

Legend
of the
Five Rings™



The
Record
of
Eihi

DAVID
ANNANDALE



SHADOWVEIL
— Legend of the Five Rings —

The Record of Eihri

TO THE SOUTH OF ROKUGAN LIE THE Shadowlands, a blighted realm born of a fallen god's hatred and torment. For a thousand years, its denizens have assailed the Emerald Empire.

At the heart of the Shadowlands lies the Festering Pit, a rift between the Mortal Realm and the Realm of Torment. From this fissure, corruption seeps into the land, twisting the very earth, air, water, and spirits. When it first opened, all nearby living things were destroyed or twisted into foul, unnatural forms. In the centuries since, demons and monstrosities have spewed forth from the pit to wreak misery and destruction.

Mortals who dare step foot in this forsaken domain must guard against the spiritual sickness known as the Shadowlands Taint, which can poison even the noblest hero's body, mind, and soul. Those who fall here are doomed to rise again, their corpses puppeted by evil spirits and vengeful ghosts.

Many have ventured beyond the vast Kaiu Wall that protects Rokugan from the Shadowlands, but few have returned. Those who do are never the same...

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PART I

The Agony of Stone

YASUKI TAKA'S SMILE HAD RARELY FELT MORE strained. He worked on maintaining it as he followed the servant through one of the courtyards of the Imperial Palace. A wind blew across the space, the first true breath of fall. It shook the branches of the cherry tree in the center of the courtyard and tempted Taka to cinch his robe a little more tightly. He was in formal garb today, which went against his grain so strongly as to be almost painful. But needs must. He had never considered himself a diplomat, but he *did* know how to convince people of things they needed to be convinced about. Usually, the result of that convincing would be a profit for him.

Today, the stakes were higher. So, he wore the elaborate robe of gray-blue with the dark blue silhouetted crest of the Crab Clan prominently displayed.

On the other side of the courtyard, the servant took him into one of the outer buildings of the palace. They walked down a narrow corridor, past rice paper walls adorned with soothing depictions of temple gardens and mountain rivers. The imagery gave him no comfort. Even so, he worked on maintaining his pleasant demeanor so it would be ready when the meeting began. There was no *fun*.

in the task ahead, and he found that terribly depressing. He almost always found ways to enjoy himself. Yes, the duty of the Crab Clan to protect the Wall and hold off the threats from the Shadowlands was the most serious imaginable, but that didn't mean that all the ways of supporting that endeavor had to be grim too. Even so, his lips kept trying to pull into a scowl.

He started to tell himself that he was fortunate that his request for a hearing had been accepted at all, and that he would be presenting his petition within the walls of the Imperial Palace. Too many messages from the Wall to the Throne had been met with the silence of indifference. At least now he would be able to present his case. A new case.

No. He stopped the unduly optimistic train of thought. False hope served no purpose. He had lived too many years, and seen too much, to pretend otherwise. He must be realistic about the nature of this meeting, and act as best he could to accomplish his goal.

The servant slid the door aside, and ushered Taka into the small meeting room. An autumn arrangement of bush clover and pink nadeshiko adorned an alcove on the right. Above it, a calligraphy scroll hung on the wall. Taka glanced at the poem.

*The caress of wind,
the whispering of warmth's end,
a call to reflect.*

Words he hoped his audience would heed.

He wished he did not feel the touch of a much colder wind in his soul. One crossing a great distance to reach him. One rotting with smiles.

A committee of three awaited Taka, sitting before a low table. They wore the green-and-gold robes of the Imperial families. They rose when he entered and exchanged bows.

“Welcome, Yasuki Taka,” the older woman in the middle said. “I am Otomo Meiko.”

Her tone told Taka everything he needed to know about her, her politeness a thin sheen over impatience to be done with the task at hand. Taka took in her cold gaze, her features weathered by time into a mask of perpetual skepticism, and he saw a bureaucrat equally bored with existence and duty. Meiko, Taka thought, did not believe life had any surprises left for her. He suspected it never had any to begin with.

Meiko introduced the other two as Seppun Fubatsu

and Miya Jiyuna. Fubatsu was considerably older than Meiko, possibly older than Taka. He did not look bored so much as like someone who had never found a particular interest in anything at all. Taka suspected that explained how he came to be in a subordinate position to his junior. He simply did not care enough to do other than the minimum required of him.

Jiyuna, the youngest of the three, appeared to be capable of curiosity. The way she kept glancing at Meiko, though, as if for cues to the correct response, signified complete submission to the other woman's will.

On the journey to the Imperial Court, Taka had hoped against hope that he might be granted an audience with the Imperial Regent. Instead, he faced the subcommittee of the uninterested.

I'll wake them up. That's something I know how to do. That would almost be entertaining, if the means at his disposal weren't so dark.

The trio sat down again behind the table. Taka rested his knees on the tatami mat before them. "I thank you for the opportunity of this hearing."

"It is our understanding that you have come to testify to the dangers of the Shadowlands," Meiko said, with

the expression of a woman who has heard it all before a dozen times, and would spare herself a thirteenth, if the choice were up to her.

“I believe it is to the benefit of the court to be reminded of these dangers, yes.”

Meiko did not conceal her sigh, but at least she did not roll her eyes. “So the Crab Clan always says.”

“A truth does not become less true with repetition.”

Meiko made a noncommittal shrug. “You have brought evidence to support a greater concern?”

“I have.” Taka pulled out the book that had traveled with him. It was small and light, yet it weighed heavily upon him since his first reading of its contents. He did not like its texture, as if the interior pain had seeped out of the pages and onto the cover. “This journal was discovered during a foray into the Shadowlands,” he said, softly. “It would perhaps be of interest to the court to hear a chronicle of that cursed region not written by one of the Crab Clan.”

At a nod from Meiko, Fubatsu put out his hand and Taka gave him the journal. Fubatsu looked through the first few pages, flipping with a casual impatience. “The chronicler is Eihi. I see no clan name.”

“There is none, but we know she is not from the Crab.”
Meiko took the journal from Fubatsu. She examined its battered, stained cover, then glanced to her colleague, who shrugged more expressively than she had.

“Very well,” she said, returning the journal to Taka. “We will listen to the journal’s testimony. You may proceed.”

Taka thanked her. The book seemed to radiate cold in his hands. He opened it to the specific passage he had chosen as his starting point, skipping over sections. He couldn’t have the committee thinking of this work as something as banal as a journal. *These bureaucrats need a jolt, or they won’t listen. Let’s give them something they’ll actually remember.*

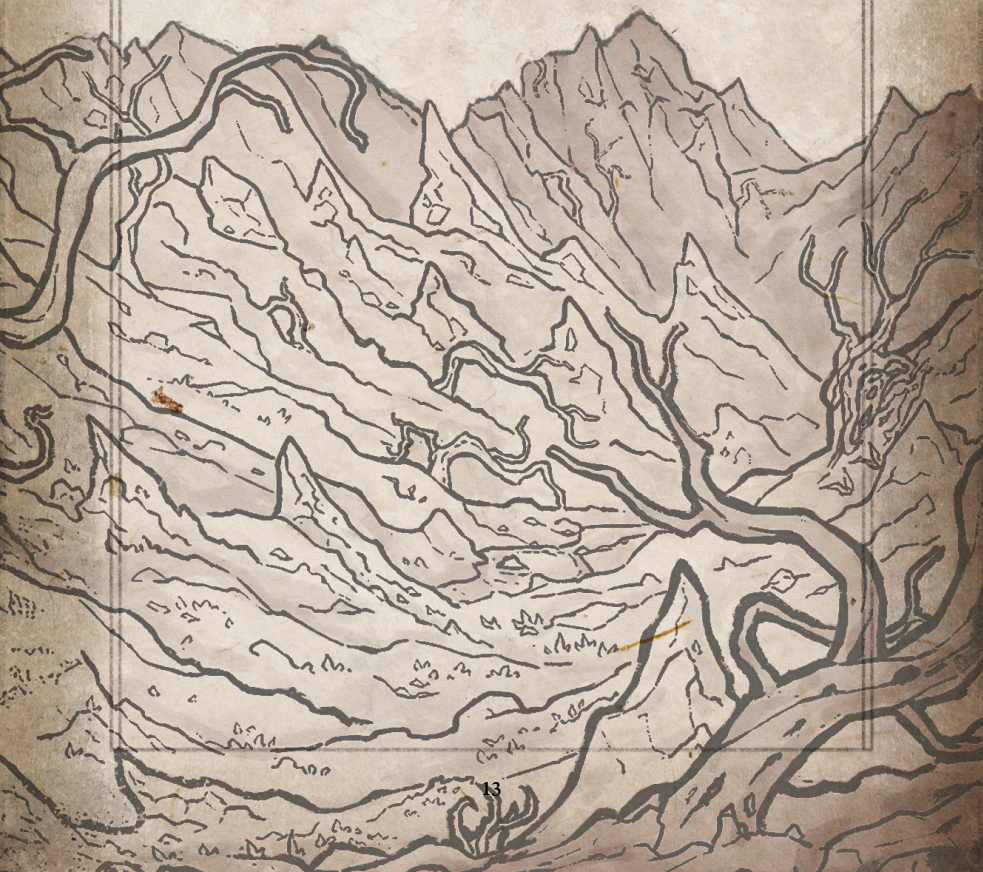
He began to read.



"This is a dead land. A murdered land."

Sosuta described it so, and he was right. We five had not left the Wall far behind us. We crested a hill whose brittle grass cracked like bones and looked out upon our first vista of the Shadowlands. A plain greeted us, gray and mournful and hostile.

Sosuta had whispered the words. I do not think Nagiko, Jchidō or Rekat heard him. Standing at his shoulder, I did.



"It is," J agreed. "One can see how this place would affect the impressionable."

Gosuta cocked his head. "Am I to be included in that group?"

"Should you be?"

He laughed. We knew each other well enough that we could banter up to the edge of insult without either taking the other seriously. Gosuta was slighter and shorter than J, but none the weaker for that. We have been comrades since childhood and fight as one.

"We are strong," J said, no longer jesting. This was not the place for it.

The others turned to listen. Jchidō led our expedition, but he nodded for me to continue.

"Stronger than the despair this land would seek to instill in us," J finished.

"So we are," Gosuta agreed. "So we are."

But he was right, too, that the land had been murdered. In its death, it was more dangerous than alive. It was an unquiet corpse, rotting forever, eager to spread its Taint to all who passed within its boundaries. No balance could ever be restored to the Shadowlands. They were defined by the very essence of its absence.

We descended to the plain and began our crossing. In the gloom of the Shadowlands, we could not see how

far it extended, nor what waited at its end. We could see no horizon, only a thickening of darkness ahead.

We marched for what seemed to be hours through the unchanging corpse of the land. Nothing moved over its broken fragments of stone. A wind blew, its direction uncertain, but there were no grasses for it to stir.

"So empty," Reikai commented. She was the youngest of our expedition. An able warrior, but her lack of experience showed in her tendency toward unchecked enthusiasm or doom.

"Truly," said Jchidō. "It leads one to wonder if the Crab Clan have perhaps been more successful than they themselves think."

I was glad to have Jchidō in command. Though his hair had turned an iron gray, age had not slowed his reflexes, and we needed his wisdom in this place. I hoped Jchidō's speculation, though only half-serious, proved correct. It would be a blessed discovery, though a dreary journey, if we found nothing at all on our travels.

"What waits for us is hidden," said Nagiko, "and the dangers will be more than physical. Remember that."

Nagiko was almost as old as Jchidō. She was the most somber member of our party. She did not believe we should have come here but joined us because she will always stand by Jchidō, their warrior bond as strong as mine and Gosuta's.

The emptiness revealed itself to be a lie as we reached the end of the plain. The land became broken, buckled as if a mailed, spiked fist had punched upward. Jagged rock formations reared up like splinters of bone through the flesh of the ground. They slanted in every direction, some thin and sharp as spines, some curving like claws, and others twisting around themselves, reaching up in stony agony. Shadows pooled like blood at their bases.



We entered the tortured domain, and the gloom of the Shadowlands pressed in closer, so close that I began to breathe it. I swear the truth of these words. I could feel grayness enter my lungs. I huffed to expel it, but that only made me take deeper breaths. I centred myself, found my stoic core, and regulated my breathing. I became aware of the others doing the same.

Then the shadows *suarled*.

The darkness transformed into a horde of debased horrors rushing toward us. Goblins, their skin the green of rot, their jaws agape and drooling, rushed out of gaps between the formations to our left and right. My flesh recoiled at the sight of them. They attacked with a ferocity and brazenness never seen in mountain goblins. In their claws, their teeth, and their spittle was the menace of the Taint. A single scratch or bite, if it drew blood, would spell doom. The goblins spread out and surrounded us within moments. They wielded broken branches and bones as clubs. They gabbled and spat, as if the rot of the land sought to find its language through their voices.

Perhaps they sought to confuse us as they circled us. If so, they failed. They should have attacked directly. Because they did not, they left themselves open to our response.

I lunged into the enemy, my katana flashing. I struck



as flowing water, even as the enemy became a stream of bodies before me. I sliced into exposed bellies. When an arm aimed a club at me, I cut off that arm. Where jaws snapped at my armor, I stabbed into the throat. I moved in and out, my attack continuous as a river's current, never stopping or pausing, its flow adjusting to the attack of each foe.

Sosuta's arrows sank into hideous flesh on either side of me, and together we broke the goblin circle.

The monsters lost their crude organization. Suttural voices shrieked in frustration and fury. They tried to surround me, but Sosuta and I held them at bay, and now Ichidō, Nagiko, and Reikai cut them down. My companions had broken through the gap in the circle and looped back, slicing through the goblins from behind. The creatures surrounded us, but now we had them trapped. They panicked, lashing out in every direction, injuring themselves in their frenzy.

They were fast and numerous. But they had no discipline. They fell before our counterattack, their blood mixing darkly with the shadows of the stones.

The last of the snarls ended in a gurgle, and silence returned to our corner of the Shadowlands. The breeze became stronger, a soft hiss of anger blowing past us and tugging at our sleeves and hair as we stood among

our carnage. We waited, weapons ready, for a renewed attack. When none came, we moved on.

"We have learned a lesson," said Ichidō. "We are not alone, and we do not pass unobserved."

"The foul things of this place have learned a lesson as well," said Nagiko. "They will not find us easy prey."

An unusually optimistic pronouncement from her. Its rarity made it worth recording.

We moved on, but not for very much longer. The gloom deepened with the coming night, and we have now made camp. Already, I can no longer see the Wall behind us. We thought there were woods where this tortured plain ends. As we twisted our way through the rock formations, we glimpsed what might be a forest in the distance, though it was hard to divine the truth of the dark mass.

I have taken first watch and took the opportunity to begin this record. I think—

I stopped my writing because I thought something moved. However, it was just shadows drifting in the flickering of our fire. I almost sounded the alarm before I realized there was nothing there. Once my watch ends, I will meditate. I clearly need to draw upon the steadiness that will come from that practice. I must not look for dangers where none exist. The real dangers will be more than enough.

I am centered. I am watchful, but not jumping at illusions.

I do not like the shadows, though. I know they are caused by the fire, but at the corner of my eyes, they seem too violent, and out of rhythm with the flames. When I look at them directly, there is nothing wrong with them, but the violence at the edges of my perception continues.

The night is long. I will be glad for dawn, when the shadows will no longer move.



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