

Beneath the Light of Jade

By Robert Denton III

Somewhere in the Shadowlands

Kuni Yori approached the dispatched *oni*'s remains, stepping much closer to them than his apprentice had. Wisps of smoke still wormed out from the *oni*'s mottled flesh, rising from where the jade light had touched it. Shattered pieces of cream-colored jade glittered around the corpse, like condensation droplets. He'd expected to have to follow up with a prayer of his own, perhaps even sacrificing one of his precious fingers of jade as an offering. But Tadaka's lone Jade Strike had been more than enough to overcome the creature.

I've been underestimating him. When Tadaka had first called the *kami* to appear in jade light before him, Yori had found his technique needlessly showy, instructing him instead on the Kuni's simpler method. He'd expected resistance—the Isawa could be so close minded—but Tadaka had proved more compromising than his kin. Now he had mastered it.

Don't praise him too much. He won't respect you.

"If it had lived, we could have questioned it," Yori remarked. "Still, well done."

Tadaka could not look Yori in the face. With sad reverence he returned the borrowed item: a small hairbrush, sculpted from whalebone.

It had been in Yori's family for generations, carved by one of his ancestors. In the passing decades, the comb had stirred, the spirit inside spontaneously awakening to sentience. It had become a living item, a *nemuranai*.

Yori rubbed his thumb over the smooth, petrified bone. The *kami* inside, the spirit of the comb, was gone. *Nemuranai* no more. Lifeless.

Tadaka bowed his head, ashamed. "The spirit within accepted my offering but fled immediately after. I am sorry, teacher. I can never make it up to you."

It took hundreds of years to create a *nemuranai*. An item had to be cared for, used, protected, cherished, passed down for generations, each decade increasing its awareness, its power. Sometimes it never happened. And now this, a precious treasure of his family, was mundane. Lost forever.

He tossed it aside. "It served its purpose."

Tadaka blinked in disbelief. A not-unexpected reaction. Despite his time among the Kuni, Tadaka had still formed attachments to objects, treating his tools as "sacred." It was all that slowed him down: all this ceremony, this useless deference. He had proved an apt pupil, but ultimately he was still an Isawa.





“The nemuranai spirit knew this place would corrupt it if it remained,” Yori explained. “Which makes it smarter than humans. Well,” he added, “smarter than us, anyway.”

The wind tugged at Tadaka’s cloth mask. “That is why the Kuni rely on nemuranai,” he realized. “In the Shadowlands, one cannot ensure that the kami answering one’s prayers isn’t Tainted.”

“And we rely on jade offerings because *kansen* do not accept them.” Yori knelt by the oni, taking care not to touch the wretched

thing. “Of course by offering only jade, one risks no kami answering at all.”

“All those years,” Tadaka murmured, “lost in one invocation.”

That was the way of things. Mortal victories were small and costly. Centuries of losses had taught this to the Kuni. He could not expect Tadaka to comprehend it all at once.

But he would. In time.

Yori inspected the corpse. He was careful not to breathe too deeply, lest he inhale its fading spirit. That was how Witch Hunters became possessed. The oni’s three bulbous eyes stared blankly, its trio of tongues rolling limp from its soundless mouth.

“Look at its features. Three eyes. Three tongues.” He nodded. “This is an oni lord’s spawn. Akuma no Oni’s.”

Tadaka swallowed. “I didn’t realize it had spawn remaining.”

Interesting. Tadaka had seen worse than this, and he never flinched. But now he seemed shaken, pale even. Why did this creature, even dead, gave him pause?

The Empire had long forgotten, but the Kuni remembered that an Elemental Master had created the oni lord. Isawa Akuma’s name was quite strong; when he gave it to the oni, he created one of the most powerful beings in the Shadowlands. The Kaiu Wall hadn’t been completed in those days. It had cost much to finally kill the creature.

Akuma was a shame of the Isawa, he realized. Yes, that would explain Tadaka’s trepidation.

I cannot afford a shaken companion, he thought. He would have to reassure Tadaka that his family’s shame was unimportant, at least right now. Perhaps Tadaka felt it was a burden he had to conceal, a curse he carried alone. But time had shown Yori that curses could also be blessings, if one looked closely enough.

Beyond, shadows gathered in the stony gulch. The sky was bleeding. It would be night soon.

“The Kuni family has existed for over a thousand years,” he said. “There have been more Kuni *daimyō* than Hantei emperors.” He glanced at his pupil. “How many do you guess



succumbed to evil?"

Tadaka hesitated. "Perhaps a handful," he finally risked. "Although far more resisted, I am sure."

"No, Tadaka-sama. Nearly all became Tainted, in the end."

Tadaka said nothing. He only stared.

"Some avoided that fate, but they are dwarfed by those who succumbed. When you fight the darkness, it is inevitable. What place is it then for the Kuni to judge the shame of other families?"

"Why tell me this?" Tadaka whispered. "That secret could destroy the Kuni."

He was a good student. He listened. He learned. And he also taught, without knowing it.

"Perhaps I have come to think of you as one of us," Yori replied as he set fire to the corpse. It burned at his feet as the sky grew darker.

"He could have been a hero," he whispered, trusting the wind to carry his words to Tadaka's ears. "If his priorities had been in order, had he learned something, Isawa Akuma would be remembered a hero, not a villain."

Tadaka watched the oni burn. He didn't reply.

Asako Tsuki startled awake. Her neck felt like an unyielding rod from lying on the rocks. When had she fallen asleep? She cursed herself for her lack of vigilance. How long had she lain there prone, with all the dangers of the Shadowlands lurking around her?

She looked to the sky before remembering that she couldn't trust the sun's position to tell the time. It was darkening, the sun transitioning to a sliver of moon, like a wide eye closing.

How many days had it been? How many weeks?

She stiffened at the thud of something crashing into the sheltered copse. But she relaxed when she saw the newcomer's digitigrade feet, the long tail thumping on the ground behind. Tsuki recognized her own outer coat draped around the being's thin shoulders. She was wearing it wrong, like a cloak or a cape. The being hunched over a flimsy basket of scavenged prizes, whiskers twitching before her bulbous brown eyes and fur-covered triangular face.

"Are you awoked?" came her scratchy, soft voice.

"Awake," Tsuki corrected, rising. "And I am now."

During Tsuki's pampered life of blissful ignorance on the right side of the Wall, the only thing she had known about the *nezumi* was that they were ratlike beings, that they could not be Tainted, and that they collected things. The sum of this knowledge had come from two feet of dusty scroll, a few lines of text with an illustration of a rat walking on its hind legs and wearing a kimono. In the last few weeks, she'd learned more about nezumi than she'd ever thought possible.



The ratling emptied her basket. "We were lucky. I gathered good food today." Her whiskers twitched. "That's the right word? *Food*?"

"Yes," Tsuki replied, dusting off her ruined silks. "Your Rokugani is coming along well."

"Better than your Nezumi!"

Tsuki laughed. She couldn't argue with that. The nezumi constantly corrected her attempts, suggesting that she "release the right musk" alongside each syllable. A language modified by scents was unlike anything Tsuki could have imagined. Such sophistication fascinated her: knowledge and meanings locked behind a puzzle she could never fully solve.

The ratling looked much better than she had weeks ago: bloodied and weak, a daggerlike tooth implanted in her side. Tsuki hadn't expected her to survive. When she was well again, she had introduced herself as "Spike-in-the-Gut." Tsuki had shorted it to a single Rokugani word: "Spike." The nezumi puffed with pride every time Tsuki used it.

"Did you make another one?" Spike's teeth scraped together with a faint chattering sound: bruxing, which Tsuki had gradually learned was equivalent to blushing, an involuntary reaction to specific emotions.

Tsuki knew what she wanted. From within the scavenged satchel Spike had given her, she withdrew one of her daily accomplishments: a plain sheet of paper, folded into the shape of a bird with wings unfurled and a fanlike tail.

Spike's glossy eyes glittered. She cradled the origami delicately, as if it would shatter at the slightest pressure.

"Tug the tail a bit," Tsuki advised.

The motion rippled across the folded paper, causing the wings to twitch. Tsuki frowned; it was supposed to flap its wings, but the folds were not crisp enough.

Spike gasped even so. "It's magic," she breathed, bruxing again.

Spike always returned with little bits and things. Pieces of torn paper, little wooden boxes, discarded whetstones. Tsuki knew the paper had to have been recently made. Greatest among a librarian's duties was to replicate all the scrolls and books, which were in a constant state of decay. Parchment lasted longer, being made of animal hide, second only to the bamboo scroll, which was nothing more than woven slats. But paper dried into brittle flakes within a few generations, or broke down into moldy pulp in wet climates. How Spike had found relatively intact mulberry paper in the Shadowlands, she couldn't say.

But she was grateful for every sheet. It was something to do besides stumble around their language barrier and walk north, something to think about other than the twitching shadows around every innocent-looking shrub, or the growing holes in her socks.

Or the nezumi. Spike seemed immune to the surroundings, in every sense. Kansen paid her no mind. She could even drink the suspect water. Tsuki had wondered if her proximity to the nezumi was the only thing that was keeping the dangers at bay. In every sense that mattered, Spike was her candle against the shadows.



Were circumstances different, Tsuki would have liked to study Spike's people, to understand how they thrived in such a hostile place. She wanted to know the culture of a people so different from humans. What did they value? What were their achievements? What were their systems of math, philosophy, and art? Were they nomadic? Did they have villages? What stories did they tell their pups, and how did they preserve their identity in a place where nothing good could grow? She wanted to learn their insights, anything from their unique perspective that could enrich her understanding. A moldy scroll did not do them justice. They were wonderful. She wanted to know *everything*.



But first she'd need to reach the Plains above Evil and return to Rokugan. With every bloody dawn, that possibility seemed more distant.

"These little things still amuse you?" Tsuki asked. This had to be the eighth origami she'd made for her since they met.

Spike beamed. Her eyes bulged out of their sockets. "Of course! They are my treasures!"

Tsuki's heart swelled. No one back home had ever valued her clumsy attempts at origami. In fact, she couldn't think of a single time she'd been so highly praised.

Treasures. Surely Spike had used the wrong word. They couldn't possibly be that meaningful to her.

Spike stoked the campfire as Tsuki separated the basket's contents to make dinner. Scavenged mushrooms, stiff onion-looking grasses, a handful of acorns, something that was probably a rock—

Her stomach growled. She'd lost a lot of weight, her kimono hanging more loosely each day. Some nights her stomach felt like it was on fire. But she could only eat whatever Spike scavenged. Nothing else could be trusted.

The onions usually weren't that bad. "Good find today."

"I had a close call just to get it, too. I was nearly caught!"

"*Bakemono?*" Tsuki asked. She hoped nothing bigger. She couldn't imagine life out here without her lone ally, and they had no way to fight something larger than a goblin.

"An oni, I think. But luckily the *zakseker* dispatched it. It never even noticed me."

"*Zakseker?*" A nezumi word. Spike had never spoken it before.

"*Zakseker.* They had clothes kinda like yours."

Clothes like mine?

A mushroom fell from her limp hand.



"Were they humans?" she asked softly. "Like me?"

She knew better than to hope. They were too far from the Wall. Not even Crab patrols, like the one that had given up pursuing her, would venture this far into the Shadowlands.

But now a tiny spark danced inside her chest, a little flame that she desperately needed to keep lit, so it would cast its tiny light.

"They were zakseker," Spike insisted. Then, another nod. "But yes, humans."

She could have embraced the ratling. Humans. Her own kind. She fell to her knees. *Thank the Fortunes! Ten thousand praises to every Fortune!*

Human beings. They would have food, shelter...

And a dungeon back at the Wall, if they were Crab. They were probably Crab, right? Who else would they be?

Even if they were Crab, she'd have to risk finding them. It was her only chance. She could explain, make them understand. She had to try.

"Can you take me to them?" she asked. "Spike, which way did they go?"

A nezumi's face was unlike a human's. Nezumi didn't make the same expressions; their anatomy was too different. But the weeks had taught her to how to read Spike's body language. She was hesitating. Holding back.

"Too dangerous," Spike finally said. She poked the fire. "Forget I said anything."

Just as suddenly as it had opened, Tsuki felt a door closing. The little flame sputtered in her chest. Each moment could take them farther away. She had to find them! It was her only chance.

Spike was shaking. A musty odor arose from her matted fur. Was it fear? She had stridden so confidently among countless dangers. Was she really afraid of a few humans?

"Are they undead?" She searched for words. "Not-alive?"

"Forget them." More poking. "Zakseker are dangerous. Can't trust them. Can't take the chance."

She's protecting me, Tsuki realized. Spike probably thought Tsuki was delusional.

And why wouldn't she think that? It could be a trick. The Shadowlands knew the human heart. It sensed desires and presented them as traps. Even if the zakseker appeared human, that didn't mean they were. And logically, there shouldn't be any people out here. Distrusting the Shadowlands, avoiding contact—that was how nezumi survived. Tsuki knew that. She'd barely survived that lesson.

But didn't it feel like the tiny flame of hope within her had burst into a bonfire? Didn't it feel like her last, desperate chance? Wasn't she allowed to be a little delusional, all things considered?

Tsuki sat directly in front of the nezumi. She didn't move until Spike raised her murine face, and their eyes met.



"Spike, I'm going to die out here. This place will take more than just my life. It will take my very soul. If there are humans nearby who can get me back..."

Her little office with the window facing the sea. Her little desk with the unfinished book on the back shelf. The salty smell of scrolls and the sea. Home. Fading away.

She let her tears fall openly. Among her people, such an open display would have shamed her. But tears were one of the few things humans and nezumi had in common. She had to let them show, to be understood, beyond all doubt. "Please, Spike. This might be my only chance to go home."

"Home," Spike whispered. A Rokugani word.

And then, softly, she nodded. "Okay."

Tsuki grinned around a new wave of tears. Home. She was going home.

"I'll take you to them." Spike clasped her shoulder. Her eyes bulged with urgency. "But be ready to run."

The zakseker, as Spike had called them, had their own camp set near the edge of a ravine. They'd surrounded it with a hemp curtain, a *jinmaku*, embroidered with the Crab Clan *mon*. It shielded them from the wind and dust while hiding their numbers. Clever.

There was probably an entire scouting party behind that curtain. They might still be looking for her. Only weeks ago, she had been hiding from them. It was really foolish to approach. They'd probably just kill her, wouldn't they? Exactly how desperate was she?

Pretty desperate, she decided, and stood.

Spike forced her down again, behind the brush. "Bad idea. Wait. Smell them out."

"I can't." She had to make Spike understand. "I have to risk it."

"Why?" Spike insisted. "I can still take you north around the Wall. It's only a month or two."

"I won't last a month or two."

Spike chittered and squeezed her hand. "And I can't protect you from them."

Guilt pricked her heart. This nezumi was the only reason she'd made it this far. She owed Spike her life. Maybe even her soul. Could she really just walk away?

There was no helping it. Neither could survive in the world of the other. She rose from the brush, swallowing her regret. "Then go, before they see you."

A long pause.

"Goodbye," Spike whispered. "Live a long time."

Her whip-tail lashed the brush. She was gone.

Tsuki blinked wetness from her eyes. It stung more than she had expected. But it was too late to take it back now.

Tsuki walked into the open, eyes on the curtains as she approached. She licked her dry lips. "Hello?" she called out, voice shaking.



The wind rippled the curtain and the mon of the Crab.

"I am Asako Tsuki," she continued, risking another step. "I am lost, but untainted. May I approach?"

Nothing.

And then, the curtain parted.

She blinked. Now she knew it was a Shadowlands trick. What else could explain the man who stepped out from the jinmaku? The wind tugged the orange and red robes of the Phoenix around his broad shoulders, and an unusual cloth beneath his cone-shaped hat obscured his lower face. His heraldry bore not only the symbol of the Isawa family, but also the silver crest of the Master of Earth.



Impossible. Laughably transparent. An obvious trap, guileless and—

"Azunami's niece?" He tilted his head just so. Jade beads glinted in a string around his thick arm. "What is a librarian doing in the middle of the Shadowlands?"

It wasn't a trap. It was him. Isawa Tadaka, the Master of Earth.

Laughter poured out like a river, so strong that she shook, nearly falling to her knees. Even as he stared, regarding her as though she'd lost her mind, she laughed until tears streamed down her face. Now she understood why the Fortunes had led her here.

"Honored Master, I have found you at last! I..."

She was filthy. She rubbed her cheek and pulled away a muddy palm. Finally she was properly meeting the new Master of Earth, and she was in this embarrassing state!

Tadaka kept his distance. He watched her with testing, calm eyes that she tried not to notice were *gorgeous*.

And of course I must present myself as a dirt-caked mule.

"Isawa-sama, excuse my...err...appearance. I carry a message for you, from our homeland."

His brow furrowed. "I must say, Tsuki-san, you are perhaps the most dedicated messenger I've ever met."

She gave a tired smile. "As you say, honored Master."

The curtain parted. A man stepped out.

Tsuki froze at his Kabuki-painted face, his long mustache, and the symbol of the Kuni family displayed on his robes. "An unexpected guest," he remarked, cocking a brow.

The *mahō* scrolls she'd found in his lab. The *tsukai*-knife. The experiments. They all came to her in a rush.



And now there he was.

"Kuni-sama," she managed, remembering to bow. "What an...unexpected honor."

It had been Kuni Yori whom Spike was afraid of. Any nezumi would know a mahō-tsukai when they saw one. Was that what zakseker meant?

She breathed calmly as she rose. She couldn't reveal what she knew. *Wait until you're alone with Tadaka*, she thought. Then she'd reveal Yori for what he was.

"You said you had a message?" Tadaka asked.

Her hand flinched toward her obi. Nothing there. She didn't have the scroll anymore, did she? "Ah, it seems I...misplaced it, but I know its contents. It was from Shiba Tsukune-ue."

"Tsukune?" Tadaka's eyes flickered. "What happened?"

She glanced at Yori. He was watching. Ever so closely.

"You can speak freely," Tadaka said. "The Kuni daimyō is a friend of the Isawa."

She bit her tongue. Tadaka didn't know? How could that be? Couldn't the Masters sense the imbalance of a mahō-tsukai?

She cleared her throat. "It is about Master Ujina. He is gone."

Tadaka held very still for a long while. "How?" he finally uttered.

"Vanished. We do not know more than that." She lowered her head. "I'm sorry, Tadaka-sama."

"My condolences," said Yori.

The Master of Void was Tadaka's father. Before all this, Tsuki had practiced how she would tell him, delivering the news to her own reflection. Now, tired as she was, she wondered if she'd been too blunt. But her exhaustion pushed away any other emotion.

They stood there in silence.

"So the council must choose another Master," Tadaka deduced, voice wavering only slightly. "My sister will replace him. Her connection to the Void was greater even than his."

"She has declined. As an Akodo, she cannot serve both clans." Tsuki bowed low. "The council will reconvene soon. They need the Master of Earth." She paused, remembering the specific words she had to use. "Tsukune-ue needs you."

He faltered at her name. Tsuki pretended not to notice.

So the rumors were true, then.

"Tadaka-sama," Yori said, "if your clan needs you, then perhaps you should return to it."

And leave you to what, sorcerer? Tsuki bit her tongue.

Tadaka turned away. "She does not need me," he whispered. "Not anymore." He straightened with new resolve. "This is more important. The council can choose without me." He turned to Tsuki. "Tell them—"

"No," she whispered. "You are going home."

Stunned silence. She'd even surprised herself. Yet it felt good to say. Startlingly so.

Yori glanced at Tadaka. "Are Phoenix usually so disobedient?"



She tried not to glare, but felt herself slip. She couldn't bring herself to respect a man who dabbled in evil while pretending to champion righteousness.

Tadaka drew a patient breath. "I know you are stressed, Tsuki-san. But remember who you speak to."

A reminder. A threat. She had been insubordinate. He was the Master of Earth, and she, a pebble.

But, she realized, she didn't care.

"Punish me," she said. "I accept any judgment for my tone. But I will not leave without you." She planted herself and looked up at his towering frame. "I endured things to find you, honored Master. I risked my very soul. A good man gave his life." Shiba Koetsu. Her poor *yōjimbō*. She choked, but pushed past her grief. "I questioned why the Fortunes led me to this evil place. Until now. They led me to you. How then can I return to the Phoenix empty-handed? If I disappoint Tsukune-ue, I can never again show my face."

He was hesitating. She could see him weighing each path, deciding.

"A question, Asako-san," Yori spoke. "How exactly did you come to be so far from the Wall? The Crab rarely allow passage into these lands. Surely you must possess a document of my clan's blessing?"

She felt like a mouse in a tiger's gaze.

"So," he said, when she didn't reply, "you are alone this far from the Wall, no documentation, and no proof of this 'message' you claim is for Tadaka. Why should he believe you?"

Yori was a daimyō. Tadaka's friend. She was...nobody. His word was greater than hers. And relations between the Asako and Isawa were rocky at best. Even now, she could see the suspicion flicker in Tadaka's eyes, an unspoken notion passing between student and teacher...

She tried to stay calm. "Honored Master, I am Phoenix. We both serve the council. Cast aside my words, and you disgrace us both."



Please believe me, she thought, trying to speak with her eyes. I am not lying! Yori is not what he seems! You are camping with a viper!

"I can think of another reason one might be out here alone," Yori said, hand inching toward his *wakizashi*.

A blur, bursting through the brush, crossing faster than Tsuki thought possible. But she knew who it was, from the moment she heard the crash to the glimpse of the long rat tail.



"Leave her be!" Spike squeaked and sunk her incisors into Yori's arm.

Tadaka stepped in front, shoving. Tsuki crashed to the ground. Words fell from Tadaka's lips. She smelled incense, an offering.

Jade light, pouring from his hands. It painted the clearing in brilliant emerald, flooding both ratling and shugenja. Faintly, she heard Yori scream.

Tadaka must have mistaken Spike for a goblin or other bakemono. Yet the Breath of the Jade Dragon would leave nezumi untouched.

Tsuki crawled to her feet as the light died. Tadaka wielded his ceramic scroll cases as he would the *hanbō*, one in each hand, ready to fight the ratling off. Spike kicked away from the groaning Yori, scrambling on all fours, hissing loudly. Tadaka raised his weapons.

"She's a friend!" Tsuki shouted.

But Tadaka had stopped the moment he realized what Spike was. He lowered his weapons. Nezumi were allies against the Shadowlands. It wouldn't do to attack.

But Spike was still hissing. She puffed up beneath her overcoat, halfway between fight and flight, facing the Kuni daimyō. She growled. "Zakseker."

Yori grunted as he stood. He was burned where the jade light had touched him.

Wordlessly, he snapped a jade finger from around his neck and clasped it in his hands. He murmured, eyes closed, feeling. When they opened again, he looked defeated. Smaller. He tossed the jade trinket at Tsuki's feet. "A gift," he said. "It won't do me any good anymore."

Tadaka's eyes widened as Yori smirked. "I told you, my student. It was bound to happen someday."

