They were massive. Each of them was several times longer than Tatsuo was tall, and their
snakelike bodies were so thick that he didn’t think he could wrap his arms around them. They
were patterned in muddy greens and browns, as if the Shinomen itself had endowed them with
its colors. They wore no clothes, but each had a bow and quiver slung over their shoulders,
along with long, curving knives. One had a large pouch as well. They stood in place staring at
him. Should he speak to them, and if he did, would they even understand him?

The question was made irrelevant by an arrow that buried itself in the tree nearest to the
creatures. Tatsuo heard Kogoe mutter a curse, and at the edge of his vision she was nocking
another arrow. The creatures were in motion now—heading toward him and Kogoe far too
quickly.

He brought up his bow and fired. It went wide and he hastily nocked another. He was well
practiced at shooting things that ran on two or four legs, but the creature’s sinuous movements
made its path difficult to predict. He managed to fire only once more before it was upon him.
As the creature slithered up and over him, Tatsuo had a sensation of solid muscle and barely contained power, as though he were being shouldered aside by a horse. He dropped the now-useless bow and reached for his sword, but the creature’s tail whipped around, slapping his hand so hard he lost his grip. Tatsuo attempted to wrestle with it, but the smooth scaly hide gave his fingers no purchase on the creature as it coiled around him, knocking him off his feet. The weight of his opponent pinned him to the forest floor, and he fought for breath as circles of darkness danced through his vision. Suddenly, the creature shifted its weight, and Tatsuo gasped thankfully for air as his vision cleared.

“What you doing in Shishomen?” it asked, its voice rumbling through the clearing like distant thunder. The syntax was strange, some of the consonants were slurred, and the words had oddly stressed syllables, but ultimately it was intelligible Rokugani.

“Shinjo Tatsuo is my name. I am a scout,” he said, recovering. “I was following you, or—” he paused while he framed the thought, “—your companion, whichever had been in my clan’s lands to the north of the forest.”

“What is ‘clan’? Why you in Shishomen?”

“The forest—the Shinomen—is filled with dangerous things,” Tatsuo answered. “We keep watch over it.”

“You say watch, but you carry weapons,” the other creature countered. “This one,” he said, indicating Kogoe with a nod of his scaly head, “this one ready to kill.”

“We were being cautious,” Tatsuo explained. “Several ashigaru have disappeared from this area. And as long as she is alive and thinks you are an enemy, she will fight you. Hiruma Kogoe’s clan is renowned for their battles against the creatures of the Shadowlands.”

“The Shadowlands?” The two Naga turned to face one another, then looked back to Tatsuo with looks of confusion.

“A place to the south of here,” Tatsuo said. “A broken, twisted land full of demons and other monstrosities.”

A violent tremor went through the tail pinning Tatsuo down and the two creatures broke into loud, hissing talk. What had he said to trigger this? If they were creatures of the Shadowlands, why didn’t they just kill the two scouts? And if they weren’t, what were they arguing about?

“Stop this noise!” Kogoe’s voice was loud enough to be heard over the argument. “Who are you? And what have you done with our ashigaru?”

The two creatures paused and looked down toward Kogoe. “I am,” the one coiling Tatsuo paused for a moment, “the Apieshu. This is the Ishikibal. We have done nothing to your ashigaru you lost them yourself.”

“We have talked too long here,” the Ishikibal said. “We are undecided what to do with you, so we will take you to the Shushual to be judged.” He reached into a pouch slung over his shoulder and pulled out a length of braided cord.

The Unicorn Clan had eight centuries of stories about encountering foreign cultures, and
those stories all agreed that he and Kogoe hadn’t found a pair of monsters—"the Apieshu" and
"the Ishikibal" were clearly members of an organized society. On the one hand, this made
them less likely to be Tainted. On the other, it meant that there was a new threat in the
Shinomen Forest that the Empire had set no guards against, because no one knew it existed.
Tatsuo’s eyes sought Kogoe’s as the creatures finished tying them up and slung them over
their shoulders. She had stopped fighting their captors and her eyes were clear and focused: a
scout’s eyes, taking in all that went on around them.

At first, the forest they traveled through was just that, forest, but gradually it changed: the
trees grew further apart, and the trail became a path that widened into a road. Then the
buildings began, made of carved and carefully fitted stone with elaborate sculptures and
ornate decorative work along the doorways and rooflines. Some were in ruins, with trees
growing in and around them, but many were intact and filled with serpent people going about
their business. As they passed by, Tatsuo caught glimpses of weavers, rope-makers, and stone
carvers. All of them paused to stare at the captives.

Finally, they came to a small structure where another of the serpent creatures was waiting
next to the door. It was smaller than the two who had captured him and Kogoe, and its scales
were a shade of cool blue-green.” The Apieshu and the Ishikibal exchanged some hissing
speech with it, and then they unceremoniously shoved their prisoners into the building and
closed the door. A lock clicked into place.

Tatsuo rolled to his feet and looked around. Dim light filtered in though short, wide
windows near the roof, revealing bare stone walls, a stone floor, and Kogoe.

"I don’t think they are Tainted," she said. "But what are they?"

"I don’t know," Tatsuo admitted. "I’ve heard legends of giant snake creatures in the forest,
but I’ve heard legends of every kind of weird creature in the forest. The only thing that hasn’t
been seen here are karakasakozō, but no one takes paper umbrellas into the Shinomen."

Kogoe grinned briefly at that "We need to figure a way out of here before they come back I
didn’t see a lot of activity in this area, so once we get free of the building we can slip into the
forest and head back to camp."

It was a sensible plan that would allow them a chance to warn the camp, but... "Perhaps we
should stay and talk to their ‘Shushual.’ We can learn more about who they are and what they
are doing in the Shinomen."

"Shuichi and the rest need to be warned."

"Our disappearance will have put them on guard," Tatsuo said. The Unicorn Clan did not
share the rest of the Empire’s xenophobia; learning more about these creatures was
worthwhile in itself. But there was more than that: save for where the Crab guarded their Wall,
the Empire had no defenses on its southern border—the Shinomen had served as a natural
defense. But if the forest was now inhabited, then it was in the Empire’s best interest that they
not be enemies with the denizens of the Shinomen. "If we know more about them, we may be
able to establish a treaty with them," he said. "We could find something they need and trade it
for the protection of our southern border.

He expected Kogoe to reject the idea immediately, but she looked thoughtful. "It would be like-" she stopped short and gave Tatsuo an odd look. "I can’t say what it would be like."

"It would be like dealing with gaijin," Tatsuo said helpfully. "You won’t even have to talk with them; I can do that. My clan has experience in such things."

"As you say."

The plaza was filled with serpent people. Most of them were forest-colored, like the Apieshu and Ishikibel, but some were of ivory or dark brown shades, and here and there were bluish ones who resembled their jailer. Tatsuo stared openly, trying to get an estimate of how many serpent people lived in this city and what fraction of them might be warriors. Kogoe stood beside him, no doubt drawing her own conclusions. Some signal that Tatsuo couldn’t discern rippled through the crowd, causing them all to turn in one direction. Tatsuo turned as well and saw a line of six serpent people headed for a stone platform near where he and Kogoe stood, led by one who wore a heavily embroidered green sash around his shoulders and waist. This, Tatsuo guessed, was the Shushual.

As the newcomers arranged themselves on the platform, the Apieshu and Ishikibel came forward. "I will announce the Shushual’s words to you," Apieshu said loudly. "The Ishikibel will announce your words to him." Beside him, Ishikibel hissed loudly in his native language. When he was finished, the Shushual spoke, his words sibilant but also somehow sharp. "What do you know of the Naga and the Great Sleep?" Apieshu translated.

"I have never heard of the Naga before today," Tatsuo said. "There are very old stories of people in the Shinomen seeing giant snakes that spoke, but I had always thought they were merely travelers’ tales." Never again would he underestimate the forest.

Ishikibel translated his words, which caused a burst of talk among the others on the platform. The Shushual ignored them and spoke again. "You know nothing useful. We should kill you to protect ourselves from your kind."

"Death comes to all at the proper time," Tatsuo replied. It had been one of his sensei’s favorite sayings. "But we know many other things, and our people have scholars who know much more. If you let us go, we can bring word of you to them."

"That does not seem wise. Our seers speak of Shishomen lands laid to waste, cities we did not build, and roaming spirits that smell of sun and rock. And what do you want? This one," he said, pointing to Kogoe, "tried to kill us on sight. Why should we let you go so you can tell your ‘clan’ of us?"

"Let Tatsuo go back," Kogoe said suddenly, "and I will stay here as a hostage."

Tatsuo stared at her, mouth slightly agape in surprise. The Naga must have been surprised as well, given the pause before Ishikibel translated her words, and the outbreak of hisses it provoked.

"Why?" Shushual asked, ignoring the argument going on behind him. "Why make this offer?"
“I was too hasty in shooting at your scouts; I had assumed they were responsible for the disappearance of our ashigaru. My acts are my honor, so I will stay as an offer of good faith.”

“And do you approve of this?” Shushual asked Tatsuo.

“Kogoe is not a member of my clan, and I have no authority over her,” Tatsuo said. “If you agree to her offer, I must accept it.”

Shushual was silent for a time as he stared into the distance. “The Akasha finds this offer acceptable. The Kogoe will stay among us, and the Tatsuo will be returned to his people.”

“What did she say?” Kaiu Shuichi asked. “Why did she stay behind?”

“I have already told you,” Tatsuo replied. “Three times.” The Apieshu’s means of returning him was to take him in the middle of the night to the clearing where he and Kogoe had first encountered the Naga and leaving him there. It was well after dawn by the time Tatsuo finally made it back to the camp, where he’d almost been skewered by the spear of a nervous Crab guard. Then he’d had to explain matters to Iuchi Rimei, who found his tale of talking serpent people difficult to believe. Shuichi and Kuni Heki didn’t question the existence of the serpent people, but were more suspicious over why Kogoe hadn’t come back with him.

“Search your memory,” Shuichi demanded. “What have you forgotten to tell us?”

“Kaiu-sama,” Tatsuo said, “if you will only tell me which presumed lie you would like to hear again, I will be happy to repeat it back to you.”

“Shinjo, you need to—” Shuichi started. “What was that?” Heki asked, looking out the tent’s door.

In the silence that followed the Kuni’s question, Tatsuo heard it: a sudden shriek and then the unmistakable sounds of weapons clashing. The Crab Clan samurai rushed out of the tent, and Tatsuo and Rimei followed. At the other end of the clearing, the ashigaru seemed to be fighting among themselves.

“Traitors!” Heki exclaimed. “Those are the missing ashigaru!”

Shuichi shouted, pointing, “We must keep them away from the lumber!”

Tatsuo dashed behind and around a stack of logs, drawing his sword as he went. All of his training screamed for him to protect his shugenja, but he throttled the urge to stand next to her. The best way to ensure Rimei’s safety was to dispatch the attackers as quickly as possible. There was an ashigaru standing at the end of the stack, watching the crowd, and Tatsuo stopped next to him. “You! Why aren’t you helping?”

The ashigaru turned around and for the second time that day, Tatsuo was nearly impaled on a spear. He evaded the blow and saw there was something odd about the man’s eyes. It was as if the eyelids and surrounding skin had been blackened with charcoal. As he moved in for a killing blow, he saw that it wasn’t charcoal at all—the man’s eyes were staring, wide open, and covered in crawling flies.

Long years of training allowed Tatsuo to follow through on his blow, even as his stomach churned. His sword swept through the abdomen of his opponent, felling him. Then, he started
to get back up. Tatsuo ducked under his blow and cut again, this time shearing off one of its arms. The dead ashigaru staggered but did not fall, and he lurched forward with his remaining arm extended. Tatsuo slashed at his wrist and then launched a second, stronger cut at the neck. The head toppled off into the dirt, and the body collapsed beside it.

A sweep of his gaze across the clearing showed that matters had not improved. Another undead ashigaru was attacking Rimei, though it hadn’t managed to harm her yet. Heki was battling two at once. Shuichi was fending off another. The remaining living ashigaru had arranged themselves in a circle and were battling their erstwhile comrades. As Tatsuo watched, two more bodies rose up and started toward him.

He would have to deal with these before he could go to Rimei’s aid. He stepped forward, shouting in defiance, and then stared amazed as both of them toppled over with arrows sticking out of their backs. As they scrambled to get back up, Hiruma Kogoe emerged from the forest with the Apieshu and the Ishikibel beside her. The serpent people went to the aid of the living ashigaru, Kogoe drew her sword and ran to Heki’s defense, and Tatsuo moved to support Rimei.

“This is black magic!” Rimei shouted while they fought.

Before Tatsuo could reply, a shriek of pain cut through the noise of battle. He looked around to see the Ishikibel writhing on the ground with a spear sticking out of its shoulder. Three undead ashigaru converged on it, and before Tatsuo could act they had run it through with their spears. A second shriek, this time of fury, came from the edge of the clearing, and
he turned to see that the living ashigaru were now attacking the Apieshu. "No!" Tatsuo shouted, running toward them. They ignored him, and he realized that there was nothing he could do—they would not take orders from him, and he could not kill another Rokugani in defense of an outsider. Before he could appeal to Shuichi, the Apieshu was dead.

With that, a sudden silence descended on the clearing. "Kogoe!" Tatsuo said, approaching her. "What happened? Why are you here?"

"When the Apieshu returned he said he had found a trail of the Foul in the forest, and the Ishikibel wanted to track it. I went with them to see what I could learn. When we realized the trail was heading here, I convinced them to help protect the camp." There were lines of stress around her eyes. "I don’t know how I will explain this to the Shushual."

"You aren’t explaining anything," Shuichi said. "You are staying here."

"But I said I would stay with them"

"That is a decision for your lord to make, not you," Shuichi said curtly. "This camp is now unsalvageable; we will take the timber we have and go."

"They died fighting our battle," Kogoe argued. "We at least need to send word to their lord of their death."

Before Shuichi could reply Heki broke in. "We shall give them an honorable pyre, apart from the ashigaru. It’s all we have time for."

"I-" Shuichi hesitated. "Agreed. Now go and organize a crew to load up the timber and another to build the pyres." His attention shifted to Tatsuo and Rimei. "You have the answer you were chasing. Now go."