

## A STORM WILL FALL, PART 1

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### *The Islands of Silk and Spice*

Daigotsu Guanrai snorted with disgust as he kicked the chain of the kusari-gama away from the feeble grasping of the dying samurai. Tasting blood, he swirled the saliva in his mouth and spit through the hole where the teeth knocked loose by the Yoritomo's blow once resided. The spittle splashed against the green of the dying fool's lamellar armor, the flecks of blood within it black and corrupt.

*Hrrn. It is progressing faster than before.* The Spider shook the disturbing thought away as he put his blade through the chest of his former opponent, ending the last of the skeleton crew sent to check on the guards of the corrupted island. They had put up a fair bit of a fight for being hopelessly outnumbered and outmatched, but all storms must fall.

"Are you quite finished, Guanrai?" The nasal and irritating tones of the Chuda's voice caused the hatred within Guanrai's form to swell with far more potency than the pitched combat he had just completed.

"Chuda-san, do not mock me. Our Dark Lord sees fit to allow you crawling worms back in our ranks, but he will not mind if I divest one such worm of its tongue."

"Regardless, your kin have already tossed their opponents on the pile. I suggest you do the same, if we are to get off this Kami-forsaken rock sometime this century," Chuda Rikan said, his sneer not at all lessened by the Daigotsu's threat. "And as I have said before, if you do not stop using the honorifics of a beaten Imperial dog, then you cannot expect to be treated as anything more."

"I am a samurai, Chuda-san. My words are what separate the two of us. The Daigotsu are not mere beasts, howling madly for the slaughter. When Kanpeki-dono's Empire is realized you will see this."

"You have not been a samurai for a long time, dog. And if you truly believe that Kanpeki still seeks to establish anything, you are not merely a dog, but a fool as well," Rikan drawled, his sneer widening.

"You would presume to know our lord's mind? You dare much worm," Guanrai's hand tightened around the hilt of his sword, the dark whispers in his mind chattering excitedly about the possibilities of this venture should the Chuda no longer be needed.

"No more than you, dog," The Maho-Tsukai countered effortlessly. "Simply put, Kanpeki cannot create an Empire. He has forgotten how to create. If the Empire thought it saw the worst this world was capable of with the Destroyers, then they are about to be most unpleasantly surprised. This world will burn, all life extinguished in a single glorious sacrifice to Daigotsu. And for our part in it," his eyes swirled with the dizzying madness of both the Taint and fanaticism. "We shall be reborn as such creatures that might be birthed from an Onisu's nightmares."

The dark whispers in the Daigotsu's heart fell silent, his inner demons temporarily silenced in the presence of one so clearly Lost. The spiritual filth rolling off the madman in front of him caused Guanrai's stomach to roil, a queasiness he did not even know he was still capable of feeling. The feeling was fleeting, however, and the moment he found his nerve again, the samurai violently

shoved Rikan out of his face, his resolve restored somewhat as the shugenja tripped over his trailing clothes and fell backwards on his hands.

“Bold words for one who can’t even complete a simple task. We have been on this island for months. Your fellow worms have been constantly summoning a Skull Tide to keep the Mantis distracted, and you cannot even solve a simple riddle. ‘The Second Seal lies beneath.’ Pah! It took all of your profane magics to defile a simple statue!” He thrust his hand up at the shrine. Over the course of their time here, the shugenja had been warping Yoritomo’s statue, smoothing the carved edges and removing the statue’s limbs. Now it resembled nothing so much as a simple pillar, narrowing at the base, topped by the untouched, twisted grin of the former statue’s head.

“Ha, but that is where you are wrong, dog!” Rikan said as he clambered awkwardly to his feet, dusting himself off. “I have been fooled for some time, it is true, but I have uncovered the truth! It is no riddle, simply fact. The Seal lies beneath us this very moment.”

“The Lost have scoured the seabed and every cave of the island. It is not there.

“True, true, but it is indeed beneath us. We foolishly thought it beneath the water. The truth of the matter is far simpler. It is beneath the Isles!” Rikan’s eyes were again aswirl with triumphant madness.

“Impossible,” scoffed Guanrai. “There is nothing under us but the sea and stone.”

“But that is where you are wrong, dog. And I will...” Rikan trailed off, cocking his head. His grin widened once more, a fowl rictus to compliment his maddened gaze. “It seems that your contribution won’t be necessary after all.”

Following the Chuda’s stare, Guanrai’s eyes were drawn to the beachfront. There, in the harbor, the water was dyed a sickly array of colors by the floating charnel pit that the Spider forces had been building since their arrival. The corpse of every Mantis guard, and every Spider they had felled, lay rotting in the water, their dispersal kept in check by numerous repurposed fishing nets. It stank, it festered, and it was a constant reminder of the losses they took every day holding this worthless spit of land. Some of the samurai now wasting in the fetid water Guanrai might even have called friends. And...

And there was something moving out to sea.

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Kyuden Kitsune was in chaos. It had seemed a normal, peaceful day, a rare gift in the Age of Ruin. Then the screaming had begun. Servants and samurai alike had scrambled, katana were drawn throughout the castle, and yojimbo had thrust themselves in front of their charges. The screaming continued for some time, and it was only after it had died down that the general populace learned that it had been coming from the chambers of Kitsune Narako.

“Poor thing,” mused one courtier, her sympathetic frown hidden by her fan.

“Such is the way of prophecy in times of darkness,” said a shugenja with a shrug. “Would that we could do more for her.”

“It is getting worse,” murmured yet another voice. “The visions are coming more frequently. What can that mean?”

“Nothing good,” offered a guard. Several other voices grumbled their agreement.

Slowly, the castle interior returned to inactivity. Just outside however, the Mori was in chaos. Spirits, normally clever and careful with revealing their forms, darted every which way in plain sight. The shugenja could only stare in amazement, unable to catch any of their attention long enough to figure out what was going on. Shapeshifters vaulted branches and their fellow spirits, often halfway through changing form. Portals to other realms blinked open and closed as those creatures that were able jumped between the layers of reality, spreading their message of panic. The ordinary beasts of the forest took up a call, a hundred voices from a hundred different throats only adding to the cacophonous din.

Meanwhile, in the chambers of the Prophetess, the shugenja herself was coiled in a fetal ball in the corner, whimpering. Her eyes glowed with an inner light as she rapidly looked back and forth at the omens only she could see. The servants were at a loss, prompting only further noises of distress when they approached with blankets or tea. None of them thought to look across the room at the simple writing desk where she often sat recording her visions.

The scroll upon it might have provided some insight, were any to look at it. Though it would inspire much confusion as well. Repeated, line after line, the scroll read "It is coming."

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The ground of the small island rumbled for a moment. All was still for a brief moment, then it rumbled once more.

*Footsteps?* Daigotsu Guanrai wondered. He loosened his grip on his sword, and turned his body to face the water, staring out at the disturbance he had spotted. An emotion almost like fear gripped his withered heart when he saw that the disturbance was something emerging from the water. As it grew in height with every rumbling step, the Tainted warrior did some quick calculations in his head, and reeled internally as he guessed the size of the approaching beast.

"The plan worked. It worked!" sang the Chuda gleefully. He practically danced up past Guanrai, staring in anticipation. "The lure seemed so simple, but sometimes simple things are best, ne?"

"What have you called, worm?" the Daigotsu asked, slightly dazed.

"Umikaiju."

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"You are coming with me."

The statement would have seemed ordinary enough, save for the fact that it came from a scandalously dressed young man who cast no shadow.

"Surely things have not gotten so bad here that you expect me to leave? Besides, you have not even finished your tea." Koumori Taruko had often entertained the Komori spirit named Bansen, and he had often made such proposals to her. They were usually couched in offers to show her his home, coupled with lewd suggestions that no proper samurai would consider. *Of course*, mused Taruko, *Judging by my Clan's ancestry, many have done more than consider.*

"It is not the time for tea. Now is the time for leaving," the bat spirit insisted.

"But Bansen-sama, I have only just returned home after years in the Colonies! Surely I can be allowed one afternoon to relax?"

“Normally, I would show you the wonders of my place in the Realms, but now is not the time for petty seductions.” Bansen seemed unusually agitated, but Taruko knew the wiles of the spirits quite well, and presumed it was simply a new tactic to try to win her favor.

“Bansen-sama, having no time for petty seduction? What is the world coming to?” she said with a laugh. “Besides, I have told you before, Meido will have to wait. I am not yet done with Ningen-do and...”

“I am not playing games, Taruko-san!” The spirit snapped unexpectedly, putting the shugenja off balance. “I am here because, flirtations aside, I consider you and your family friends and...” Bansen trailed off, his eyes growing wide. In the distance, Taruko could hear the screeching of a huge number of bats, growing closer.

“Bansen-sama?”

“I am sorry for this, Taruko-san.”

Bansen lunged forward, his form shifting to that of a giant bat as he did so. Off-balance as she was, she was unable to reach her prayer scrolls before she was suddenly engulfed in the massive wings of the spirit. There came a grey flash, as though the air imploded, and suddenly the room was quite empty. The air was filled with the sounds of bats’ wings as color leaked back, recovering from the sudden passage to the Realm of Waiting.

The tiny island that the Bat Clan called home was swept over by the shrieking wave of spirits. One looking at it from above might see it as a dark wave, and in its wake numerous grey flashes that momentarily drained the color from the island as samurai and commoner alike were snapped up by the Komori. The entire process lasted all of a minute, and then with a final flash, the shrieking went silent. The Island of Lost Wilderness was completely quiet, and not a single living thing remained on it.

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Chuda Rikan cackled with glee as he watched the monstrosity approach, dancing wildly as massive claws reached for the pile of dead.

“Do you not see it? It is coming, a new age of blood! Such beasts as this will be its heralds, and we have ushered it in!” The shugenja’s lunacy snapped Guanrai out of his daze, and he turned away from the sight of the massive creature beginning to shovel gore into its fanged maw, tightening his fist around his katana’s hilt once more.

“What of it? Daigotsu’s hordes have many such mindless creatures, some far more terrible than this,” Guanrai stated, ignoring how dry his mouth was for actually being so close to one such ‘mindless creature.’ “What do you expect it to do?”

Rikan rounded on the corrupt samurai, his teeth flecked with red and black caused by biting his tongue in his ecstatic flailing.

“Why, my dear dog, I expect it to reveal the truth!”

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The members of the Tsuruchi scouting force jeered as they herded the lone goblin that was left of the raiding party. Arrow after arrow dove at its feet, keeping the shrieking beast dancing to and fro. Every single archer among them had trained in the art of Kyujutsu since before they had even

passed gempukku, and even the ashigaru who served with them were better shots than many in the Empire. The arrows, far from missing their targets, landed exactly where they had been intended to.

Though it had gone on for some time, Tsuruchi Goshō decided that it was past the point where they should have moved on. His whistle carried through the forest branches, and the arrows stopped flying as he lined up the killing shot. A simple breath passed, and then the taut bowstring released, the missile flying through the air like a needle in a tsunami. The simple, well-fletched dart was death, and the goblin would die before it knew that it was still being fired upon.

Save for the sudden wind that sent the arrow off course, slapping it aside to plunge quivering into the trunk of a tree.

The jeers resumed, his unit mocking its commander. Though the verbal barbs were mostly good-natured, as all of the archers knew that an errant breeze could doom even the best shot, they still brought a bright burn of shame to Goshō's cheeks. He lifted his yumi once more, and in a single motion drew and released the shot that would correct his previous error. Once more, death took wing towards the hapless goblin.

A sharp crack heralded the falling tree branch that intercepted the second shot.

The chuckles and comments came again, but more sedate and fewer in number. The more experienced among them had seen similar things happen to foul a shot in the past, but they were few and far between, and knowing that it was possible only made all the clearer how unlikely it was. Goshō swore softly under his breath and grabbed the shaft that would claim his quarry's life with a grim finality. For the third shot, he took a much deeper breath, centered himself, and drew the bowstring far past his cheek.

A sudden snap echoed through the wood, and pain lanced across the archer's cheek. He stared in shock at the narrow, jagged seam running through the body of his favorite bow, the now-slack string slick with his blood. The unit was silent, jumping from their perches and coming out from cover to see what had happened. Unnoticed, the goblin fled into the deeper wood, still shrieking. Goshō numbly fingered the maimed weapon, mentally going over the numerous times he had checked and cared for it, keeping the wood in perfect condition, both strong and flexible. His perfect memory could reveal no fault in his method, and he recalled seeing no flaw in the wood that morning. He did not react to the cut across his face, though the thin line where the bowstring had lashed him was bleeding profusely, any more than he gave any indication of seeing his gunso approach.

"Goshō-sama?" the soldier ventured. "What happened?"

"I... do not know," Goshō said without emotion. He looked up at the confused faces of his scouts, when he was struck by a sudden feeling of foreboding. "Something... is wrong. Something is very wrong."

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"You see, Daigotsu, the truth of the world is this: No matter how the samurai caste pretend they are above all others, they are filth. No matter how the heimen toils, he will never reach out of the mud. Only the hinin, despised by all, is truly honest with himself, for he handles the waste and detritus of all the others. He knows we are all equal, all worthless, all garbage, and that one day the ash of his bones will mean as much to the world as the ash of any lord. He knows he is garbage, just as we all are. The heart of the world is black and oozing, why else would Jigoku be so near? Tengoku is but an illusion to keep the samurai killing, the heimen toiling. Yomi is empty, the worthless souls of the

world simply gathering more dirt around themselves as every lifetime drags them further down. Down, down into the mud with the rest of us filthy creatures!”

Chuda Rikan swayed in the sea breeze, his ragged robes clinging to his skeletal frame. He laughed, long, loud, and wild, a cackle half between mad sobs and a cry of ecstasy. Guanrai stared, not knowing whether it would be better to strike the maniac down where he stood or let the beast come for him when it had finished its grisly feast.

“You are insane.”

“Insane?!?” Rikan rounded on the Daigotsu, and started to stalk over. “But of course! Sane people know how to stay in line, to respect the order. Sane people know to praise the Emperor, bow before the Fortunes, dust the knees of their finery with filth in reverence for beings that do not even know they exist. Sane people serve their lord, corrupt though he may be, through everything, the birth of the Clan and the death of its ideals. But let me tell you something, dog,” he spat, stepping so far into Guanrai’s reach that he would have to fall back several paces just to have enough room to strike the Chuda. Rikan thrust his face close enough to Guanrai’s own that the distant reek of the charnel pit was almost completely masked by the foulness of the shugenja’s breath. “Only a family that is truly insane would return to that lord after they were slaughtered far from home in a steaming, rotting JUNGLE, as a sacrifice to appease the very powers we had formed the Clan to overthrow!”

Rikan’s pupils, like some lightless well deep beneath the earth, went on forever, and the beasts at the end of the eternal spiral howled in Guanrai’s mind. They seemed to reach out of the onyx abyss of the blasphemer’s eyes, clawing at the Tainted samurai, demanding whatever filthy remnant remained of his soul as their own. The moment seemed to last far longer than the brief seconds that it took for the Daigotsu to wrench his eyes from that hypnotic gaze, and while he stared at the bare rock in shame, Chuda Rikan laughed his malevolent cackle.

“Kanpeki has embraced the madness, Daigotsu. You would be wise to do the same.”

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The valley of the Centipede was quiet. The silence was not a natural one, as the population of the valley were still present, in part. The daimyo’s vision had come true. The survivors of the massive attack walked without speaking through rows of fallen creatures; goblins, ogres, minor oni, and unknown horrors with no name. They walked, holding their sleeves to their faces to filter the horrific smell of burnt flesh, leading a train of hinin servants to collect their fallen for the funeral rites.

Moshi Ikako stood on her balcony, overlooking the carnage that had come to her lands. *It is not their fault, she thought. Not their failing that they did not have sufficient faith in Lady Amaterasu. No, the fault for that lies solely at my doorstep. I am their leader, and had I taught them better, there would be far fewer Moshi in need of cremation this day.*

She swept her gaze over the castle, surveying how, despite the ferocity of the attack, the castle that had grown around the temple itself was more or less unmolested. Thunder and the blessings of Lady Sun had won the day, annihilating some of their foes so completely that naught remained of their presence but ugly smears on the steps of her home, dark brown and black stains that bore the faint scent of ozone. Amaterasu Seido stood, as it always would, as a memorial to the old ways of the Centipede. The golden glow of the late afternoon sun illuminated all, save for the edge of redness that marked where the setting had begun.

Only... sunset was many hours off yet. The sharp spike of fear snapped the Moshi daimyo’s gaze from the balcony view to stare at the sun. The fear roiled inside her, turning into full-blown panic,

her lips silently forming the word “No...” as the Obsidian Moon made to once more eclipse the face of the Sun.

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The rumble of the island shaking brought Daigotsu Guanrai out of his reverie. He looked up, to see that Chuda Rikan was many paces away from him, his concentration locked on the massive Umikaiju. The shugenja waved his arms wildly, directing the beast’s attention, though his stare was locked on the massive creature the whole time. Whatever he was doing, it was working. The oni had risen from the gore, and was taking lumbering strides towards the hideously altered Shrine of Yoritomo.

Guanrai stared at the shrine, the angled pillar coming to an almost impossible point at the base, and topped by the leering, tainted mask that seemed to leer up at the approaching monster. He wondered for a moment if the oni was going to channel the power that had twisted the Shrine, becoming a conduit for the Second Seal. Or perhaps it would act as a beacon, showing the way to the Seal. Or maybe...

Guanrai had not chosen the Taint. Rather, with Daigotsu’s bargain broken, it had chosen him, without either knowledge or consent. He had left his Clan in shame, but met with Kanpeki himself, before everything had fallen apart. The giant of a man had looked him over, and declared that he was a Spider now, and Spiders survived only by the strength of their steel.

Guanrai’s steel was strong indeed, and in the few short months that he was a Spider, he grew to respect and be respected by his peers. There was a simple honesty to their ways, horrific though they had seemed initially. Power was there to be seized by those who coveted it, the weak would become strong or die trying, and they were family, based purely on the fact that no one else would have them. They were already damned, so there were no depths left to sink to, no sin that was not embraced.

The Lost souls lived decadently, killing monsters with their own monstrous powers, forming friendships over battle and drink, lording over the gaijin they ruled. The jungles had been a temple to the Dark Fortunes, the Spider their priests, their indulgent lifestyles, supplications. They walked amongst gods, and laughed as they slew them.

When Kanpeki had surrendered to his father’s dark blessing, he had promised them a home, an Empire where none would look down on them for being corrupt, for being Tainted. An Empire where the Spider would rule, and live as the daimyo did. The Tainted, Guanrai included, had roared their approval, rallying to his banners...

Guanrai’s eyes widened as the only possibility that made sense rushed to him, along with the Chuda’s previous words. *The Seal lies beneath us at this very moment.* He whipped his horrified gaze over to the shrine, scrutinizing its new shape rapidly as his terror grew, his fears confirmed.

It resembled nothing so much as a stone mason’s chisel. And it was pointed right at the heart of the island.

It was in that moment that he decided that Rikan needed to die. The terror steeled his grip on his sword as the voices in his head shrieked for him to act. This was no act of nobility, no sudden realization of his wrongdoing, it was simply a desperate lunge for survival. He had fled his home to survive. He had joined the Spider to survive. He had killed hundreds to survive. He was not about to drown on some kami-forsaken rock in the sea, not after what he had been through!

He rushed forward, his blade ready to strike, and his guttural roar mingling with the bellow of the sea monster who was raising his clawed hands together in a closed fist.

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Out on the border of the Sea of Shadows, the Yoritomo captain surveyed his crew, all eyeing the growing Skull Tide with some degree of trepidation. He walked to the rail, ready to shout words of encouragement to rally his tired samurai, when a sudden wave rocked the kobune. Experienced sailor that he was, he did not even sway, simply grabbing a rope and riding it out. He gazed out at the roiling water.

“Rough tide ahead,” he muttered.

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The claws came down, smashing into Yoritomo’s carved visage, and with an ear-splitting shriek, the world broke.