

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 IV

The Archive of Venom's Dream

“A GHOST WITH TALONS?” SEPPUN FUBATSU snorted.

“We are not unfamiliar with ghosts outside the Wall, Yasuki Taka,” said Otomo Meiko. “What you have just read to us defies belief.”

“And there you have summarized the character of the Shadowlands,” Taka told the leader of the committee. “The Shadowlands defy belief. That is one great reason why they are so dangerous.”

“There are other explanations that should be considered,” said Meiko.

“Such as?”

“Such as lies and fantasies,” said Miya Jiyuna, clearly jumping in to curry favor with her superior. “Why should we take any of this writing as anything other than a tall tale?”

“I would not waste my time or this committee’s with such a trifle,” Taka said, putting on a hurt expression.

“We do not mean to suggest otherwise,” Meiko added, glancing at Jiyuna, who shriveled before the rebuke. “We cannot, though, simply dismiss all other explanations.”

“Precisely,” said Fubatsu. “Shameful as it is even to

suggest this, could it not be that these accounts are an attempt by this Eihi to exculpate herself of cowardice? Or of a crime? Perhaps even an attempt to make herself believe in her innocence? Or she could simply be deluded.”

“And thus the Crab Clan is composed of fools?” Taka asked with mock innocence.

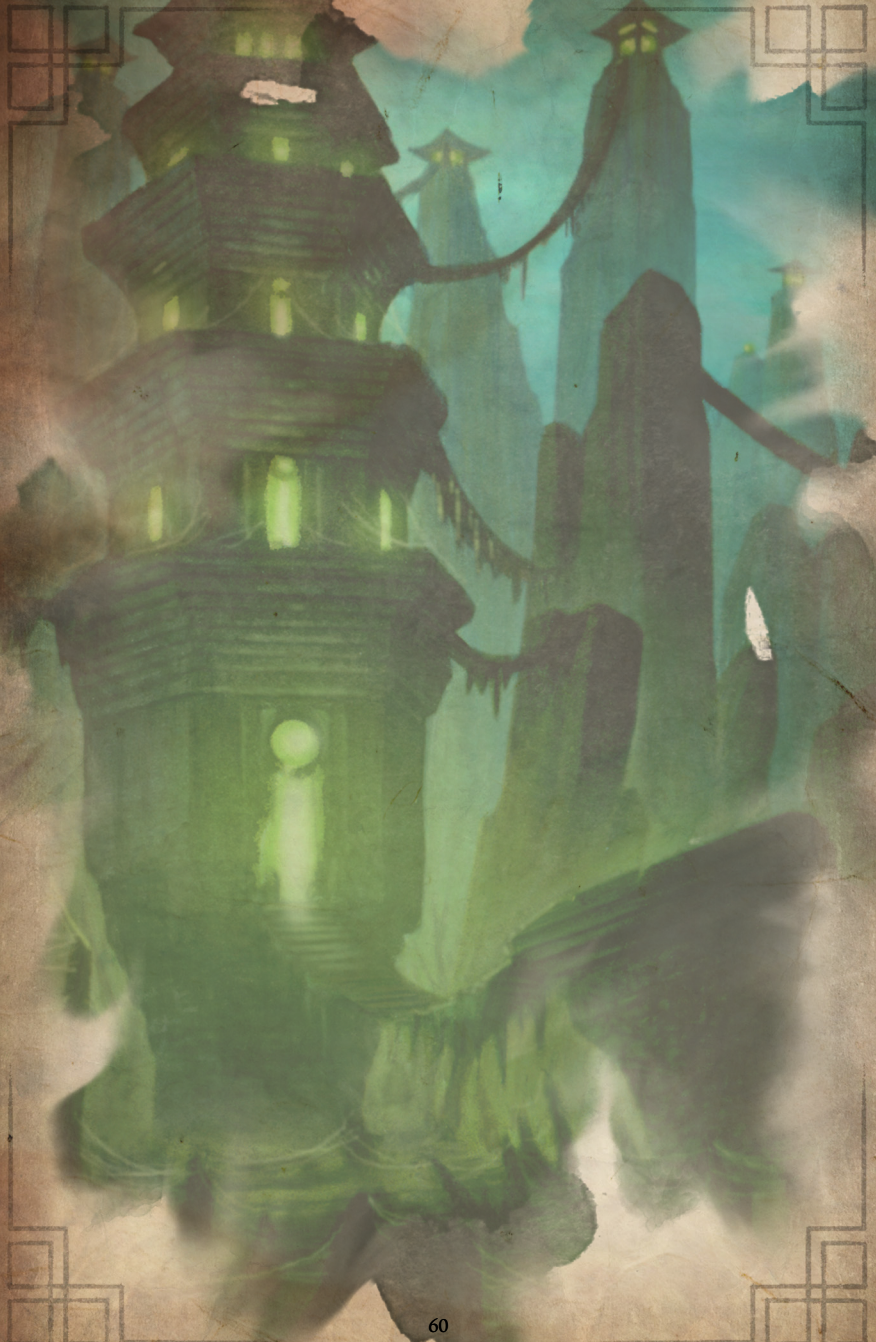
“Again, that is not what we mean to imply,” said Meiko.

“Is it not?” Taka became serious. It was not in his nature to lecture, but this trio of the hidebound needed to be told a thing or two. “Is it not your suggestion that we have read this journal in the most gullible way possible? I remain grateful to the committee for its time, but I would most respectfully remind it that the Crab Clan has protected the Wall and thus protected you for centuries. We know what lies beyond the Wall. I do not doubt that the committee members have knowledge concerning ghosts as they appear on this side of the Wall – mournful creatures of an eerie and strange nature. But we of the Crab Clan know that in the Shadowlands, ghosts can be hunters. There is nothing in this journal that I have not read with a sense of dreadful recognition.”

After a pause, Meiko spoke perfunctorily. “We apologize if we conveyed that unintended slight.”

They are still only hearing what they want to hear, Taka thought. *They have shifted from dismissiveness to disbelief, for both Eihi and the testimonies of the Crab. That is not a step in the right direction.*

Dear Eihi, I still hope that your courage in setting these words - these truths - down is not in vain.



I passed the night with Gosuta's body, grieving his loss. I could not hear the others, nor guess where in the darkness they might be. When morning came, the trampled path that Gosuta and I had made through the reeds in our flight from the hunting ghost still remained.

I arranged Gosuta to give him as much peace and dignity as possible. I prayed over him, fervently hoping that his death in the Shadowlands would not condemn his spirit to wander here. Then I started back down the path.

I had no trouble finding the place where we had first been attacked. The reeds were even more trampled here and spattered with blood. There were no bodies, and I chose to take comfort in that. My remaining three companions could still be alive. There were two other paths leading away from here. Down these routes, people had fled. I took the right-hand one, my great wish that it would lead me to my friends, and to an escape from the suffocating reeds.

The path ran straight for a while, then reached an area where combat had occurred. I found more blood, but no bodies. After this, the path bent and twisted, whoever had made it losing the straight line once again. I followed, because what good would it have done me to do otherwise? I might yet find one of my comrades.

I was much more conscious of the path's meandering this time. I seemed to be tracing a knot through the reeds. My steps took me on a ritual against my will. The reeds waved and whispered, and I caught glimpses of other movement. Figures shadowed me, keeping pace with me, just far enough away that I could not see them clearly. More hunting ghosts?

Then one did come closer.

"Sosuta!" I gasped.

I knew it could not be him. He appeared distinctly for a moment as the reeds waved to one side. He stopped when I stopped, and he looked at me with cold eyes, his face pale, but not the waxy mask of death.

You made a mistake! I thought. He wasn't dead! Go to him!

I almost started forward. But then I realized. No. That is not him. He bled to death. He had been cold for hours when you left him.

I closed my eyes and felt a hiss at my neck. When I looked again, Sosuta had vanished.

He reappeared a few minutes later, and then again, sporadic glimpses to taunt and torture me. I began to see the others too, one at a time, never together. I lurched forward to grab at Nagiko, the next apparition, but caught myself and retreated. That was not her. Nagiko would

have called out. She would not just look at me with such a horrendous expression.

But then and again, I did not call out to her in welcome and simply looked at her in kind. I was sure my face possessed the same kind of terror.

I stumbled through the endless reeds, more and more unsure of the ghosts, myself, and my location, desperate for the sound of a familiar voice. If someone had



called my name, I would have answered without thinking, whether it be friend or foe.

However, before that happened, before I fell into such a trap, I emerged from the reeds. They ended suddenly, the terrain going from marshy to rocky without transition. I had arrived on a wide lava plain, and there, not ten yards away, stood Reikai. She whirled when she heard me and raised her katana.

We faced each other in silence, just as I had the ominous figures in the reeds. Was this her? Truly her? Or another lie?

I studied the glitter of her eyes, the desperation in her features.

"Reikai?" I gambled that this was truly her, although I feared the Shadowlands had conjured obvious lies in order to trick me with something far more insidious.

"Is it you, Eihi?" she asked.

"It is." I took another chance and sheathed my blade. My hands shook.

"How do I know it's you?" she asked, agony cracking her voice.

"Because I'm not sure who you are," I responded, and that sounded almost logical.

Reikai felt that way, too. She lowered her blade, although she did not sheath it. I stepped toward her but

stopped before we came too close. I thought this was her, but I could not be absolutely certain.

"Where are the others?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said. "We became separated. More ghosts came and..."

A rustle behind us stopped her. Her eyes widened, and so did mine. Nagiko and then Ichidō emerged from different points in the wall of reeds.

I drew my blade. Reikai raised hers again, though we edged no closer to one another. We still did not trust each other. The other two paused and took up defensive positions.

We all stared at each other. Suspicion and hope warred in my chest. It must have in the hearts of the others too, if they were who they appeared to be.

Ichidō sheathed his weapon first. He strode forward. "I rejoice to find you," he told us.

"Do you?" asked Reikai. "And do you rejoice that we all arrived here at the same time?"

Ichidō slowed. "Do not let the Shadowlands use time to turn us against each other."

"You seem very sure that we are who we appear to be. I wonder why you are in such good spirits."

Ichidō took a step backward, his face becoming wary.

"Where is Sosuta?" Nagiko asked.



"Dead," J said. "That specter tore his throat before we could destroy it."

The focus of suspicion shifted from Jchidō to me.

"I did not kill him," J said to their hard stares.

"Were you wounded?" Jchidō asked, looking at the blood on my robe.

"No," J said. "This is Gosuta's blood. I am unharmed. The Taint does not have me."

Jchidō did not look reassured.

Nagiko broke the long silence that followed. "Perhaps we cannot trust the reality of each other. But nor do I want to walk alone through these lands. I choose to risk

being betrayed and will travel with those who will take the same risk."

No one wanted to be alone. We moved on, but carefully. We kept a space of two blade lengths between us.

The lava plain rose as we left the reeds behind, gently at first, then with a more pronounced slope. We topped a rise, and before us, maybe an hour's march away, a tower raised a crooked shape to the sky. Its foundations grasped the ground like claws. Its height curved upward like a scorpion's tail, its spire a vicious sting.

"That is an ill place," said Reikai.

"It is," said Jchidō. "But perhaps, from its peak, we might be able to see the Wall."

"You think so?" Reikai said with absolute doubt.

"He cannot know," said Nagiko. "We have nothing else to try, though, do we?"

"Then let us hurry," I said. "I would not choose to be inside those walls when night falls again."

We marched quickly, acting as one, and yet I felt more alone than ever, isolated from the others by my suspicion. I could not even trust their suspicion of me to be unfeigned. I had no choice, though, but to act as if they were my comrades. I needed them to be.

An open doorway awaited us, tall and curved in the shape of the tower. Inside, we found a single chamber,

its roof the peak of the spire. A web of staircases and gossamer-thin bridges tangled its way to the top. On the walls were shelves piled high with scrolls. The tower was an archive, one whose contents I would never wish to read.

We began to climb, Ichidō in the lead. We could find no direct route to the top. We climbed a level, descended another, crossed the entire space of the chamber, and so it went. After several minutes, we were barely more than ten feet off the ground.

"This could take days," I said, the prospect grim. The goal of reaching the top and coming back down again before nightfall now seemed beyond reach. We were just a few yards from one of the scroll-covered walls.

We heard a shifting behind the paper, like the running of rats. The sound whooshed around us, coiling about the archive. We tensed, turning about, trying to follow the noise to see where the attack might come from. But it spread everywhere. The *shshshsh* of paper enveloped us.

The wall behind Ichidō rippled. Scrolls uncoiled and slithered around each other like the shed skins of serpents. Their dry rustle was a susurrus of a thousand insect legs. A shambling horror, a torso with limbs, lurched out from the wall. Half again as tall as Ichidō, it wrapped its arms around his chest and head, suffocating his scream. It squeezed. Though it had no head, an opening at the



top of the torso opened and closed as if it were laughing. The rasp of paper against paper sounded in my ears and gnawed at my soul.

Kyōrinrin. I had read of such creatures.

Jchidō slashed at the tainted horror. His katana sliced the scrolls and stabbed through the mass of paper. The kyōrinrin shifted scrolls about itself, retaining its shape. Jchidō could as well have been stabbing water. The monster held him tighter. The silhouette of Jchidō's face pressed against the paper tightening over his nose and mouth like a second skin. His mouth gaped with the futile struggle to breathe.

We closed with the kyōrinrin, our suspicions of each other forgotten in the moment of the attack. We hacked at the mass of paper, chopping away scrolls, but so many constructed the mass of the creature that there were always more, and Jchidō's struggles became both desperate and weaker. We could not slash what suffocated him without wounding him ourselves.

Nagiko and I attacked the creature's arms. The stairway was so narrow, we crowded against the monster, and we did not have the room to strike with our full force. Though the kyōrinrin looked fragile, its constant renewal made its arms powerful as tree trunks.

But when our incessant attacks finally found its

limits, the arms parted from the torso, like a sharp blade slicing through paper. Reikai caught Ichidō as he fell and she tore the paper from his mouth. It clung with a will of its own, but she freed him.

The severed arms tumbled to the ground, and the kyōrinrin reared back from us, closer to the wall. Scrolls rained down on the monster, adding to its bulk. It regrew its arms and transformed into a colossus.

We leapt from the stairs and into open air. Ichidō fell and landed badly. We supported him as we fled the tower, the rustling laughter of its immense guardian at our heels.

The kyōrinrin did not follow us from the tower. We hurried away, away from the lava plains into a shallow valley on the other side of the structure.

We have made camp here, just beyond the shadow of the tower. The fellowship I felt during the battle has leaked away. I again do not know if I can believe in the reality of the people around me.

Even this journal, which has been my anchor, could be tainted. Could the kyōrinrin control it, too? Will it try to smother me during the night?



SHADOWVEIL

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