



Legend of the
Five Rings

Curse of Honor

CAN HE FIND GLORY
AMONGST THE RUINS?

DAVID ANNANDALE

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A Legend of the Five Rings Novel

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Legend of the Five Rings™

*The reckless pursuit of honor exposes an empire to demonic invasion, in this epic fantasy novel of duty and warfare, set in the extraordinary world of **Legend of the Five Rings**.*

The realm of Rokugan: a land of samurai and mystics, mad dragons and divine beings – a land where honor is stronger than steel. The clans have defended and served the Emperor for a thousand years both on the battlefield and in Rokugan's courts. While conflict and political intrigue divides the clans, the true threat awaits in the darkness of the Shadowlands, behind the vast Kaiu Wall. There, in the twisted wastelands, an evil corruption endlessly seeks the downfall of the empire. The rules of Rokugan's society are absolute, and the Great Clans must always maintain their honor, lest they lose everything in the pursuit of glory.

CHAPTER 1

Above the mountain peaks, he saw winter closing in on them, and he knew that this day would be added to the litany of his failures.

Hida no Kakeguchi Haru had looked back north to check on the progress of the merchant caravan. The slope of the path he had chosen through the Twilight Mountains was steep here, and the train of wagons was stretching out more than he would like as the horses struggled to pull their laden wagons uphill. At first, he was merely irritated. Everything about this journey was taking longer than he had planned, and every day that passed drew his return to Striking Dawn Castle shamefully further from what he had promised.

Then he saw the clouds. Heavy, shimmering silver-gray with threat, they were a wave breaking over the mountains. Haru had never seen the dividing line of the seasons before, yet he knew that was what he was witnessing now. Those clouds were drawing a barrier between the earth and the sky. When it passed over his head, it would seal away the light and warmth of the sun. And white ruin would fall through the air.

Already, the wind from the north was blowing colder. It pried at the seams of Haru's armor. He could feel it at the back of his neck, gnawing. Soon it would be numbing.

A mass of cloud billowed slowly forward, the prow of a ship spreading the wake of cold. It was the shape of inevitability. It was the announcement of his failure.

The caravan had left the Summerlands over a week ago. There was still the best part of a day's march to Striking Dawn. A day's march in clement weather. And it was already the hour of the horse.

"Will we reach Striking Dawn before the storm arrives, Lieutenant Haru?" Chen, the head merchant, had seen the clouds too. Sitting on his wagon, his fingers tight around the reins, the gray-haired man was looking at Haru with that expression the merchant thought was properly reserved, but radiated fear and need. The man disgusted Haru. It was a constant effort to keep his contempt submerged. The mere sound of Chen's voice, rough as if he perpetually needed to clear his throat, and with a timbre stopping a hair's breadth from being a whine, was exhausting.

"We will arrive safely at Striking Dawn," Haru said. He disliked speaking to someone of so low a station. To address Chen was to stoop, and there had been too much stooping in Haru's life. Yet reassuring Chen was a necessary evil. The man was nervous. Unchecked, the anxiety of the caravan's leader would spread. What Haru needed more than anything else was for everyone to focus on making the best speed possible. "You should have no doubt about the successful outcome of this journey," he said.

Chen's eyes widened as he realized the insult he had

unintentionally given. "I am sure you are correct, Lieutenant Haru," he said. "Please excuse the clumsiness of my question. I did not mean to imply doubt."

Haru gave the other man a long stare, then turned away. He had made his point. Now Chen would be more scared of him than of the approaching winter. For a while, at any rate. That would contain the possibility of panic.

As long as everyone else faced forward and did not look at what was coming.

Ishiko rode up beside him. She was the most veteran guard in the escort squad Haru commanded. Her armor was less burnished than his. It showed the tolls of the road more clearly. Haru's armor gleamed because of the care he gave it upon rising every morning. He had fought in almost as many battles as Ishiko. Yet the ease with which she wore her armor, as if it were a second skin, as did Fujiki, Hino and Ekei, the other bushi in the squad, had the effect of heightening Haru's insecurity. Ishiko was never insubordinate. She had never challenged his orders. And still, how often he had read judgment just beneath her neutral gaze, whether it was present or not.

"You saw, then?" Ishiko asked. She gave her head a subtle jerk in the direction of the clouds.

"I did," said Haru.

"The snow will hit us."

"I know. So we will march through the snow to Striking Dawn." He spoke, he thought, with the right degree of calm certainty. His anxiety diminished. Delay would be less significant than the achievement of bringing the last caravan home, not before the coming of winter, but *through* it. He

pictured the arrival, and the sense of accomplishment he would feel. This was good. This was something he needed, and for more than his sense of self-worth. It would, he thought, improve his standing in his mother's eyes. As heir to Daimyō Akemi, he needed to do better to show he deserved to be. Perhaps then Barako might also look at him with favor. Maybe.

If he was honest, he wasn't sure which he hoped for more.

"We are approaching dangerous terrain," said Ishiko. "Crossing it in a snowstorm will be more than difficult."

Haru thought about what was ahead. Ishiko was right. The ridge they would soon reach was completely exposed. The hope of glory turned slippery in his grasp. He sighed. "This voyage has been cursed by ill luck," he said. Days of bad rain had sent torrents and rockfalls across the path of the caravan again and again. "One less flash flood, and we would already be at Striking Dawn. One less wall of debris."

"We have had our share of obstacles," Ishiko said.

What does that mean? Do you agree with me? Or is it that all of these events were predictable and I should have allowed for more time? Maybe I should have taken a different route? Too many possibilities. Maybe all were true. Or maybe Ishiko meant nothing more than what she said, and he was hearing the voices of his own doubts. He heard them often. They were loud enough at the best of times.

The rains were not my fault. We could not have gone faster. The storm is not my fault. It is the risk that attends the final caravan. This could have happened to anyone. It could have happened to Ochiba.

Only it had not happened to the commander of Striking

Dawn's forces. It was happening to him. *What matters is what I do now.*

"We could take shelter here," Ishiko suggested. They were in a wide pass. The mountainside to the right was only a few hundred yards away, and there were numerous overhangs. They would provide protection from the snow, and some relief from the wind.

"Nothing big enough for the whole caravan," said Haru. "We'll be very spread out." He shook his head. "I don't want to be trapped here."

"You think there will be enough snow to block the pass?"

"Not this one. There are much narrower ones ahead. And we have no way of knowing how long the storm will last."

"We have supplies aplenty, if it comes to that. We have enough for many days."

The thought of a prolonged siege by the storm was not a comforting one. "For food, yes," Haru said. "But for heat? For how long?" There were so many ways a snowstorm at these altitudes could be lethal. Cold was the first of them. "I will not risk it. We push on."

This caravan is all that my mother will entrust to me. She has made me a bodyguard to merchants, and how can I blame her? I deserve no better. If I cannot even complete this task?

What would Barako think if she saw us now? The thought of Striking Dawn's other lieutenant of the Kakeguchi was too piercingly painful. He pushed it away.

I will not fail. I must not.

"Where do you plan to stop for the night?" Ishiko asked.

Haru's original intention for the day had been to keep going as long as possible. He had hoped to reach Striking Dawn

without having to spend another night in the mountains. He had known that would mean continuing to travel after sunset. He had hoped to make up enough time that it would not be necessary to travel long in the dark.

You hoped. Did you really think it was possible?

I didn't think. Not the way I should have. And here we are.

Where do we stop for the night? He had no good answer. He could not even guess how long they had before snow made further travel impossible. "We keep going," he said, conscious that he was repeating himself. He looked straight ahead as he spoke, as if he could already see their goal. "We keep going for as long as we can. The further we can get, the better." The words sounded meaningless even to him. It did not matter how firmly he spoke. His confidence was a hollow shell.

Ishiko said nothing. She nodded. He had issued his commands, and that was an end to it.

Haru almost asked her what she would do instead. Pride stopped him.

They rode on in silence.

As the hour of the goat began, the caravan reached the top of the pass and started across a long ridge. It rose gradually and then descended, tracing an arc a few miles long before the route entered another pass. The ridge was wide enough for three to ride abreast with confidence in clement weather. Haru ordered a single file. The wind was growing stronger, and the slope to both sides of the ridgeline was steep.

Overhead, the clouds had arrived. They hid the sky behind a shield of heavy gray. Haru glared at them, silently commanding them to hold off, demanding that winter delay one more day.

In answer, the clouds mocked him. Half an hour after the last pack horse had left the comparative shelter of the pass, the first snowflakes fell.

They were few at first, innocuous in their gentle fall, tiny and light, dancing on the wind, uninterested in ever touching the ground. They landed one at a time on Haru's arm, lingering a bit, then melting away. They posed no threat. They were barely visible.

The escalation happened gradually. The flakes became more numerous and more insistent. The wind picked up. Its gusts turned into blows. Haru fought against them to remain steady in the saddle as the buffeting increased. The snow no longer danced on the wind. It flew against Haru's armor with a purpose. Though the wind was from the north, mercifully blowing against the back of the caravan, errant gusts hurled the snow into his face with stinging force. Flakes caught in his eyelashes. He wiped them away brusquely, cursing under his breath as they blurred his vision.

"It's snowing," said Chen.

"Merchant," Haru snapped, "if you have nothing to say except to point out the obvious, you will be silent."

Chen shrank from the reprimand. He huddled in on himself, wrapped in a cloak. He looked as if he hoped he could disappear behind Ishiko.

The rocky ground began to change from gray to white. Midway across the ridge, there was enough snow for the horses and wagons to leave prints.

Haru glanced back at Ishiko. She was concentrating on the road ahead, checking behind at the caravan periodically.

"We will manage this," he said, though she had asked nothing.

“We are,” she agreed.

For now, Haru thought. That’s what you’re thinking, isn’t it?

The wind picked up again. What seemed like a gust hit, and kept hitting. Haru looked back in time to see one of the merchants leading a pack horse slip and fall. Ekei was close by, and rode up, staying close until the man had regained his footing.

“The visibility will be a problem before long,” Ishiko said.

“I know.” The pass they had left behind was a blurry vagueness in the distance. The peaks ahead were the same. To the left and right, the vista was disappearing into limbo. It would take the best part of an hour at least, if the snow did not descend much harder, before the caravan could reach the next pass.

If the snowfall did not grow worse. If it did, and it became impossible to see where they were walking, they would be trapped in the open.

“We should go faster,” Haru said.

“I do not think we can. It has been a long march without a rest already. The heimin on foot could not go faster even if it were not snowing.”

Haru almost insisted on driving the merchants harder. *They will be worse off if we do not go faster.* The hope of reaching Striking Dawn was fading with every heartbeat. There were no good outcomes to the day now. Being caught on the ridge was the worst of the bad ones, though.

Whose fault is that? You could have stopped when Ishiko suggested finding shelter.

Too late for that. We must go on, and we must get out of the open. There are no choices. It is that or death.

“No faster,” Haru agreed, “but no slower. No pausing. Not until we are off this ridge.”

Despite his words, he urged his horse forward. If he could only coax a little bit more speed out of the merchants. Not enough to be dangerous, just enough to get to the next pass. Chen would make sure he kept up if he saw Haru pulling ahead, and the other merchants would do the same.

And then? If we reach the pass, what then?

He had no answer. He pushed the question from his mind. The snow forced him to concentrate on the present moment. He had enough to think about to make sure he, and everyone in his charge, stayed on the disappearing trail.

The light began to fail. The storm declared its intentions, and sank its claws into the mountains. The clouds descended, obscuring the mountaintops. The wind howled. The wind shrieked. The snow came down in blankets. The pass seemed to recede further and further from view. There was less and less of the world around Haru. There was only gray instead, streaked with the implacable white and inhabited by vague, shadowy masses that might not be real any longer. He could still see where he was going, though he had to squint against the driving flakes. He could barely make out the rear of the caravan, though.

“We will have to stop soon,” Ishiko said, “or we will walk off into air.”

“If we stop here, we die,” said Haru. *Faster. Still a bit faster. We must be almost there.*

Haru tried to make out the pass. The curtains of snow hid it from him. And then someone cried out.

He whirled. Fifty yards back, a pack horse had slipped and

fallen. It whinnied in panic, its legs flailing. It began to slide down the slope. The merchant guiding it was tangled in the lead rope and fell too. The animal dragged him with it towards the drop.

Eikei and Hino were close. They leapt off their horses and ran to help. Hino grabbed the merchant and hauled back, digging her heels into the deepening snow. Eikei grabbed for the reins, seeking to free the man's legs.

The ridge was too narrow to ride past the wagons, so Haru and Ishiko leapt from their mounts and ran hard. Already, the snow was deep enough to slow them down. Haru was wary of his footing, horribly conscious of how long it would take to reach the position of the accident.

The horse kicked wildly. A hoof struck Eikei in his chest plate. He fell. He and the horse slid further down, dragging the merchant with them. Hino could not hold him. She began to slip too.

CHAPTER 2

Grimacing into the wind, Haru sprinted. The merchant, Eikei and Hino were moments away from plunging off the ridgeback. Haru saw the scale of his failure expand. He could not deliver the caravan to Striking Dawn on time. He could not reach the castle before winter. His charges were not in shelter, and the storm was upon them. And now to lose fellow bushi...

Not like this. Not like this. Not like this.

He tore down the slope, heedless now of the danger to himself. Eikei was unconscious. The horse was whinnying in terror. Hino cried out from the pain of the effort to slow their descent, but she held on.

Haru drew his katana, and launched himself over the last few yards. With one hand, he grabbed Eikei's left arm by the leather plating of his ashigaru armor. With his other hand, he cut the reins.

The horse disappeared over the edge, screaming. Eikei's momentum pulled him forward. Haru dug his heels into the slope. Snow built up against his boots. He stabbed his blade

into the ground, a desperate anchor. He finally came to a stop.

Eikei's legs dangled over the precipice. The weight was pulling Haru's arm from its socket. He couldn't move. If he tried, he would lose his grip, or he would fall with Eikei. His grip was uncertain. His fingers began to cramp.

Then Ishiko and Hino scrambled to his side and took hold of Eikei. Together, they pulled him back up. They carried Eikei to the front of the caravan and placed him in Chen's wagon.

The winds were blowing even stronger. All trace of the mountains and the pass ahead had vanished. From this end of the caravan, Haru could not see the rear.

"What is going to happen to us?" Chen asked. "What will we do? What will we do?" Fear was making him disrespectful.

Murmurs and sobs came from the wagon behind. The wind was too loud to hear much else. Haru did not have to. The mood of the caravan was clear.

Hino turned to him, waiting for his orders before heading back down the line.

"Stop your sniveling!" Haru snapped at Chen. "Do you have no honor at all?"

"It is so cold. We can't see."

"This is snow. It is a snowstorm. It is not the coming of darkness from the Shadowlands."

"But what do we do?"

"We do what we have been doing. We move forward. Would you prefer to stay? You can stay and die, if you like. That would rid me of you, at least."

Chen shook his head. "Please forgive me, Lieutenant Haru," he said, remembering his place.

Haru ignored him. To Hino, he said, "Tell Fujiki we keep going." The last of Haru's bushi was bringing up the rear of the caravan. "We should be less than a mile from the pass."

The caravan moved on. Though the pass had disappeared behind the curtain of falling snow, Haru could still see the ridge for several yards ahead. The way forward was clear, though it seemed to be a way forward into nothingness. The wind hammered at his back. Snow drove against his armor. It fell almost horizontally. Gusts hurled it into spiral dances. The day darkened to twilight.

The pace of the caravan slowed to a crawl as the horses struggled to pull the carts through the deepening snow. Haru lost track of time. Every moment was the same, just his horse plodding on in the endless whiteness, nothing to see except the same narrow stretch of ground. The whiteness grew stronger and stronger. Wind and snow were one and the same, smothering light and hope. The perpetual strain of marching forward was hypnotic. The whiteness, a whiteness that brought darkness with it, closed in, a fist, a curse, a mockery.

I am winter, the wind seemed to howl. You and your dreams of a restored reputation are less than nothing. I will show you. I bring nothing, and to nothing I will cast you.

The cold gnawed at him, a dog with a bone. It pried open the seams of his armor. It sank through his skin. It congealed his blood. It nestled into his core and made itself a den. It would never leave. He shrank in on himself, huddling tighter for a warmth that was no longer there.

"We have to stop," said Ishiko.

Haru blinked, startled out of his trance of effort. He

brought his horse to a halt. The creaking of the wheels behind him had ceased.

“It’s too dangerous,” said Ishiko.

Haru’s attention had so narrowed, he had been focused only on the next few feet of snow before him. He had not realized that was now all he could see. He suppressed a shudder. Ishiko was right about the danger. It would be easy now to wander off the ridge, and then fall down the slope into the abyss. Why was he still riding? What was he thinking?

He dismounted and peered through the whiteness, searching for some hint of landscape, the slightest phantom of a mountain. There was nothing. The world had deserted him. There was only the presence of the void. The terrible drop waited, hungry, for Haru and his charges. The ground on which he stood was suddenly a tiny island, and a step in any direction would be fatal. He struggled against vertigo and the pull of the fall.

Lead them to me. Embrace the end. You can do nothing else.

Haru shook his head, hard, pushing away the fancies of despair. Yes, Ishiko was right. They had to stop. Only they must not.

“We cannot stay here,” he said. “That is certain death.”

“So is walking this ridge blind.”

“I agree. So we must counter the risk of our march.” He saw what he had to do. A wave of giddiness passed through him. He bit his tongue to hold back mad laughter, and the sensation of being *glad* that death hovered close to the caravan, because he knew how to save everyone. He did not know how to reach Striking Dawn safely. He did not even know how to survive the day. But he saw the way out of the present moment.

That sufficed for him. It would be a victory, and he would show that he was capable of leadership. It would be a spark of light in the darkness of failure, and it would warm him.

“Gather rope,” Haru said to Ishiko. “If there is not enough rope, tie cloths together. Anything to make tethers so that every member of the caravan is fastened to another. We will move forward as one, carefully, one step at a time. I will lead. If any one of us steps wrong and falls, the others will hold fast.

And then what?

That was the question Ishiko did not ask. She accepted his command and went to work.

And then what?

The words were Haru’s curse upon himself. He hurried to put his plan into effect, trying to outrun the question.

Fingers clumsy with cold, it took more than an hour to finish tying the carts together. No one rode now, and the merchants fastened one wrist to the animal or wagon they trudged beside. It would work, Haru thought. The caravan had the strength of unity now. A single person could make a mistake. They would be safe, and the caravan would be alerted to the danger.

By the time they were ready to move again, the cold was ferocious. When he faced into the wind, Haru experienced the tempest as a pure, sharp pain. His skin turned numb, but the pain did not diminish. The snow was knee-deep, turning every step into a heroic effort.

“We follow in your footsteps, Lieutenant Haru,” Ishiko said.

Haru grunted, this time sure he perceived her other meaning: *Do not walk us off a cliff*. He started forward. *Lead*

them. Lead them well. They are following in your footsteps. Show them that you deserve their faith.

The progress was agonizingly slow. Haru thought carefully before each step. Behind him, a trail formed, growing more certain and easier to walk as his followers marched through it, packing down the snow. For him, though, there was only the white. The blinding white, the stinging white, the mesmerizing white that erased the difference between ground and air. He had no way of knowing, before he set a foot down, if he was still going in the right direction. All he had was hope, and precious little of it.

He struggled on. Ishiko was not much more than a periodic tug on the rope around his waist. When he looked back, the blast of the wind and the sting of the snow were so strong, he could barely see her. And Chen was a vague, stumbling shape. The rest of the caravan was a mere shadow, vanishing in the whiteness.

He would have to order torches to be lit very soon. He hoped they would reach the pass while there was still light enough to walk without them. Without shelter, the storm would smother any open fire. He was not sure there were enough lanterns on hand to show the way for the entire caravan.

Show the way! Show what way?

Onward, slowly, onward into numbness and cold and blindness and the end of day. Haru was alone on the ridge, alone in the howling and the white, the white, the white. And he was glad he was alone. He wanted to be alone. The closer the ultimate failure of death loomed, the more he wished to seal himself away from the caravan. But even with his charges

reduced to less than the traces of ghosts, he felt the weight of silent judgment. It came from Ishiko, and Hino, and Fujiki. It came from Chen and his people, though they had no right to judge him. No one had said a word, and there were no faces for him to see. It did not matter. He could feel the judgment. It sat heavily on his shoulders. It forced his feet deeper into the snow, and made it that much harder to lift his legs to take another step.

Soon the day would end. Soon the darkness would come, and they would not be able to move at all. Death would come, and when it did, it would strip away more than the last of his reputation. It would destroy his last chance to be the warrior and the succor he should be for his family. He would journey to Meido with nothing to show for his life but shame. He held his rank of lieutenant only because he was heir to the daimyō. His performance on the battlefield was mediocre at best. Shameful at worst. He was his own harshest judge in that regard. No one had accused him of being responsible for the death of his father ten years earlier, when the Kakeguchi had repelled an assault on the Wall. But he knew. His strategy had been poor, his position had been overwhelmed by goblins, and his father, Genichi, had overstretched his own forces in rushing to his aid.

No, no one had blamed him. But in every engagement since, his contingent was either in reserve, or acting in support of an action led by Ochiba, the captain of the guard at Striking Dawn, or by Lieutenant Barako. It was as if Akemi had ordered them to act as his battlefield nursemaids for the rest of his life.

The worst part of it was that he was grateful.

The light became more and more dim. Once, twice, three times, and then four, he wandered off the ridge in spite of his care and deliberate pace. The snow gave way beneath him, and he started to slide. Ishiko caught him, and when, once, she started to slip too, the solid mass of Chen's wagon held her back. Haru was able to scramble back up to safety, the wisdom of his plan justified, yet his dignity even further eroded.

He had wrapped a scarf around his helmet, but it did not prevent ice from building up on his eyelashes, threatening to freeze his eyes shut. He kept having to rub his face to break the ice, and then the cold would make his eyes water, and the process would start over again. He was trapped in an eternal cycle of repetitive, painful, pointless effort. Perhaps he had already died. Perhaps this was what had been awaiting him in Meido.

The sound of the wind changed. The snow eddies ahead became more violent. He squinted, struggling to see through the billowing, bellowing curtains of the storm, and he saw it. A mountain face was close on the left. And so was another on the right.

They had reached the pass.

"We are there!" He had to shout for Ishiko to hear. He wanted to laugh in the giddiness of victory. He had to remind himself this was no victory. They were still miles and miles from Striking Dawn. The caravan had escaped the exposure of the ridge. That was all.

Even so, he grinned with fierce relief. He claimed victory over the danger of a single moment. It was satisfying enough.

Were those grateful shouts he heard? Or just his imagination

shaping the sound of the wind into what he wanted to hear. He decided there were shouts. He would not be the only one to seize onto the mirage of safety.

He walked more quickly, struggling at first against the pull of the rope until, slowly, the rest of his samurai and the merchants walked faster too, freed from the immediate terror of falling off a cliff.

“To the right,” he called to Ishiko. The pass was in a sharp cleft between the mountains. The bottom of the pass was a treacherous gorge, but the path was on a wide platform of even ground extending out of the mountain on the west. To Haru’s left, though he could not see it, he knew there was the sharp drop into the gorge. But to the right, the ground was level, and then encountered a vertical cliff wall. With the mountain at their side they would have a faithful guide through the pass.

And then what?

He had a few minutes before he had to think about that question again. He banished it from his thoughts.

In the pass, the wind blew stronger, screaming as if at the prey that had escaped it on the open ridge. The snow was deeper too, already forming drifts closer to the rock face. The greater effort seemed a small price as the high, black wall came clearly into view. Haru approached until he could reach out and touch the granite. He still could not see forward more than a couple of yards, but there was no risk of disaster for the time being.

He would leave the ropes attached, though. If anyone fell too far behind the rest of the caravan, or wandered off at all from the path, they could easily be lost. If the snowfall became much worse, the danger would be a certainty.

“What are your orders, Lieutenant Haru?” Ishiko asked.

And then what? She was forcing him to think about more than the next footstep. He resented that, but she was right. She almost always was, and that was fortunate for him.

“Forward. Always forward.” *For now.*

“I am grateful for your leadership,” she said, her tone fully respectful and devoid of any trace of irony. “We are fortunate that you have a plan in place to deal with the exposed regions that lie ahead.”

Of course, there were more ridges to come. He knew there were. He knew very well. But the need for a victory, for any kind of victory, had narrowed his attention to the present moment. It was as if he could no longer think clearly about the future. And he had to, or everyone would die. There was another ridge between here and Striking Dawn that was even longer than the one they had just left behind. By the time the caravan reached it, night would have fallen. It would be impossible to cross.

Haru realized he was still imagining returning to the castle without stopping. The fear of what seeking shelter for the night might mean had made him refuse to countenance the possibility.

Think this through. You must, or you fail in your duty.

I know. I know. We go no further. That is the truth.

“We must seek shelter here,” Haru said. “We will wait for the morning, and hope the storm has abated enough for us to move on then.” *And hope that the snow is not ten feet deep and trapping us in the pass.*

There was no shelter here. The cliff was sheer, unbroken. As he started forward again, Haru racked his memory about

what lay ahead, trying to remember the precise shape of the mountain face. *You must know it. You've gone through this pass often enough.* His memory refused to give up the detail he had never had reason to notice before. He couldn't picture the cliffs any more than he could see them.

He almost asked Ishiko if she knew what was coming. He stopped himself. The question would be an admission that he did not know what he was doing, and her answer would make no difference. The wind was shrieking through the pass, seeking vengeance for the caravan's escape from the ridge. There was no choice but to go on. They had to keep moving until they found refuge, or they died.

Onward, and the drifts were deeper yet. Onward, and the light was failing, close to death. Haru tried to move faster, but the wagons kept getting stuck in the snow. Everyone was in the grip of exhaustion and cold. Haru was barely able to lift his legs. The wind carried the moans and weeping of the merchants to him, the chorus of his failure.

A deeper note entered the refrain, a low, long, sharp cracking. Then a rumble, a thunder that did not pass but only grew louder.

"Avalanche!" Haru shouted. "Hurry!"

The merchants took up his cry and repeated it down the length of the caravan.

It was impossible to tell where the avalanche was coming from. In the pass, the shouts of the mountains bounced off one another until directions were meaningless. The thunder rumbled from everywhere at once. If the snow was coming down on the caravan's position, everyone was doomed.

Haru plunged through the snow, praying that in another

ten feet, or another ten feet, or another ten feet, he would find any kind of shelter. All he asked for was an overhang. Anything other than the vertical cliff.

The thunder of the avalanche built in a fearsome crescendo. The mountains roared their anger. They bellowed their announcement of his absolute failure. There was no shelter. And there was no hope.

Then the thunder faded. The wind shrieked to new heights, assaulted by the passage, swift and violent, of the snow. Where the avalanche fell, Haru could not see. All that mattered was that it did not fall here.

He pushed on. The caravan had been granted more time. He had another chance to save his charges. He struggled forward another ten feet, and then another ten feet, the wall of rock mercilessly featureless ahead of him, but visible for so short a distance that there was always the chance, just a bit further, just a little bit further, that they would find refuge.

There. *There*. Was that something different he saw? Did the rock turn in? Was that the dark line of cleft?

For just a moment, he was able to see almost a hundred yards ahead before the veil of snow concealed the vision from him. It might have been an illusion.

It might not be, though.

Haru plowed through snow three feet deep. There *was* shelter there. There had to be. He willed it.

The cracking thunder came again, and the roar that followed, the snarl of a terrible beast. The clamor of echoes overwhelmed the song of the wind.

Haru did not have to see the avalanche to know that this time, there would be no mercy. "I see shelter!" he called. It

did not matter if he really did or not. If he was right, they had hope. If he was wrong, no one would live to condemn his lie.

The roar, the roar, louder, louder. The onrush of white death.

He ran, hauling on the rope as if he could yank the entire caravan after him. His lungs were full of stones. Breathing was such agony he could not speak. The pains of fear and hope worse yet. He felt the tug of Ishiko racing too. There was no need to shout a warning. The entire caravan knew that chance had become the enemy. The merchants and their horses would be panicking. There was nowhere to run except for the dream of shelter, the dream that had vanished as soon as he had seen it.

Nowhere to run, but nothing to do except run.

Haru ran. He ran through the white darkness, until the roar descended on them all.

CHAPTER 3

The cries of the merchants filled the smothering dark. The lamentations were close by, but in the pitch black, Haru could not see the merchants. They were as invisible to him as he was to them. For a few moments, he could wrap himself in oblivion and not confront the cost and the scale of his failure. For a few moments, though it shamed him to admit this to himself, he could rest in the illusion of irresponsibility. In this void, there was nothing he had to do any longer.

“I am here, Lieutenant Haru,” said Ishiko.

He had been named. The illusion was over. He was summoned to resume his duties.

“I am here,” said Hino. “I have Ekei with me.”

Silence from Fujiki.

“Give us some light,” Haru commanded.

After much fumbling, Chen managed to get a lantern lit. From its glow, others spread as the surviving merchants found their lanterns, and the surroundings came into view.

The caravan was inside a deep cave. The entrance, blocked by the avalanche, was about fifteen feet wide and high. Past

the entrance, the ceiling went higher as the cave bored into the mountainside, until the cavern became a high split in the rock, as if struck by a monstrous ax. After the first fifty feet, the cave narrowed until it was a fissure no more than five feet wide that vanished into the heart of the mountain.

Haru took a breath and with his bushi began to take stock and to count the cost.

“A bit more than half the caravan remains,” Ishiko summarized when they were done.

He nodded. The rest of the merchants were gone. So was Fujiki. No one said they were fortunate that the losses were not worse. The shame of what had been lost was too great.

Haru picked up a lantern and strode through the merchants to the entrance. He looked up at a solid wall of snow.

“We will not be leaving again in a hurry,” said Ishiko.

“There is no need to,” Haru answered. “We are safe from the storm here. We have food enough, and we can make all the water we need.” They could survive in this cave almost indefinitely. “We will dig our way out, however long it takes. If the storm is done, we move on. If it is not, we wait it out. Divide these laborers into digging teams. One hour each. That will give them something to focus on.” He turned and looked at the merchants. “We are safe,” he said again, more loudly. “The danger is past. We will prepare a way out for when it is time for us to resume our journey.” He chose his words carefully, making the snow seem like a useful tool instead of an impenetrable wall trapping them inside.

Haru and his bushi led the digging shifts. He wanted to set the example of industry, of the calm determination that would re-emphasize the lesson that there was nothing to fear.

This was what he told himself.

And it worked. It *was* the right decision. Haru took the first shift, using one of the spades in the caravan's supplies. He scarred the snow with the first cuts himself. The unblemished whiteness was an ominous sight. It was too final. He dug into the wall, and turned it back into mere snow. What lay ahead was a long, arduous task, not an impossibility. The merchants on his shift attacked the barrier with a will.

The wails that had come with the darkness ceased entirely. The merchants no longer mourned the lost. They were grateful to be among the survivors. And they were grateful also to their savior.

"Lieutenant Haru," said Chen as he dug into the snow and added to the pile behind him, "we are in your debt forever. Your foresight has preserved us."

Haru grunted. He kept working. He clenched his jaw shut to keep himself from lashing out at the merchant's sycophancy. *I do not deserve your thanks.*

"Lieutenant Haru..." Chen began again.

Be silent! "Save your breath for work," Haru said, coldly, but keeping his temper.

Chen's thanks grated. They shattered the wall of mindlessness that Haru sought to create through heavy labor.

Foresight. What a bitter joke that was. If Chen were not such a spineless creature, Haru would have suspected him of satire. It would be a pleasant thing, a *joyous* thing, to say that he had known the cave would be here, that this had been his goal all along. Instead, he had only luck or fate to thank. Both shamed him. He wasn't sure which made him more uneasy.

Chen kept quiet now, but it was too late. Haru attacked the

snow as if it were his guilt given form. He sweated with effort. His muscles began to ache as he punished himself with the heaviest load he could take with each spadeful. Nothing he did let his mind rest.

He kept seeing Barako's face. She did not look on him, as he so often wished she would, with tenderness. She looked at him instead with judgment in her eyes. In reality though, he had never seen her do that, either. There had never been anything other than a respectful neutrality in her gaze.

Haru had no illusions about himself and Barako. He would, in due course, be wed to the woman of his mother's choosing, selected for political advantage and the extension of the lineage. Barako was a warrior, not a courtier. She served under Ochiba, the captain of Striking Dawn's guard.

Her political unsuitability was only one obstacle, though. There was also Haru's incompetence. He had yet to perform on the battlefield in a way that would measure up to Barako. He had never done anything that would earn her respect, let alone her admiration. That neutral, disinterested gaze hurt. He would move mountains to see some other emotion directed his way.

I've done that now, haven't I? I've brought one down on us.

No, he had no illusions about Barako. But he had his dreams. He had been thinking of those dreams when he had pushed the caravan onto the ridge and away from certain shelter. He imagined how she would look him when he finally did reach Striking Dawn, with half a caravan or less. The condemnation he pictured was another dream. It was a nightmare. It was no more real than the tenderness he was used to conjuring for himself. Barako was the model of honor. She would no more

show her disappointment in him than she would a forbidden love.

That means nothing. She would not show what she does not feel.

He dug even harder at the snow. *Be silent*, he shouted silently, at himself now instead of Chen. *Put this aside. It doesn't matter. It will never matter. Those dreams were foolish. Now they're dust. Get back with what you can. That's all that's left.*

Haru threw himself into the work. He would have been grateful for total exhaustion. The more Barako and thoughts of shame haunted him, the more ferociously he worked to put them aside. The dig turned into a backbreaking rhythm. He worked until the cavern felt like a furnace. The cold of winter was far from him. He only felt it now and then on the back of his neck, a single point of cold. It scratched at his mind. The chill cut through the sweat to make his skin prickle.

Just before his first shift ended, when despite all his efforts, Barako and who she was loomed in his mind's eye, he heard the whisper. Close and far, a breath in his ear and an echo lost in the stars. When he stopped moving, the whisper was gone.

That was her voice.

No, it wasn't. You didn't hear it properly. You didn't even hear what it said. You must have misheard.

When his shift was over, Haru moved back in the cavern, away from the merchants and the other bushi, putting some distance between himself and the din of the work. Taking up his watch duty, he listened for the whisper.

He did not hear it again. He did discover why he had felt cold on his neck. A draft blew in from the depths of the cave. It was sporadic, and so gentle it would have been unnoticeable

except that it was so cold. It came after long intervals, a slow sigh of the mountain.

Haru looked into the darkness of the narrowing cave. He wondered how far the fissure went.

Ishiko was leading this shift of excavators. Haru watched her as he waited for the next touch of the cold, and still listened for the whisper. He began to lose track of time. Ishiko jerked at one point and looked around, startled, then resumed her digging.

Haru had heard nothing. He looked at the other bushi. Ekei was unconscious, and too badly injured to be of use. Hino was asleep, resting before her turn digging and keeping watch. Haru waited until the hourglass he had taken from a wagon marked the end of the shift. It was, as near as he could guess, the hour of the ox.

Ishiko woke Hino and then came to Haru to relieve his watch and let him rest.

“What did you hear?” Haru asked.

Ishiko hesitated. But he had not given her the option to say she had heard nothing. “A whisper, I thought,” she said.

“What did it say?”

“I don’t know. I must have been mistaken.”

“I don’t think you were,” Haru said.

She nodded in understanding of his implication.

He felt the exhalation of the mountain against the back of his neck again. “What do you make of that draft?” he asked.

“I’m not sure. It might come from another entrance.”

“That is my thought as well.” He wanted to keep the whisper separate in his mind from the draft. There were other possibilities. Neither Haru nor Ishiko wanted to articulate

them just yet. “We need to see how far this cave goes,” Haru said. “And where it goes.”

Ishiko nodded.

They spoke briefly to Hino. Then Ishiko took one of the lanterns and they started deeper into the gloom. As the cave narrowed, it became a tunnel. The ceiling was invisible. Ishiko held up the lantern. The fissure above them never closed. The crack seemed to run all the way to the peak of the mountain.

Soon the passage was no more than five feet wide. It turned sharply, but always straightened, going ever further into the mountainside. It kept heading west. The sounds of the digging became muffled very quickly. Soon they were inaudible. Haru and Ishiko were alone, two ants tunneling through a hairline crack in stone.

The cold draft came at sporadic intervals.

“Is it stronger now?” Haru asked.

“I think it is,” said Ishiko.

Haru kept listening for the whisper. He wanted to hear it again, to learn what it was. He hoped he would not hear it, so he could dismiss it as an illusion that he and Ishiko had somehow shared at different moments.

The air in the deep mountain was still. It was oppressive. It was heavy with waiting.

After half an hour, the relentless westward direction of the passage began to worry Haru. It was also sloping downward. It had been almost since Haru and Ishiko had left the caravan, and the descent had been much steeper in the last while.

Ishiko must have had the same thought. “If we keep going this way...” she began.

“I know.” They were deep now into the last of the mountain chain before the Kaiu Kabe, the Carpenter Wall against the Shadowlands, the region of darkness where all that was evil dwelled, all the hungry dead and the demonic oni that fell under the dominion of the fallen kami Fu Leng. “We still have a long way to go,” Haru said.

He tried to picture the caravan’s precise position. Striking Dawn was south of the Castle of the Forgotten, midway between it and Hida Castle. With most of a day’s march still ahead of the caravan, Haru knew that, relative to the Wall, the caravan was at a considerable distance to the north and south from one of the twelve Kaiu Towers. They were parallel with one of the sections of curtain wall. It was impossible to patrol every part of that huge length at all times. These were the regions of the Kaiu Kabe most vulnerable to attacks from the monsters from the Shadowlands.

Even so, if the tunnel ran all the way through the mountain, which Haru still wanted to believe was unlikely, then they would still emerge with the Wall before them. He was facing enough current disasters without imagining new ones.

The descent worried him, though. He could not stop himself from picturing this crack going down and down and down, below the roots of the mountains, and passing underneath the Wall.

Is it possible? It isn't likely. But it isn't impossible.

What if it's true? To find such a break in the defenses would be extraordinary.

It would be a way back from the disgrace of failure. It would mark a return in triumph. A return, also, to the respect and reputation he deserved. He would have found something

critical to the survival of the Kakeguchi, and perhaps of the Wall itself.

Too much imagining. Set this aside. Concentrate.

That was enough fantasizing. Indulging in fantastic hopes was not the least of his flaws. He lived too much for what he hoped. That had been his downfall on the battlefield more than once. Disaster for the Kakeguchi family had been averted by Ochiba and Barako. And by his father. It was his hopes of restoring himself in the eyes of his mother, and most of all Barako, that had made him lose half the caravan. What was he hoping for now? Something terrible and vast? Anything he found that was as important as he wanted would also be something that two samurai could not possibly defeat.

Not two samurai led by me, at any rate. So stay focused. Think about real consequences.

Consequences. If this passage somehow led all the way to the Shadowlands, then the cavern was not a refuge for the caravan at all. But he did not know this. It was still entirely possible that he and Ishiko would simply find another crack in the mountainside, perhaps one they could use, perhaps not, and nothing more extraordinary than that.

The breeze blew again. It was stronger. Haru was certain. There was more than a frozen touch on his cheek. The breeze pushed against him. As it did, he heard the whisper.

Haru jerked to a halt, hand on the hilt of his katana. "Did you hear it?" he asked Ishiko. "The whisper?"

"No. Could you make it out?"

Haru shook his head. That was almost a lie. Though the breeze made no sound, the syllables of the whisper hid

beneath it, wrapped in its cold, their presence discernible but not their shape. Yet there had been two syllables.

A sigh like hunger. *Aaaaaaaaaaaaaa.*

A cunning moan. *Ooooooooooooo.*

That was not my name. I did not hear my name. I'm just looking for a pattern.

Aaaaaaaaaaaa... ooooooooooooo...

Not my name. Not my name.

No point in saying anything to Ishiko until he was sure. Better that she listened unbiased.

It was a little while before the breeze came again. When it did, it was stronger than ever. Colder. And it lasted longer.

Ishiko gasped.

Haru paused and turned to her. "You did not hear your name," he said.

Ishiko stared back at him. "How did you..."

"Because earlier, it was not my name that I heard."

She nodded slowly.

"This is the first time you've heard the whisper since we left the caravan?" Haru asked.

"It is. You heard nothing just now?"

He shook his head.

"Perhaps it is not our names," Ishiko said, expressing less a concession than a hope.

"But it is real," Haru admitted.

"You think we should go on, Lieutenant Haru?"

"I think we need to know the nature of the threat. *If* there is one. We are presuming the worst. We might be wrong to do so."

"You believe, then, that it would be a greater risk to the

caravan not to go forward?”

“I do.” *I am aware of my responsibilities. I am thinking of the consequences.* This felt like the right decision.

They moved on, still heading west, still descending. The breeze soon became a wind. It blew with increasing frequency, until it became a continuous blast. The breaths Haru had felt before now revealed themselves to have been the gusts, so powerful that not all the twists and turns of the passage could block them completely.

“We must be nearing a way out,” said Haru. He had to raise his voice. The wind keened in shrill pain.

Snow began to appear. The wind hurled flakes with stinging force down the tunnel. There were no more whispers. The howl of the wind sometimes sounded like voices.

The further Haru and Ishiko went, the fiercer the wind became. Haru had to lean into it. The wind strained against him, a physical barrier that sought to halt his advance. The cold pulled his lips back in a frozen grimace. It bit into his nose and cheeks, its teeth sharp and painful. Then it gnawed until he was numb.

The tunnel narrowed again. There was barely enough room for Haru to pass. His shoulders brushed against the frost-covered walls. The wind screamed. His breath hissed with the effort to move forward.

Haru followed the bend as the tunnel curved to the left, and suddenly the exit was before him. The wind screamed at him once more, the snow blinding him. He could just make out that he was not coming to a cliff, that there was stone stretching out in front of him. He took another few steps forward, and then he was outside.

No longer funneled into the passageway, the wind lost its strength. It fell back, defeated.

Haru wiped the snow from his eyes.

Ishiko stopped beside him. “What ...” she began, staring at what lay before them.

“I don’t know,” Haru whispered. His throat had gone dry, and the words came out in a croak.

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