

Smokeless Fire

By Katrina Ostrander

"Are you ready?"

"Yes, sensei."

Isawa Atsuko rapped the youth's knees with a bamboo stick, and he stiffened with pain. Nobu showed great promise, but his sensei had to keep him grounded.

"No, sensei," he corrected himself. "I am not ready."

"Better. You are not prepared, not truly, to witness the Void. We must retrain your vision, so that you may learn to see without sight—strengthen your will, so that you do not lose your very self in the Realm of Void."

The initiate nodded and closed his eyes. He breathed deeply, in a calm and focused pattern, centering himself in this moment. Atsuko settled into a meditative pose beside the initiate. Her knees complained, and the room was too hot, but she would move past the ache and discomfort soon.

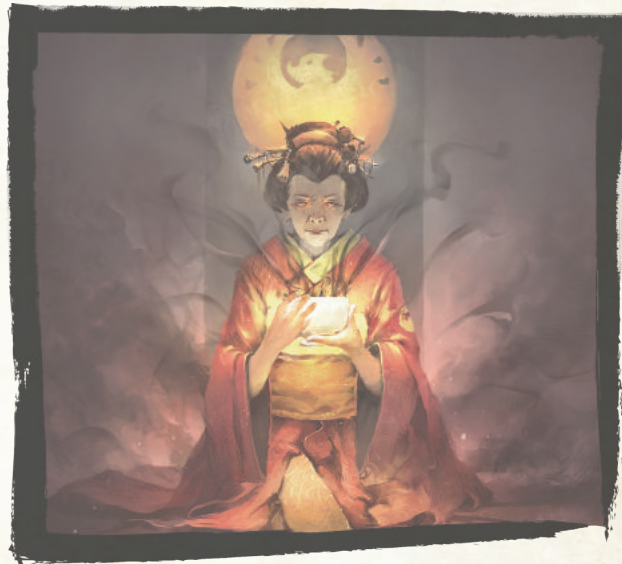
"Let the sounds of the temple reach you and move past you." She opened her ears and called attention to the current of the world. "Hear the muffled patter of shuffling feet rising and fading, rising and fading, the wind rustling through the pines, the birds chirping in their branches..."

They continued like this for some time, and Nobu's breathing slowed even further. Others conversed in low tones elsewhere in the complex. A gust of wind surged, and a branch creaked. Faintly, the waterfall beyond the compound tumbled into the pool below. Her apprentice would perceive the river for himself, now, and allow his ego to gently drift away. Atsuko allowed herself to do the same.

Minutes passed, perhaps hours. She stood against the coursing river, serving as an anchor for her charge, when a faraway knot pulled her taut like twisted silk.

Something is wrong. Nobu-kun, leave now.

She waited until her apprentice had surfaced. Satisfied that he was safe, she searched for that



constricted feeling, pulled against it, and followed it to its source, flowing against the stream of space and time.

Eyes closed, Atsuko reached for her scrying bowl. Where the mortal mind struggled to comprehend the churn of the Void, the sacred metal could capture fleeting images on the surface of the water within. The chill of emptiness cascaded over her hands, as though she were holding a bowl of mountain snow. She opened her eyes and peered within.

The purple and fur robes of a rider on horseback.

A carven antler flashing silver.

Wings of gold unfurling, a gleaming ruby glow between them, cracking in two.

The sun and moon trading places along the horizon, plunging the world into darkness.

That darkness pooled within the bowl, writhing and seething, twisting, growing darker and longer into a shadowy form. Where its feet touched the earth, blood ran like a river, coursing through rivers and mountains and plains. The creature followed the blood, and in its wake darkness spread, like a cloud blotting out the sun.

East—it was heading east. Toward the rising sun, toward the dawn-radiant Imperial Palace.

Fear struck like debris in a swollen river. She cast about for a handhold and pulled herself out of the torrent. She cried out as her consciousness slammed back into her arching body and both tumbled backward. The bowl clanged to the floor.

As she pulled herself up, Nobu was retching. The disturbance—it must have resonated in her ill-prepared student as well. *For the Void to have washed over him, even when I had sent him out...*

Soft wails rose up around them from elsewhere in the complex, confirming her fears. She had to make contact with Master Ujina and Lady Kaede immediately. They would have to warn the Emperor before it was too late.

Atsuko's creaking voice faded from her mind, but even when the touch of the Void left Kaede, the chill in her heart did not.

It shouldn't have surprised her—the *shugenja* of the Phoenix Clan had suspected for a long time that the Unicorn's foreign sorcery was dangerous. The Emperor should never have accepted it into his Empire.

And now, it had caused ripples in reality itself, ripples that had been felt by all those with the gift to perceive the Void. Fortune must have smiled upon Atsuko, or the Ishiken might not have had the chance to pull apart the tangled knots of the future and catch a glimpse of the source of the waves.

Kaede poured herself a cup of the tea infusion and placed her hands on both sides of the porcelain, a vain attempt to ward off the chill.

When she closed her eyes, echoes of the disturbance washed over her again, and the

dizziness returned. She breathed in the sharp scent of ginger to ground herself and quell her unease.

She could reach out, try to send herself to the place and time whence the ripples came, but she dared not attempt the journey from within the capital. She could drown in the emptiness, or worse, drag down others with her. As she had before. She would not risk losing anyone else.

She opened her eyes and sipped at the tea, but still her hands trembled.

They said she had inherited Ujina's gift, that one day she might prove an even more powerful Ishiken than he. But what good was her gift if it was too powerful to be used?

"The universe seeks equilibrium in all things, Kaede," her father had assured her. To have been granted such a terrible gift meant that there would be a terrible need in her lifetime, and one day she would succeed him as the Master of Void.

She prayed she would be ready when that day came—for both the loss of her father, and the weight of the responsibility that would be placed on her shoulders.

Here, in the capital, she could use other powers: scholarship and diplomacy. She represented her father and the rest of the Elemental Council in the highest court, and she advised His Imperial Majesty on matters of spirits and the realms. The Phoenix had supreme authority on all the realms except this one: that of Ningen-dō, the mortal realm, the realm threatened in Atsuko's vision. It was the sole province of the other clans' counsel.

The other clans would not take kindly to her interference in their domain.



All official Imperial business was suspended for the length of the Chrysanthemum Festival, but Kaede's warning could not wait. Not when the Ishiken had enacted powerful rituals to contact her across hundreds of miles in an instant.

And not when there was a chance the Unicorn would flaunt their foreign magics before the Emperor, endangering him and the innocents who had come to celebrate the day.

Kaede found the the Emperor and his children, their Seppun guards, and the highest-ranking members of the Imperial ministries in the second-story gatehouse that marked the entry to the palace. *Kichō* curtains and reed blinds filtered the glare of the summer heat and shielded the Hantei from public sight while allowing him to observe the ceremonies. As she

bowed and entered, she caught Crown Prince Sotorii's smirk and lingering gaze, but she couldn't let that distract her now.

She spied Ishikawa, Captain of the Seppun Honor Guard, and maneuvered herself closer to him, guessing correctly that he would step away to greet her. They exchanged the sophisticated dance of pleasantries, but she needed to speak with him alone, away from the rest of the royal delegation.

"Captain, would you join me in trying to catch a better glimpse of the parade?" The sounds from the thronged mass in celebration below would keep their words from becoming court gossip.

"Of course," Ishikawa replied, casting a quick glance to the Ruby Champion, Agasha Sumiko, who nodded and stepped closer to her charges, the Emperor and his heirs.

A cheer went up from the citizens of the Forbidden City, and the procession rounded the corner. She had been looking forward to this day, when the pall of mourning for Doji Satsume would finally be banished by the mirth of celebration. Now, the crescendo of the wooden clappers and drumbeats sounded like a sickening cicada's call.

Below them, in the crowded streets, the representatives of the Otomo, Seppun, and Miya families paraded in their Imperial raiment past the gate. Chrysanthemum blooms were draped about them in ribbons and they held aloft emerald banners emblazoned with the golden Imperial *mon*.

"What has cast the shadow I see in your eyes?" the captain asked.

Kaede took a deep breath. "I received word from Starry Heaven Sanctuary today." Ishikawa would recognize the name of the school for Void shugenja, and that whatever the message was, it could not wait. "I come bearing dire portents. Our Ishiken believe the Emperor is in danger.

"A darkness threatens from the far west, across the Spine of the World. All of us have felt it, but one of our own caught a glimpse of its provenance. We believe it originates with the Unicorn and their talismanic sorcery, their so-called 'name magic,' *meishōdō*."

The captain considered her words in silence.

After the Imperials marched the Lion, their warriors in full war regalia, white manes flowing in the wind. These samurai had defended Rokugan from invasion time and again, whether it was from the hordes of the Burning Sands, the fleets of the Ivory Kingdoms, or more far-flung foreigners.

But would they be able to protect the Emperor against this shadowy threat? Once the darkness formed, would there be any stopping it? Would the Lion, seemingly poised to start an all-out war with the Crane, be ready? The Phoenix's fledgling champion, Shiba Tsukune, would be hard-pressed to foster peace between those two bitter rivals. Perhaps not even the Emperor could, now.

The Lion warriors turned and bowed toward the gatehouse in perfect unison. They rose and shouted, “Banzai!” for their Emperor, before continuing the procession through the Forbidden City.

Her words would be an insult to the honor of the Seppun family and their schools, but Kaede mustered the courage to ask, “If the Unicorn use their accursed talismans today, and something happens, will the Emperor’s guards be prepared?”

Ishikawa’s eyes went wide and he immediately checked the gatehouse behind them, ensuring the safety of the Imperial family. “The members of the Honor Guard are prepared to sacrifice everything to safeguard the Emperor’s life, and the Hidden Guard shugenja have sworn to protect the Emperor’s very soul.”



She pressed further—her words bordered on impropriety, but they had known each other for years. They could be honest with each other. If she had tried to offer her advice to the Seppun shugenja, they would have dismissed her out of hand. She took a deep breath and asked, “Can they defend against forces they do not understand?”

He stood straighter, his hands curling into resolute fists. “They are the best of the best, and they have never failed His Majesty.”

Before the Lion contingent had finished their pass, the drumbeats and song of another clan floated down the avenue. The Crane were next, promising a spectacular performance of dance and artistry. Cerulean robes and ribbons flowed and ebbed like the great Sea of the Sun Goddess, and like a school of fish, silver swords flashed in a scene from a Kabuki play. Such beauty was so fragile, so easily snuffed out by the wickedness of the world.

Kaede continued unsteadily. “The techniques of the different families are among their greatest secrets, and their shugenja traditions are even more carefully guarded. Only over many centuries have the Isawa come to understand the strengths and weaknesses of each clans’ shugenja. The Soshi can lift their prayers wordlessly, while the Kitsu invoke the guidance and protection of their ancestors. We do not know precisely how they do it, but we—and the Hidden Guard—know what to expect, at the very least.”

“Are not the Asahina shugenja’s charms very similar to—if not the same as—the Iuchi’s talismans?” Ishikawa tilted his head slightly, looking askance at Kaede. “Both the Crane and Unicorn’s amulets seem to bestow the blessings of the kami upon their wielder.”

Were they truly blessings of the kami—or some demon’s boon? “Of that we cannot be certain.

No one is.” The Asahina’s charms of bamboo, folded paper, silk, and bells looked not unlike the *omamori* crafted by shrine-keepers to share their kami’s blessings, although the Asahina’s protections were much more powerful. By contrast, many of the Iuchi talismans took the shape of hideous monstrosities: the human form corrupted with scale-covered tails, feathered wings, horned heads, and furry legs. They were as grotesque as the *oni* that dwelled in Jigoku.

Kaede had to make him understand. “I swear, Captain, we do not bring this to you lightly. You lead the Emperor’s protectors. Please convey my fears to the Emperor—it will only mean something if it comes from you. If *meishōdō* is as dangerous as we fear, and your guards are met with a terrible threat to the Emperor...”

“Then you believe we must forbid it.” Ishikawa filled in her blanks, releasing a sigh. “The Phoenix and the Lion will rejoice at seeing what they believe to be heresy quashed, but the Dragon and Crane will not stand idle while their ally is censured. The Crab may be relieved to see their old enemy weakened, or perhaps they will see it as losing a possible new defense for their Wall. No doubt the Scorpion will seek to capitalize on the situation either way. Most of all, the Unicorn will not look kindly on the Emperor refusing to accept their manner of service.”

Yes, there would be many political ramifications, but spiritual threats were much more complex—and perilous—than mere mortal concerns. Kaede replied, “Yet, if they brought back witchcraft from the Burning Sands, then surely it is the Emperor who has the wisdom to determine whether such arts continue to serve his Empire.” As Lady Sun’s conduit to her lost descendants, the Emperor was effectively divine, his wisdom irrefutable except by other Hantei.

The Phoenix procession came next, instantly recognizable by the portable shrine carried by the guardians of the Shiba family. Around the warriors, a flock of *shugenja*, priests, and shrine-keepers danced and sang for the glory of the spirit they carried. It was said to be the kami of Seppun Hill, the guardian spirit of the land beneath this very city, who had watched over the line of the Hantei since the city’s founding.

“There is another way,” Ishikawa began. “If, as you suggest, the danger lies in not knowing, then perhaps instead of outlawing it entirely, the Unicorn will submit to teaching the Hidden Guard the nature of their powers.”

“The Iuchi will be loath to give up their secrets,” Kaede pointed out. Something so simple as the captain’s solution could never work.

“The Unicorn are a practical clan. Their champion may well decide it is better to confer with the Seppun than to lose the arts of her *shugenja*.”

“We shall see,” said Kaede. Ishikawa gazed out at the crowd.

The next delegation snuck up on them, hot on the heels of the Phoenix like the deepest shadow following the brightest light. A group of acrobats tumbled and contorted and leapt from atop each other’s backs, spinning through the air before landing gracefully on their feet. Dancers joined them, donning mask after mask and swirling among silks such that they

seemed to flit about the street. This, too, had to be a trick of some kind, although what hidden meaning lay beneath, Kaede could not guess.

"Mine will not be the only voice advising him. The Emperor has many counselors, and you can be sure that each will have their own opinions. Any decision will come neither lightly nor quickly."

By then, it might be too late. She would have to find a way to sway these other counselors, or find a way to protect the Imperial family herself. "This cannot be delayed as so many matters of court are! Please, take this directly to him, I beg of you. For my sake, but also for the Emperor's."

Ishikawa's eyes held hers, too long, but neither of them could look away. "Very well, Kaede-san. If the Emperor indeed judges your concern sound, he will need help to enforce his laws. We have the Emerald Magistrates, but the Jade Magistrates of yore—" A cheer went up, cutting him off.

"The Phoenix will assist however they are needed, make any sacrifice," Kaede quickly put in. The office of the Jade Champion had not been needed in centuries, and the Empire did not need them now. The Elemental Masters were the supreme authority on spiritual matters, and they would see to the law's implementation themselves. They would ensure that there would be no cause for the Imperial ministry dedicated to rooting out heretical shugenja to be reinstated.

At last, the delegation she feared most came into view, their contingent mounted atop terrifying steeds, their purple and white garb bearing patterns she had never seen before. A stench wafted up from the horses, sickly sweet and turning her stomach. The clop-clop-clopping of hooves against the stone-paved avenue matched the pounding of her heart; their whickers and neighs sent shudders down her spine.

Please, let nothing happen, she prayed. Her power answered unbidden, welling up inside her. The cold emptiness of the Void lapped at her feet, as though she were standing in the surf of a starry night's sea. Despite the heat of the day, she shivered beneath her many-layered robes.

"Kaede, are you—"

"Forget me," she managed to whisper. "Go to the Emperor. Ensure he is safe."

While the horses trotted in circles, weaving a pattern like the shifting sun, a Unicorn shugenja at the circle's center held aloft a golden winged talisman, a ruby gem glinting with the light of Amaterasu.



No!

The Void knocked her feet from under her, and a riptide of power threatened to consume her. *Let go, and you will have all the power you need. Surrender to the will of the world.*

I will not give in. But I must see... Her vision darkened, and she saw into the Realm of Void. Where before had existed only the parade, now infinite street-goers were packed into the avenue, souls from every moment from the distant past to the far future, their elements bleeding through the scene in four colors. War, peace, desolation, desecration. She strained to find a single thread in time, to see where the Unicorn shugenja had stood.

The cold of the Void pressed down, trying to drown her. *There!* She could see it for but an instant: a spirit, a shadowy creature of smokeless fire, horned and bestial. It howled, writhing against some binding force, trying to pry itself loose.

Deeper and deeper, into the nothingness, one with an ocean that never ended—

Remember yourself, came her father's voice. *Do not lose your way.*

I am Isawa Kaede, daughter of Ujina, daughter of Ninube, sister to Tadaka, spiritual advisor to Hantei the Thirty-Eighth, betrothed to Akodo Toturi, friend to Ishikawa...

She surfaced from the darkness and gasped at the returned warmth of the sun. *The Emperor—the princes—*

A cry went up from the crowd—one of joy, not fear.

Her back was pressed against the battlements, her legs shaking, breath unsteady. She prayed no one had seen her stumble, or sensed that she had nearly lost herself to her power.

The Unicorn finished their display with a bow to the Emperor, and they bid their horses trot past the gatehouse.

Much of the crowd's attention turned from the parade, moving on to the next celebration or to the countless stalls of food and wine. The Crab, who were next, had offered only a dour contingent of warriors for the parade of Great Clans.

The captain returned, wariness in his eyes.

"I saw something," she managed, her voice trembling. "A spirit, trapped within the talisman. It was trying to break free, trying to get to the Emperor."

He regarded her for a long time. Something in his eyes told her he believed her, but he wasn't convinced. "I will see to it that His Majesty is warned, but that is all I can guarantee." He bowed his farewell and returned to the gatehouse.

"Fortunes guide us all," Kaede whispered.

Only the Dragon remained. Ambassador Kitsuki Yaruma and his meager delegation marched in silence.

The ambassador turned and looked upon Kaede with a cold, knowing stare. She could not fathom why.