

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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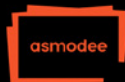
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PART V

The Blood and Shadows

YASUKI TAKA LOOKED UP FROM THE JOURNAL. He approached the end of the record, now. Precious little time left to make any headway with the committee, to make them see, make them believe. He looked at the three faces sitting across from him. They seemed uneasy, and he took that as a positive sign.

"The tower she writes about," said Otomo Meiko. "Does it exist?"

"It does," said Taka. "It is the Archive of Venom's Dream."

"And the kyōrinrin..." Miya Jiyuna began.

"What Eihi describes is in accordance with their known behavior, yes. There is nothing in this record that contradicts what is known about the Shadowlands and the dangers therein. That is why I am presenting it to you. This is the voice of someone from outside the Crab Clan who witnessed the threats first-hand."

"The description of what happened in the archive is alarming," said Seppun Fubatsu, and Taka felt a disproportionate sense of elation for having managed to get him to admit that much. "But..." Fubatsu continued.

Defy my expectations. Find some original thought in your life. The change would be good for both of us.

"But," Fubatsu repeated, "the kyōrinrin did not follow them out of the archive. It remained within its tower. Surely that diminishes the danger it represents."

"The Shadowlands are not a collection of discrete threats that can be examined one at a time," explained Taka. "Do you see individual threads when you look at a tapestry of silk?"

Fubatsu shook his head.

"Nor should we look at the Shadowlands in such a way. Perhaps, on another occasion, the kyōrinrin *would* emerge. The Taint permeates everything. It is wrong to think that leaving one horror behind is any kind of real escape. The Shadowlands are perverse, changeable, and unpredictable. Their moods may have them choose to use one danger to push victims to another."

"Is that what happened?" Meiko asked.

"I will let Eihi answer," said Taka, and he picked up the journal again.



I barely slept, worried about what might happen to me when I closed my eyes, and what I might see when I opened them again. I was too exhausted to fight off sleep entirely, though, and when I woke, the others were as I had last seen them, each curled like a fist on the hard ground.

We rose, saying nothing to one another, and then headed down the shallow, lava-strewn valley. We did not discuss which way we should go. I knew only my instinct to place more distance between myself and the tower as quickly as possible. I knew the others felt the same. Or their simulacra pretended to.

I marched in a dull fog of despair. I marched because there was nothing else to do. I no longer believed I had any hope of escaping the Shadowlands.

After what might have been a few hours, the valley narrowed, and its walls steepened to the vertical. We transversed through a tiny pass, the rock faces so close they brushed against my shoulders. On the other side, the land rose slowly, and we encountered the twisted, claw-like stone formations we had moved through on our first day in the Shadowlands.

"We're almost out!" Reikai exclaimed, recognizing the landscape. "We're near the Wall! We must be!"

"Maybe," said Nagiko, and even hope sparked her voice.

I wanted to believe in our salvation. I wanted to believe I marched with my comrades, and not creations of the Shadowlands. I dared not allow myself the folly of such belief.

I was right not to. Only a few minutes later, we crested a hill that gave us a prospect of hopelessness. The hill was a rise within a much greater valley, and the twisted rock formations extended in all directions to distant slopes, with no way to tell which exit from the valley, if any, might be closer to the Wall.



The sun hid behind thick clouds, offering no guidance. A pale light, weak and directionless, lay across the Shadowlands.

Every way forward would now take us into deep gullies that branched out like veins as they wound around the formations. Another maze awaited us, another prison within a prison.

I hated Ichidō, then. Whether the person standing only a few steps away from me was him or a Shadowlands created mirror image of the samurai I respected, I hated the man who had brought us to the other side of the Wall and lost us utterly.

He turned around slowly, his face sagging in defeat and indecision.

"We must go somewhere," Nagiko said, with resignation.

There was no point in going back the way we had come. Nagiko took the lead, directing us down into the cracked and wounded earth.

When we reached a star-shaped intersection of five paths, a strange laughter filled the air. We looked up. A woman in black and crimson robes stood atop the gully's cliff. Her face was skeletal, the skin shriveled tightly against the bones. Black eyes gazed at us with hate and mockery. She raised her arms, and blood rained down from her forearms.



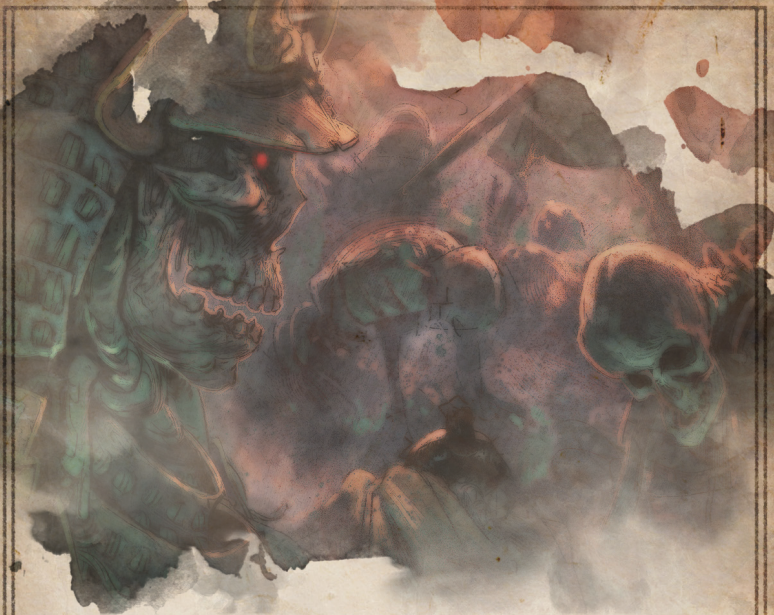
"You have entertained these lands," the madōshi said in a voice that sounded like wind slicing over tombs. "You have obeyed the rhythms of the dance set for you. Now, I have been sent to end the performance. Will you take your bows?"

As the sorceress of blood magic spoke, skeletons and zombies came at us down every path. Bones rattled and rotten flesh thudded against stone. Skulls gaped in silent laughter, rotting throats howled with hunger, and the cursed horrors attacked us with rusted blade and filth-encrusted claws.

There were six of the horrors. Far too many.

If I had trusted in the reality of my comrades, and if they, if truly themselves, had trusted each other and me, the battle might have gone differently. We would have been standing close together when the attack happened. We would have fought as a unit. Though the horrors were many, we might have defeated them as we did the goblins an eternity ago.

But we stood apart. In seconds, I found myself alone and caught between three creatures, surrounded. I spun and slashed, severing an arm and a head, and ducking under blades. But I was battered by fists. A claw slashed my robe and grazed my skin. I could not think, but only fight on instinct. I could see nothing but the blur of



attacking horror. To parry would be to become vulnerable from the flank. I turned and turned and turned and slashed and slashed and slashed. I no longer had a mind or body or eyes. I was movement and blade and rage. Pure rage.

The madōshi's laughter rang in my ears. I fought relentless monsters, all my thoughts vanishing in the need to destroy the corrupted flesh before it brought me down into the embrace of the Taint. I roared, drowning out the rattles and howls with my fury. I cut bodies down. Nothing could stop me.

Nothing until my blade parried with new force and

skill. The shock of interrupted movement drove me to still greater rage, but now I had to parry because my foe's katana, shining with blood, almost disemboweled me. The red haze lifted partly from my eyes, and I realized I was fighting Nagiko.

She seemed to see me at the same moment. Reikai and Jichidō paused in their own struggle. We stared at each other, panting, bloodied, our clothes in rags. We looked like the zombies.

I spotted the glitter of madness and hate in the eyes of the beings I had pretended were my comrades. I could not fight them all, but I swore with my next heartbeat I would try all the same if I stayed there. But what would I become if I did?

With a shout of despair, I fled down the nearest path, the laughter of the sorcerer chasing after me.

This will be my last entry.

I took refuge inside a crevice in the cliff wall. The others did not follow me, but a cloying mist did. It descended into the gulleys like a serpent stalking prey. It was thick, and when I breathed, it invaded my lungs with corruption, and my mind with confusion.

Did those beings who might be my companions fight and kill each other? I do not know. The walls of the gullies echo with screams and wails. I must cover my ears. Some of the time, the shrieks have been mine. The others are agonized, maddened voices that might be familiar, or they might not. The fog plays with the sounds, muting and amplifying according to its perverse whims.

I have decided to go back to where we fought, if I can find my way, and face the end of this nightmare. I will hold fast to the Code of Akodo and try to put an end to those corrupted things that look like my comrades.

Or end a different horror.

Because I wonder now if I am the one corrupted. Am I still me? Who was that creature who fought the dead with such unthinking frenzy? Who is this being who feels she must kill her friends?

I do not know what is true. I do not know if anything is true.

I am lost, body, mind and soul. So, I will go to those
who wait.

I will meet the end.

I can only hope that it is the end.



YASUKI TAKA CAREFULLY PLACED THE JOURNAL on the table before the committee. He said nothing and studied the three members.

The silenced stretched. Taka remained calm. He had presented the case. It fell to the committee now to show if it had managed to truly hear what Eihi had recorded.

And if I have succeeded at all in what I came to do.

At last, Meiko spoke. "Was the journal found in the location the narrative ends?"

"No," said Taka. "It was found in a forest clearing, and it has exchanged hands many times before ending up in mine."

"Do you know how the journal came to be there?"

"We do not. But the presence of that fog in the final entry may have something to do with that. It is an evil fog, and much may have happened to Eihi within it."

"Why do you put so much emphasis on a fog?" Jiyuna asked. "That is hardly an unusual event, compared to the other tales you have read to us."

You fools.

"That is no ordinary fog," said Taka. "May you never discover that for yourself. It is the Shadowveil. Nothing

good comes out of its embrace.” He paused. “Many have used the wisdom in this journal to understand the threat within the Shadowlands, however. When you look within, you will see others have left notes or thoughts.”

“Have you considered the possibility that you were meant to find it?” Fubatsu asked.

“We have,” said Taka.

“Well, then,” said Fubatsu, as if Taka had just made his point.

“Forgive my obtuseness, Seppun Fubatsu, but what would be the significance if the journal had been planted?”

“To mislead,” Fubatsu said, vaguely.

“To mislead us into what?” Taka asked. “The Crab Clan confirms the reality of every danger Eihi encountered. If this is a fabrication, it is one that consists of descriptions of entirely real threats. What would be the purpose of such a fiction?” Taka paused long enough for it to be clear that Fubatsu had no answer before continuing. “Let us entertain Fubatsu’s notion. Say the author of this journal placed it where she knew it would be found. I ask again. To what end?”

“To alarm us needlessly,” said Jiyuna.

“Needlessly? By presenting you with the truth? Truth

that another clan has also voiced with great alarm? That would be a strange tactic indeed on the part of the Shadowlands' forces. It will take someone far cleverer than my poor self to fathom what such a tactic would accomplish."

"We understand that you believe the journal to be authentic," said Meiko.

"It is."

"Nonetheless, all questions must be asked, even if they are immediately dismissed. We must not be guilty of overlooking anything."

Taka bowed in acknowledgment. "I quite agree."

Meiko brought her hands together. "You have given us much to think about, Yasuki Taka."

"I would like to think so."

"Will you entrust the journal to us?"

"That has always been my intent."

Meiko nodded to Jiyuna, who reached forward and claimed the journal from Taka's hands.

"May I ask what you intend to do?" Taka asked.

"With the journal?" said Meiko.

Taka hesitated in his response.

No. I care not for the fate of the journal. I want to know;

will you take the record's lessons to heart? Do you understand how much of a threat the Shadowlands represent, and how much the Crab Clan needs greater support to meet that threat? So no, I don't care what you do with the journal as much as I do about the journal.

He said none of this. "Yes," he said simply. What they did with the journal would answer his true questions.

"This is a record of some importance," Meiko said, and raised Taka's hopes. "As such," she continued, "we must be cautious not to let it tempt us into hasty action."

Taka's heart fell.

"We shall therefore place it into the Imperial archives for future study."

The words struck Taka like the toll of a mourning bell.

He stood up to take his leave.

"Please do not wait too long," he said, knowing he might as well have been speaking to the Wall. "Or there may be no future."

He left the palace, thinking of inescapable stone claws, and how their shadow had reached all the way here to trap the last vestige of Eihi once more.

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