

To the South (Part II)

By Marie Brennan

Given the reputation of the Shinomen Mori, Shinjo Tatsuo was almost prepared to believe the sight in front of him was an illusion crafted by some trickster spirit.

At least two dozen Crab Clan *ashigaru* were hard at work felling timber, supervised by a hatchet-faced samurai with a loose roll of papers under his arm. They'd been at work for some time, judging by the pile of logs laid to one side, and they hadn't wasted any of the branches, either. The excess had been transformed into a tidy palisade of fire-hardened stakes. It was a logging expedition, clearly—but what was it doing in this ancient forest?

The Hiruma scout leading them into the camp wasn't very talkative. She detached a group of their own *ashigaru* to watch over his, then led Tatsuo and Rimei to her commander, who set aside his papers as they approached. "*Gunsō-san*," the scout said, with a brief bow. "These Unicorn were scouting our camp."

"We were investigating the smoke," Tatsuo corrected her. "I am Shinjo Tatsuo, a *gunsō* of the Shinomen Wayfinders, and this is Iuchi Rimei. We've been pursuing a creature that was sighted outside a Unicorn village to the north, and thought that whoever was here might be able to offer assistance."

He was in charge of their patrol, but Rimei was responsible for handling spiritual matters, and she broke in. "What are your people doing here, anyway? Logging in the Shinomen Mori—do you have any idea what spirits you might anger? Do you have any way of controlling them?"

From behind them came another voice, touched with both humor and annoyance. "That would be my job."

Tatsuo turned to find a second man approaching. He wore no armor, but his *hakama* and tied-back sleeves had none of the usual formality of a *shugenja's* robes, either. If it weren't for his unsettling face paint, white with red lines, Tatsuo would never have identified him as a Kuni. The newcomer eyed Tatsuo and Rimei and said, "Shinomen Wayfinders? I thought you Unicorn preferred the open plains."

"Our duties do not always take us where we prefer," Tatsuo said stiffly, turning back to the commander. "Please forgive Rimei's blunt way of asking—but the question stands. I am glad to see a *shugenja* with your group, but there are a great many dangers in this forest, and cutting down trees is a quick way to wake them."

The commander looked unmoved. "We know the risks. But as you say: our duties don't always take us where we want. Heki is taking care to appease the spirits of the trees before we cut them."



That must be the Kuni's name. "Aren't there trees in your own lands?"

"None that fit our needs," he said. "I am Kaiu Shuichi, an engineer in the Twelfth Tower Command. We need large beams to conduct repairs on the northern end of the Carpenter Wall, and there's nothing suitable closer to hand. We have Imperial permission to log here."

No wonder the camp was so well constructed, with a Kaiu engineer in charge. But Tatsuo had a feeling it wasn't just normal Crab paranoia that made them take such precautions—a feeling that grew stronger when Shuichi spoke again. "This creature you're chasing. What is it?"

He asked as if he already had an answer in mind. And given Rimei's suspicions, Tatsuo couldn't see any good reason to hold back. Courtiers might treat information like treasure, to be hoarded and spent with care, but here in the hinterlands of the Empire, he preferred to reach out with the hand of alliance. "We don't know," he admitted. "It's large, and it leaves a broad, flat trail. And it's fast. We...the possibility has occurred to us that it might be something from... further south." He couldn't quite bring himself to say *Tainted*.

"Impossible," Shuichi said, without hesitation. Before Tatsuo could write it off as arrogance, he added, "We have Kogoe scouting the vicinity constantly, and Heki alert for any sign of the Shadowlands Taint."

"But you *have* seen something," Tatsuo said.

Shuichi glanced past him, at the Hiruma scout—Kogoe, presumably. She said, “Seen, no. However, several of our laborers have gone missing. Mostly without a trace, but in one spot I found a brief track that sounds like what you’re describing.”

“How long ago?”

“Six days.”

There was no way the creature Tatsuo had been chasing could have been here six days ago; its trail wasn’t that old. Which meant there was more than one. “What do you mean, ‘a brief track’?”

“I don’t mean that I lost it,” she said evenly. “I mean that it stopped. And Heki doesn’t know of anything that flies *and* leaves a track like that. Do you?”

“No,” Rimei admitted. “We were following our trail not far from here; we only diverted because we saw the smoke from your fire. If we go back and pursue that, we may find the source of both our problem and yours.”

That was optimistic of her, given their failure to chase the thing down yet, but Tatsuo was even less willing than before to give up. He gazed past the palisade, into the forest. He was sure it held the answers...if he was willing to risk getting them.

He’d already led his patrol far beyond the boundaries of his duty. And it was possible that not one but two clans were at risk from this unknown threat.

“Kaiu-san,” he said. “Obviously you have to devote most of your effort to protecting this camp, which means you can’t spare much for exploring the nearby forest. But we’ve come all this way to investigate, and are more familiar with the hazards of the Shinomen Mori than your own people. I will lead my patrol on a circuit through the area—and if we find anything, we will share it with you before we return north.”

“Gunsō-san!” Rimei stared at him. Her abrupt shift to formality showed how much the suggestion alarmed her. It was one thing to ride south, but to go deeper into the forest...

Tatsuo shook his head. “Not you. If Kaiu-san is willing, I will have you remain here in his camp, until we return.” Or until it was clear that they wouldn’t.

Her expression was mutinous. “How do you expect to deal with a spirit when you have no shugenja with you?”

“I have no intention of engaging with it at all. We will scout only.” He knew as well as she did that plans like that rarely worked out—but he wasn’t going to be responsible for losing her to the forest.

Kuni Heki intervened. “If you stay here, Iuchi-san, we might be able to work together and learn more from the spirits. And if your intention is to scout, Shinjo-sama—” He turned to his own commander. “Could we lend him Kogoe-san?”

Tatsuo couldn’t deny she would be useful, given how effectively she’d crept up on him. He bowed to Shuichi. “The reputation of the Hiruma is well known in Unicorn lands. I would be grateful for the assistance.”

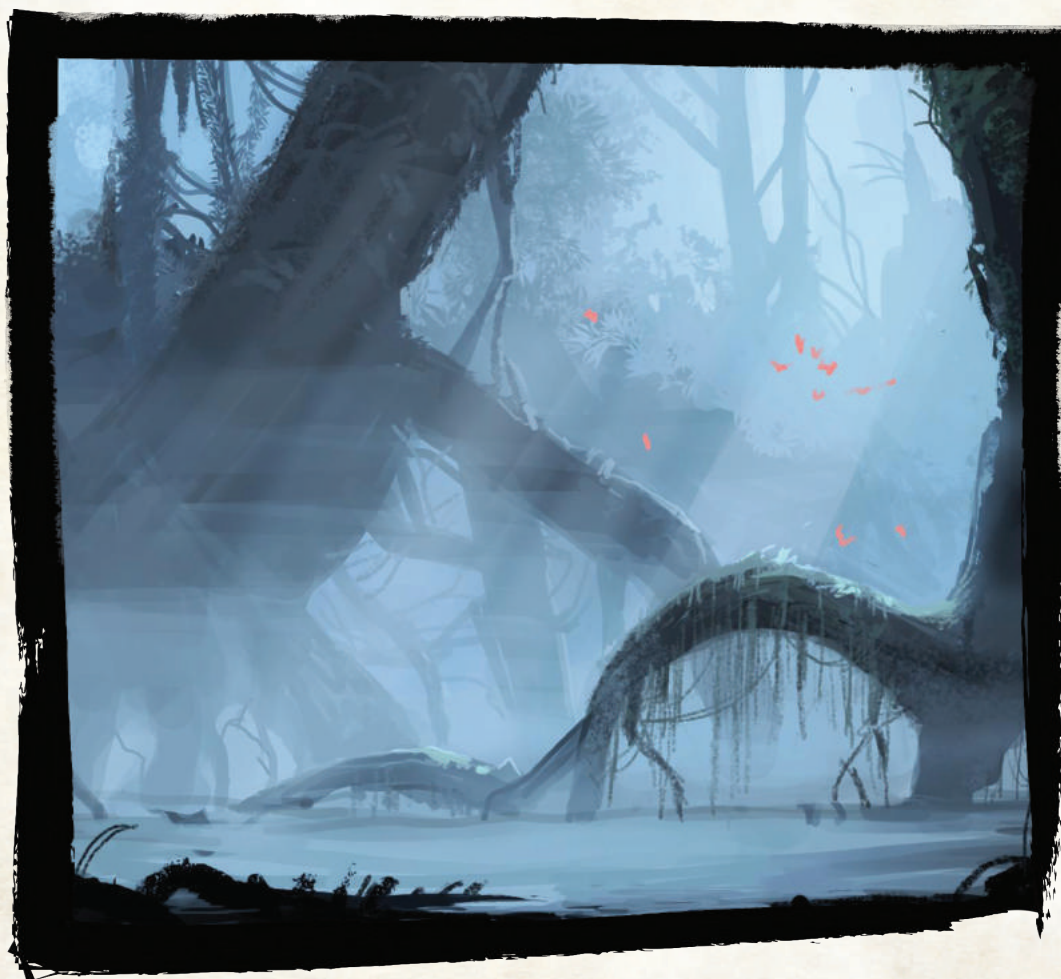
Shuichi nodded. “Find me what’s causing this, and find a solution.” He only had the authority to command Kogoe, but he seemed to be addressing both scouts indiscriminately. “We can’t afford to lose any more people or time.”

Tatsuo had to admit that Hiruma Kogoe was far more at home in the forest than he was. There were trees in Unicorn lands, of course, and he’d been in and out of the fringes of the Shinomen Mori for years—but his ancestors made their home on the plains, and he never felt comfortable being hemmed in like this.

She didn’t know nearly as much about the Shinomen as he did, though. “There aren’t a lot of friendly things where I usually patrol,” she admitted after she nearly shot a rabbit spirit. It faded away an instant before her arrow would have struck. “We’re trained to assume anything we see is probably dangerous.”

“Wayfinders learn the same thing,” Tatsuo said, “but we generally try to avoid confrontation. In the Shinomen, ‘dangerous’ and ‘needs to be killed’ aren’t always the same thing. Most creatures in the forest will leave you alone if you don’t trouble them.”

“When we find this thing,” Kogoe said darkly, “I’m not giving it the benefit of the doubt.”



He couldn't blame her. But it would be a moot point if they couldn't find the creature. Or creatures—however many of them there were.

Kogoe was the one who figured it out in the end, proving his sensei's admonition once more. Stopping Tatsuo with one outstretched hand, she breathed a few words, almost too quiet to hear. "I think they move through the trees."

Once he looked for it, he saw it, too. Fallen leaves and twigs on the ground, and up above, branches stripped suspiciously bare. It could have been *hibagon*, the reclusive ape-men who haunted the forest—but they swung by their arms, and wouldn't leave this kind of damage. Without a word, he nocked an arrow to his bow. Kogoe did the same.

Not long after, they heard a sound up ahead. Not the chattering of animals or their spirit kin, and not the weeping of some creature in the form of a woman or a baby, hoping to lure the unwary to their doom. Two different sounds, alternating with one another—like voices in conversation. But the cadence of it was nothing like Rokugani.

He and Kogoe separated, so that if one of them were spotted the other could attack or escape. And then, placing one careful foot at a time, Tatsuo crept forward.

The voices were coming from a small dell with a quiet, shadowed pool at the center. Two tall boulders stood alongside the pool, narrow outcroppings from some larger mass of stone below—

One of the boulders moved.

Not stone. A creature—two of them—each easily fifteen feet in length, rearing up from their long tails. They were speaking in a hissing, liquid language like nothing Tatsuo had heard before.

Perhaps his nerve failed him at this crucial moment, faced with a pair of giant serpent creatures that his mind screamed must have come straight from the Shadowlands. Tatsuo didn't think he'd made a sound...

But one of them stopped talking, and turned to look directly at him.