

Dark Hands of Heaven

By Annie VanderMeer Mitsoda

Meanwhile, to the far southeast...

A brisk wind scudded across the dry plains, tugging at the robes of the *shugenja* and snapping the banners atop the Kaiu Wall. Unmoved, Hida Kisada stared impassively from the battlements to the Shadowlands beyond, where a vast force of enemy troops swayed and shifted like grass.

In the eyes of his troops—even battle hardened as they were—he had seen the shadow of fear. *Samurai do not fear death*, he thought. *An easy sentiment for those who shelter in the safety of our wall. My samurai know death too well not to fear it. But they will face it anyway.*

Kisada stared down the foe with the same impassive gaze for which the Champion of the Crab Clan was so well known. Around him gathered his children and closest retainers, who did not seem to share the Great Bear's taciturn demeanor.

"Look at them arranging their forces so considerately. One could almost mistake them for Crane," sneered Yakamo, Kisada's eldest child, as he casually lifted his *tetsubō* onto his shoulder, posturing with the great iron and jade war club as a youngster might a toy. "It will make it even easier to crush them outright."

From Kisada's left came a worried "hm," and he knew without needing to look that it came from Sukune. "I do not like this," his youngest son said matter-of-factly. "Shadowlands troops do not often amass in such a fashion. They are much more likely to hide their real strength."

"A bit of a costly maneuver for it to be a trick, displaying their power like this," mused O-Ushi, and Kisada glanced to his right briefly to see his daughter frowning in consternation before she looked at him. "Do you think this might have a connection with the attack to the north, Father?" Kisada gave a low grunt of consideration, overshadowed by Yakamo's sudden rough laugh and the *thunk* of his son's war club thumping the ground.

"Children, quaking at the sight of goblins!" the young man sneered. "Such a proud example for our noble father. Do you want me to read you bedtime stories while the real warriors fight?"

Sukune bristled. "And you would run headlong into peril, endangering our clan with your bloodlust? Do you think that you can take on an entire army by yourse—"

Kisada grunted quietly and held up a hand, satisfied when his children immediately lapsed into a reluctant silence. The champion's eyes tracked once more over the immensity of the battlefield, noting each unit like pieces on a game board, arranged in precise rows. A frown creased his features briefly. *They are much more likely to hide their real strength.* He imagined a small pile of pieces hidden beneath his opponent's hand. Unease clenched his heart.



Turning from the vista before him, he scanned along the wide corridor atop the great Wall for his chosen advisor. "Kaiu Shihobu!" he bellowed, deep voice ringing with the power that led warriors to victory and death. A tall woman looked up from one of the giant siege engines nearby, then turned and approached at a brisk pace, wiping her dirty hands on a cloth. Though the leader of a powerful family, Shihobu was never far from something she had built or repaired, and it was apparent she would not be satisfied the battle could begin until she had inspected all of the siege equipment personally. Her bow was brief, but full of respect.

"Hida-ue, how can I serve?"

"What is the latest report on the near-breach in the Ishigaki Province?"

"Slowed by rains, but proceeding apace. The damage was severe, but the Kaiu estimate completion within seven days."

Kisada gave a small nod of agreement. "With our current numbers, what are our siege capabilities?"

The Kaiu *daimyō*'s usually warm brown eyes dimmed, and her frown puckered the long scar on her cheek. "We have the troops needed for the siege engines, and a small force to repair damage and shuttle ammunition. But we are spread thin." She sighed. "The Kaiu family will never fail the Crab. But if the Wall itself is hit by that force out there, we cannot guarantee its security."

Sukune let out a long, worried breath. "Our jade stores, Father..." The pale young man trembled a moment as he suppressed a cough, but he swallowed hard and continued. "They are nearly empty. If a significant force breaks through, our resources are insufficient to deal with a possible incursion of the Taint. If the land becomes corrupted, we do not have the means to cleanse it. We will lose ground."

Kisada turned his eyes to a nervous young retainer, who started and bowed as he saw the clan champion looking his way. "Yasuki Oguri. What of our missives to the Emperor? Have they not gotten through?"

Oguri shook his head, his words wary. "They have, Hida-ue. My father has confirmed they have been delivered, and he has sent the Emperor's replies back. But each time it is the same. A formal letter, the finest calligraphy on the smoothest paper. 'The Emperor regrets he cannot send any aid at this time.' For supplies, for troops, for jade..." The young man looked down awkwardly, embarrassed. "It is always the same response."

Yakamo growled, slamming his war club on the ground again. "A sham of courtesy!" he bellowed, seething. "I should go to Otosan Uchi myself and demand what we are owed as the protectors of Rokugan!"

Kisada waved a hand, as if sliding a door closed, and Yakamo cut off his rant, subsiding into low grumbling. "Do no disrespect to the Yasuki. Their *daimyō* is there now. If Yasuki Taka cannot catch the Emperor's ear..." The thought trailed a moment, and then Kisada snapped his attention to Shihobu once more.



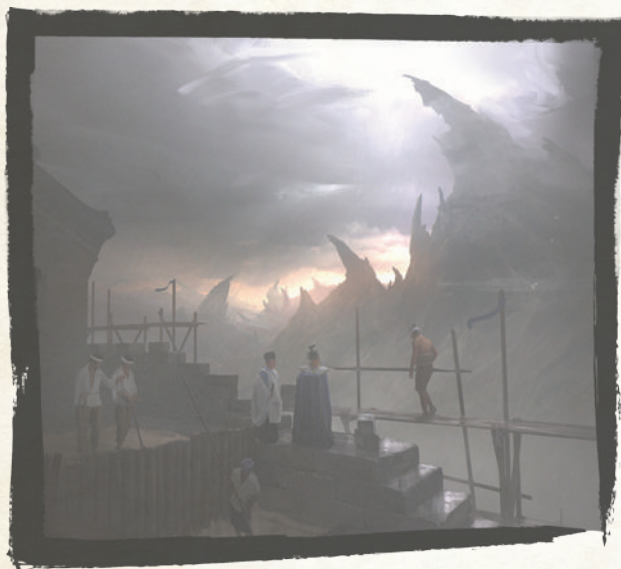
"Respect to the Kaiu and their Wall," said the champion briskly. "But where are the weak spots closest to this location?"

Shihobu's brows pinched in thought. While Kisada's visage had been still as granite as he planned, the Kaiu daimyō's face was all energy, the calculations flickering across her features like a merchant's hands on a *soroban*, beads clacking back and forth. "Just north of here. A larger stream required installing a runoff pipe. It should have a grate, but no seal is perfect. If you require, I will assign a retainer to show you."

Kisada nodded his thanks, then cleared his throat; around him, every spine straightened. "This is the duty of the Crab. The Kaiu Wall stands to protect Rokugan, but our people do as well. And even stone can only take so much before it shatters. As Kuni Osaku once raised a wall of water so the Wall could be built, so today shall we raise a wall of iron.

"Kaiu Shihobu."

The tall daimyō bowed to her champion.



"Direct all your troops to crew the siege engines and ferry ammunition. Hiruma Yoshino, split your troops. Longbows atop the Wall, short bows at the base—each with a signal arrow."

The daimyō of the Hiruma family bowed, the well-oiled leather of her scout garb bending without the slightest creak. "Anything else, Hida-ue?"

Kisada considered a moment. "If you think *they* are ready, then proceed." Yoshino bowed again, and Kisada could feel the weight of the others' curiosity. It hardly

mattered: either the plan would succeed or it would fail, and everyone else had other things to consider.

"Kuni Yori," he continued, and the Kuni family daimyō bowed as well, dark mustache twitching with a too-wide smile. "Split your forces as well—a quarter to support the Kaiu, and the rest to aid on the ground. Your skills and those of your shugenja will be needed on the field."

Finally, he turned to his children, who all bowed as one. "Yakamo, you will be at my side. Sukune, you will remain on the Wall to relay my commands.

"O-Ushi. Collect your best troops, follow the Kaiu retainer to the weakness Shihobu spoke of, and do sweeps of that area. Make it clear the utmost vigilance is required."

Although his daughter made no visible sign of displeasure at being left out of the main battle, Kisada sensed her bristle a moment before she bowed to him. "I will make it so,



Champion,” she agreed, turning crisply on her heel to leave, a retainer nearly stumbling in his haste to follow her. Tension rippled again as Yakamo grinned, his expression impish, and Sukune glared at his brother, grinding his teeth in an unspoken argument. Kisada raised his chin sharply, and once again the siblings quieted, the tension dispelled like a hand waving away smoke.

Turning from his children’s argument, he took a final look from the top of the Wall. The forces of the Shadowlands roiled and shifted, waiting patiently for their encounter. Such patience felt wrong: a storm would never choose to wait for a soldier to find shelter before loosing a deluge of rain.

The Crab Clan Champion gave a low grunt—one which all who knew the Great Bear understood as his final punctuation before considering a matter closed—and turned to descend the stairs, his sons and retainers following as smoothly as one of Shihobu’s machines.

Just outside the gates of the Kaiu Wall, the forces of the Crab moved into position, waiting for the word of the man who once again stared impassively into the distance. As the others around him shifted from foot to foot, or shrugged to adjust where their *sode* armor sat on their shoulders, Hida Kisada waited, as tall and impassive as the cedars that rose beyond the Wall’s protection. To the daimyō of the Hida, armor had always felt as comfortable as his own skin—although, feeling the beginning of an ache at the base of his neck, he wished the weight of years sat on him half so well.

The Crab forces waited patiently as each of their units arrayed themselves into formation, and Kisada carefully counted each of their number, measuring them against the plan in his mind. One by one, his commanders surrounded him and his eldest son—who stood at his right, cracking his neck and throwing back his shoulders like a dog straining at the leash—until the Hiruma daimyō arrived, her steps as silent as snowfall. Kisada’s dark eyes met hers a moment and locked, asking a wordless question answered by her small nod.

“The court is arrayed,” stated Kuni Yori, in his sibilant half-whisper of a voice. “We await your orders, Hida-ue.”

Kisada nodded at his generals and withdrew his *gunbai* from his belt, raising it aloft—all around him, the shifting of thousands of bodies came to an abrupt halt, the great clack of legions of troops coming to order echoing across the vast landscape. Each gesture of his war fan meant a shifting of stones across the wooden wilderness of a game board, and the movement of hundreds along the windswept plains of the Shadowlands. A point and left-to-right sweep of the war fan sent the shugenja of the Kuni to the flanks to prevent the enemy from cutting off a retreat back to the Wall. A point and right-to-left, and the Hiruma scouts raised their bows, *daikyū* above the Wall and *hankyū* below. A point upward with a backward flick, and the siege engines atop the Wall were readied, the grinding of their mechanisms audible even from



hundreds of feet away.

Finally, the troops settled into their positions, and Kisada lowered the gunbai a moment, finally clicking his *mempō* into place, the steel and gold faceplate hiding all but his focused eyes. He raised the war fan once more, holding it high in the air as his generals looked on nervously: the balance of life and death on a winged wand of iron, emblazoned with the Crab Clan symbol. Moments passed as though the world were taking a final breath.

Then the gunbai sliced forward, and the world erupted into chaos as battle was joined.

Shrieking hordes of *bakemono* ran forward—some actually aflame, for what the goblins thought of as an “honor”—and scores of them fell, riddled with Hiruma arrows.

A hideous tentacled horror rose roaring from the enemy ranks, but its roars turned into shrieks as a well-aimed rock from a Kaiu catapult found its mark, the monster writhing in agony before shuddering and going still.

The shambling forces of undead attempted to push against their southern flank, but the prayers of the Kuni shugenja fractured the earth beneath their feet, shattering them against the ground.

Above all this chaos rose the towering form of Hida Kisada, gunbai sweeping through the air, guiding the Crab forces as tiles on a board, rising to meet threats and bring them low.

Suddenly a hellish shriek split the air: a detachment of *onikage*, ridden by the foul undead samurai known simply as the Lost, burst forth from enemy lines, sweeping in a scythe-like maneuver and heading directly toward the heart of the Hida forces.

Kisada frowned. He had set his troops to tease the enemy into striking from the left, to seize them in a pincer maneuver—he had even chosen this spot for his command post, about a hundred meters from the Wall, for its rough terrain. To attack them from the right, through an area meant to disrupt swift charges, and where the Crab's defense was strongest, seemed a move ill considered for even the most foolish of the Shadowlands spawn. Still, the *onikage* were powerful creatures, and the Lost even more so.

In his mind, Kisada saw a game piece pushed forward by the enemy, breaking the lines as its own troops fell away: its best forces in one attack, counting on just enough surviving to strike at the heart of its opponent's command. He was only too glad to make this attempt a futile one.

The gunbai hissed through the air, sending a *naginata*-wielding detachment forward. Even against the unearthly speed of the undead horses, the bladed spears of the Crab troops slashed with deadly efficiency, sending armored corpses flying as their mounts gave eerie screams and crashed to the ground. As the remaining Lost staggered to their feet, more troops flooded in to engage the enemy—and Yakamo, no longer able to restrain his bloodlust, gave a great bellow and lunged into the fray.

Kisada growled at his son's foolishness and opened his mouth to call him back—just as the ground shook beneath his feet, and the standard sounds of battle coalesced into screams of terror. A vast shape, black and rough as stone, burst out from behind the shattered mass of





Hida Kisada - Unyielding Champion of the Crab Clan



onikage and crashed through the Crab troops like a meteor, scattering bodies in its wake.

So the strike at the command had been genuine after all. But he had misidentified what the enemy's most powerful force was—when he had sent his troops to deal with the cavalry, he had left himself exposed. An uncharacteristic curse slipped from his lips as he brought his *kanabō* up just in time to block the twisted black blade of his opponent, the impact sending the Crab Clan Champion staggering backward.

Kisada's enemy stretched itself to its full monstrous height: an *oni*, its massive bulk armored in chunks of chipped obsidian, its eyes burning like the fires of Jigoku itself. "Crab Champion!" the beast thundered, pointing its misshapen saber at Kisada. "You and your troops will fall! I will take great joy in tearing off your limbs and devouring you alive, like the meat you are."

Kisada allowed himself a smile, dangerous and thin as the blade of a knife, and held his war



club at the ready before him. "Then let us begin," he declared, and the oni leapt forth with a howl.

The world around the champion seemed to fall away, all complexity stripped free as cloth before flames. There was only he and the oni, strike and parry, lunge and dodge. The oni roared in anger as the champion's iron club shattered one of the obsidian plates lashed over his demonic body; the champion bit back a groan as the beast's backhand caught his thigh, sending him briefly stumbling to

one knee. A chuckle from the monster became a strangled grunt of surprise as Kisada's lunging swipe caught it under the chin, cracking part of its jaw and spattering the ground below with sticky black blood. The aged champion grunted as he blocked another strike with his *kanabō*, his joints howling with pain as they never had in his youth. Age was another opponent he faced, and his best defense was simply to shut it away—an act well-rehearsed with the pragmatism and stubbornness for which his clan was so well-known.

Suddenly the oni bellowed in surprise: more black blood splattered onto the ground, and a lone *bushi* appeared with *ōtsuchi* in hand, the warhammer slick with gore. The figure took a moment to duck its head to Kisada and hurriedly begged forgiveness for the interruption. Kisada, still in the haze of battle, only grunted a reply. The two joined against the creature, the smaller warrior acting as distraction while Kisada broke more of the beast's armor, the foul obsidian shattering into pieces, bits embedding themselves in the creature's flesh. The oni growled and took another step forward, making as if to swing its blade at both its assailants—
—and howled in pain as the ground gave away beneath its left leg, burying it up to the



knee. The oni roared in anger and confusion, jerking as its leg was further pinioned, lashed down by rough ropes and spiked into the earth. Small furry creatures scattered within the hole, scurrying away into tunnels within the earth. Hiruma Yoshino's strange plan had worked, then.

He whirled at the feeling of the bushi's hand on his arm.

"Forgive me, my lord!" the warrior yelled. "But the battlefield is in disarray! Sukune-sama craves your signals. I can hold this beast here while you disengage!"

The haze cleared, and the chaos of the battlefield returned—Kisada heard at once the roars of more oni, and the screams of his troops. Gone was the red-tinged mist of combat, and the game board slid into the champion's mind once more. He clapped his hand upon the bushi's and nodded, and turned away as the warrior ran at the restrained monster, hammer in hand. The image was lost in moments as Kisada retreated, and the battle swallowed the pair.

Kisada turned back toward the Wall to see Yakamo laughing with bloodlust and smashing a trio of Lost warriors to bone splinters. With a bellow, he called his son's name, and the young man started as if in a dream, then wordlessly ran to his father's side. Through scores of surging goblins and Lost, and the madness of a hundred small fights, they pushed back to the edge of the Wall, where Hiruma Yoshino and her archers were nocking and firing arrows as quickly as their hands could move. Yakamo grabbed one of them, who yelped and nearly dropped his bow in surprise.

"Prepare the signal!" Kisada commanded, and the archer hurriedly grabbed a special reed arrow and shot it into the sky. As it arced upward, a plume of fine red dust trailed after the missile, and then it plunged toward the ground with a piercing shriek that echoed across the field.

Almost instantly, the Crab forces began to withdraw, pulling back toward the Wall, and with a howl of triumph, the Shadowlands forces started to follow them...

Then Kisada raised his gunbai high, and the sudden backward strike of the war fan was echoed by a twanging chorus from above the Wall as countless mechanisms released at once. The front lines of the advancing forces had just enough time to scream—if they were able, and not voiceless like the undead—before they were obliterated by every rock, stake, and boulder the Kaiu siege engines were able to fire.

For a brief moment, there was dust and silence. Then Kisada's war fan waved once more, and the troops returned to the field, bloodied but determined to continue.

Smoke, oily and black, billowed upward from the pyre of the Shadowlands dead, as bodies—smelly bakemono, crumpled Lost, chunks of oni—were thrown onto the growing pile by a group of peasants covered head to toe in dirty brown robes. The Mudcrows were a common sight after battles, either drawn by the need for coin or commanded to as punishment for some crime. It was easy to tell one from the other, as the ones supporting families carried trinkets



to ward off the Shadowlands Taint: charms tied to sleeves, lockets holding papers with prayers scrawled on them, chipped bracelets on thin wrists. They surely knew charms were worthless against such a grave evil—only blessed materials like jade showed any signs of preventing the physical and mental corruption inherent in the Shadowlands and its creatures.

The Mudcrows splashed oil wherever the pyre's flames faltered, forcing it to choke down its vile meal of death. There were more here, he realized suddenly, than he'd ever seen in one place before. There had been many battles in his life and aches such as the ones he felt now. But today had been different. Both his aches and the conflicts had been growing worse. One day, his strength would not be sufficient to master either of them.

The sound of a stomping gait approached, and the daimyō knew before he heard the voice who it was. "Quite the battle!" Yakamo exulted, laughing with pride. "And this is hardly the only pyre for the enemy dead. Next time the Shadowlands scum should just save us all the trouble and throw themselves into the fire directly!"

Kisada remained silent, and this time Yakamo seemed oblivious, recounting how he had taken down a trio of goblins with a single swipe of his tetsubō. The clan champion turned his head slowly, and a nearby samurai hurried to his side, long since accustomed to his master's subtle gestures.

"My lord?"

"There was a bushi who aided me against an obsidian-clad oni, allowing me to withdraw and focus my attention elsewhere." Kisada commanded softly. "Find out what has become of the samurai, and report back to me immediately." The retainer bowed crisply and retreated, and Kisada turned his attention back toward the Kaiu Wall just in time to see a messenger jogging toward him. Yakamo made as if to intercept the woman, but stopped as the messenger held up a cloth with O-Ushi's personal seal, bowing to them both.

"My lords, I beg your pardon. Lady Hida has returned, and she has asked that I request your presence in the parade grounds. Her brother Lord Sukune has been summoned as well." Kisada grunted acceptance and gestured for the messenger to lead the way, and he and his eldest son followed.

"It's a shame you didn't slay the oni yourself, father," Yakamo drawled as they walked. "Especially one clad in obsidian. Imagine the glory of the kill! You—"

Kisada stopped short, and Yakamo stumbled a moment in confusion, turning to look up at his father as the daimyō crossed his arms over his chest and drew himself up to his full height. "Have I need of glory, eldest? Do you think the Hida family requires it? Or all of the Crab, do we seek such things?"

Yakamo opened his mouth to reply, but a gesture from his father shut it again.

"You must learn this lesson well, eldest," Kisada said, keeping his voice low. "Strength is a grand thing. Yours reminds me much of my own, when I was your age. But strength is iron, meant to be tempered. And glory is as fine a thing, but it is nothing without pragmatism."



Remember that.” Yakamo nodded—a bit sullen but properly humbled—and with a knowing grunt, Kisada began walking again. His son and their retinue smoothly followed after.

O-Ushi and her troops waited in the large courtyard just inside the Kaiu Wall’s gates, armor splashed with black blood, and a small group of prisoners—bakemono and an ogre—chained in a line behind them. As Yakamo and Kisada approached, Sukune ran down the last steps from the Wall, out of breath and wheezing slightly, and O-Ushi gestured quickly for one of her retainers to offer her sickly sibling a drink from her canvas waterskin. “Be at ease, Brother, I have survived,” she said kindly, concern evident in her voice.

“I see that—not all of your troops—were as fortunate,” Sukune replied, catching his breath. “That and your prisoners make me wary. I expected a smaller number to try and break through our lines.”

O-Ushi’s expression grew grim. “Actually, two groups tried to break through the Wall. The goblins snuck through the pipe that Kaiu Shihobu mentioned, but the ogre and his brethren actually climbed over a shorter section of wall. That was where my troops were lost—but we were able to capture one all the same. I’ll make certain to give him to Kuni Yori-sama, per his earlier request.”

The color drained from Sukune’s already-pale face, and he staggered a moment, the implication of the dangers seizing on him. Yakamo growled and ground his teeth, tensing his hands on the hilts of his weapons. Only Kisada remained outwardly calm, nodding slowly. “Send a pair of shugenja to the sites of the battles to check the area for Taint—and make sure they are well equipped with jade.” Sukune made to open his mouth to protest, but nodded instead.

“I will check our stores, Father.” He sighed. “I know there will not be much, but I will do what I can. I pray they will not need it.”

The tension was disrupted by the appearance of the samurai whom Kisada had spoken with earlier, striding in from the gate. Two brown-clad peasants trailed after him, carrying a covered body on a stretcher. “I beg my lord’s pardon,” he said with a deep bow. “But I searched the battlefield as you asked. The oni clad in obsidian is dead—found with a hammer buried in its skull.

“Unfortunately, as we moved the oni, we found this body in its grasp.” The samurai walked over and pulled the sheet back, revealing the still form of the bushi, splattered with the black blood of the oni. “It seems they gave their own life to kill the beast.”

Kisada walked slowly over, noting for the first time that the crest on the bushi’s helmet was Hida, that of his own family. The strap that held the mempō in place on the helmet was snapped, and the daimyō carefully lifted the mask aside. The retainer gasped, and Kisada was deeply grateful that the man’s exclamation covered his own shock.

“Ah, Hida Tomonatsu,” the samurai said. “She was a promising warrior. Fortune can be cruel. At least she died well.”



The bushi's face was still, almost peaceful, eerily young to be clad in such armor, and splattered with such gore. Kisada looked up to see O-Ushi gazing at him, and for a moment something in him trembled like the plucked string of a *shamisen*. He recalled the first moment each of his children wore armor—Yakamo, nearly popping out of his first set, even at an early age; Sukune, stumbling under its weight; and O-Ushi, confident as if she was born to wear it.

Confident as Tomonatsu had been when she stood next to him, facing the oni by his side.

"Give her a proper funeral, with all honors," he heard himself saying, pulling the sheet back over her as he pulled his wits back together, locking his emotions back under his armor. "She honored her family, and served her daimyō well."

The samurai bowed, and he and the peasants shuffled away with Tomonatsu's body.

Behind him, Kisada heard his children talking—Yakamo and O-Ushi discussing their respective battles, Sukune speaking to a retainer about finding what jade they could—but the Crab Clan Champion hardly registered it. Instead, he watched the train of Mudcrows bringing in casualties: some to the infirmary, shrieking for aid; others to their families to be cleaned and redressed in simple robes before cremation, their personal effects passed on in accordance with tradition. Still others were laid out in rows, so infected with the Taint they were to be burned immediately in the smaller courtyard beyond the parade grounds, where servants ferried logs of rough-cut cedar for their pyres. For long moments, he beheld the rows of the dead, neat as pieces on a game board. The most corrupted of them would be burned in their armor, leaving nothing to send back to their families but a note of thanks and regret. It would not be on a paper so fine as the Emperor's, but it would mean something. To the Crab, at least.

Hida Kisada's eyes finally moved upward, following the plumes of dark smoke—on both sides of the Wall, fed by the bodies of enemy and ally alike—snaking like black fingers up into the sky.

How much smoke would it take for the Emperor to act? Or would all of Rokugan have to be aflame for his majesty to notice?

