

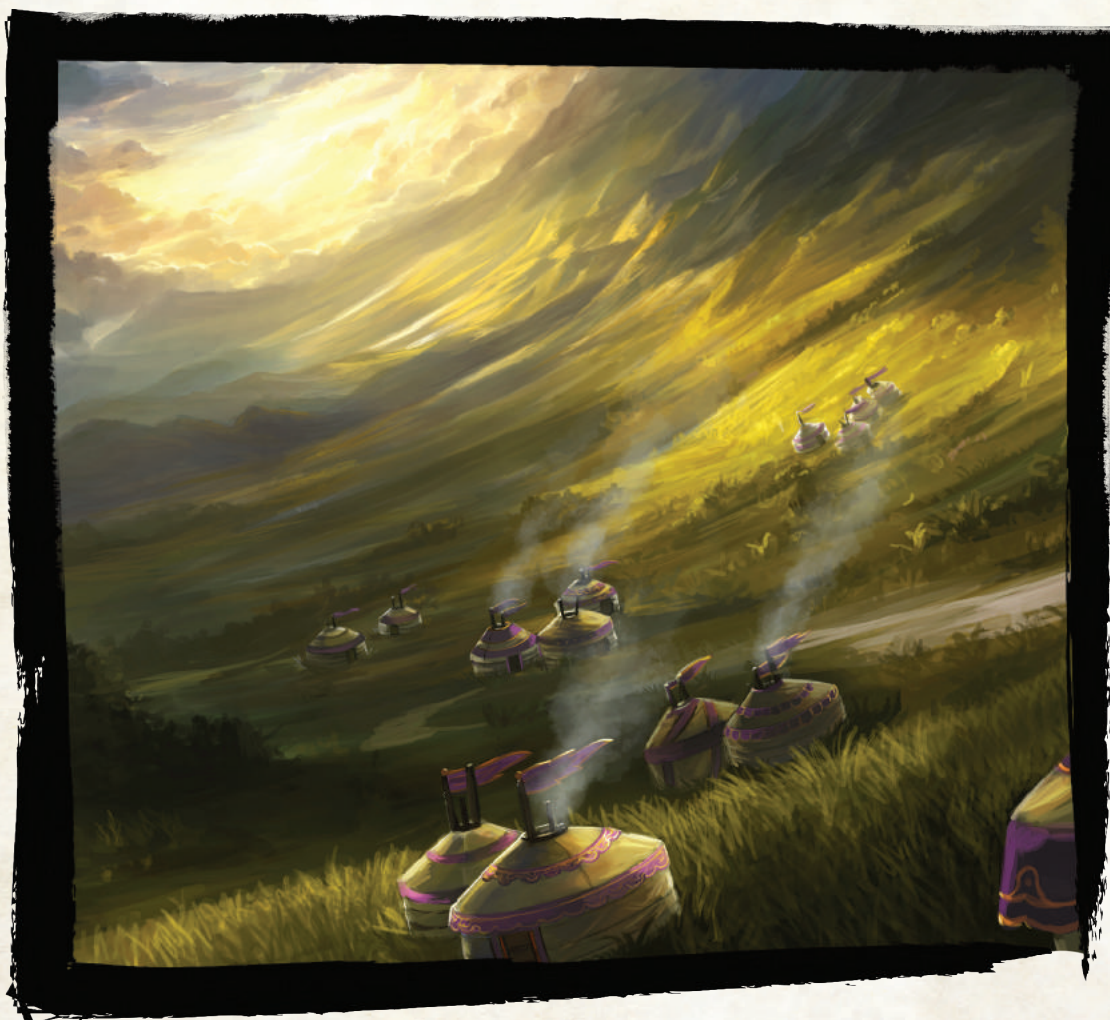
To the South (Part 1)

By Marie Brennan

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

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

His *ashigaru* had fanned out to either side of him, likewise searching. In the distance he heard a pair of voices, Iuchi Rimei questioning the bent old woman who led this village. He couldn't make out the words, but he didn't need to. The phrase “superstitious peasants” had come up more than once on their ride here. One might expect Rimei, as a *shugenja*, to credit spiritual explanations more readily than the average samurai, but instead the reverse was



true. To her way of thinking, all strange sightings were wild animals or drunken farmers until proven otherwise.

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

A flattening of the dry grass caught Tatsuo's eye. He followed it to the brush, where he found broken twigs littering the ground. No creature that large would have bothered to wade into the brush...unless it was looking for a hidden place from which to observe the village.

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

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

"Where does it lead?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rimei was too polite to make Tatsuo eat his words.

He could have blamed the ashigaru's horses, which were of lesser stock than his Naegi

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Who guarded Rokugan against the Shadowlands.

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

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

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



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

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

“Then we keep going,” he said. “But the moment we’re sure—”

She nodded. “I ride north.”

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

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

Two days later, they saw smoke.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He whirled and brought his bow up to full draw.

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

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