

Kurosunai Village

By Chris Longhurst

The fence post was crooked. Katsuo swore quietly under his breath, wrapped both hands around the post, and pulled. It came loose from the dry soil too easily; the long summer had baked the dirt into coarse powder.

"Aren't you supposed to be mending that fence?"

Katsuo laid the post on the ground, turned, and gave Tomoko a tired smile. She was standing under a gnarled camphor tree by the side of the path, taking advantage of the shade that didn't quite reach the spot where Katsuo was working. Two buckets of water stood on the ground beside her.

"I don't build like the Kaiu do." He waved at the hole. "It was crooked."

"I know." Tomoko smirked. "I've been watching you sweat for a while."

Katsuo rolled his eyes and held out his hand. "Come here."

Tomoko stayed where she was and mimicked Katsuo's gesture. "You come here. It's shadier."

Katsuo shrugged. It was true. He crossed the path and kissed her hello.

"Your mother's going to wonder where her water is," he said. Tomoko wrapped her arms around him and rested her head on his shoulder.

"I volunteered to go to the well on the path that runs right by your farm," she said. "She knows exactly where her water is. Besides," she added, "my parents like you."

Katsuo said nothing and held Tomoko close. She had threaded a flower into her hair, its perfume mixing with the scent of camphor from the tree. Looking over her shoulder, beneath the berry-laden branches, he could see the terraced fields of Kurosunai Village, the local wood bordering them to his right, and on the left, the dirt road along which the village's few visitors would come and go. Beyond all that, the wider expanse of Ishigaki Province. Maybe one day he would get a chance to see some of it.

He squinted and shaded his eyes. Tomoko twisted around to see what he was looking at. There were figures on the road. A small group, mounted, bearing pennants, too far away for him to read their crest.

"Samurai?" he said. Tomoko nodded.

"Looks like. Doesn't Yasuki-sama normally come by herself, though?"

"Normally. Why would she need—" Katsuo suddenly felt cold. "It's the still. The barley. It's got to be."

"No." Tomoko pushed away from him. She bit her lip. "Maybe? No. Who would tell them?"

"Take the water to your mother, and let her know that samurai are coming," Katsuo said.



"I can't go anywhere until this fence is fixed."

"Make it quick," Tomoko said. She crouched to retrieve her carrying pole, weaving it into the handles of the two buckets and heaving it onto her shoulder as she stood up. "Yasuki-sama still dotes on you like a mother, so you're our best chance of her going easy on us."

Katsuo watched her as she hurried away. No sense of contentment this time, or faint wonder that, of all the boys, she had chosen him...just the cold coil of fear in his stomach.

Yasuki Hikaru had looked after the village for longer than he'd been alive, and she'd saved him and his family from bandits when he was too young to remember. Since then, she'd come around more frequently to make sure the bandits were really gone, and never really stopped. She'd learned his name and those of the other villagers, watched him and Tomoko and Shiro grow up. Samurai caring about their subjects was somewhat unusual, and it was simultaneously a blessing and a curse.

Diverting the magistrate's attention from the *shōchū* still and the missing barley that fed it had long since become routine. But nothing good would summon a *group* of samurai. Katsuo took a deep breath and turned to the gap in the fence. One thing at a time. First a straight fence, then straight home.

Katsuo trudged down the track toward his home, too apprehensive to feel weary, despite the heavy hammer resting over his shoulder. There were people outside the house: the bulky outlines of his father and mother, the powerful shape of his friend Shiro, chopping firewood—and the sharp lines of Yasuki's traveling clothes and armor. Katsuo started jogging, then forced himself to slow down. Nothing seemed out of place yet.

Just in front of their home, his dog greeted the samurai with enthusiasm; she crouched to fuss over him, before taking a stick from the firewood pile and throwing it for Takuhiro to fetch. The magistrate was of an age with Katsuo's mother, black hair turning to grey, lines appearing on her face, but even if she dressed in rags one would never mistake her for a peasant. She was too poised, too certain in her own strength, her arms decorated with scars she refused to tell the stories of. In her sky-blue haori, laminated armor gleaming in the sun, she could have been a kami stepping from the air itself. She greeted Katsuo with a casual wave that made his father cringe.

"Katsuo-kun!" she called. "Your father tells me you have been mending fences."

"It is so, Yasuki-sama," Katsuo replied. He let the hammer head drop from his shoulder and bowed low.

"And taking his sweet time about it," Katsuo's father said. "Where have you been, Katsuo-kun?"

"Mending the fence on the goat field, father," Katsuo replied. "My first fence post was crooked, so I had to reset it."





"Katsuo-kun's diligence does you credit," Yasuki said. "You have raised a fine son. A fine son who seems troubled by something. What ails you, Katsuo-kun?"

Katsuo hesitated, then spoke.

"I saw several samurai on the road, Yasuki-sama," he said. "I wondered what brought you."

"I came alone," Yasuki frowned. "Can you describe these samurai?"

Katsuo shook his head. "They were too distant, Yasuki-sama."

"Well. I should be present when they arrive. Sanjiro-san,

please look after my horse. I feel the need to stretch my legs."

"Of course, samurai-sama." Katsuo's father bowed as low as he could, but Yasuki was already walking away. She had barely reached the road when Shiro sauntered over and clapped Katsuo on the shoulder, staggering him. He was the same age as Katsuo, but where hard work on the farm had just made Katsuo lean, hard work at the smithy had wrapped Shiro in muscles upon muscles.

"Praise from the magistrate!" His face split into a wide grin. "Maybe she'll see fit to name you as one of her *dōshin* someday!"

"So that he can go traipsing across the entire province on samurai business? No, we need you here in the village, Katsuo." Katsuo's father glanced past his son at Yasuki as she walked up the road. "But you said there were other samurai?"

"Yes," Katsuo said. "I think they're here about the still, or at least the barley we've been putting in it."

"You can't know that," Shiro said, although he looked tense.

"Why else would a bunch of samurai come here?" Katsuo said. "They must know we've been shorting them on the barley."

"How?" Shiro pressed. "They're samurai. They don't know how much barley we get in a harvest."

"Someone told them?" Katsuo said. "I don't know. But they're definitely coming."

"Where are the barrels now?" Katsuo's mother interjected.

"The village leader's house," Katsuo's father said. "As long as Yasuki-sama doesn't go in—"

"Where else is she going to go?" Katsuo's mother snapped. Her face curled like a fist. "If she's



going to receive other samurai, she's going to do it there. Tell me at least the barrels are hidden."

Katsuo watched the color drain from his father's face. "We were expecting Shin soon..."

Katsuo's mother turned away. She swore, explosively, and Katsuo involuntarily took a step back.

"It's been too easy for too long," his father said apologetically. He shook his head. "Pride has made fools of us all, Maki."

"It'll make *corpses* of us all," Maki said. She swore again, colorfully. "Katsuo, Shiro, come with me. We need to keep Yasuki-sama and the others out of that house or we'll all be put to death."

"Would they really kill us?" Shiro asked as they hurried for the paddies. Narrow tracks ran through the rice for unencumbered villagers who didn't want to take the path around, and these would now provide a vital shortcut. "Over shōchū?"

"The samurai would kill us over a bow too shallow," Maki said, "or because they were having a bad day. They would absolutely kill everyone here over barley we've been leaving off the ledger."

"But Yasuki-sama always seemed like she cared about our village," Shiro protested.

"Samurai are human," Maki said. Her face was a fixed mask of tension, all lines and surfaces. "But Bushidō comes from the Kami. They will do what they think must be done, even if it makes monsters of them."

Others in the village had thought along similar lines. When Katsuo, Shiro, and Maki arrived in the village center, the village leader and the other older villagers—those not working the fields or attending to other tasks—had gathered and were in the process of greeting Yasuki-sama. The greeting rituals would delay her, but it was clear she wanted to receive the other samurai in the most formal setting the village could offer.

"Where are the other samurai?" Katsuo said as the trio slowed to a casual walking speed. He glanced at his shadow to note the position of the sun. "We saw them at least an hour ago, maybe two."

"Worry about that when they arrive," Maki said. She lowered her voice and pulled the two young men close. "Katsuo-kun, you and I will talk to Yasuki-sama. Shiro-kun, explain things to the others when she is distracted."

She rearranged her face into a pleasant smile and strode toward the samurai, Katsuo trailing in her wake. He tried to match her demeanor but couldn't—Yasuki-sama had easily discerned his earlier anxiousness, and it felt wrong to deceive someone who had never been anything but kind to him. Couldn't they explain? Come to some sort of deal?

"Yasuki-sama," Maki said, bowing low. "May I beg a moment of your time?"

"Of course, Maki-san," the samurai said. She excused herself from the old man she had



been talking to. As soon as she turned away, he scurried over to where the other elders were gathering around Shiro.

“Although,” the samurai added, “should my peers arrive, I must greet them at once.”

“Naturally, Yasuki-sama.” Maki bowed again. “My son is old enough now to choose a path in life, and he wishes to pledge himself to your service. Would you accept him as an *ashigaru*?”

Katsuo dropped into a low bow to hide the shock on his face. An ashigaru? What about the farm? Tomoko?

Yasuki said nothing. Katsuo wasn’t sure when—if?—it would be appropriate to straighten himself. The villagers murmured to themselves not far off. Insects hummed. No birdsong, though. Was that an omen?

“Katsuo-kun. Maki-san. Straighten.” If Yasuki-sama’s voice were a sword, her hand would be on the hilt.

Katsuo obeyed. The samurai’s face matched her voice, a gentle mask thin enough that he could see the steel beneath.

“I’ve known your family for seventeen years,” she said, addressing both Katsuo and his mother, “so I will overlook the insult implicit in your deception. But I am hurt. Why are you lying to me?”

Katsuo opened his mouth to say something, but he was immediately cut off by a horrible scream. That was a novel way to distract Yasuki-sama—

Hoofbeats. Who had a horse? Yasuki struck him in the chest, and he fell backward, the breath knocked out of him as he hit the ground. A huge shape whipped between them in a thunder of hooves, right where he had been standing. He scrambled to his feet to see a mounted figure—a mounted samurai!—cutting down screaming villagers. People he knew, people he’d grown up with. Was this samurai justice for using a little barley to make *shōchū*? Would there be no trial, no ceremony? Just slaughter?

“Get inside!” Yasuki bellowed.
“Lock your doors!”

She stood alone at the center of a widening circle. The villagers didn’t need her encouragement to run. A handful of unmoving bodies told the story of those who hadn’t reacted quickly enough.

Katsuo caught a glimpse of the mounted samurai circling their



horse around the smithy, coming back around for another charge. And there, another! Idly cantering her ragged horse into view, *daikyū* in hand, eyes expressionless above the snarling dog muzzle of her helmet. But if they were no allies of the Crab, why were they here? Why were they killing people?

"Katsuo! Inside! Now!"

"But—"

She spared him a glance, and it was all he could do not to drop to the earth and beg forgiveness. There was nothing but death in that look. His. Hers. Anyone's.

An arrow whistled. Yasuki's sword flickered, and the arrow fell aside in two pieces. Katsuo ran.

The door to the smithy was closed. Barred. The next house, too. Everyone was taking Yasuki's instructions to heart. Behind him, he heard hoofbeats thunder, another arrow whistle, Yasuki's *kiai* shout rattling the shutters. He glanced back, but the skirmish had moved out of his sight—

Something rolled under his foot, and he went sprawling across the ground. Looking down, he saw he'd tripped over a head.

He had no idea whose it was. He couldn't see the body anywhere nearby. Something instinctive drove him up and away from it, legs and arms moving of their own accord, hands clawing for grip on a nearby building. He leaned against it, breathing heavily, unable to take his eyes from the gory castoff.

Screams burst from inside the house as though his touch had struck a nerve. The nearby shutters rattled violently against their ties as a heavy weight struck them from the inside, followed by the distinctive, wet sound of a blade in raw meat. Butchery.

"Katsuo!"

Tomoko ran toward him, clothes soaked with blood, eyes wide with horror. Shiro followed close behind.

"Run!" Shiro yelled. "They're in the houses! They're killing everyone!"

"They're in the village center, too," Katsuo shouted back. How many of them were there?

Tomoko crashed into him, flinging her arms around him and crying into his shoulder with great, heaving sobs. The flower in her hair was still there, Katsuo noticed. Petals a little bent. Not a drop of blood on them. Shiro was pale, eyes roving, clenching and unclenching his fists. More screams made them all flinch. They couldn't stay there.

A door creaked as it swung open. Katsuo didn't wait to see who was coming out.

"Run," he urged, disentangling himself from Tomoko. "*Run!*"

She whimpered, but she moved. Katsuo took off on her heels, and Shiro on his—but Shiro wasn't built for speed. Katsuo heard him shriek and fall, then spit defiance and every obscenity he knew at their pursuer as Katsuo and Tomoko left him behind. Katsuo glanced back as he turned the corner of the next house: Shiro on one knee, clutching his arms to his chest, a



samurai in once-green armor standing over him. The samurai split Shiro's stomach side to side with a casual flick of his wrist. Katsuo ducked around the corner, praying to anyone who was listening that he hadn't been seen. Tomoko beckoned from an open doorway, and he ran to join her.

"What's happening?" she said, voice high and tight. Katsuo shook his head as he closed the door with painstaking slowness and slid the bar home.

"I've got no idea," he whispered. The shutters were still open on the windows into the one main room. If the samurai followed him, he would be able to look right into the house and see them. "We can't stay here."

"Where *can* we go?" Tomoko asked. She bit her knuckles to stifle a sob. Katsuo looked around.

"Out of the back window," he whispered. "Quick and quiet. We can sneak away while he's—"

"And after that?" Tomoko clutched at Katsuo's shirt. He took a deep breath, held her hands in his, forced himself not to glance at the window where the samurai would be passing at any moment. All she wanted was hope. Was for him to convince her that everything could be alright.

"After that, my house. And after that," he cut off the protest before she could say it, "just... away. Anywhere but here. We can do it. But we have to do it now."

She nodded and moved to the back window, climbing nimbly through despite her kimono and shaking hands. Katsuo followed, then doubled back to snatch a large knife from the kitchen before joining Tomoko outside. He handed her the knife. She looked at him blankly.

"If you get a chance, stab him."

"I can't kill someone!" Tomoko said in horror.

"Maybe not," Katsuo said. Cut wood was heaped by the side of the house, and next to that tools—including a heavy maul like the one he had been using to drive fence posts that morning. He picked it up. "Better to have it and not need it, though."

A great shout echoed through the village. Something heavy hitting the ground not far away, wood bouncing off wood. Yasuki still alive, still fighting.

"Go to my house," Katsuo said. "Take the shortcuts. The samurai don't know them and their horses won't do well in the paddy fields."

"Oh no," Tomoko said, shaking her head, divining his meaning. "You're coming with me."

Katsuo struggled to find the right words. Any words.

"Yasuki-sama's fighting them by herself," he said at last, as if it explained anything.

"And what are you going to do?" Tomoko pleaded. "You can't fight samurai. You'll die!"

How could he *not* fight them? How could he leave the magistrate to fight and die alone when his presence might make a difference? She'd saved him once—and now he could return the favor.

"Listen." Katsuo tilted Tomoko's chin up to look her in the eyes. "Head back to your farm,



get your family, and we can meet at my house. If I'm not along soon, leave without me."

Tomoko took hold of Katsuo's arms. "I love you," she said. "I *need* you to know that."

"I love you, too," Katsuo said, and he meant it. He kissed her. "But I couldn't go without... knowing."

Another kiai from the village center, this one muffled. Yasuki had taken her own advice and gone indoors.

"Go. Be safe. I'll do what I can."

I'll do what I have to.

Katsuo gave Tomoko a small push, then turned away from her. He dared not look back to see her go.

Movement caught Katsuo's eye amid the stillness of the village center. The door to the leader's house, open and swinging on its hinges. No sign of the samurai, their horses, or Yasuki. No screams. Not a sound save the soft noise of his own footsteps as he approached the door. If the magistrate was anywhere, surely she would be here.

It was only proper that the village leader had the largest house in the village. Almost the whole ground floor was a single open room, large enough for the entire village to gather in if necessary, and well-appointed enough to greet Yasuki, Shin the merchant, or any other honored guest.

Today it held something different. The air was thick with the smell of blood. Two large barrels of shōchū stood where they had been left, unmarked but obvious for what they were. The tatami mats on the floor were soaked with blood, dead bodies scattered where they had been cut down. And at the far end of the room, seated at the village leader's table, was a thing out of nightmare.

It seemed to be a samurai at first glance, armed and armored as a samurai with a skull-faced helm—but as Katsuo watched it move, he realized the skull was its face, skinless, given ghastly expression by what scraps of meat remained attached to it. The monster examined a row of eyeballs laid out before it on the table, holding each in turn delicately between two slender fingers and subjecting it to the scrutiny of its eyeless sockets.

Katsuo froze just inside the doorway. His stomach clenched like a fist. This was no samurai. This was something altogether worse. Half-remembered tales of childhood terror struggled for his attention. "*If you don't behave, the goblins will get you.*" Was this...*thing*...some sort of divine punishment for withholding the barley?

The creature replaced the eye it was examining in the row before it and moved on to the next one.

Yasuki was not there. Katsuo made to slip back out of the door but stopped as his roving gaze picked out the slumped form of his mother, curled into a ball not far from the eyeless



monster. As Katsuo watched, Maki twitched slightly and whimpered. She was alive!

The monster continued with its macabre inventory.

Katsuo approached his mother with painful slowness. Sweat trickled down his face. His knuckles ached from his grip on the maul. Maki's face was a ruin, but she still took deep, shuddering breaths.

Katsuo forced himself to take the last few steps slowly and silently; the thing seemed blind without eyes. He crouched beside his mother, trying not to notice the horror.

"Say nothing," he whispered, and Maki swallowed a whimper. "It's me, Katsuo. The thing can't see. If we're quiet, we can escape."

"I can see perfectly," came the haggard voice.

Katsuo leapt to his feet, spinning around. The mockery of a samurai was so close to him that he recoiled, tripping over his own feet until his back fetched up against a support pillar. One eye had found a home in the thing's right socket. Its jaw hung slackly open, its deep, sepulchral voice rolling forth without tongue or lips.

It laid one hand on the hilt of its katana. With the other, it pointed at Katsuo's face—his eyes, he realized—then tapped the cheekbone just beneath its empty socket. *Tap tap*, gauntlet on bone.

Katsuo clutched the maul defensively. His bowels felt like ice water. His heart had climbed into his throat, pounding like it might burst.

The mockery closed its mouth with a definitive click. Its katana rung like a bell as it slid from its sheath. It advanced on Katsuo, not even bothering to adopt a *kenjutsu* stance. Katsuo raised the maul, Tomoko's words coming back to haunt him.

You can't fight samurai.

You'll die.

An unearthly howl echoed around the room, and a bedraggled shape crashed into the monster, throwing it off balance.

"Mother!"

Maki shrieked like a spirit from Jigoku as she clung to the creature's sword arm with her entire body, spinning the two of them to the ground.

The monster drew its *wakizashi* backhanded with its free hand and jammed it so hard into



Maki's chest that Katsuo heard it strike the wood of the floor. Maki spasmed and coughed up blood but clung to the thing with the tenacity of death itself. The samurai-creature paused to get its feet underneath itself, ready to cut itself free of the entangling woman once and for all.

Like driving a fence post. Katsuo's overhead swing blasted the thing's skull to splinters.

The only sign of life when he reached his family's farm was Yasuki's horse still standing patiently outside. Would the abominations kill all the people but leave the horses alive? Katsuo couldn't guess.

"Katsuo-kun!" Tomoko burst from the door and wrapped her arms around him. Then she pulled back. "I found Yasuki-sama. She's here!"

Sure enough, the samurai had followed Tomoko out of the house. She was armed with the maul Katsuo had left behind earlier, clothes disheveled, armor bearing the scrapes and dents of combat, otherwise untouched. It was like watching a mountain walk out of his home. Behind her cowered his father, one hand holding the scruff of Takuhiro's neck. The dog whined and bared his teeth, aware that something was wrong. Perhaps he could smell them.

"Yasuki-sama," Katsuo said, bowing. "They're not human. The one I killed had no face. I don't...I don't know *what* they are."

"You killed one?" Yasuki raised her eyebrows a fraction and glanced at the maul Katsuo held. "Impressive."

"I had help." Katsuo couldn't look at her. Her praise reminded him of Shiro, cut down like wheat. "Father...Mother is dead."

Katsuo's father gave a curt nod, his face paling but showing no other reaction. He and Katsuo would do their grieving later.

"They are the Lost," Yasuki said. She propped her maul against the door frame. "Samurai who have been consumed by the Shadowlands. May I see your hammer?"

"It had *no face*," Katsuo repeated as he handed the hammer to the samurai. Spoken aloud, it sounded absurd.

"The Shadowlands spawn every kind of horror," Yasuki said. She seemed distracted as she examined the hammer's head. "Faceless and otherwise. Speak true: did you really kill it?"

"Yes, samurai-sama."

"Then you have done Rokugan a service." She propped the maul next to the other one. She walked out to the front of the farmhouse, glanced up and down the track, then walked back to the family. For a moment, Katsuo saw an expression struggle to reach her face, but she repressed it. "Now I must also do Rokugan a service."

"Midakai Province isn't far to the east," Katsuo's father said. His voice was weak. "We could find safety there, let the clan know what happened."

"No," Yasuki shook her head. "To halt the spread of the Shadowlands Taint, you all must die."



She drew her katana. The blade caught the sun.

"What?" Tomoko shrieked. "We *survived!*"

"Katsuo, Tomoko. You are covered in blood. You have been exposed to the creatures of the Shadowlands. The Taint could be taking root in your bodies even now. As a samurai in service to my clan, I cannot permit you to live and spread it further. The most I can offer you is a clean death by my hand."

"What about as a human being, Yasuki-sama?" Katsuo's father asked quietly. "You saved us from bandits. You have watched Katsuo-kun grow up. Is the most you can offer us, as a *person*, a clean death?"

"As a person, it breaks my heart." Not a trace of emotion made it to Yasuki's face. "But my duty is clear. Please. Bow your heads."

"What about jade?" Katsuo asked, grasping for memories of the stories. "We can just be purified with jade!"

A whistle, and the sound of metal in meat. Katsuo half expected to experience his own head falling from his body, but another whistle followed—and this time Yasuki was a blur of motion, sword slicing a barbed arrow from the air. A third arrow, cut from the air once again. It took Katsuo a moment to locate the first: planted solidly in Yasuki's back.

On the road, the dog-masked woman from before was back, daikyū in hand. Now that he knew to look for it, Katsuo could see the Taint in her and her steed alike: their emaciated appearance, their translucent grey skin shot through with veins of black. Almost casually, the woman unstrung her bow and dismounted. She drew her sword and looked down its length, inspecting it for defects, but she did not approach.

"There is no jade," Yasuki said. A tiny waver in her voice. Pain from her wound, or her heart? Blood was blossoming onto her *haori* from the site of the arrow. "The other clans will not sell it to us, and we do not have enough to discharge our duty."

Katsuo fumbled for words. "I...don't understand."

"Neither do they." Yasuki tried to draw a deep breath, and couldn't. She coughed, blood speckling her lips as they curled into a bitter smile. "I have lived long enough that I forgot about mortality. I am going to die here, Katsuo, and I need you to swear me an oath."

"An oath?"

"If your father, or Tomoko—or *Takuhiro*—show the faintest signs of the Taint...you have to kill them. If you show the signs of the Taint..."

"I understand." Katsuo glanced at Tomoko, who was staring with fixed terror at the pale-skinned samurai on the track. Could he kill her in cold blood? "I will."

"Then you will be a better samurai than I." Yasuki reached behind her, and with a gasp of pain broke the shaft of the arrow. "I will spend what remains of my life to purchase as much time for you as I can. Take your family and *run*."

Katsuo's father approached them. He silently offered Yasuki a maul. She returned her sword



to its sheath and took the hammer. Hefting it, she began to walk toward the other woman, who was cutting the air with her sword in the manner of an unschooled bravo.

"I am Yasuki Hikaru of the Crab Clan," she spat, "and you will meet your end at my hands."

The woman smirked and shook her head. She lifted her sword in a ready stance.

Katsuo turned to his father. "We need to go." His father nodded, and the three of them fled with Takuhiro at their heels. Behind them, Yasuki's battlecry rang out one more time.

Katsuo had never traveled this far from his home before. Night had fallen some hours ago, but none of them had wanted to stop. Now, the moon was high, the last heat of the day fading to the chill of night. He sat on the ground, Tomoko wrapped up with him, Takuhiro and his father asleep together on the other side of a small fire. Would the Lost see the fire? Perhaps. But the villagers wouldn't survive the night without it.

"I don't understand," Tomoko murmured. "She was ready to kill us...then changed her mind?"

Katsuo listened to the insects, the crackling of the fire. Somewhere, a night bird was singing.

"Samurai are human," he quoted after a while. "She never wanted to kill us. She just thought she had to. That it was her duty."

Because the Crab didn't have enough jade to do their duty *correctly*. Wasn't it the duty of the Kaiu Wall to keep Shadowlands monsters out of Rokugan? The duty of the other clans to give the Crab what they needed? How many villages had the Crab slaughtered to keep the Taint contained?

"Duty," Tomoko said into his shoulder, her voice morose. "I heard what she asked you. Would you kill me? If the Taint got me?"

In the end, Yasuki Hikaru had stayed her blade. Would Katsuo have the courage to kill where she had chosen to die?

"I don't know," he admitted at length. "I wouldn't have thought so, but...would you want to become something like that?"

Tomoko shuddered. "No."

They sat in silence for a while, Katsuo listening to the sounds of the night. Tomoko's breathing became slow and regular as she finally succumbed to sleep, and he laid her gently down on the grass.

He lay on his back next to her, staring up at the stars. The world was broken. Were the Fortunes watching as everything came apart like a cart with a cracked axle? Were they trying to fix it? Was this part of their plan?

"Something has gone terribly wrong." He said the words aloud, as if to test them, and hearing them spoken cemented his conviction that they were true. The giants were fighting, and all he could do was pray that they watched for the ants beneath their feet.

