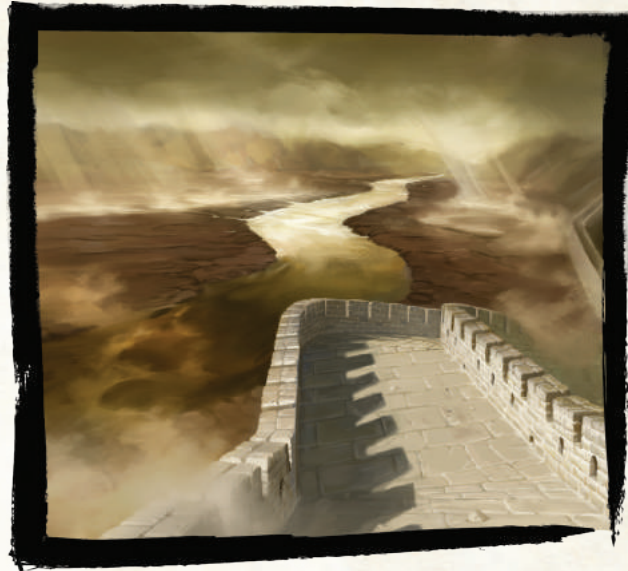


The Sea and the Sun's Shadow

By Annie VanderMeer Mitsoda

Yasuki Oguri squinted at the water ahead, inexpertly shading his eyes against the rays of the dawning sun creeping over the Kaiu Wall and across the deck of the *Poison Tide*. Around him, the crew did their best to stifle nervous yawns, attending to the business of guiding the ship to its destination as though it—and perhaps themselves as well—were made of glass. Oguri could hardly blame them for being unsettled by their environment: though the waters of the River of the Last Stand had been used to protect Rokugan from



the invasion of the Shadowlands centuries before, it wasn't as comforting a thought when one could simply glance to the west to see that dreaded land just beyond the banks. And from what he noticed, the glances of those around him were frequent, especially this early in the morning.

Oguri sighed and scrubbed a hand across his eyes as if to wipe away the need for more sleep, doing his best to stifle a yawn. He had been pushing his escort hard to reach the Watchtower of Sun's Shadow, speeding their exit from Friendly Traveler Village and up the river, holding gamely on to a faint hope that the lack of communication from the outpost was merely an error and not an indication of a far graver situation. The Mantis crew had grumbled at such haste, but at a glare from their leader—the formidable *shugenja* known as Kudaka—they had quickly bitten their tongues and fallen in line. And tensions had grown tighter and tighter as they progressed further from the coast, nerves stretching like bowstrings. Oguri hoped they would reach their destination before any strings snapped.

His gaze drifted to the sides of the ship, where Kudaka's two protégés, Fuu and Umi, sat opposite one another, staring over the gunwales, waving their hands slowly over the surface of the water. His father had seen them on the Mantis champion's flagship and had spoken of the twins connecting effortlessly with the kami, their prayers to the spirits making the water around the ship as smooth as glass. The trip here, however, seemed to have taxed them greatly: their already pale skin stretched tight across their delicate features, their eyes cloudy with exhaustion, their struggles evident to Oguri even from where he stood at the stern of the ship.



"You see it too, then?" Oguri did his best not to start at the sudden interjection and turned his head to see Kudaka at his side. Though the woman had ceased using her connection with the spirits of air to buoy her across the deck—which he felt had been gratuitous—she continued to move with a stealthiness that a cat might envy. "Twins've been a bit sluggish lately."

Oguri heard his father's lessons in his head about diplomacy and gave his best attempt at a casual smile. "Honestly, I barely noticed. I know everyone is a bit run-down and on edge. And besides, we have been making pretty good time."

Kudaka, ever unimpressed by tact, snorted loudly. "We'd be makin' a lot better time if they wasn't havin' so much trouble," she said, covering the seriousness of her tone somewhat by idly picking a bit of breakfast from a back tooth. "Said the kami weren't listenin' proper. *Spooked*, they said."

Oguri's practiced veneer cracked and he frowned. "And what do you make of that?"

Kudaka turned and spit on the deck, her face sour. "I know the Shadowlands does some odd tricks. But I ain't never heard of kami being 'spooked' exactly. I'd call 'em more reluctant, sure, but..." Her frown deepened. "We don't all have the same kind of askin', if you catch my meaning. I reach to them, they know my years, they know how familiar I am. Those two..." She shook her head. "If I'm a waterwheel in a stream, *they're* by a stinkin' great waterfall. I can brush off the taint of those dark lands and just feel a bit like I stepped in seal scat—but for them?" A pained look crept into her eyes. "Must feel hard to breathe."

Oguri opened his mouth to ask her for a bit more detail on what she meant, when a short whistle sounded from the lookout at the bow of the *Poison Tide*. "Watchtower sighted," he said and clambered quickly down from the upper deck, rushing to the front of the ship to try and get a better look. He strained his vision a moment, peering through the long shadows of dawn and trying to get a proper measure of the place, before remembering a gift that the first mate had given to him when they set off. He fumbled in a bag at his side, withdrew the brass tube, extended it, and put the spyglass to his eye. Pleasant as the morning light could be, its golden rays skating across the area and making the desolation nearby look almost lovely, it was proving a bit of a problem in trying to look past and see what lay ahead.

Next to him, a Crab *bushi* scoffed and shook their head. "That's not so bad. The walls look secure. A proper Shadowlands assault would have pulled the whole place down and had *oni* stomping on the rubble. Not a demon in sight!"

"Walls up are one thing," another said, uncrossing her arms to point at the structure looming in the distance. "The walls even have sentries, see? All this way for nothing."

Oguri continued to fiddle with the spyglass, bringing it up and focusing on the walls, something itching at his brain.

"Don't say that," the first bushi chuckled. "Maybe they have some saké to share. After all this time on alert, I could certainly use some, couldn't you?"

"You said it. Why don't we—"



Suddenly, the image in the spyglass came into focus, and Oguri's eyes widened in shock. He whirled on Kudaka, who actually took a step backward in surprise. "*Stop! We have to stop the boat immediately!*"

Without missing a beat, Kudaka nodded, then spun around and leveled a blast of wind at the mainsail, which creaked with the sudden force of the gust, and made the whole ship shudder. "*FULL STOP!*" she said loudly, but noticeably kept her voice below a yell. "Not one yard further or I'll flog you myself!"

A low chatter spilled around the deck like an upturned sack of acorns, rolling from group to group. Oguri tried to put it out of his head and continued staring through the spyglass, the brightening light making the view clearer. *I'm right*, he thought to himself. *Damn it, I'm right.*

"What's the wait?" Kudaka said, leaning close to him to keep the conversation quiet. "Looks clear to me."

Oguri covered his startled jump at Kudaka's closeness and handed her the spyglass, then pointed toward the walls of the watchtower in the distance. "See the edge of those walls?" he said. "Before I left Kyūden Hida, I studied the plans for every single watchtower built along the Wall, and the regulations for how each of them is maintained. Every one of them is to have two ballistae and two catapults in working order."

Kudaka shrugged, still squinting through the glass. "And? I see 'em right up there, on the corners."

"That is the problem. They are supposed to be *centered*."

Kudaka snorted. *I'm getting a little tired of that snort*, Oguri thought to himself briefly. "So what's the fuss? Fallen behind on them regulations, maybe?"

He shook his head emphatically. "I would have been less worried if they just were not there. But that ballista up there is pointed diagonally. Which would not put them in ideal position for anything coming *across* the river, but—"

"—anything comin' up the river would be a perfect target." Kudaka snapped the spyglass shut and sucked her teeth. "Damn, good thing you had us stop. Kaiu ballistas would be rubbish on a ship, like I said, but they'd sure punch a hole clear *through* one." She jerked her chin at the figures on the walls ahead. "What about them sentries, though?"

Oguri set his jaw. Though the figures wore Crab armor and stood at their posts as they should, the spyglass showed him the truth of what they were...something that the slumped shoulders and slight sway made apparent now, even at a distance. "They are not sentries—or at least not ours. Those are undead." The zombie soldiers weren't the best at keeping watch, but they were plentiful wherever the Taint spread, turning the defenders' strength into fresh horrors. "This almost certainly means there are more dangerous creatures inside the watchtower proper." He swallowed, his voice thick. "Maybe even Lost samurai."

Kudaka eyed him, her expression measuring. "So what now, cormorant?"



Oguri gave a sharp sigh of frustration. “Don’t know exactly yet. Putting that together. We cannot go any further along the river, that is for certain. Let’s try to moor as close to the shallows here as we can and disembark the bulk of the forces. Zombies are far better at spotting bigger threats, so we might be able to get a scout or two closer to the tower to get a feel for the situation.”

The Mantis woman nodded, and in short order the crew steered the ship into the shallows, carefully dropping anchor before the boat became mired in the river’s silty bottom. To Oguri’s dismay, Kudaka thought it wiser and more expedient not to lower the rowboats and simply set down rope ladders, sending everyone—with the exception of Kudaka and her twin students, who floated down from the deck to the land—wading through thigh-deep water and onto shore. Scouts were dispatched as the expedition force wrung out their wet clothing, strapped on their armor, and cautiously approached along the base of the Wall, positioning themselves as close to the watchtower as they could without being spotted.



Oguri was shifting uncomfortably in his cuirass when the scouts returned, the light of true day turning the sky from pink to blue—I might have found the view lovely, if not for the circumstances.

“Report,” he said quickly, waving away their bows.

“There is a breach in the wall, as expected,” the smaller one said grimly. “Northwest side. About the size of six bushi shoulder-to-shoulder.”

“Or one oni,” the larger scout grumbled. “We could not pick up numbers, but the chattering of *bakemono* was loud...until we heard a loud, deep voice tell them to shut up.”

Oguri stifled a wince. *Goblins and ogres. Exactly what I was afraid of.*

“Is there more?” he asked. Both scouts looked worried.

“My lord...” The smaller scout started, scratching behind an ear like a nervous tic. “We two could approach unseen, but a larger force...rounding the distance from here to that breach would leave us exposed, even at a full run. With their numbers and siege equipment, I estimate that they could eliminate at least a third of our numbers before we even reached the watchtower.”

“Not to mention that breach is like the neck of a saké jug,” growled the bigger scout. “If we do not punch through in a hurry, we will get trapped in there and cut to pieces.”



Oguri's brow furrowed. "So we need a distraction. Something to draw the sentries down to the courtyard and keep everything down there occupied long enough to let us run in, get through the breach, and engage them."

Kudaka gave a rough, bitter laugh, causing the scouts to level dark looks at her that she absolutely ignored. "Too bad the watchtower didn't get no warnin' out before they got wrecked," she said wryly. "Could do with a few more troops now, I think."

Oguri drew in a sharp breath as a thought came to him suddenly. "You're right. You're *right!* They didn't get out a signal."

Kudaka, the twins, and the scouts all gave him peculiar looks, which he hardly noticed. Oguri's brain was already piecing things together, a mishmash of teachings from his father and Hida Kisada that he hoped would do both his daimyō and his clan champion proud.

"The Watchtower of Sun's Shadow was inspected very shortly before contact was lost with them, and the report said that all their stores of goods and equipment were at capacity. If they did not get a signal out, that means the whole stock of signal arrows is still untouched."

The scouts looked perplexed. "But my lord..." The smaller one scratched behind his ear again. "Even if we used those, help could not possibly come in time to assist us in taking the watchtower."

Oguri shook his head. "We don't need to fire them into the air to make them useful. Each signal arrow is packed with a bright red powder... I can tell you firsthand it is a nightmare to deal with. When I was a child, I snuck into the equipment room at Yasuki Yashiki to play with the weapons. I accidentally broke one of the reeds holding the powder, and it went *everywhere*. Even just one arrow had enough to coat almost everything in that room, myself very much included." He gave a sharp laugh at the memory. "I was seeing red in my vision for hours afterwards, and sneezing big gobs of crimson snot. Terrified the courtiers that I was dying."

The scouts continued to look confused. "My lord...what..."

Kudaka beat them to it, giving an echoing laugh and clapping her hands. "I think I get it," she chuckled. "Get them arrows, dump the dust in the courtyard, run in while it's chaos. I like it." Her grin turned dark. "I'll do it."

Oguri suddenly blinked, startled. *I...hadn't really thought of the logistical implications of that plan*, he thought with alarm. "I...I didn't mean that you—"

Kudaka waved him off, and Oguri wondered if the breeze he felt on his face was part of that action. "Don't be daft. Of course it's me. You know anyone else who could just hop up that wall without causing a fuss, find a stock of arrows, and upend a mess of red dust all over everywhere?" Fuu and Umi had a moment to look stung before Kudaka whirled on them.

"Stop sulkin', you two. Your job is to keep that same dust away from the fightin' force so they can get to stabbin' and smashin', eh?" The twins looked mildly mollified.

Kudaka's tone softened a little as she placed her hands on their shoulders. "You're me students, and the pride of the Mantis. You been doin' fine this whole way, but today's the day



you really gotta show what you can do, yeah?" She squeezed their shoulders affectionately. "Do our clan proud. And me."

The twins nodded solemnly, and Oguri could almost swear some color had come back into their pale cheeks as Kudaka turned back to him. "Now, where are them dusty arrows?"

"The corner outposts, on top of the walls," he said, pointing carefully. "Regulations state that there needs to be a store of them at each one, but the main supply should be on the southeast corner, furthest from the Kaiu Wall." Kudaka nodded, and Oguri frowned. "I still don't think you should be doing this."

"Try and stop me, cormorant," the older woman laughed, standing and stretching. "It's dyin' here or on a deck, and either seems a fine way for me. Just look for my signal—it'll involve a lot of screaming!"

He opened his mouth to voice another useless protest as Kudaka took off running, soundlessly as a shadow, making it to the base of the watchtower, then leaping up along the face of the wall, bounding from one smooth brick to the next as a column of wind whistled beneath her. He had a moment of fear as the undead sentry above her leaned down to look at what was rapidly scaling the wall, and then there was a flash of silver in her hand—and a sweep of the *kama* in it—and the head of the walking corpse fell off the neck of its owner and hit the ground with a distant soft thump. Another airy leap, and the teal-robed figure was up over the side of the tower and out of sight.

"Wow," whispered the scout next to him. Oguri found himself silently agreeing.

He turned to the warriors gathered around him. "Everyone, ready your weapons and be prepared to run. Scouts, you are with me at the front. Sailors, you are behind us—remember to either use blunt weapons or be wary of any blood spray. If your jade is at all stained, get back on the boat right away—we do not have time to deal with anyone becoming afflicted by the Taint." He reflexively felt under the collar of his armor for his own protection, relieved at the feel of the jade beads around his neck. "And Fuu and Umi—stay by my side, and do as Kudaka said: that dust is a nightmare to deal with. I want it to be our foes' nightmare, not ours." The twins nodded, pale eyes serious, and Oguri gripped his *ararebō*, grateful for its weight.

There was a sudden crash from the distance, the shriek of a gale-force wind, and immediately after, a chorus of other shrieks, terrifying and inhuman as the bluster that preceded them. "*Now!*" Oguri yelled, and he and his troops dashed forward at a full run, chunks of river dirt flying under their feet. They turned the corner of the watchtower wall and scrambled through the rubble of the breach to view the utter chaos within.

Red dust swirled like a tornado of crimson pollen, like a spirit possessed, blasting everything within the walls. Undead soldiers lay like sacks of meat where the initial blast had thrown them, bent over archery targets and pressed into walls, most crushed and limp but some still twitching. Goblins clung to whatever surface they could grab a hold of, their claws digging in deep, while others screamed as the winds buffeted them about. Even the pair of

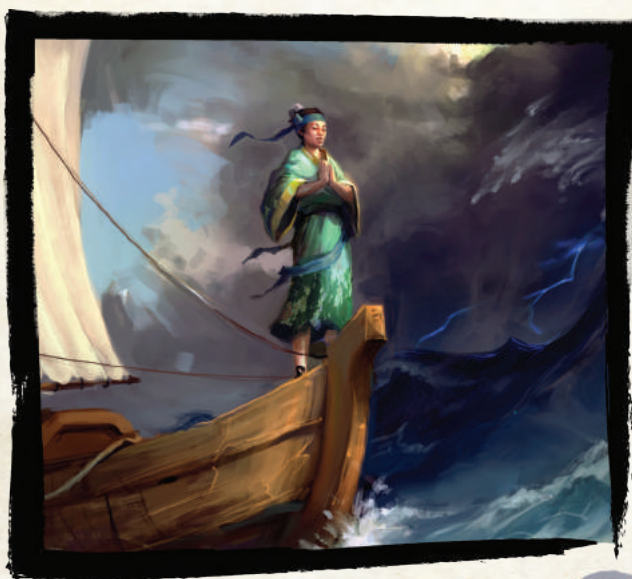


ogres, tall and horrifying, had dropped their massive *kanabō* to scratch at their eyes, blinded by the crimson dust. The Crab and Mantis forces yelled, and the gale suddenly stopped, dropping everything roughly to the ground. There was a half-moment as the enemy forces blinked, confused at the interruption, before Fuu and Umi unleashed twin blasts of wind at them, sending them staggering backwards in a wave of red.

Then it was more chaos and more red. Oguri found himself barely able to manage the panic of battle, his conscious mind retreating as if to a safe distance, watching himself crush the skulls of goblins and cave in the chests of undead—*don't think of them as people, they're just empty shells*—with his club, hearing wild yelling all around him. An ogre suddenly loomed before him, and he struck out without thinking, bashing it savagely in the leg, causing it to stagger to one knee. The hit jarred his arms so much that Oguri himself stumbled and would have likely been crushed by the twisted creature's next strike if not for the bushi that suddenly shoved him away, their final scream cut short as the ogre's weapon crushed their chest. In a haze, Oguri saw the figure as the club lifted—a figure in the teal of the Mantis...but a sailor, loyal to the end. *Thank you for saving my life. I'm sorry you didn't die on the ocean*, he thought numbly.

Time snapped back into focus as the ogre's attention returned to him, and before Oguri had a chance to plan, he lashed out again, crushing the creature's arm and causing it to drop its club. It roared, reaching for him with its nonmangled hand, and he scrambled backwards in a panic, trying to outpace the giant creature's inexorable advance—

All of a sudden, the ogre's roar of rage turned into one of confusion, and it wobbled as a sheet of ice formed beneath its feet. Oguri looked to his left to see one of the twins, hair wild about their face, expression one of fierce concentration. The other appeared to their left, and at a gesture, sent a gust of wind to tip the ogre onto its back. The beast struggled to stand, and the two shugenja joined hands, using their free ones to stretch to the sides, forming long daggers of ice in the air. A wave, and they flew forward, ramming into the ogre's body, turning its roars into a death gurgle, steam rising from the ice around it as the body collapsed to the ground.



Oguri stared at the pair, who suddenly slumped, exhausted, against one another. *A waterfall—that's what Kudaka said*, he remembered. *Such incredible power, but so exhausting to unleash it.*

"Are you all right?" he called to them, running over and helping them back to their feet. The two looked exhausted, but nodded—and another shriek drew their attention away, and the three were again immersed in the chaos of combat.

It felt like a thousand years before the



battle was over, but soon the haze lifted, and Oguri found himself without an enemy before him, the courtyard slick with gore, red and black blood alike gummed into brown dirt and red dust. He coughed and was shocked at how raw his throat felt, realizing suddenly that loud screaming he'd been hearing throughout the battle had been him.

"Quite the fight," a voice croaked behind him, and he turned to see Kudaka coming down the steps from the walls, carefully picking her way amid the bodies and chaos.

"Quite the distraction," Oguri countered. "I don't want to think about how this could have gone without your help." Kudaka snorted—*that snort*—and waved her hand in dismissal.

"Just a bit of fun. Just don't ask me to...clean up..." She froze suddenly, her face intense, staring across the courtyard. Confused, Oguri followed her gaze and saw the twins slumped against one another again, unmoving; but unlike before, their expressions were not ones of exhaustion, but a rapt and dreamlike gaze, eyes unfocused. The fingers of one of them—he could never tell which was which—began to wiggle as if it was being pulled by a curious child.

"No!" Kudaka suddenly screamed, stalking forward like fire advancing across dry grass. She grabbed a pouch from her side and tugged it open, grabbing the substance within and throwing it into the air toward the twins. To Oguri's surprise, it hung in the air as if stuck to something invisible, and a low hiss seemed to emit from somewhere close but indistinct. Kudaka cried out some words he didn't know, and the substance seemed to expand like a net around something in the air: an odd swirling kind of smoke and dust, vaguely humanoid. It turned a face—*A face? Is that it?*—toward Kudaka, its dark smudge eyes and mouth widening in a soundless scream.

"*Salt and ash, bone and sand bind you!*" Kudaka shrieked, her eyes full of fury. "*Kami of earth and air, I call on you to aid me and banish this abomination!*" She clapped her hands together, sending everyone in the courtyard staggering backwards as a gust of wind rocketed outwards in all directions from that strike, and the substance around the...*thing*...coalesced further, like the threads of a fishing net.

"*BEGONE!*" came the final cry, and as Kudaka tore her hands apart, the bindings of the creature drew taut and ripped it to pieces, the ghost of a scream fading into the air. There was a quiet moment afterward as she panted for breath, and then the twins blinked, bewildered—and Kudaka collapsed. Oguri was there to catch the woman before she hit the ground, quickly guiding her over to an overturned barrel to sit and catch her breath. Fuu and Umi ran over immediately, falling over themselves with apologies. *This is maybe the first time I've heard them speak*, thought Oguri absently.

"Stop frettin' and bein' so full of sorry," Kudaka groaned, waving at her protégés. "Gimme some water if you wanna be useful—and some saké if we got any. This retakin' watchtowers is thirsty work." The twins ran off, and Oguri looked seriously at the older tenkinja.

"What in Jigoku was that thing?"

Her laugh was dry and bitter, almost a cough. "Never seen a *kansen*? They try to seduce and overpower shugenja. Heard their whispers here and there on the trip, sure, but still surprised



one dared to actually make a move.” Her voice got low. “I’d rather ‘ave never seen one again.”

Oguri’s stomach knotted. “A kansen?” he gasped. “I had hoped they would not appear this close to the border. If I may ask...when have you see one?”

Her gaze was dark. “Sometimes you get a novice shugenja, wants to be powerful in a hurry, does some forbidden magic and summons one.” She pursed her lips, mind in the past. “Fellow apprentice did that, back when I was just a scrap of a thing. I was doin’ better than them at nearly everything, and they wanted to punish me for it. Kansen grabbed me, just like it did Fuu and Umi there, and thankfully my master saw it and got rid of it before it got rid of me.” She winced, coughed, and spat into the bloody mud. “Took the other apprentice along with it, too. Master taught me how to banish them, but never thought I’d have to do it.”

“Why did it come here?”

Kudaka shrugged, then groaned at the effort. “Ugh, I’m definitely not young as I used t’ be... Easy guess is it smelled the talent in the twins and couldn’t resist tryin’ to get its claws into ‘em—they’re skilled, but they ain’t never needed to protect themselves from those kinda threats. Still, this close to the border, like you said...” She started to shake her head, then stopped with a wince. “Somethin’ called them here, maybe. Somethin’ very strong.” Her gaze locked onto Oguri’s. “I think it was here well before we showed up, too.”

Fuu and Umi returned with water and saké, and he left the two of them to take care of their master as he went to survey the cost of the battle. They had been fortunate, if the word could really be used. Their numbers had not suffered much, while the numbers of enemy dead were impressive. Even without the two ogres, the number of goblins present had been daunting. Oguri instructed the troops in the proper method of disposing of the enemy bodies and before long a pyre roared outside the watchtower, ready to receive the dead and send their souls—or what passed for them—back to Jigoku.

It was hours later when the last body was tossed on the waning blaze, sending ripples of light against the darkening surface of the river. On board the *Poison Tide*, Fuu and Umi continued to protest, arguing with Kudaka even as the small contingent of sailors pulled up anchor and began to unfurl the sails for the journey south. From atop the ruined watchtower, Oguri watched master and students bicker, until finally Kudaka settled the argument with a blast of wind from her hands, sending the ship scudding along southward, to bring the news of the watchtower’s fall and recovery to the outposts along the route back down to Kyuden Hida. Switching his gaze to the goings-on in the courtyard below, Oguri was pleased to see most of the rubble had been cleared out from the breach, and one of the masons—*very glad I was able to find one who could come along*, he thought with relief—sketching out repair plans in the dim light of a lantern.

He heard Kudaka coming this time, her tread heavy on the stairs behind him. “Are you doing all right?” he asked with concern, and the tenkinja waved him off.

“I’ll be fine,” she growled. “Don’t cluck at me like a mother hen. All that fightin’ carries a big



price, and I ain't young like those two." She gestured at the disappearing form of the *Poison Tide* and sighed. "Hate t' send 'em away, but they ain't safe here."

She laughed wryly. "Not like anyone is, really."

Oguri grunted agreement, then sighed, watching the shadows stretch longer over the courtyard for a moment before he spoke again. "The bakemono were wearing armor."

"Ain't that usual for goblins?"

"Not like this." Oguri chewed his lip. "It looked almost like a uniform. Had little things scrawled on it, all the same symbol. Ogres had it on too."

"Hm. Organization, huh?" Kudaka bit off a bit of a nail and spit it over the edge of the wall. "Don't sound good. That and the kami bein' on edge...bad sign." She looked at him seriously. "You sure we shoulda sent out them messengers? I mean, havin' the *Poison Tide* leaving was bad enough, but that had to be done. What about sendin' notice overland?"

"Not much choice." He sighed. "More outposts need to know what happened at the Watchtower of the Sun's Shadow. They need to be prepared for anything that might be coming."

"Yeah?" Kudaka glanced at him, her concern evident even in the growing dark. "And what about us?"

Oguri took a deep breath, watching the last rays of light spreading over the Shadowlands beyond. All his life, he'd known it was out there, a threat ever-present, waiting. This was the first time he truly felt that it was looming—and looking right back at him.

"We pray," he said quietly, and the sun slipped over the horizon.

