

THE BANQUET OF STARVING GHOSTS

Robert Denton III

SOSHI MINAI HAD to take her time placing the paper talisman, despite being just within reach of the hungry ghosts. They hadn't noticed her yet – the banquet table held their attention like lamplight to moths – but her research from the *Manual of Dim Spirits* was explicit about the danger. So much as a paper rustle, the slightest tear, and a feasting ghost might raise a pallid face to cast milky eyes to the servant nook where Minai crouched. No amount of bent light and shadow would hide her then. There would be no time to escape them.

She adjusted the paper so it conformed neatly to the floorboard seams. Gently. No need to rush. She even took a moment to admire the swirl of Hazuki's thick calligraphy on the blessed paper. What would Hazuki have said if she knew Minai had taken up her burden, unasked, while she was... while she...

Clink. The bell wand vibrated in her belt, the topmost bell emitting another tinny *clink*.

She froze, bracing for the deafening screeches and stained claws of grasping dead.

Grunts and chewing noises. Spoons and fingernails scraping against bowls. And beneath, the silence of the grave.

Minai exhaled in an effort to relax a body coiled too tightly. Her stiffened joints thawed a little more with each shallow breath. The bells may have fallen silent, but her thumping heart still rang in her ears. She thought it might burst.

But she could not be upset. The bell wand – a cluster of twelve bells arranged along a blessed catalpa-wood handle – had served her family for generations. It had even saved her grandmother's

life once. The spirit within had only meant to remind her not to linger. Still, she wished it hadn't risked a sound.

It's OK, she thought, I know what I'm doing. She let her confidence radiate into the wand until they were both calm again.

No, she would not become a centerpiece for this banquet of starving ghosts. A death so dramatic was reserved for the Scorpions portrayed in kabuki plays and pillow books. It was how a villain died, and Soshi Minai was not a villain.

Even if suspicious eyes following her across the town square suggested so, even if her peers embraced the villainous portrayals of her clan in story and song, Minai was different. She was no opportunist, no pragmatist. And what she did now – a mission undertaken with disregard to her own safety, for the benefit of strangers outside her clan's lands – would prove it. Finally, Kaikoga Hazuki, the only one who truly believed in her, could tell her peers, "You can trust my friend Soshi Minai."

That was, when she was well again.

Again, the bells vibrated in Minai's grasp. As if to say, "Worry about that later, look where you are now!"

One down, three to go.

The second blessing needed to be placed in the southeastern corner, assuming Minai had deciphered Hazuki's disorganized notes correctly. A risky trek, but so long as she did not attract attention, the image weaved by the elemental spirits of air would continue to cloak her from the dead still hunched over the banquet




table. Muffling the bell wand with her sleeve, Minai pressed her back against the wall and inched towards her destination.

She had never seen hungry ghosts in person before. Dealing with such spirits was not the focus of her training. She counted twenty-eight figures, seated in an asymmetrical way that made her teeth itch. At the head, one bloodless figure sat upright in ancient regalia, his midnight hair top-knotted, chopsticks held at the farthest ends. The others were also dressed in finery, but they ate with stained hands.

There were two ghosts who only appeared now and again, passing through the northern door carrying trays heavy with food and drink. They laid these on the table, maws agape and stares lingering, only to leave empty-handed. The book hadn't mentioned any hungry dead that could resist their hunger. Minai hadn't thought it possible.

Perhaps these were the spirits of those who lived in this castle long ago, back when it was a lone keep along the edge of the Shinomen Forest, in the neutral territory just beyond the border of the Moth Clan. Before Komorebi Town grew around the crossroads here. Before the fire that destroyed it, burning the lords in their beds.

The keep reappeared only recently, as if out of a dream. No one seemed to know why. Townsfolk feared that the castle's ghosts would venture out, where they would do as all hungry ghosts did: eat.

The living. The dead. Whatever couldn't escape them.

The Scorpion Clan was unconcerned. If the townsfolk had nothing to offer in exchange, let the Moth worry about ghost palaces.

Minai placed the second talisman. Unlike her kin, Haruki wouldn't have to ask Minai for help. Especially since she couldn't.

The third blessing would be tricky: it needed to go at the head of the table. Just behind the lord. In full view of the ghosts.

The wand shook. Trust the illusion, it seemed to say.

She crept towards the northern wall, holding her breath.

Everything Minai read about the Realm of the Hungry Dead suggested they were cursed to eat revolting things. Corpses. Feces. Or the things they chased in life: gold, warm flesh. Nothing satisfied their hunger. She risked a glance and spotted a plate of rice balls – perfect orbs of snow white dusted with a hint of cherry. They looked scrumptious. Her mouth watered through tapestries of coaxing scents. Hot rice. Salty miso. Nose-prickling sorghum wine.

But she knew better than to trust her senses. In this place, what appeared to be normal food could be anything. Rocks. Live centipedes. Human flesh. She knew little about ghosts, but illusions were her world. She would not be fooled.

Still, these hungry ghosts didn't match the manual at all.


It was Hazuki who'd once told her that the books were not always accurate. "Just as no two people are alike, no two ghosts ever are."

"So long as they follow the pattern, the same methodology should work," Minai replied.

Hazuki rolled her eyes at that. "Patterns can only be trusted until they're broken."

She was like that. Where Minai spent hours in archives, planning contingencies within contingencies, Hazuki was an improviser. She never worried about anything. Oversleeping for hours. Lunch for breakfast. The Kaikoga never corrected Hazuki's behavior. It was easy to love someone so unfettered, so optimistic. Minai had never been so jealous. She loved Hazuki too.

That was why it hurt to be turned away. To be



distrusted by default. The Kaikoga family never said it aloud, but they didn't have to. Minai's all-night research yielded a sachet of herbs that could have improved Hazuki's chance for recovery. She knew they'd never burn them. They'd been warned, after all: Scorpion were villains.

"There are advantages to be perceived as a villain," Minai's teacher once said. She could hear him now: "When your enemy gives you a knife, where should you put it?"

His words turned her stomach just as it had all those years ago. *Enemy*. Was everything so easily divided into friend and foe? She could even see him now, stirring the dark with long fingers, those smiling eyes...

Clink.

She blinked. An illusion. A memory projected by this place. Broken by the bell wand.

Inches before her, the ghost at the table head straightened his back.

Ice shot through her veins. He'd heard the bell! Her pact with the spirits of air, broken. She felt the faint breeze of a curtain falling away. Exposed! They would all see her now!

In her periphery, arms carrying trays appeared through the door. The food-delivering ghosts. And now the lord turned to look over his shoulder. Trapped. Nowhere to go. Nowhere except...

Minai threw herself into the ghost's blind spot as he turned, slapping the third talisman on the floor as she rolled beneath the table. A row of knees sat inches from her nose. She hugged the bell wand and prayed, mute words shaking like her coiled body on the floor. She pressed her knees into her chest and begged whatever listened. Please. They didn't see. Don't let them look!

Silence. Then the clatter of bowls and cups returned.

She unfolded onto her belly as the sounds of feasting resumed. Her body ignored her demands to stop shaking. That shouldn't have worked, she thought. I should've died.

One more. Just one more.

With inheld breath, she probed for the final paper blessing. This one needed to go at the room's center. She'd hoped to invoke the elemental spirits to accomplish this, but that was impossible now. Could it go beneath the table? Perhaps. She'd have to crawl. A few feet, by her estimation.

One more paper blessing and the incantation. Then the ritual would be complete. The castle, the ghosts, would vanish like a bad dream. A grateful populace would hail Minai a hero.

And then the Kaikoga would *have* to let her see Hazuki. They couldn't turn her away, or make excuses, or lie about how Hazuki was feeling better, and any day now she would return Minai's letters. She wouldn't have to pretend that she hadn't snuck into Hazuki's room nights ago under illusionary disguise. That she didn't know about the fever, the coma. She could even be there when Hazuki finally awoke. She would say, "Welcome back, Hazuki. While you slept, I banished those ghosts that were troubling you." Like it was nothing.

For that, she could crawl a few feet.

Minai dragged herself like the seconds that passed. Slowly. Silently. Like a child hiding from her grandparents.


Almost there. Almost.

"Minai?"

The clattering stopped. The closest ghost pushed away from the table. Minai felt its gaze. Don't look, she thought. Don't look at it.

But she couldn't stop herself. She had to see. Because she recognized the voice that spoke her name. She knew it well.

Minai looked up into the ghost's round face,



its mouth agape beneath a freckled nose. A few rice specks stuck to her lips. A sash embroidered with the image of a moth covered her left eye.

By the Fortunes – The ghost wore Hazuki’s face.

Minai’s breath caught in a web of colliding thoughts. How was it possible? Could hungry ghosts steal the faces of the living? Some spirits could. Had they reached into her mind and peeled away a face that would freeze her in her tracks? Had she been strung along, all this time, just so they could take her now?

And if so... why fight it? Her breath left all at once in a great sigh. The bell wand dangled from her limp fingers.

She crawled out from under the table. Stood up before the banquet. The unexpected guest. She was aware of what she was doing but couldn’t stop. Twenty-eight hungry gazes settled upon her.

The ghost with Hazuki’s face extended a hand. “Give me that,” it said, gesturing to the final talisman. “Please, Ume. Please.”

Fortunes. It sounded just like her. It even used Minai’s childhood name. She looked into her best friend’s chestnut eye and felt warm. Safe, like when they were children. Like she could trust her.

What a dirty trick. Illusions were Minai’s world. A hero would not be fooled.

Minai slapped the talisman down. Incantations tumbled from her lips.

The ghosts leapt forward. Bowls shattered from the table. Stained hands reached for her throat.

She rang the bell wand.

They crumpled, grasping their ears. Their screams drowned in the chimes, the spirit released. The room burst into heatless flames.

Hands cupped Minai’s cheeks. Hands that should have felt cold as death instead were warm,

like a hearth. Tears streamed down Hazuki’s anguished face. “Why?” it asked. “Why?”

Minai blinked. She stood shaking in an empty lot of ivy-claimed timber. No castle. No ghosts. At her feet was the tiny stone shrine dedicated to the souls lost that night. Around her, Komorebi Town continued to slumber.

It worked. The ghosts, the castle, all sent back where they came from. She’d saved the town.

So why did her heart still pound against her chest like tiny fists? Why was her mouth dry and sour, her head swimming with the memory of Hazuki’s tearful face replaying over and over? Why was she so cold and soaked with the dread that something horrible had just happened. That she’d missed something important?

It must have been an illusion. The castle trying to defend itself. What other explanation could there be? But she couldn’t banish Hazuki’s expression. The hurt and betrayal...

Tired feet carried Minai through the town in a daze. Not even the crickets chirped. She found herself at the estate where Hazuki stayed. Found herself climbing the balcony, as she had before. Found herself at Hazuki’s window.

She had to see her. To banish that nagging doubt. To silence her hammering heart.

She found Hazuki motionless in her bedroll. She didn’t need to feel a pulse to know that Hazuki had died in her sleep. Recently, maybe minutes ago. Maybe at the exact moment Minai rang the bells.

The wand shook, jerking her attention to the snuffed candles in the room’s corner. Had they always been here? They looked like the candles lit by the Moth Dreamweavers when they wished to cross the barrier of sleep and enter the Realm of Dreams. To take things with them...

...Or perhaps, to bring something back. To meet in secret...

A distant scream broke through the night.

Then another. And another. Over and over, the pit in Minai's stomach growing every time. Each horrified cry carried the weight of discovering a loved one unmoving in their bed. Each cry signaled a life snuffed out. Severed in haste by an overthinking fool who didn't know what she was doing. Who saw only what the dream castle thought she wanted to see. A ritual she'd entered whose rules she hadn't known.

Perhaps they'd tell her tale one day: how a Scorpion illusionist killed twenty-eight Kaikoga Dreamweavers in their attempt to reconstruct a palace as it appeared in their dreams. The story of Soshi Minai, the villain of Komorebi Town.

But what did any of that matter now?

The bell wand chimed as it fell to the floor. Minai sank to her knees. Guards would discover her soon, but so be it. Nothing mattered. A villain took whatever she wanted, and now she wanted to let her tears fall freely onto Hazuki's unmoving face. She didn't want to remember her friend as a spirit projection with an anguished expression of betrayal. She wanted to remember the carefree girl lying in her bedroll. Hazuki always liked to sleep too long.

And she looked so peaceful now. Like she was dreaming.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ROBERT DENTON III is an emerging genre fiction and tabletop roleplaying author who lives with his extremely understanding wife in the New River Valley of Virginia.

There he can be found serving four spoiled cats and cooking too much. He is best known for his dozens of short stories in the *Legend of the Five Rings* setting, his contributions to the 4th and 5th Editions of the *Legend of the Five Rings Role-playing Game*, and his cozy slice-of-life roleplaying game *Tiny Taverns*. His most recent novella, *Deathseeker*, can be found in *The Great Clans of Rokugan: Volume 2* from Aconyte Books, if you feel like having your heart broken.



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