had



proper Crab shugenja accompany you, Yasuki-san. *They* would have been able to get that wall rebuilt without any of your troops needing to lift a finger.”

Again Oguri laughed that tinny, false laugh—a fact that Etsuji didn’t seem to notice, and one that Kudaka suddenly doubted that she herself would have been aware of several weeks ago, when they had first set out for the watchtower. The young man flashed a quick warning glance at Kudaka before flicking his eyes at the ground. She looked down to see that a small whirlwind of dust had appeared around the Hida’s feet, and she hurriedly smoothed over her thoughts and dismissed the air kami that had caused it in response to her agitation. Unaware, Etsuji continued, gesturing at the watchtower grounds.

“—shouldn’t be over there at all. Weapons should be closer to the entrances.”

“We thought it would be wiser to keep them centrally—easier to find, and if one or both of the entrances are taken, we wouldn’t be without adequate defense.” Etsuji scoffed at Oguri’s comment and removed his helmet, holding it tucked carefully under his arm.

“Another problem with these Mantis soldiers. A Crab is *always* at the ready, especially this close to the Shadowlands. I would look upon the rest of this outpost, to see if it is in order and how much work I will need to do when I take over command.”

Oguri opened his mouth in protest, then shut it and nodded. “Of course, Hida-san. Your horses will be taken care of—please tell your troops to set up as they require while I show you around... With the exception of the barracks, of course, to respect those on the night watch who are now resting.” He threw a glance at Kudaka while he and Etsuji walked away, and she nodded quickly, understanding.

Kudaka walked back over to the game table, gesturing to her second mate, Sojiro, as she did so. “Aye, lady?” he said, idly scratching the long scar on his neck from a wound that had nearly cost him his head. “Some great donkey that Crab fella is, ain’t he?”

“And then some.” She sighed. “But we’re to play nice. Just think of the koku we’re earnin’ for this, and keep it civil.”

The sailor spat and frowned. “Won’t be easy.” He grunted. “Sides, I thought that were the plan—get the Crab back their pile o’ rocks; then we head back t’ the mother waters. That change?”

Hearing the edge in his tone, Kudaka gave him a level look, and Sojiro bent his head reflexively like a reed in a sharp breeze. “Nah,” she said slowly, “but I don’t like this. Don’t sit right, exactly.”

“Havin’ t’ be nice t’ that thick-necked stomper don’t either.”

“Then I’ll make it easier. Get everyone to the barracks—let’s stay out of that Hida’s way for now, and when the supply wagon arrives, let’s hope it has sake.

“In the meantime...” She grinned and held up her cards. “Let’s see who’s up for letting me take all of their money.”



It was after sunset when she finally saw Oguri again, padding up the stairs to the parapets facing the Shadowlands. They hadn't been there long, and it hadn't ever been a thing they'd agreed upon, but every night the two had found themselves there, watching the sun go down across the long, barren expanse of the cursed lands across the river and the night sweep its blanket across the world. She gave him a welcoming nod as he approached and continued walking a coin across the fingers of her right hand, a winning from the hours before. "Neat trick," he said quietly.

"Nervous tic," she explained. "Learned it from a trader hailin' from the Ivory Kingdoms. Took me years to get right, and even now, muscles knowing the memory n' all, still tricky. Makes me concentrate. Only thing can get me through bad situations I can't control, sometimes."

Oguri sighed. "I'd say this qualifies. I wish I could walk a coin past dealing with Etsuji."

Kudaka shot him a sideways look. "Eh? You get along with everyone?"

"Hardly means I *like* everyone!" Another sigh, and for a moment there was silence as the two watched the shadows stretch long and dark across the land. "He is a good commander—his troops obviously respect him. And I have heard his skills in battle are well honed."

"But his diplomacy, not so much?"

"By *far*." Oguri shook his head. "I understand that might not be what's most needed here, but this situation worries me. I suspect—as I'm sure Etsuji does too—that his name is stale in the mouths of his superiors, and he needs something to boost his reputation if he wants to rise higher than commander. I imagine he thinks this is the place for it."

"*Glorious victory*," Kudaka said grandly, then spit, the words bitter on her tongue. Certainly the Crab were owed some glory, but this was toying with forces too deadly to think of. "Any good tide seer knows you don't fight storms; you guide 'em away—and you certainly don't call 'em to your feet. If this Hida gets a storm that's more'n he can take, more'n just his pride will be broken."

Oguri's shoulders slumped. "It's a bad situation. From the moment Etsuji and his troops arrived, I could hear mine chattering excitedly about going home. They're not trained to be out here like the watchtower guards are—and the reduced rations we've been on have got them on edge. I'd imagine things aren't much different for you and yours, either."

Kudaka passed the coin to her left hand and let it continue its journey back and forth across her fingers. "You'd be right. And they ain't much for excuses. Sure, they've trusted my feelings—bad and good—many a time, but even that goodwill only goes so far. They're so eager to leave I think they're lookin' forward to the walk southward to the Watchtower of Grim Resolve without even waitin' for the *Poison Tide* to return."

Kudaka abruptly flipped the coin in the air and snatched it as it fell, then froze and leaned forward, her eyes wide to catch all the light she could. She could feel Oguri's curious gaze on her, but as she'd watched to catch the coin, she'd seen another glitter in the darkness—faint



and far away, but there. With eyes that had seen through fog thick as matted fur and dark as pitch, she strained her sight, and stretched out her will to the kami just a little, feeling a kind of unease, a stirring across the river.

Something cool and metal bumped into her shoulder and she started, then saw Oguri handing her his spyglass, nodding. Saying nothing, Kudaka quickly extended it and gazed farther into the darkness, scanning the other riverbank...

...and roughly gasped "*bakemono!*" as the hideous, toothy visage of a goblin skittered into her vision. She stood abruptly, and her eyes met Oguri's, his face serious and not without a touch of fear.

"Looks like Etsuji's getting his attack sooner than any of us thought," he muttered, then turned and sent out a yell at the top of his lungs. "*ATTACK! Goblins across the water! Get to your stations! Archers, to the west wall! Bring me a bow!*"

The alarm bell's rough metal clang resounded through the watchtower and feet clambered up the stone steps. Peering through the darkness, soldiers grabbed quivers and bows. A full volley came next, illuminating figures on the opposite bank who were drawing and loosing with practiced speed. Kudaka acted quickly to douse whatever arrows stuck and began to burn and was grateful that nobody had yet been hit.

"*FLAME ARROWS!*" thundered a voice farther down the parapets, practiced from shouting across the din of battle. "*DRAW! Attendants, LIGHT!*" Five archers drew taut their longbows while attendants touched lit reeds to the arrows, catching the oil-soaked rags around the arrowheads alight. "*LOOSE!*" Etsuji bellowed, and five more fiery arrows launched across the River of the Last Stand, burying themselves in the soil of the other side—save for one, which elicited a shriek that subsided to a gurgle as the target collapsed, its body slowly catching flame. In the lights of that ghastly pyre, they finally could be seen, albeit faintly: a large number of bakemono, dangerous twisted shortbows at the ready.

This only seemed to whet Etsuji's appetite. "*Just a pack of damn goblins!*" he roared, grabbing up a bow and nocking an arrow. "*Hurry up and bring them down!*"

Arrows hissed across the river, and a chorus of unearthly shrieks followed each volley—with only the occasional grunt from the watchtower as a lucky arrow tagged an odd shoulder not fully in cover—until a long silence seemed to stretch through the night, and no volley of arrows followed. "Disappointing," Etsuji growled, slinging his bow roughly around his shoulder. "You said you'd fought ogres, Yasuki. To just send goblins to harry us is...*insulting.*"

Kudaka opened her mouth to reply but noticed Oguri twitch his head to the side, as if a sudden thought had grabbed his head and pulled it. "Can't be. If it was just to harry us, they'd have left the second they started losing significant numbers, or weren't causing casualties—even their bows were the wrong..." His eyes widened suddenly and snapped to meet hers.

"This can't be the only attack. Can you ask the kami? I need to know something, and I can't risk losing more arrows if worse is coming."



Surprised, Kudaka nodded, and she stretched out her consciousness, reaching to the kami of the river, connecting distantly with their essence. They did not communicate using words as humans knew them, but she passed along a feeling of query, and received in return a wave of anger, anguish, revulsion, and *wrongness*—strong enough that bile coated the back of her throat. “Somethin’s there. Somethin’ not right.”

Oguri didn’t waste a second, grabbing up a torch and hurling it over the parapet wall, sending the burning brand spinning end over end until it landed with a *thump* near the edge of the river, spreading a thin light across the bank. For a moment, there was nothing. And then a ripple, and the shadow of a body shambled forward. And another. And another.

“*Undead!*” Oguri cried out. “Walking along the riverbed! Fire arrows, raise and—”

“*NOT A CHANCE!*” Etsuji barked, hefting a large warhammer and charging down the steps. “*TROOPS! To me! Cross the breach and destroy any that make it to shore!*”

In shock, Kudaka watched the commander run toward battle, fire arrows from the parapets peppering both shores for visibility, until she started at the touch of a hand on her arm. “Can you do something?” Oguri’s face was pleading. “The undead don’t move quickly; there’s no telling how many are still down there. With the breach still unfixed...”



She nodded and grinned despite herself—*maybe some of that Crab’s vigor is catching*, she thought absently. “Do my best. I think the river kami will be more’n happy to comply.”

Through the haze she reached out her mind again, meeting the kami, distressed as they were, and asked for their aid. *You flow already; it’s easy. Just a bit more vigor for now, bit more focused, to wash ‘em to the other bank, to shove ‘em back, not down.* There was a sense of agreement, and with their wills linked, Kudaka lifted her arms as if against a heavy block and *pushed*—sending a great wall of water arcing from the river, like a flat tile flipping over, depositing dark shapes of bodies in crumpled masses on the other side. She leaned against the wall for support, watching the river right itself, and looked below to see Etsuji and his troops finish off the undead that had made it ashore, Etsuji’s yelling audible even from the parapets.

“You all right?”

Kudaka chuckled at Oguri’s question.

“It’s taxin’ being out here,” she admitted. “Every day I feel more and more kinda—*pressure*—from somethin’ out there, and it’s takin’ more outta me to keep it back than I like. But I’ll be



fine.” Her grin turned lopsided, a little impish. “Might be the lack of sake in particular botherin’ me.”

Oguri gave a laugh of relief. “Well, that’s fixable, at least. For now, let’s get down to the courtyard—we need to have some words with Etsuji.”

She was just turning away from the scene below when something tugged at her—something dark, dangerous, familiar—and her eyes widened, causing her to whirl around reflexively and stare back into the dark, straining her vision, even though she knew she wouldn’t see it. *It’s not comin’ close, not after what happened to the other one.* She was breathing heavily, sweating in the night air, and she tried to slow her thundering heartbeat. It took her a moment to realize Oguri was holding her shoulder—both her shoulders. Had he stopped her from falling?

“—ang on, Kudaka, come back!” His voice was insistent, and it had a worried tinge to it she hadn’t heard from him before. She shook her head and steadied herself, brushing hair out of her eyes with a hand she wished wasn’t trembling so much. “What happened?” His face was full of genuine concern, dark eyes holding hers. She searched for something glib to say, but the truth fell out of her like blood from a wound.

“Another *kansen*,” she whispered, swallowing hard and coughing slightly. “It didn’t come at me—I dunno if it was even there for me. I...I don’t think it was.”

“YASUKI-SAN!” came the cry from below, jubilant. “*You and the tenkinja fall off the Wall? Come down here and celebrate with us!*”

Kudaka found her footing and drew slowly away from Oguri, who made sure she was steady before removing his hands from her shoulders. She gave him a nod that by now, between them, had a clear meaning: *later*. He began to descend the stairs, and she hesitated before stilling her face and following after.

The cheers of Etsuji and his troops rang through the night air, echoing eerily as the soldiers stepped through the passage in the roughly boarded and masoned breach on the river wall. Kudaka observed with irritation that Etsuji’s troops had torn out some of the new masonry in order to get through, and she saw Oguri’s shoulders tense as, she imagined, he noticed the same. Etsuji himself finally strode through, his blue-gray armor and warhammer splattered with gore, and nodded at them—well, at Oguri more so than Kudaka—with a self-satisfied look. “A fine skirmish,” he cried, handing his weapon to one of his attendants, who hurriedly applied jade to it to stave off any Shadowlands Taint. “Good thing to think about the river, Yasuki-san. Haven’t seen the Shadowlands troops use that kind of tactic before, but it will take more than a few dozen corpses to defeat us!”

“Well, the river was something that Kudaka noticed, not me,” Oguri corrected, his tone controlled but a little stiff. “And I’m less concerned about their numbers than I am about their subtlety. This isn’t the first time we’ve seen the Shadowlands forces using new tactics—the recent Battle of Twenty Pyres at Kyūden Hida and the hidden attack that went along with it, the



breach here, the—” His mouth closed on the rest of his words as Etsuji shook his head and gave a harsh laugh.

“What, you’re afraid of a little challenge? Go hide under a lily pad like the koi in your family’s mon, if you’re so scared. If the Shadowlands scum think they can terrify us by walking underwater, they have a rude surprise coming, courtesy of my hammer.”

“Your hammer’s just as dense’s your head,” Kudaka snapped, unsure if it was tiredness or frustration that had driven her to the breaking point, and not caring much if it was either or both. “D’you know how much work you just undid by breakin’ open that masonry to get outside? Why not just drop rocks n’ such on the undead from the safety of the parapets? I’m from the sea and even I can tell that’s the better option.” Etsuji’s eyes narrowed into dark slits, but Kudaka wasn’t finished. “What’s more, I may not be no military genius, but even I know what it looks like to sound out an enemy. That weren’t a real attack—they was testin’ the defenses.”

“And they will hardly find them wanting!” Etsuji snarled, his reed-thin patience breaking. “Twelve bushi finished off over forty goblins and at least as many undead—I do not call those numbers a test, not when they failed to land even a single blow upon my troops. And I do not need some spindly saltwater insect to tell me my business!”

Kudaka snorted, and the reflexive gust of air that echoed it snapped her robes around her like a stiff gale. “And I ain’t here to deal with hardheaded scuttlers like you, but I do quite care if those staggerin’ corpses make it over to this side of the shore just because you want to decorate your hammer with their stinkin’ guts!”

Oguri stepped between them, and his tone had a joviality injected into that sounded almost like it was meant to placate an angry beast or a thoroughly unreasonable child. “Come, Kudaka, let us not take away from this victory with ill wishes and unkind words. Hida-san, I congratulate you on your heroism! My troops and the Mantis will take the watches tonight, so that you and your troops may take a well-earned rest.”

Etsuji frowned at this, undoing his helmet carefully, then nodded. “A gracious offer, and we do accept. But to be clear: I mean to command this fort, and that means my troops must be in control here. If the Mantis wish to remain even for the rest of the night, I need to know they will follow my orders. We cannot afford confusion regarding who is in charge.” His dark eyes regarded Oguri carefully. “I know I need not demand this from your own soldiers,



for they are loyal Crab, and will follow a leader who knows I have the best intentions for this watchtower and its defenders.”

“Of course,” Oguri chirped, and Kudaka stiffened at his tone. “Kudaka and I will retreat to the parapets to keep watch and notify our troops to do the same. I am grateful to you for your victory.”

When they were away from Etsuji, Kudaka shot Oguri a dubious look. “Notify our troops? They’re *already* keepin’ the watch.”

“A bit more placating,” he explained, then heaved a long sigh. “Hardly does any good, though, if he means to keep this fort to himself.” He paused, then regarded her carefully. “But... that kansen. If you don’t think that evil spirit was there for you, then there’s one other very real possibility.”

Kudaka hissed a breath through her teeth. “I weren’t wrong—they *were* testin’ defenses! No goblins or undead got away, but something nobody could see...” She looked up at Oguri, blood running cold. “Hardheaded or not, we gotta warn him.”

Oguri shook his head slowly. “I can tell you already that he wouldn’t believe you, and I don’t think he’d believe me either—‘under the spell of that witch,’ I fear he’d say. I can do my best to advise him, and will, but...” He trailed off in frustration. “In his mind, that was a complete victory—and likely the first of many. I could suggest he call in reinforcements from other watchtowers, but if he feels it’ll take any of the focus off of him...” He shook his head, his face dark.

Kudaka snarled and spit, frustrated. “So all this been for nothin’, then?”

“Not unless we find a way to *make* Etsuji call in reinforcements. And nobody in this area outranks him.”

Kudaka crossed her arms, chewing her lip in thought. “One captain can’t just take over from another unless they got someone bigger’n them makin’ the orders...and for someone like Etsuji, I imagine it’d have to be by more’n a little bit.”

Oguri’s eyes met hers, a flicker of moonlight illuminating his consternation. “I just hope Kisada listens.”

The two stood the rest of the watch in silence and, despite knowing they would be leaving just after dawn, found themselves unwilling to move until a wan light returned to the world, painting the pale stones of the watchtower for what both of them hoped wouldn’t be the last time.

