A dry wind slid out of the Shadowlands, fluttering the paper wards Kuni Yori had affixed to the Wall. Horns and drums were sounding from a distant watchtower, but Yori ignored them, keeping his gaze fixed to the south. Kuni Utagu looked in the direction of the signals, then moved closer to his daimyō.

"Lord Yori," Utagu said, "Lone Candle Keep signals that the enemy has attacked in force to the north. If we depart now-"

"This is our place, Utagu-san."

Kuni Utagu’s voice dropped further. "My lord, if we wish to test this new ward you have crafted, we should-"

"There is a vacant position in our embassy to the Crane, Utagusan," Yori said, turning to face Utagu. "Questioning me a third time will convince me that you are an excellent candidate for it."

Utagu bowed and stepped back. As he did, Yori pointed. "And...there, Utagu-san, do you see? Our enemy approaches even now."

A wave of darkness rose up from the blasted approach to the Wall, quickly resolving into a horde of chitinous monstrosities, like swarming ants. Horns and drums sounded again, all around them this time, as the bushi and their supporting archers and siege engines braced for the onslaught.

Utagu narrowed his eyes at the approaching horde. "How did you know they would attack this place, my lord? And at this time?"

"I know our enemy, Utagu-san."

If Utagu had a reply, it was cut off by an ear-scraping rattle of segmented limbs and clashing mandibles that grew louder by the second. Arrows hissed away from the archers, rattling ineffectively against resinous carapaces. A heavy stone flung from a catapult slammed into their midst, crushing several horrors into black paste, but the horde didn’t slow. It continued its headlong rush, charging directly toward where Yori stood among the fluttering wards.

Half a bowshot, now.

Yori closed his eyes and began to intone a prayer. Some of the paper wards shivered madly in response, jade-green light flaring from one, then another, then more in quick succession. The onrushing swarm swerved aside, slamming into the Wall to Yori’s left. A caustic stink rose from the creatures as they clambered over one another, piling up against the stone. Arrows poured into the rising pillar of monstrosities while chūi and gunsō shouted orders, readying their troops for the attack. The crest of the squirming pile reached the battlements,
segmented legs scrabbling at the stone. Tetsubō and the great axes called masakari rose and fell, hacking limbs and cracking carapaces, knocking the creatures back-

Something massive erupted from the heaving pile, a vile fusion of the creatures, dozens of them joined into a single, monstrous entity. It easily mounted the Wall, serrated mandibles seemingly everywhere, clashing, chewing through armor, flesh and bone. More bushi piled into the fray, striking and slashing, but the huge agglomeration of creatures kept shoving forward, driving the defenders back.

"My lord!" Utagu shouted. "Indeed," Yori said, closing his eyes and chanting again.

The remaining paper wards fluttered wildly. Yori felt the Earth kami roiling in the stone beneath his feet, but his will, focused through the wards, infused them with unified purpose. He shouted a final word of supplication and flung up his arms. A deep rumble. The Wall trembled...then a massive spike of rock stove upwards from the battlement, skewering the fused monstrosity like a colossal yari striking it from below. An explosion of fetid gore showered the bushi engaged with it, sending them stumbling back, retching and wiping desperately at their mouths and eyes.

Yori lowered his hands and watched as the remaining bushi closed back in. "We are done here, Utagu-san."

"But...Lord Yori," Utagu said, "these warriors yet need our aid-"

"Are you saying they require our continued assistance to win this battle, Utagu-san?"

"I...no, of course not, my lord."

"Good. Now, select six of those most affected by the creature’s effluent. Have them brought to Castle Kuni." He paused and looked at Utagu’s apprentice, a young man staring at the carnage with wide eyes. "You...Kuni Daigo, is it not?"

The apprentice blinked, then bowed. "Yes, my lord."

"You will accompany them, recording detailed observations as you do. When you reach Castle Kuni, deliver your report directly to me."

"Yes, my lord."

Yori waved a hand and the remaining paper wards curled to ash. He turned and walked away from the dying clamor of battle.

Kuni Yori leaned on his worktable and browsed the notes taken by the apprentice, Daigo. The effects of the foul liquids shed upon the bushi Were both detailed and insightful, surprisingly so. He must keep an eye on this Kuni Daigo...

A faint sound made Yori turn. He stood alone in his work chamber, a spartan dungeon deep beneath Castle Kuni. He started to turn back to the notes, but his gaze caught on something resembling a large bird pinned to a stained slab of wood. It had feathers of bone, each as a keen as a katana’s blade, and a bulbous head spitt by a mouth bristling with needle-sharp teeth. A spawn of Nairu’s Oni. it was dead, of course, and should be in the specimen vault. But its delicate, dangerous feathers fascinated him with their vie beauty, so he’d kept it, as a curiosity...
The Nairu spawn’s head was facing him, its eye sockets filled with blackness, with cunning and knowing.

You will damn them all, Yori, it hissed, with your foolish pride.

Yori closed his eyes. When he opened them again, the Nairu’s head was canted to one side, its eyes as empty and dead as they’d always been.

Sighing out a breath that tasted of chemicals seeping from the nearby laboratories, Yori turned back to Daigo’s notes—

Another noise—this time, a soft tapping on the heavy wooden door that separated his work chamber from the laboratories. Yori moved to the door and opened it, to find a woman waiting there.

"Kuni Ayame-san," he said, returning her bow and gesturing her in, "it is good to see you."

"As it is you, Lord Yori." Ayame entered the work chamber, followed by a servant carrying a large wooden box. "Your summons was clearly urgent, so I came as quickly as I could."

Yori closed the door with a soft thud. "Time-sensitive is more accurate." As they settled onto opposite sides of a small table, he said, "I have followed your work with interest. It appears... promising."

Ayame offered a shrug. "I have made small gains, my lord, since the last time we met."

Yori narrowed his eyes at what might be intended as a minor rebuke. He had last visited Ayame’s laboratory in the Kuni Wastes... a year ago? Longer? He couldn’t recall.

"Small gains are still gains," he said, returning the shrug. "In any case, I have a renewed interest in your work. According to the last report I read, you have been able to entirely suppress the Taint in a subject, yes?"

In answer, Ayame gestured for the servant to place the contents of the box on the table between them. It was a small bonsai tree contained in a large glass bell jar. It appeared no different than the multitude of bonsai trees gracing homes and courts throughout the Empire. But Yori immediately took note of the soil, which was grey, like ash, and shot through with fungal tendrils—some as fine as hair, that writhed against the glass; others bulbous and pulsating, like disembodied veins.
I have applied my methods to the tree," Ayame said, "which is rooted in soil taken from the Shadowlands. it remains entirely unaffected by the Taint." She paused, then went on. "It is, I believe, a significant achievement...and most gratifying to have it recognized by my esteemed daimyō."

Yori looked up from the tree. Again, a hint of recrimination. Yori frowned. He owed his vassals no explanation for his interest in their work, or lack thereof.

Perhaps that is not what pains her, Yori. The Nairu spawn looked back at him, knowing...

"Yori?" Ayame said as they strolled along a battlement at Castle Kuni. "That is the name you have chosen for your gempuku?"

The young man who would soon be known as Kuni Yori nodded. "Why? Do you find it...objectionable?"

She gave an exaggerated frown. "Yori," she said, as though testing the name, to see if it fit in her mouth. "Yori..." His own frown deepened and Ayame laughed. "Do not be so serious! It is a fine name." Her hand brushed his and she smiled brightly. "I am certain I will quickly become accustomed to it."

Yori glanced down at their hands...then back at Ayame, and he smiled in return.

Yori turned back to Ayame. "Lord Kisada has made it clear that every resource, every opportunity to assist the clan, must be exploited." He looked at the bonsai tree. "Your work has clearly progressed to the extent that it is more than...a curiosity. It is something that must be more fully explored."

You speak of the promise of her work. Perhaps she thinks of another promise, one that you never kept.

Yori turned again to the Nairu spawn, but it was, of course. mute and lifeless.

"I see," Ayame said. "Well, I have begun to apply the method to simple animals...mice and rabbits taken from the Shadowlands. These subjects are-"

"What of men?"

Ayame stared for a moment. "We...still have much to learn, my lord, before we begin to use humans as test subjects."

Yori glanced at the Nairu spawn. "We do not have the luxury of such time. We assign our Tainted brothers beyond the Wall, to The Damned, but that is an imperfect solution. it only forestalls the inevitable. We must retain every warrior we can on the Wall."

"But my lord-"

"There are test subjects available," Yori went on, picking up the notes made by Kuni Daigo and offering them to Ayame. "These are detailed observations regarding them, from the moment they were first exposed...a rare opportunity. Speak to Kuni Utagu...he will arrange for them to be transported to your laboratory, along with anything else you may need."

Ayame opened her mouth, but closed it again. "We are the Crab, Ayame-san," Yori said. "We waste nothing." She finally nodded. "Your will, my lord."

When she was gone, Yori resumed other work he had put aside. He glanced once at the Nairu spawn, but it remained. . .was. . .dead.
Yori shaded his eyes against the bleak sunlight of the Kuni Wastelands. Nothing but barren, lifeless dirt and rock surrounded Ayame’s laboratory, itself a dour cluster of stone buildings. This had once all been Tainted, the pervasive residue of an ancient attack that had breached the Wall. Many decades of effort had mitigated the corruption, but the methods used were a dead-end, suitable only for dumb soil and stone...and even then, they left utter lifelessness in their wake.

Yori continued into the laboratory. Perhaps more promise waited within.

He passed through an entry vestibule and into a dimly lit room crammed with the tools of the Kuni trade-arrays of alchemical apparatus, beakers and flasks, alembics and crucibles, some bubbling over guttering flames. A few bottles contained viscous fluids that glowed with their own light. He passed the bell jar containing the bonsai tree; another filled with what seemed to be nothing but tentacles, slowly writhing; yet another containing a disembodied hand in yellowish fluid, whose ragged nails scraped at the glass as Yori passed by. A fume, cloying and acrid, hung in the air. He found Ayame at the back of the laboratory, speaking with a hulking Hida bushi in a barred cell. Three other Crab warriors occupied nearby cells. All appeared well. They bowed at Yori’s arrival.

"Lord Yori," Ayame began. "As you can see, we are making significant progress."

Yori nodded curtly, then turned his attention to the Hida. "How do you feel?"

"I am fine, Kuni-sama," he rumbled. "In fact, I’m ready to quit this cell and return to my duties."

"These are your duties, Hida-san, until you are otherwise directed."

The man’s mouth pressed into a thin line, but he nodded. "Of course, Kuni-sama."

Yori gestured for Ayame to follow him. They stopped near the jar containing the restless hand. "It appears that your methods continue to bear fruit, Ayame-san."

"I am...cautiously optimistic. The four remaining subjects still find the touch of jade unpleasant, but even that seems to be fading."

"Excellent." The hand abruptly flattened itself against the jar, as though reaching for them. Yori glanced at it, then said, "I expect to soon have another subject for you."
Ayame frowned. "I would prefer to remain focused on these cases, my lord. As I said, I'm optimistic, but the outcome Temai ts far from certain. The final stage of the process is yet to begin, and it carries the most risk, both to the subjects and the Practitioner."

"Lord Kisada's wishes are clear. There is considerable urgency to this. And..." Yori looked again at the jar containing the hand.

her hand brushed his...

He turned back to Ayame. "And there are few I would trust with such an important undertaking. I...have faith in you, Ayame-san."

Ayame...

...smiled brightly...

...bowed. "Your confidence honors me, Lord Yori."

"How long do you anticipate this final stage will take?"

"At least several days. Perhaps a week."

Yori nodded. "Very well. Send word to me when you have completed the process. I shall return then."

"As you wish, my lord."

A week passed. Another. And still there was no word from Ayame. Yori could finally wait no longer and returned to Ayame's remote workshop, accompanied by Utagu, his apprentice Daigo and—at Utagu's insistence—a squad of Hida bushi.

It was immediately clear that something was wrong.

Yori studied the cluster of buildings. No movement, and just deep silence, aside from a fitful wind that raised dust devils from the desiccated soil.

Without a word, he entered the laboratory, followed by Utagu, Daigo, and the bushi.

No fume clouded the air. The lamps and burners sat cold and unused.

Yori felt the bushi tense and heft their weapons. Utagu gripped a finger of jade, his face grim. He said, "My lord—"

Yori raised a hand, cutting him off. He heard something, now...a soft, wet sound coming from the rear of the laboratory. Yori started that way, but the gunsō leading the bushi stepped forward. "Kuni-sama, you must let us proceed you."

Yori frowned, then nodded curtly. The Hida warriors moved forward cautiously, their armor clattering. Yori and the others followed. When they reached the cells at the rear of the laboratory, the Hide stopped suddenly. Yori heard the gunsō whisper, "By the Kami..."

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Yori stepped around the man’s armored bulk.

The cell that had contained the Hida bushi was now filled with a mass of heaving flesh that bulged obscenely through the bars. The other cells held...

Worse. Much worse.

But Yori’s gaze was drawn to the figure on the floor. ‘It was, he assumed, Kuni Ayame, but the grey. brittle form could have been anyone. Stepping forward, he knelt. He was perilously
close to the distended flesh in the cell, so much so that both Utagu and the gunso immediately stepped forward, Utagu saying, "My lord, beware-!"

But Yori ignored him, looking instead at the crumbling shape on the floor. It was horrifying, but more horrifying still was that it yet lived, fragments like greasy ash flaking away as it moved, The mouth worked"

...she smiled brightly...
-a soft, dry rattle briefly becoming recognizable words.
"...doesn't...work..."
Kuni Yori shook his head. "No, Ayame-san. It appears that it does not"

Kuni Utagu placed the bonsai tree on Yori's worktable. "As you directed, Lord Yori, this is all that remains, aside from Ayame's notes. Everything else has been destroyed."
"And what of Ayame herself?"
"She...lives, after a fashion. Daigo remains with her, observing...also as you directed."
"Very well."
Yori expected Utagu to depart, but the man hesitated. "My lord, if I may...we were forced to send Ayame's test subjects to their rest. Should we not do the same for Ayame-san herself?"
Yori stared at the bonsai tree. Most of its needles had been replaced by thin, writhing tentacles. "We are the Crab, Utagu-san-"
Her hand brushed his...she smiled brightly...
"-we waste nothing."
Utagu paused, as if he meant to say more. But he finally just bowed and departed.
For a while, Yori stared at the vulgar corruption of the bonsai tree.
Eventually, he picked it up and took it to a heavy vault set into the stone. The lock, a complicated device of Kaiu construction, took him a moment to open. He swung open the heavy door, then rearranged some of the contents-a smooth, porcelain mask of unknown origin he'd discovered among his late father's effects, and a thick sheaf of papers bearing a single name, that of his great-grandfather, Kuni Mokuna-a man whose name was reviled throughout the Empire for his research. To Yori, though, he was someone to be admired.

He paused, brushing a finger over the brittle paper, touching the ribbon he'd used to mark his place in Mokuna's ancient journals. Then he turned, retrieved the bonsai tree and placed it in the newly cleared space in the vault, closed the ponderous door, and locked it again.

You were deceived, Yori.
He looked at the Nairu spawn. "No...I was not."
So you knew it wouldn't work? Yet, you allowed her to continue regardless?
Yori moved to the spawn and looked into eyes, blacker than night.
"What I know," Yori said, "is you."
The Nairu Spawn said nothing, because It was long dead. Still. as he left his work chamber, Yori felt its eyes following him.