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of the
Five Rings™



THE CLAN WARS
A THRONE BETRAYED

New York Times best-selling author

JULIE KAGAWA
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THE CLAN WARS A THRONE BETRAYED

A LEGEND OF THE FIVE RINGS NOVEL

By Julie Kagawa & J.T. Nicholas

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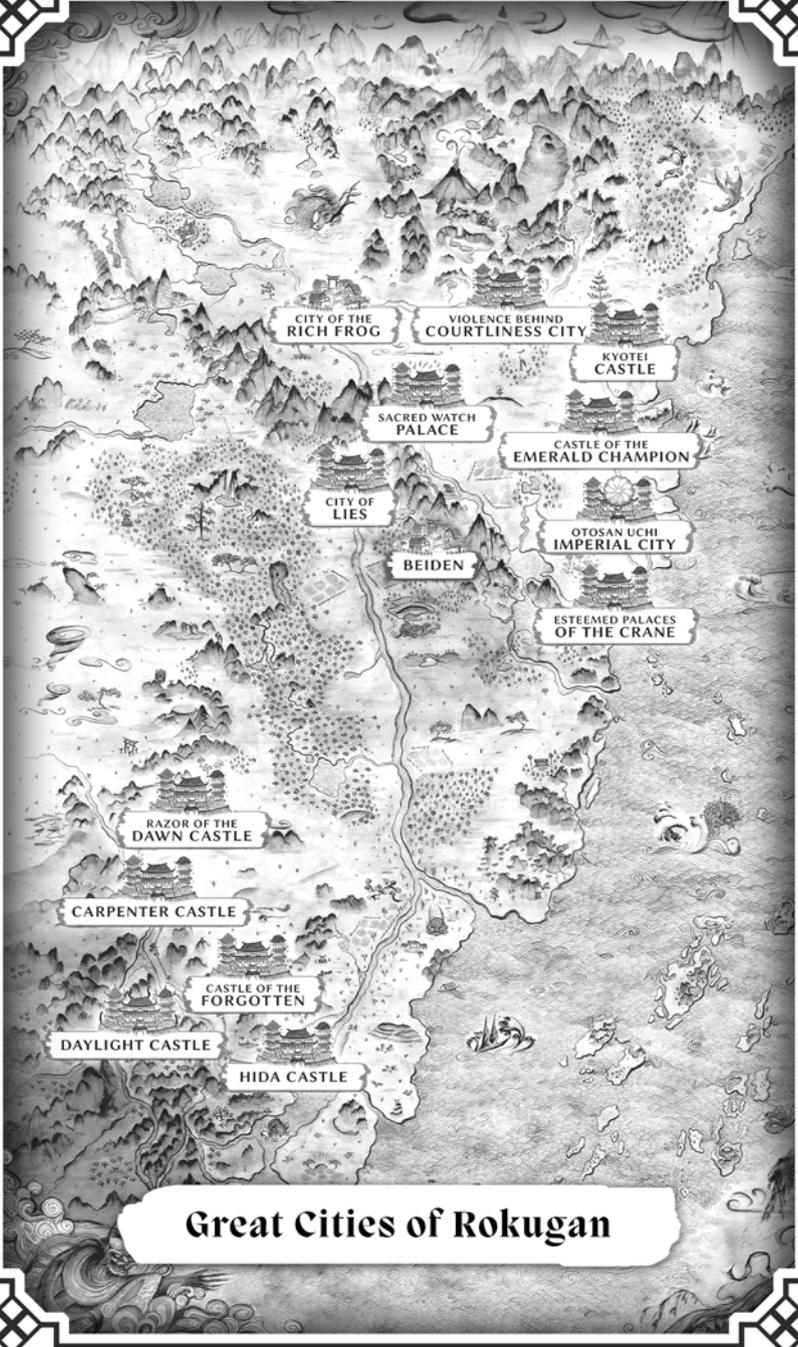
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*To all those who have
journeyed with us through
the Emerald Empire
over the years.*



Domains of the Great Clans



Great Cities of Rokugan

1

Toturi



“Are you one of the bad men?”

The rōnin looked down at the boy, who stared back with an expression equal parts wonder, excitement, and fear. The child had emerged from the bean fields at the edge of the village, his tousled black hair waving above the green fronds like a banner. He was seven or eight years old and fell in step with the warrior, taking two strides for each one the rōnin made, their footfalls raising puffs of dust from the packed-earth path that served as the village’s main street. The boy wore simple peasant garb: short, loose-fitting trousers and a sleeveless tunic, both woven from undyed hemp. His arms and legs thrust out of the garments like the spindly limbs of a scarecrow that had lost its stuffing, and the boy himself looked nearly as underfed.

It took courage for a peasant boy to approach anyone carrying the daishō – the paired katana and wakizashi that only the samurai were permitted to wear – even one as tattered and travel-stained as the rōnin. For a moment, as he pondered the warring emotions

flicking across the boy's face, he felt an ache deep in his chest. His failure, his shame, meant that he would never wed, never have children of his own. Never get to instill such courage in another.

He crushed the thought beneath the discipline that had been ingrained into him in the monastery of the Dragon Clan, forcing his mind away from the past, from a future that would never be.

"Are you? One of the bad men, I mean?" the boy asked again, interrupting his contemplation.

"What bad men are those, boy?" His voice sounded rough to his own ears, gravelly from disuse. They had passed the first line of houses now, and the rōnin took a moment to truly see the village. The buildings all had their sliding shutters closed, transforming the modest homes into nondescript wooden shacks. The shutters kept the people safe from the ravages of storms; perhaps they hoped they would also keep them safe from the ravages of men.

The rōnin knew better.

Few people moved in the streets, and those that did kept their heads downcast and walked with a furtive haste that spoke more of fear than industry. They did not meet his eyes, gave no sign that could be taken as courtesy... or challenge. In fact, one might be convinced they paid him no mind at all, if it were not for the wide bubble through which he moved, and the occasional worried glances at the boy walking beside him.

"My mother says the bad men are bandits!" the boy exclaimed, his eyes guileless and bright with the excitement of it all. "Bandits come to make the village pay trib... tribu..."

"Tribute."

The boy nodded. "What's tribute?"

"A failure by those tasked with protecting you," the rōnin muttered. He felt his hands tightening into fists. These lands had been under his protection once. All the Empire had been under his protection. It was the duty of the samurai to protect

the peasants, just as it was the peasants' duty to work the land, coaxing forth the crops needed to ensure everyone's survival. That balance, that harmony, handed down from the Celestial Order of Heaven itself, was fundamental to the structure and well-being of the Empire. To allow one of the villages under your protection to be tormented by armed thugs was shameful. And in the lands of the Lion? He clenched his jaw. Were he Clan Champion, he would have more than harsh words for whichever samurai claimed this village as their own.

But he was not Clan Champion.

Not anymore.

The rōnin drew a calming breath. Held it for a moment. Exhaled. He forced his hands to relax. His own failures had led him here; could he so easily hold another's failures against them? He glanced down at the boy, still watching him with a blend of fear and fascination. The rōnin could see the hardship of the village clearly in the child's lean limbs and sunken eyes.

"Please, my lord samurai. Please. He means no harm!"

The rōnin looked up to see a woman wearing the same homespun tunic and trousers as the boy, rushing from the shelter of one of the nearby houses. She threw herself on her knees before him, bowing until her head rested in the dirt, arms outstretched before her. The boy blinked in confusion, glancing back and forth between the rōnin and what must be his mother. Seeing her obvious terror, the fear that had been dancing across the boy's face solidified. Tears welled in his eyes, and he shied away, moving behind the kneeling woman and outside the rōnin's grasp.

The rōnin sighed.

"I am not here to hurt you," he said to the woman. "Or your boy. He was merely keeping me company as I walked through your village."

The woman said nothing, holding her bow, but he could see

the quiver in her shoulders. Fear, or relief? “Where is your lord or lady?” he asked. “Where are the patrols meant to keep the roads open and the villages free from bandits?”

“Gone, my lord,” she said. She did well to control her voice, but the rōnin could still hear the barest hint of bitterness beneath it. “Marshaling to fight the Crane.”

The rōnin allowed a small frown of disgust to break through the emotionless mask he wore. The effects of the Emperor’s death at the hands of the traitor, Bayushi Shoju, still echoed throughout the Empire, amplified by the fact that the Bayushi family had been seen as one of the most loyal families in the Empire. Hantei 38th’s reign had not been the time of peace and prosperity for all Rokugan that the samurai may have wished, but with his death and the disappearance of Princes Sotorii and Daisetsu, the clans’ territorial disputes and endless infighting reignited. And, it seemed, had already spread to the villages.

And you are to blame, the rōnin thought. It is your failure that caused this. And it will be villages like this one that ultimately suffer for it.

What was it that the *Teachings of Shinsei* said?

The coward sees what is right and does nothing.

The rōnin felt another weight settle across his shoulders. “Where?” he asked with a sigh.

“My lord?” she asked.

“Where are the brigands?”

The woman said nothing, keeping her face pressed into the dirt, but he saw a new tension in the set of her back. What would happen to this woman, he wondered, if he found himself facing more enemies than he could handle? What vengeance would they exact if they felt the townspeople had held out on them, and instead put their resources into hiring rōnin? More than one village had been razed by bandits, even during years when the

whispers of war had not spread across the land. Perhaps it would be better for everyone if he left things alone. To let the strong prey upon the weak, as they always had.

To ignore the fear that rolled off the woman in waves. To ignore the resigned looks of the villagers. To ignore the underfed and malnourished boy.

To see what was right and do nothing.

His jaw tightened. Turning to the boy, who had edged far beyond his reach, he tried to put a soothing note into the gravel of his voice. "Where are the bad men, boy?" he asked, ignoring the way the child flinched away from him, his earlier curiosity completely swallowed by fear.

The boy pointed a shaking finger, indicating a side road that branched off from the main village path. The rōnin nodded his thanks and stepped around the still kneeling woman. She made no sound as he passed, no movement except for the slight trembling in her back and shoulders. As he strode away, he heard a cry, and glanced back to see the boy fling himself into his mother's arms. They clung tightly to one another, weeping, as the rōnin continued his path into the village.

His stomach felt sour. If that was how the people viewed the samurai, were they so much better than the brigands?



The path took him past small workshops and businesses. Like the homes, they, too, had their shutters in place, walling themselves off from the rest of the town. All save the sake house. The rōnin had seen dozens like it; a square, squat building of wood with a clay-tiled roof that overhung the broad windows, casting them in shadow but protecting them from the torrential rains that sometimes fell. From within came the sounds of raucous laughter

and shouting, the clatter of cups against tables, and the calls for more drink.

The rōnin stepped up the single stone stair and onto the encircling, veranda-like engawa before pushing open the door and ducking inside. The ceiling nearly brushed his head as he took a moment for his eyes to adjust. A half-dozen low tables were scattered around a central fire pit, the sullen glow of its embers barely visible against the infiltrating sunlight. Wisping tendrils of smoke danced as they drifted toward the hole cut in the roof above the coals.

The four tables closest to the fire spilled over with rough-looking men – too many rough-looking men. The tunics and pants of their samue were a nondescript brown, stained and dirtied from long wear. They could have been farmers, taking their ease after a long day working the fields, except for the short, broad-bladed swords that rested by their sides, and the carefully expressionless features of the serving girl kneeling to place another tray of sake cups on one of the tables. The tension in the set of her shoulders, the stiffness in her back as she knelt, and the mocking laughter and crude remarks from the men at the table told the rōnin nearly everything.

The expression of the older man standing toward the back of the shop, a sliding panel partially open to reveal a kitchen beyond, told him the rest of the story. The woman – his daughter, judging by the resemblance and age difference – was better at controlling her expressions than the man. His face danced between an impassive mask and an angry, helpless scowl in a series of contortions that would have made a Kabuki actor proud. In the dim interior, the rōnin could barely see the large bruise that covered half the man's face, but it bore mute evidence as to the treatment of the town at the hands of the brigands.

The fifth table, closest to the door, sat empty. The final table was set closer to one of the windows and occupied by another man. This was no bandit or villager; the man wore a light gray haori over

dark gray hakama. He wore no clan or family crests, but the daishō tucked into his obi named him samurai as surely as his flowing hair, dyed a brilliant white, named him a Crane.

He was young, scarcely passed his gempuku, and slight of build. A stone teapot sat on the table before him, and he sipped from a matching cup. As his eyes met the rōnin's he offered a small bow, little more than a bare inclination of the head, before returning his watchful gaze to the revelers. The young man was a Crane, and therefore born to the machinations of court, adept at concealing his emotions. Even so, the rōnin could see the faintest tightening around his eyes, the stiffness to the mocking set of his lips, and the slight furrow of his brow that told the rōnin he might not be entirely alone in what was about to happen.

One of the men at the nearest table of ruffians noticed him. "In or out," he grunted, a harsh note of command in his voice. The rōnin watched as the man's eyes flicked over him, pausing for only a moment on the swords before dismissing them with a grunt. "Rōnin." He spoke the word like a curse.

The man was big, nearly as big as a Crab Clan berserker, with broad shoulders and a thick, barrel-like chest. His arms were the size of the rōnin's legs, and he had the broken and scarred face of someone who was no stranger to battle. He also had nearly a dozen of his friends by his side.

Twelve men against one. In the stories, the greatest of the samurai could cut down whole armies while barely breaking a sweat. But the rōnin knew the truth of battle, the harsh realities of war. The stories were simply that: stories. In the real world, one man did not fight twelve and live to see the next dawn.

The wise thing to do would be to leave.

Though it shamed him to admit, the rōnin knew the town's situation was by no means unique. It was the samurai's duty to protect such places, but the samurai could not be everywhere,

and the strong had preyed upon the weak since the Founders first fell from Heaven. Even Hantei's reign had not been free of such happenings; with its fall, the rōnin feared that this tableau would be playing out across the Empire as old rivalries reignited and the scabs over wounded pride tore free. The clans, both great and minor, would pull their forces back, leaving the villages and the people who lived there defenseless. This village had likely survived dozens of tributes paid to bandits and rough treatment at their hands throughout its history. No matter what he did here today, it would survive dozens more.

All he had to do was walk away. Walk away and leave a frightened mother, a starving boy, a battered father, and a beleaguered girl in the hands of those who would do them harm. Walk away, like he had from his duty. Walk away, like he had from the Empire.

The rōnin was tired of walking away. The looks of utter hopelessness in the faces – not just in this room, but in every town he had passed through – haunted him, a constant reminder of his own failures. He could not undo those failures. He could not erase his shame. And he could not single-handedly right the Empire from its current course.

But he could try to help these people.

“I will go outside,” he said, speaking loud enough to fill every corner of the room. “And you will follow. You will take your men, and you will leave this village. You will not return. Or” – he offered a flat, uncompromising smile that had served him well in Court, and spoke the words that would seal all their fates – “you will die.”



2

Hotaru



Doji Hotaru felt the shiver of ancient enchantments as she passed through the gates of the inner wall. Otosan Uchi spread around her, the city flowing out from the Imperial Palace perched upon Seppun Hill as surely as water flowed down from the mountains. The tingling, she knew, came from the spirits bound to the inner wall, infusing the barrier with a strength far greater than simple stone. Those walls had never been breached, never fallen to any siege engine, invocation, or dark ritual.

For all the good that did.

The vaunted walls of the Imperial City had done nothing to stop the murder of the Emperor. They had not turned aside the traitor's blade. They had not closed around Prince Sotorii or his brother to keep them safe. No. For Hotaru, the walls were a stark reminder that here, in the Imperial City, the dangers one must fear the most came not from without, but from within.

She emerged from the long tunnel that passed through the wall and into the sunshine once more. The outer city was a hub

of trade and commerce, a place as much for the peasants as the samurai, full of a bustle and industry that was almost vulgar. The outer city thumped like the frenetic beat of the war drums that accompanied the samurai to the field of battle. By contrast, the inner city was calmer, more refined. The plucked strings of a biwa resonating in a council chamber, the soft melody of a koto fading into the background of a moon viewing party. Peaceful. Elegant. Sophisticated.

Hotaru nearly snorted. For all the poise and courtesy, she suspected that far more blood was spilled within the inner city than without.

“Now that is a sour expression for such a lovely face.”

A smile broke free as Hotaru turned to the sound of the voice. Her hand reached unconsciously up to push the stark white strands of hair from her face, which had slipped loose during her travels. The man before her had drilled her incessantly about the need to keep her vision clear. Her uncle and teacher, Kakita Toshimoko, stood there, leaning casually against the sacred enchanted wall as if it was his school back in Tsuma. Actually, that wasn't fair. He would have treated the walls of his school with more respect than he did the walls of Otosan Uchi. Despite the fine cut and weave of his kimono – a drab and washed-out gray that may have begun life as the vibrant cyan of the Crane but now could only be called blue if one were being generous – he still managed to look slightly rumpled and unkempt. His silvery-white hair, a color bestowed as much from age and care as the dyes that Hotaru used, was pulled back in a warrior's tail that only accentuated his retreating hairline. He had a broad smile on his own face and a hint of laughter in his eyes, showing far more emotion than was appropriate in such a public place. He did not look fearsome or serious, despite the blades at his side. Any who did not know Kakita Toshimoko would barely give him a second glance.

And yet.

Even Hotaru, who had trained with her uncle from the moment she could properly hold a bokken, could not look at him without feeling the edge of danger. A katana housed in a battered and chipped sheath was no less deadly than one wrapped in silk. And Kakita Toshimoko, master of the Kakita Dueling Academy and one of the highest-ranking nobles among the Kakita family, was the finest swordsman in the Empire, its sharpest blade. There were a few skilled samurai who, perhaps, came close to matching his prowess, but all those who had chosen to put the matter to the test had left some of their blood behind for their efforts.

“Uncle!” she exclaimed, a note of genuine affection underlying her voice. “It is good to see you. Though I assume it is not mere chance that brings you here.”

“Bah,” he grunted, and unceremoniously pushed himself off the wall. He stood tall and was blade-thin, but Hotaru stood as tall, easily able to look him in the eye. “Nothing happens by chance in this city. There are more spies, informants, and gossips here than grains of rice in all the Empire.” His lips pursed as if he wanted to spit, but not even Toshimoko would go quite that far in breaking the bonds of courtesy. “The palace knew you were arriving an hour before you passed the gates of the outer city,” he went on. “By now, every courtier in Otosan Uchi knows where you’ve stabled your horse.”

He turned a disapproving eye to the naginata she held loosely in her right hand. “Though you didn’t leave your weapon with it, eh?” He said *weapon* in a voice that implied the exact opposite. “Still carrying around that overgrown walking stick? It saddens my heart to think of all the years I wasted teaching you the sword.”

Hotaru whirled the naginata in a quick spin, the curved blade at the end of the lacquered wooden shaft flashing in the sun. “Training at the Kakita Academy was the happiest time of my

life,” she offered as Toshimoko raised a brow, unimpressed. “And I value the skill you drummed into my head beyond measure.”

She didn’t point out that, despite bringing the naginata with her into the city, she still wore the daishō at her side. Toshimoko could see that as plainly as any, just as he knew that most of the techniques he’d taught her applied just as well to the naginata, but the man couldn’t resist poking at his favorite student. Another smile danced across her lips as she said, “Besides, as the Crane Clan Champion, it’s only fitting that I be the best at *something*, and Fortunes know, as long as you live, it won’t be the sword.”

Toshimoko laughed. “True enough, student.” There were few people who could address her so casually, but her uncle and former teacher – still her teacher in many ways – was certainly counted among them. He raised a billowing sleeve to the city. “Now, to business. We must get you to the palace so you can see the regent and learn of all the horrors facing the Crane. And the Empire, of course.”

Hotaru kept her face impassive at Toshimoko’s words, stifling the frown that pulled at her lips. His tone may have been casual, bordering on flippant, but Hotaru knew he could be every bit as precise with his words as he was with his blade. Putting the Empire second, behind the Crane Clan, was no mistake, and the implications underscored why Hotaru had felt compelled to come to the capital in the first place.

Like Toshimoko, the Imperial Regent, Kakita Yoshi, was one of Hotaru’s uncles. The wily courtier had served the Crane well in his position as both ambassador to the Imperial Court, and Imperial Chancellor. When the Emperor had fallen to foul treachery, the stewardship of Rokugan had passed to Yoshi. At least, until the princes could be found and the line of Hantei restored to its proper place. But Yoshi, for all his time in the capital, was a Crane

through and through. Hotaru had rejoiced, as any Crane should, with her clan's sudden rise to power. But as Clan Champion, she could not allow herself to be unaware of the dangers, even when they came from within.

Even before the murder of Hantei 38th, there had been whispers among the other clans that the Crane had risen too high, that they exerted too much control over the policies of the Empire. The empress was a Crane before she was blessed with marriage to the Light of Heaven. The Imperial Chancellor was a Crane. Many of the most influential courtiers and members of the diplomatic corps were Cranes, as were a disproportionate number of the lesser court functionaries. Of the key positions within the court, only those of Emerald Champion and Imperial Advisor had been filled by individuals with no ties to the Crane. The role of Imperial Advisor – once held by the traitorous Scorpion – now stood empty and was unlikely to be filled. Akodo Toturi had held the position of Emerald Champion, but he had abandoned it, and his duty, after the Emperor's death.

The Scorpion Clan, the Crane's only real rivals when it came to matters political, was in shambles, disgraced by the actions of the traitor. No Scorpion would dare show their face at court, though in the quiet places of her heart, Hotaru wished that at least one would. The Lion still reeled from Toturi's abdication of power. The Crab cared only for the Wall. The Unicorn were practically outsiders, despite having been returned to the Empire for centuries. The Dragon spent too much time staring down at their navels and the Phoenix too much time staring up to the Heavens. There were few obstacles to the political ascendancy of her clan.

But Hotaru knew that the other clans, particularly the Lion, would not sit idle while the Crane rose to dizzying heights of power. And since the Lion were known not for their political

expertise, but rather the strength and fervor of their armies, if the balance of power was not corrected, the situation along the Crane-Lion border would only worsen.

“When will the regent see fit to call for a new tournament to name the Empire’s next Emerald Champion?” she asked Toshimoko. Traditionally, the Emerald Champion acted as the protector not only of the Emperor, but of all Rokugan. In practice, that meant both leading the Imperial Legions and serving as a mediator in martial disputes between the clans. A neutral third party with the backing of Imperial might would go a long way to easing the tensions.

“There will be no tournament,” Toshimoko said, making Hotaru’s brows shoot up. With a wry twist of his lips, her uncle opened his kimono slightly, revealing the emerald badge of office hanging from a thin silver chain around his neck. They had begun walking down the broad avenue that led straight up Seppun Hill to the palace proper, but seeing the amulet made Hotaru stop in her tracks.

“You?” She tore her gaze from the badge to blink up at him in confusion. “How? Even traveling, word of the tournament would have reached me.”

“By Imperial decree,” Toshimoko said. That wry smile still adorned his face, but Hotaru could see the worry that simmered in his eyes. “My brother, in his wisdom, decided that there was little point in holding a tournament when he could simply appoint me to the position.” He shrugged as they began walking, and the lazy swagger returned to his stride. “Not that there would have been any doubt as to my victory in such a tournament.” There was no bravado in Toshimoko’s words. And why should there be? So far as Hotaru knew, he had never lost a duel.

“I don’t particularly want the position,” he continued. “It’s more politics than I care for. And it keeps me away from my students

longer than I'd like. But if it is the will of the Imperial Regent and for the good of the clan..." He shrugged.

"I wonder how good it will be for either," Hotaru replied, her mind spinning in worried circles. The traditions of the Empire were iron bound. Breaking them in such a blatant fashion would not be taken lightly – or well – by the other clans. To say nothing of the gathering of so much power in the hands of her own clan. "I'm sure you've heard the whispers. The other clans grow uneasy with the power of the Crane. The Lion stalk closer to our borders, and there is talk that they have Toshi Ranbo in their sights."

Toshimoko snorted as they continued the long climb to the palace gates. "The Lion ambassador took it poorly when my brother appointed me Emerald Champion," he said wryly. "But he's not the one we must worry about. Matsu Tsuko arrived in the city five days ago, along with a retinue at least fifty strong. Not enough to challenge the guards in the Imperial Palace, but more than enough to get up to some mischief."

Hotaru felt a chill slide up her back. Matsu Tsuko had no love for her; it was Hotaru's arrow that had claimed the life of Tsuko's betrothed, Akodo Arasou, at the gates of Toshi Ranbo. She felt no guilt over the matter; the battle had been fought well within the bounds of both law and tradition, and every samurai who stood to battle knew the risks. She felt confident that Arasou's spirit bore her no ill will. His widow, on the other hand, was a different matter. Would Tsuko let the personal enmity between the two drive their clans to full-scale war? And potentially tear apart the Empire in the process?

"Can she be reasoned with?"

"A Lion?" Toshimoko asked incredulously. "You might as well try to convince Lady Sun to rise in the west as reason with a Lion." He snorted. "You'd have a better chance of success."

That was perhaps unfair to the Lion, Hotaru thought, as they

continued their way through the outer city. As a clan, the Lion were known to be unyielding and inflexible, but they were also brave, loyal, and fearless in battle. And they cared more about their personal reputation than any other clan in the Empire. Surely, Matsu Tsuko could be reasoned with, if Hotaru chose her words very carefully.

They had reached the palace walls, and Toshimoko waved at the guards standing at crisp attention at the gate as they passed. No one challenged them. Whether that was because of Toshimoko's newfound position as commander of the Imperial armies, or if they recognized Hotaru as Champion of the Crane – or both – she could not be sure. Still, in the wake of the Emperor's murder, she would have expected a little more scrutiny.

Once inside the walls, Toshimoko grabbed the first functionary he saw, a young courtier who barely looked old enough to pass her gempuku. From her dress, the girl was a Dragon, slight of build, wearing a silk kimono in Dragon green and gold.

"Lord Kakita," the girl said with a proper bow. "How may I help you?"

"Take the Crane Champion's pointy stick to her quarters in the palace, if you would," he said, waving one hand at Hotaru's naginata. "We must present ourselves to the regent, and I'm sure the guards would be a bit upset if Lady Hotaru brings it with her."

Hotaru shook her head in amusement as she passed the naginata to the courtier, who held it like the stick her uncle claimed it to be. "As you wish, Lady Kakita," the girl said with another bow. She turned and glided off in the direction of the Crane living quarters that stood near the east gardens.

Hotaru and Toshimoko walked through the palace grounds and Hotaru, who lived in the Doji Palace surrounded by the finest works of art that the finest artisans in the Empire could produce, still found herself marveling at the beauty around her. The

gardens were tended daily by an army of highly skilled workers, and each leaf, flower, and blade of grass was maintained just so. Drought never touched this place, nor did the ravages of storm or flood leave any scars upon it. The statues and other works of art that lined the winding paths were all from the greatest artists to walk the Empire. Many depicted the heroes of old, while others honored nature or the Fortunes, but they were all sculpted with the tools of a master.

The people she passed, whether peasant or samurai, seemed to reflect that beauty, as if the backdrop of the palace grounds lifted them to heights of elegance those who lived outside could never obtain. It was an illusion, she knew. A silk and makeup disguise over the harsh realities of palace life. But it was an illusion that she allowed herself a moment to enjoy. Even her uncle, rumpled and unkempt, somehow managed to look like the graceful blade he truly was within the backdrop of the Imperial grounds.

And then Hotaru saw her.

She perched demurely on the edge of a fountain, one hand trailing in the waters, ripples of light dancing across her skin. Her hair spilled down her shoulders like a dark river, framing a face whose beauty pained Hotaru to look upon. The lacy butterfly mask reflected the light of Lady Sun in a way that made it seem almost alive, somehow only adding to her beauty rather than concealing it. Her kimono, woven of the finest silks and thin enough to border on the scandalous, flowed across her body like a caress, highlighting both the strength and softness that Hotaru knew lingered there. The kimono and mask were both the deep crimson of the Scorpion Clan, making the woman stand out like a splash of blood against the alabaster stone of the fountain.

Kachiko. Hotaru felt her breath catch as she gazed at the Scorpion, her heartbeat suddenly loud in her ears. She had no doubt that Kachiko had staged it, had planned every little detail

from the crook of her knee that emphasized the curve of her hip to the twist of the shoulder that pushed her breasts against the silk of her kimono. Everything the woman did was planned; Bayushi Kachiko, Mother of Scorpions, widow to the traitor and murderer Bayushi Shoji, played politics in her sleep and never let even a moment's advantage pass her by. Hotaru could not fault her for it; it was simply who Kachiko was.

But she still wore the mask that Hotaru herself had gifted her so many years ago.

Hotaru swallowed hard. Kachiko shouldn't be here. The Scorpion were pariahs, their entire clan bearing the shame for the murder of the Emperor. It was only by the grace of the Fortunes that the clan had not been disbanded, their ambassadors and diplomats – or spies and assassins depending on whose tale you believed – retreating to within their own borders. The clan's power was broken, at least for a time. It was dangerous for any Scorpion to be outside of the lands they controlled, and no place more dangerous than here. Hotaru's heart quickened at the thought of Kachiko placing herself into that danger.

Why had she come?

It didn't matter. All that mattered was that she was here, now.

Then Kachiko's dark eyes lifted, meeting Hotaru's gaze, and the glimmering emotion within easily snuffed out everything else. Thoughts of the regent, the Lion, the dangers to the Crane, vanished. Without thinking, Hotaru turned and strode to meet the woman whose delicate fingers were irrevocably tangled in the strings of her own heart.



3

Yakamo



“**T**hey’re coming again!”

Hida Yakamo tightened his grip on his iron-studded tetsubō and tried to ignore the stench that threatened to raise the bile in his throat. All around him, the Great Carpenter Wall seemed bathed in blood and carpeted in the bodies of the dead Shadowlands creatures and his fellow Crab warriors alike. This close to the foul domain of Fu Leng, the curse that loomed over all the Emerald Empire sank its blackened claws into everything, even the recently deceased. Their flesh festered and rotted far faster than it should, and though Yakamo had learned to ignore it, sometimes the foul miasma seemed to have a life of its own, forcing its way into his nose and lungs and filling him with a nausea ill-suited to a warrior.

Yakamo shook his head, as if to violently fling the thoughts – and the stink – from his mind. He shrugged his massive shoulders and shifted his feet, the heavy plates of his armor – once the deep blue of the Crab Clan but so covered in blood and ichor it might

as well have been black – grating against one another. He did not have the time to dwell on such matters, for the enemy was nearly upon them. The last wave had broken no more than ten minutes ago and he had sunk down, placing his back against the parapet to catch a few moments of rest. The water bearers, Crab youths not yet old enough to hold a weapon and stand a watch – had not made it to his position, and his throat felt dry and thick. Still, despite his thirst, he pushed himself to his feet and turned to face the onrushing darkness.

The Great Carpenter Wall rose more than a hundred feet into the air, topped with the banners and pennants of his clan. Despite the rigors of battle, the banners still flew, the Crab emblem that was the namesake of his people dancing in the fetid winds. Perched atop the Wall, Yakamo had a clear view of the wastelands that stretched out to the south. Broken earth and blasted rock spread as far as his eye could see. The land was barren; no tree or bush pushed its way through the crags, no hint of grass poked through the rubble, no bird or bug flitted through the air. The tableau was empty. Dead.

Except for the army crouched beyond the wall.

The forces of the Shadowlands milled about just outside of the range of the great siege weapons that dotted the Wall's watch towers. From the lofty height of the Wall itself, he could not make out much of the enemy. But he didn't need to. All Yakamo had to do was look at the bodies of the monsters that had twice now made it over the parapets and onto the battlements.

Goblins were the least of them. The spindly, green-skinned creatures stood no bigger than a child and were no match for a warrior. Not in a stand-up fight. But the Jigoku-damned things bred faster than rats or rabbits, because there seemed to be thousands of them in every assault and an infinite reserve just waiting to break their needle-like teeth against the Wall. They fought more

like wild animals than disciplined warriors, but a pack of rabid dogs could take down a man, if there were enough of them.

Worse things marched at the goblins' side. Ogres towered over their goblin allies, dwarfing even Yakamo who was used to being taller and broader than any of his kin. Their thick hide was nearly as hard to pierce as boiled leather and one blow from their broad blades or axes could tear through the Crab's steel and lamellar armor like paper. And still that wasn't the worst of it. Yakamo could slaughter goblins by the dozen, and no ogre would drive him to fear. Even the lesser oni, demons summoned or escaped from the pits of the Realm of Torment itself, did not fill him with the creeping horror that could overcome any who fought the nightmare beasts of the Shadowlands.

For Yakamo, that feeling only came when battling the dead.

They were out there, too. All too often wearing rotting kimonos and broken armor bearing the colors and the crest of the Crab. Warriors who had gone into the Shadowlands and never returned, their bodies reanimated and pressed into the service of Fu Leng. Yakamo could think of no worse fate, and in his bleakest moments, he would wake from dreams where the dead coming for him wore the familiar faces of the samurai under his own command.

If I die here, he thought, at least I die clean.

The roiling mass of the enemy was moving now, surging forward again, as relentless as the tide rolling up the shore. He heard the thump of the siege engines, and watched the hail of rocks sailing overhead. Most fell short, but some crashed among the enemy. Where they did, they exploded, the invocations the shindōshi had inscribed onto them reacting to the foulness of the Shadowlands Taint, detonating with the fury of Fire and Earth. The holes that opened in the enemy lines closed almost at once, the forces of Fu Leng absorbing the losses with unflinching fanaticism.

"Ha! Look at them fall!" The voice was deep, like rumbling

stones rolling down a mountainside, but at the same time full of laughter. A smile came unbidden to Yakamo's lips as he stared at the onrushing horde. He turned to see the grinning face of Hiruma Bunzō, whose eyes glittered with cheerful indomitability. "We will fling them back into the holes they crawled out of," the man crowed. "They will cower in the darkness and rue the day they dared to cross the Crab!"

For all the deep rumbling of his voice, Bunzō was slight of build, almost scrawny, even in his armor. He moved with the exaggerated swagger of a man twice his size, like a Kabuki actor claiming the stage. The dark blue lacquer of his armor was stained and chipped with battle, but a smile hung on the man's face. The men and women under Yakamo's command laughed as the wiry soldier strutted by, and with the laughter came the sense of a weight lifting. The enemy still surged forward – soon they would be within easy bowshot and the archers could begin their bloody work. Not long after that, the goblins would gain the battlements, and the world would regress to exertion and pain and death. But in that moment, they all laughed.

It was a welcome reprieve, and one that reminded him of his duty.

"Get the battlements clear," Yakamo ordered. "Return the bodies of the Shadowlands filth to their fellows and start seeing to our own dead."

His forces turned grimly to the task. No one wanted to touch a corpse; doing so was considered unclean and usually reserved for peasants. But the Crab had long since come to terms with the fact that, on the Wall, polite and proper had to give way to pragmatic and necessary. Unpleasant though the task might be, it was difficult to fight atop a blanket of corpses. His soldiers muttered, but they started grabbing goblin bodies and hurling them over the parapets. Yakamo grabbed a pair of dead goblins by the scruff of the neck, his massive muscles bulging as he lifted

them easily from the stones. With a casual toss, he threw them over the edge, sending the creatures back to the Shadowlands where they belonged.

“That’s a lot of goblins coming,” Buzō muttered as Yakamo wiped his hand on the wall and turned his attention to the body of an ogre. The enormous monster lay sprawled on the battlements, its grayish skin covered in dozens of wounds from sword and arrow, one limp claw clutching a rusty axe. Gritting his teeth, Yakamo grabbed the ogre’s tree stump arm and levered his weight beneath it, striving to heave the body up the wall.

Buzō set his lean shoulder into the mountain of flesh as well, lending his strength as Yakamo struggled to push the eight-foot body of the beast through one of the embrasures. “Do you think they’ll make the walls again?” Buzō grunted as they both shoved to rid themselves of their disgusting burden.

Yakamo’s answer was interrupted by the sound of hundreds of bows firing at once. Yakamo had no archers under his command; they were concentrated in the bastions that stood every thousand feet along the length of the Wall. But with the advantage of height the bastions offered, the yumi-armed ashigaru and samurai could range along the front of the Wall between their towers. Only a narrow corridor a hundred and fifty feet wide was relatively safe from their arrows, and it was in that gap where Yakamo’s troops held the Wall.

Yakamo still could not decide if it was a sign of respect, or a punishment. His father, Hida Kisada, the Great Bear himself, had ordered him here, at the very heart of the current assault on the Wall. It was the position most likely to be tested, and the one most likely to fall.

It was the place where a young commander might prove himself to his lord. Or where an heir who didn’t quite live up to his father’s expectation might find himself conveniently removed.

Is that why I'm here, Father? To finally rid you of your disappointment?

"They will make the Wall," Yakamo grunted, crushing thoughts of his father beneath the weight of the ogre and the task before him. He and Bunnzō heaved the ogre through the embrasure and together watched it tumble down the sloped face of the stones. Even as he said it, the first of the enemy reached the base and began scrambling up, climbing more like spiders or insects than anything human.

"Good," Bunnzō replied, kicking a severed goblin head off the backside of the battlements. His voice rose in volume, carrying to all those nearby. "It's boring to sit up here and watch the archers and engineers have all the fun, and my blade hasn't claimed nearly enough goblin heads. What a wonderful day to be a Crab!"

Yakamo could only chuckle. The Laughing Crab, as Bunnzō was known by his fellows, was irrepressible. And it was a blessing from the Fortunes that he was. The pragmatic Crab Clan, Yakamo among them, fell all too easily into a stoic shell, shutting out the horrors of their everyday life. But that often meant shutting out the little moments of joy that could be found, even here. Bunnzō's antics reminded them all that the grim reality of their sworn duty as samurai and Crab didn't have to turn them into numb, emotionless killers. All along the length of the Wall, Yakamo saw the samurai and ashigaru in his charge casting glances at Bunnzō and heard the laughter that rose in their wake.

A smile tugged at one corner of his mouth. Trust Bunnzō to rouse the fighting spirit of the troops; now it was his turn to wake them up entirely.

"You heard him!" Yakamo shouted, raising his voice to be heard by his entire command. "Lady Sun shines upon us, and the Fortunes cheer us to victory. Let us meet our guests and show them what it means to have a good day on the Wall."

Newfound laughter and roars met his words as the Crab warriors tossed the last of the goblin corpses over the Wall. They plummeted down the fortification and, in some cases, smashed into the faces of their fellows, the lead elements of which were now less than fifty feet below the parapets, still climbing with the alien grace and speed of arachnids. They would gain the heights in a few moments, and once more, the battle would be joined.

“So many of them. They just keep coming.”

Yakamo looked over at Bunzō, shocked not at the words, but at the tone. The laughter was gone from his voice as he peered over the Wall, and he spoke in a near whisper that only Yakamo, standing right beside him, could hear. Despite the bravado from only a moment before, Bunzō now seemed deflated, folded in on himself as the goblins scabbling up the wall drew ever closer.

Yakamo narrowed his eyes. How much of Bunzō’s laughing persona was an act, put on to bolster his own courage and those of his companions? He couldn’t be sure, but he knew that all of them wore masks, as surely as any Scorpion. And they all needed support when those masks began to slip.

“We have been here a hundred times, my friend,” he said quietly, “and we will be here a hundred times more before we’re done. Besides,” he added as Bunzō glanced up at him, “if we let this filth overrun us, my father would have Kuni Yori pull us both from our graves just so he could tell me what a disappointment I was.”

Bunzō gave something that was half snort, half shudder at the mention of the shindōshi’s name. “Don’t invoke that one lest you summon him,” the Laughing Crab warned, in a voice that was only half mocking. “I’d rather face all the demons of the Shadowlands than Kuni Yori. Or your father.” He leaned and spat over the Wall, a breach of courtesy so shocking anywhere else in the Empire that it would almost certainly lead to a duel. Then he snorted again. “Not that it matters now. Our guests are arriving.”

Yakamo glanced over the parapet and saw that the goblins were mere feet away, shrieking furiously as they climbed. “Then let’s give them the welcome they deserve,” he growled. The first leathery green fingers grasped the embrasure in front of him and he smashed his tetsubō down, feeling bones crush between the iron-studded wood of his club and the unforgiving stone of the wall. The goblin fell away with a shriek, but there was another to replace it.

There was always another to replace them. As Bunzō said, they just kept coming.

“Steady!” Yakamo roared, bashing the second goblin off the Wall and back to the Shadowlands. “Push them back! They gain nothing but death here today.”

All along the length of the Wall, battle was joined. Bowstrings still thrummed from the bastions, and the regular thud of the catapults and ballistae launching their deadly missiles into the massed troops below still sounded, but for Yakamo, the world shrank down to the hundred or so feet of the Wall that was his responsibility. The goblins scaled the Wall, and the Crab met them, smashing them from the ramparts and sending them tumbling into the waiting darkness. But for each goblin that fell, two more seemed to take their place.

Yakamo grunted as the jagged point of a goblin spear shattered against the steel plates of his armor, the inferior weapon splintering into a dozen fragments. He turned and swept his tetsubō in a broad arc, connecting with the creature and feeling its ribcage shatter even as it was flung off the Wall, plummeting to the ground far below. His muscles strained as he stopped the momentum of the massive club and snapped it back in the opposite direction, faster than would have been possible for a weaker man. The iron studs rang as they shattered a goblin’s hastily raised shield and sent that one, too, disappearing over the Wall. Another spear slipped along his armor before catching behind his kote and digging a shallow furrow in his flesh. He

roared and smashed his club straight down, crushing the goblin as easily as swatting a bug.

And still more goblins came. They poured over the walls now, those behind shoving those ahead bodily into the waiting line of Crab, uncaring as their comrades fell to the blades, hammers, polearms, and clubs. Should they gain a firm foothold on the walkway, reinforcements would swarm like ants until the Crab – at least those under his command – would be consumed.

“Push them back!” Yakamo bellowed. “Push them from the Wall!” He drove forward like a man possessed, weapon raised high. His muscles burned with fatigue and breath came in panting gasps. He ignored the pain as he drew a ragged breath. “Hida!” he shouted as his tetsubō smashed through the hastily raised sword of a goblin less than half his size. “For the Crab!” He bodily kicked another goblin, ignoring the biting teeth and hooked claws that scratched the lacquer of his armor. “For the Empire!”

He fought without grace, without precision, a desperate brutality that left his enemies broken and dying before him. He could not help but revel in the fury and violence of it all. It was the way of the Crab. Let the Crane have their duelists, the Dragon their sword masters, and the Lion their grand strategists. Let the other clans train in their pristine schools where the mats were freshly swept and mistakes were corrected with soft words and guiding hands. Let them fight their clean wars where cultured warriors exchanged pleasantries and played at politics when they should be spilling each other’s blood.

The Crab couldn’t afford any of those luxuries. If they faltered, even for a moment, the Shadowlands would overwhelm them. And the soft, fat lands beyond the Wall would fall as surely as wheat to the scythe.

The pressure eased and Yakamo realized he had pushed all the way to the parapets, driving the goblins before him. His samurai

and ashigaru had followed suit and pushed the invaders back over the Wall. A quick glance showed him that the same scene had played out at every point between the two bastions, and it looked like the goblins were in full retreat, scabbling down the wall more quickly than they came up it.

“Run, you cowards!” Bunzō cried, waving his blood-spattered ono in the air as he shouted at the goblins’ retreating backs. “Go back to the foul pit that spewed you forth!”

He was answered by a trumpeting sound that was half-shriek, half-roar. It came not from the ground below, but from the skies overhead. Yakamo cursed as he tore his gaze from the retreating goblins and scanned the slate gray sky.

It was all too easy to dismiss the creatures of the Shadowlands as mindless, animalistic monsters. And some of them were exactly that. But not all. There were beings in the lands of Fu Leng with enough cunning to put a Scorpion to shame. And there were others, creatures like the oni or Fu Leng’s dark necromancers, who had a deep understanding of tactics and strategy.

Deep enough to use a ground assault by the goblins to draw the Crab’s watchful eyes away from the real threat.

“There!” an armored warrior shouted, stabbing a finger toward the washed-out clouds. But it was already too late. Another trumpeting scream sounded, directly above, and creatures unlike anything Yakamo had seen swooped from the sky toward the Wall.

Yakamo’s skin crawled. These monsters had long, emaciated bodies with the bones beneath their leathery skin clearly visible and thick, lizard-like tails. Two legs, birdlike, stretched out behind them as they flew. Yakamo could see with crystal focus the massive, curved talons at the end of those feet. Their arms, if arms they were, were thick and powerful, far longer than would be normal for a human, and ending in hands that looked disturbingly like those of a man. A membrane stretched from

the creature's wrists to a point halfway down the powerful tail, creating something more akin to a sail than a wing. The creatures had long necks, two-thirds the length of their bodies, and arrow-like heads that reminded him of the herons he had seen in the Imperial City. Except, these creatures didn't have beaks, just long, fleshy proboscises that he had little doubt were full of razor-sharp teeth.

Yakamo did not know how birds flew, but nothing of these creatures resembled the liquid grace of a bird in flight. They beat at the air like they were trying to bludgeon it into submission, and their angry cries echoed with as much pain as hate.

But still they flew. Directly for the Wall, and Yakamo's forces that waited there. Arrows flew at them, the archers quickly responding to the sudden threat from above, but the few that struck the creatures did nothing to slow them down. They soared over the Wall, silhouetted black against the mottled clouds. Yakamo felt the chill of their shadows as they glided over him. It mirrored the chill that shot up his spine at the sight of the beasts. He fought back the fingers of fear – there was no place for it on the Wall – as his eyes tracked the beasts.

At some unseen signal, the creatures reared up, flaring out their wings and, as one, dropped from the sky. Their taloned feet crashed into the broad walk atop the Wall, striking with enough force to crack the stones. Yakamo stumbled, clutching his tetsubō, as the creatures turned on them with an ear-splitting wail. The beasts were huge, each towering nearly twice the size of a man and half again as broad, even with their wings folded. They moved on all fours, upper limbs reaching out as their powerful legs and tail drove them forward in something that was half slither, half crawl. A dozen of the demons had dropped onto his section of the Wall. Behind him, Yakamo heard the triumphant howls of the Shadowlands army as they prepared to charge once more.

Scarcely a second had passed since the monsters crashed into their midst, and his samurai were already reacting. The first to reach one brought his *ōdachi* slicing down, the long, slightly curved blade moving with the speed and force that only desperation could bring. Yakamo watched in horror as the razor-edge of the weapon met the leather flesh of the monstrosity... and bounced. That blow could sever the head from a man, but all it left behind on the beast was a thin, shallow cut leaking black ichor.

Almost casually, the monster reached out, curved talons closing around the torso of the samurai. Its proboscis opened, peeling back in four separate, tentacle-like appendages, each lined with barbed protrusions that were somewhere between teeth and the suckers of an octopus. The mouth where those four appendages met was circular and lined with more teeth. The same cry – half rage, half agony – thundered forth as the massive muscles in the creature’s legs flexed, and the samurai, armor and all, was crushed.

A moment’s stillness settled over the Wall. It couldn’t have been more than a heartbeat, but to Yakamo, it felt like an eternity. In that frozen moment, as he watched the nightmare slaughter one of his own with casual ease, Yakamo saw death. Worse, he saw the complete and utter failure of his duty.

But that duty remained, no matter how hopeless.

If I die here, at least I die clean. I swear it.

He raised his *tetsubō* above his head, drew a deep breath, and shouted, “Charge!”



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