

# THROUGH BLOOD AND THUNDER

## PART ONE

### THE YEAR 1128, MONTH OF THE DOG

"I have nothing further to teach you," the old man had said.

There had been no disdain, no judgment, no emotion whatsoever. It had been a simple statement of fact. The Grand Master no longer had any use for a student, at least not if that student was Morito Tokei. With those six words, Master Kuro vanished as quickly as he had come.

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"Do not let this consume you, Tokei," Morito said, frowning at his brother across the low table.

"You cannot understand, brother," Tokei replied with a sigh. "You do not know what it is like to call upon the kami. The Grand Master showed me how to summon wind, rain, and flame, to hear the eternal voice of the earth. I thought that I was making great progress, as if I were on the edge of a great breakthrough... instead I am abandoned, as if I am not even worth the great Kuro's time."

Morito shrugged. "Perhaps you are not," he replied, lifting a chunk of fish with his chopsticks and popping it into his mouth.

Tokei looked at his brother curiously.

"That seems a rather insulting thing to say," Toku said, peering at the unshaven mercenary with a hurt expression. Toku had been the only member of Toturi's command staff to remain in the village with Tokei after the Black Lion had departed.

Morito chewed thoughtfully for a moment before explaining. "Tokei and I have wandered the Empire for years now. Because we are ronin, everyone has told us we're worthless, from the lowest peasant to the great daimyo of the Unicorn."

"Except for Kuro," Tokei corrected.

"And Toturi," Toku added.

"And that's exactly my point," Morito said, pointing at Toku with his chopsticks — an impolite gesture, but Morito had never been much for etiquette. "Look at Toturi. There is no question that he is an important man. Everyone knows he is important, and look where that has gotten him. Dishonored. Reviled. Half the Empire wants him dead. The other half probably wants him tortured first. In the long run, he has it even worse than we do. Better, I think, to go unnoticed than make a spectacle of yourself and end up like the Black Lion. Perhaps Kuro was doing you a favor, turning his back on you like that. The student of Naka Kuro, that's the sort of person who attracts attention, but another ronin shugenja sitting in a sake house in Nanashi Mura? Nobody cares."

"I don't understand," Tokei said. "Are you saying that it is better to hide like a coward than to risk failure?"

"What sort of life is that?" Toku sneered, disgusted. "Without honor, one may as well be dead."

"I'm saying that there's no point in being honorable," Morito said. "I'm saying that there's no sense in sticking your neck out without a good reason."

"Toturi has a great purpose!" Toku said.

"That he does," Morito agreed. "As much as the Empire may hate him right now, you have to respect him. But you, brother?" He turned to Tokei. "You had no purpose studying under the Grand Master other than to scrounge up all the power you could, as quickly as you could. That's not noble. That's the sort of thing that gets you into trouble."

"I was not 'scrounging.' I intended to put the Grand Master's studies to good use."

"Such as?" Morito sipped from his sake.

Tokei stalled, his mouth open but no words coming out. "I'm sure I would have found a purpose in time," he said finally.

"Of course," Morito said with a laugh. "That's always been your trouble, little brother. Always eager to throw yourself into the breach, never smart enough to stop and think about what's on the other side."

"Like when I left the Unicorn to follow you as a ronin?" Tokei said.

"Exactly. I never asked you to follow me." Morito shook his head slightly. "Well, I'm done eating," he said, rising from his seat. "Good knowing you, Toku. Are you ready to go, Tokei?"

"I'm not leaving," Tokei said, looking down at the table.

Morito gave a sharp chuckle. "You can't be serious. Yogo Junzo knows that Nanashi Mura is allied with the Black Lion. Rumor has it his oni are marching here even now. Toturi has his hands full in the south; we need to leave before the snows set in. The Horde will wipe this place off the map of the Empire."

"Toturi asked me to stay here," Tokei said.

"Only because he wanted you out of the way," Morito said.

"Nonetheless," Tokei said. "This is my duty."

Morito looked around. "To die for a village of ronin? Nobody here really cares about Toturi's cause, or they'd be with his army right now."

"I care," Toku said, frowning.

"And if there were a hundred of you in Nanashi Mura, Toku, things would be different," Morito said. "But they're not. If you're looking for something to fight for, Tokei, I don't think you'll find it here."

"I have to begin somewhere," Tokei said, meeting his brother's gaze.

"I will stay and fight, Toku."

The young ronin nodded quickly.

Morito sighed. For a moment, it looked as if he were about to argue. He scratched at his unshaven cheek and gave another sharp chuckle. "All right, then," Morito said. "I'll tell you what, brother. If you survive, and you find what you're looking for, you come let me know. Hm?" Though his words were light, Morito's voice was thick. The gruff ronin knew that he would never see his brother again.

"I will," Tokei said. "Will you do me a favor as well?"

"Name it," Morito asked.

"When you win back your honor and become a true samurai again — for I know that you will — name your castle after me," Tokei said.

"Ha," Morito replied. "Of course. I will name it the Castle of the Ox, for you are surely as stubborn as one."

"Fair enough," Tokei said.

With a final grin, Morito bowed to his younger brother and exited the sake house.

"You made the right decision, Tokei," Toku said. "We may die, but we will die with honor."

As Tokei listened to Morito's horse galloping away, he wondered if Toku was right.

### THREE MONTHS LATER...

"Foolish samurai!" the oni roared. "You should have run when you had the chance."

This, Tokei reflected as he unleashed a blast of jade in the oni's face, had definitely been a poor decision.

The village was surrounded. The Shadowlands Horde had broken through Nanashi's feeble defenses on every side. The armies of the walking dead marched beside squat bakemono and terrible oni that defied all description. Only a handful of defenders remained to stand against the onslaught, and they were quickly losing ground to the Horde. Toku and a few others had ridden out in search of reinforcements, but there had been no sign that they had even escaped.

Again and again Tokei shouted to the kami, summoning forth the power of jade in the manner that Naka Kuro had taught him. Beams of green energy lanced into the Horde's ranks, striking down three

creatures at a time. It was not enough. The Horde seemed endless, and they were intent upon making an example of this tiny village that had allied itself with the Black Lion.

"What do we do, Tokei-sama?" shouted a desperate voice at his side. It was Tsuo, the young peasant who now led the Eyes of Nanashi. The young man's face was pale with fear. Tokei wondered how much of that fear was reflected in his own eyes.

"Keep fighting!" Tokei shouted. He had hoped to say something more inspiring, but it was all he could manage under the circumstances.

It seemed to have the desired effect. The samurai redoubled their efforts, holding the line against the enemy. Then Tokei heard it; it was not his encouragement that had inspired the troops — it was the loud, clear note of a Unicorn hunting horn. Reinforcements? There may be hope yet.

"I think not, little samurai," shouted a voice from the ranks of the Shadowlands Horde. A massive creature stepped forward from the army, as tall at the waist as the largest ogre. The beast held a great nodachi in each hand. Its skin was covered in sharp, glistening scales and two great horns curled from the crest of its head. Around its neck it wore a necklace of shattered helms, taken from Crab samurai. The Shadowlands forces withdrew at his approach. Even the mindless undead seemed to sense this creature's power. "Lord Junzo demanded that an example be made of Nanashi. You will all die today."

Even from here, Tokei could sense the creature's power. The combined forces of Nanashi stood no chance. Unless the entire Unicorn army rode to their rescue, even the reinforcements would likely perish when they arrived.

It was then that Naka Kuro's final lesson took shape in Tokei's mind. The young shugenja realized what he must do.

"No!" he shouted, stepping forward from the ranks of the village's defenders. The power of the fire kami swirled in brilliant aura around his body, as if angered by the corruption of the oni.

The oni laughed at Tokei. "Ah," it said. "Run, little shugenja. Turn around and scamper into the forest while you can. Perhaps you can live to tell others what we have done to your village. I will give you this chance, for your bravery."

Tokei merely scowled, and said three words.

"Not this day."

Raw energy flared from the former student of the Grand Master, and the world itself seemed to bend to Tokei's will. A great sphere of white energy widened from the shugenja's position, consuming all else in its path. The armies of the Horde screamed in pain and terror as they scuttled away. Trees were torn from the earth by their roots. The skies above, clear only an instant before, now churned with clouds as black as night. Lightning crackled from Tokei's fingers, and fire burned in his eyes. The great oni did not try to turn or run as the others did; it knew there could be no escape from what was to come. It seemed to bow in respect for a single instant before the wave struck and its body crumbled into dust.

The Eyes of Nanashi turned to retreat as well. The daring paused to look back at the onslaught Tokei had unleashed. The wise just ran. The earth trembled and seemed to scream as the shugenja released his power. Tokei fell to his knees in the center of the storm, struggling vainly to control the magic. He knew that there was only one way.

Tokei glanced up just as the reinforcements arrived at the edge of the clearing, and for a single instant he could see his brother at Toku's side, leading the charge to save Nanashi Mura. Morito shouted something, but Tokei could not hear.

Tokei could control the power he had summoned no longer. He surrendered himself to the power of the spell. One instant he knelt amid the great crater of destruction he had unleashed. The next instant, he was merely gone, and all was at peace once more.

One week later, the ronin Morito arrived at the secluded home of the Grand Master, carrying news of his former student's sacrifice.

"Sacrifice?" Kuro replied. "What sacrifice? My student has merely begun his greatest journey." With a nod of satisfaction, he closed the door in Morito's face.





CHAPTER ONE:

# JIGOKU, THE REALM OF EVIL

## THROUGH BLOOD AND THUNDER PART TWO

When Tokei opened his eyes, he saw a darkness so complete, so total that it made him cry out in pain. He felt as if he had stared into the antithesis of the bright light of the sun, a sight that hammered a spear of pure ice into his heart and drained all hope from his soul. He curled into a ball and clawed at his own face as if trying to remove what he had seen from his mind.

Was this what it was like to die?

"Open your eyes, shugenja," hissed a voice in his ear. "I want you to see this."

Tokei opened his eyes once more. He floated amid a great void. Strange shapes flickered in the corner of his vision, half-formed creatures that stared at him with great mournful eyes. The darkness in this place had nothing to do with light; it was the essence of hopelessness. He was not meant to be here.

"Can you feel it?" the voice said again. "Can you feel the eyes of this place staring into you, Morito Tokei? You belong to Jigoku now, Morito Tokei. You will languish in the Realm of Evil forever."

Tokei saw the form of a large creature hovering near him, a man-like beast with two great curling horns. "You..." Tokei said. "The oni who attacked Nanashi Mura."

The creature seemed to resolve itself from shadow, becoming more real as Tokei remembered it. It scowled down at the shugenja. "I am called the Maw," the creature roared. "I am a true Oni Lord, a master

of demons. My true name was lost due to fools such as you. I thought that I was damned to remain in this place forever, until the Dark Lord gave me one last chance to redeem myself, to return to the mortal realm. You took that chance away from me, Morito Tokei." The beast pointed at Tokei with one long, gnarled finger.

"You dragged me to Jigoku?" Tokei asked.

"No," the oni replied flatly. "You came here yourself; the spell you cast simply pulled me along. Not that I am not pleased to see you." The oni smiled and gestured vaguely. Tokei felt a sharp pain in his arm. Sharp spikes of bone suddenly pierced Tokei's kimono from within, stains of blood welling up where they appeared. The shugenja hissed in pain. Another spike erupted suddenly from his leg, and a third from the center of his chest. As a fourth pierced the skin of his jaw, Tokei realized that his very bones were erupting from his flesh at the Oni Lord's command. He attempted to call upon the kami, and the sound of maniacal laughter filled his ears.

"Your spirits cannot help you, Morito Tokei," the Maw said. It reached out with one hand, gently wrapping its fingers around the curling horn of bone that grew from Tokei's jaw. More bone spears erupted from Tokei's arms, legs, and spine. The pain was inconceivable, but Tokei would not give this thing the pleasure of hearing him scream.

"I am not afraid to die," Tokei said. "I am a samurai."

"Death?" the Maw looked surprised. "Morito Tokei, there is no death here." With a quick twist of his wrist, the Maw snapped off the spear of bone. Tokei did not realize that he could create such a scream. "There is only me." He turned the long shaft of bone over in his hand, tracing it idly along Tokei's chest.

"You intend to corrupt me?" Tokei asked, his voice hoarse and ragged. He could no longer move his limbs for the painful protrusions that erupted from his body at the oni's command. "You intend to make me into an undead abomination like Yori and Junzo?"

The Maw looked pointedly at Tokei. "No. I would not shave Jigoku's gifts with the wretched little bug that robbed me of my freedom. You will remain here in the Realm of Evil, sane and untainted, forever." The oni buried the bone shaft in Tokei's shoulder so deeply that the shugenja coughed blood.

"There are many reasons that even an Oni Lord should fear Jigoku, Morito Tokei," the Maw said. "I intend to show you every one."

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One torment ran into another in Tokei's mind, an endless chain of pain. He had no idea how long he had been in this endless realm of night, or if time even followed rules in such a place. His existence had become a cycle of torture and humiliation at the Oni Lord's hands.

A sudden light appeared at the edge of Tokei's vision. He did not bother to turn and face it. Too often had he seen such visions, assumed that he would be rescued, and had instead been greeted with another torment at the Maw's hands. Once, Naka Kuro had saved Tokei, brought him back to Rokugan. For seven years he had lived a peaceful life, even married and fathered a son, all to discover that the entire affair had been an illusion created by the Maw. The Oni Lord had shattered the illusion with malicious glee, drinking in Tokei's pain.

Since that day, Tokei faced each new torture with grim acceptance. The Maw had become increasingly frustrated, irritated by Tokei's inability to appreciate the cunning new horrors he had devised. As Tokei floated through the dark haze of damnation, he took some solace in this small victory.

"Tokei," a familiar voice called to him. "You must come with me. I have distracted the Maw, but if we are to leave this realm you must hurry!"

"Go away," Tokei said. "I've learned your lesson. There is no hope."

"Toturi would be disgusted to hear you say that," the voice replied.

"Look at me, damn you."

Tokei opened his eyes. The white-clad figure of Matsu Hiroru, the ninja who had served Toturi, hovered before him. "Damn me?" Tokei laughed. "I'm afraid someone beat you to it."

"Not yet," Hiroru said. "Not if we hurry."

"You must be quite a talented ninja, to sneak into the Realm of Evil to rescue me."

"I was trained by the best."

"Go away, illusion," Tokei snapped.

"Fine then," Hiroru said, pulling his mask away and scowling at Tokei. "Would the Maw know the face behind this mask?"

"Perhaps. This place seems to know everything I know..."

"Fine," the ninja spat. "Pretend I am an illusion created by the Maw. Would you rather hover here in eternal pain, or spite the Maw by taking comfort from the very illusion he created to torment you?"

Tokei looked at the ninja warily. "How will we escape?" he asked. "My magic does not work here."

"Ninja do not need magic," Hiroru replied with a smile. "Follow me, old friend."





CHAPTER TWO:

# GAKI-DO, THE REALM OF HUNGRY GHOSTS

## THROUGH BLOOD AND THUNDER PART THREE

Takei had been to Ryoko Owari once before. It seemed almost as if he were standing there now. He recognized many of the buildings, and the river was definitely familiar, but this was not Ryoko Owari. Everything seemed somehow empty, washed out with tones of gray. The usually crowded streets were vacant, littered with the half-eaten bodies of animals. The smell of rotten flesh was everywhere. Somewhere, he could hear a loud buzzing, like the sound of a swarm of insects mixed with an endless hollow moan.

Already the shugenja felt his strength returning. Since leaving Jigoku, he could hear the voices of the kami once more. They were faint, but they were definitely there. He had not yet convinced himself that this was not an illusion created by the Maw to taunt him, but neither had he abandoned hope.

"Hiroru, where are we?" Takei asked, turning to face the ninja.

"We are in Gaki-do, the Realm of the Hungry Dead," the ninja replied, wrapping his silken mask about his face again. "The spirits of those who lived their lives consumed with greed and avarice linger here, feeding on whatever the fates decree fit for their punishment, consuming endlessly until they can move on to a better fate."

Takei looked at the ninja curiously. "You know much of this place," he said.

"I should hope so," the ninja said, looking over his shoulder at Takei.

It was then that Takei noticed that his friend was not fully himself. Below the waist, Matsu Hiroru was vague and insubstantial. "A gaki," Takei said. "But how? You were a hero."

Hiroru laughed. "When you knew me, perhaps. It never struck you as odd how fiercely I embraced Toturi's cause? I had much to atone for, shugenja. I have no regrets. I deserve this fate."

"I am sorry."

"Do not pity me. This realm borders closely on Jigoku. If I had not met this fate, you would be there still. Take comfort in my hunger, Morito Takei; it has bought you freedom."

"How do I return to Rokuogan?" Takei asked.

"Look about you," Hiroru gestured. "You are already in Rokuogan."

"You know what I mean."

"The living world," Hiroru said wistfully. "I can see it sometimes, but only when I feed."

"Show me," Takei said.

"I will not," Hiroru said. "I would rather you remember me as I was."

"There must be another way out of this realm," Takei said.

Hiroru shrugged. "Perhaps for you," he said, drifting away down the street. "This is where I belong, Takei. I wish you luck, wherever your journey takes you next."

"You will not come with me?" Takei asked.

Hiroru looked back at the shugenja. His eyes had become twin segmented orbs. Sharp mandibles emerged from his cheeks, piercing his mask on either side. "Soon the hunger will be upon me again, Morito Takei," he said, his voice echoing with a menacing insect buzz. "I cannot be held responsible for what will happen then. I can only ask, for the sake of our friendship that once was, that you be as far from me as possible when that happens."

Takei said nothing, only nodded.

Hiroru paused. "And if you see Shizue," he rasped after a moment, "tell her... tell her that you saw me, and that I am well. Lie to her, Tokei. For me."

"I will," Tokei said, his voice thick.

Hiroru nodded a final time, and drifted away, his white figure shining in the gray shadows of Ryoko Owari.

Tokei continued onward in the opposite direction.

## CHAPTER THREE:

# SAKKAKU, THE REALM OF MISCHIEF

## THROUGH BLOOD AND THUNDER PART FOUR

"This is wrong," Tokei said, looking about in confusion. "All of this is wrong." He may never have visited the Seikitsu Mountains, but he was fairly certain that the River of Gold did not flow uphill. He was also relatively sure that it did not rain origami birds, as it seemed to be doing now.

Tokei paused for a moment, sat on a stone, and wiped a chunk of horse excrement from his shoe with a handful of leaves. He had stepped in such piles three times in the last hour, despite his efforts to watch his step. He had yet to see any horses. With a sigh, he tossed the mess aside. On impulse, he plucked a small bird up between two fingers. It seemed to be made of some sort of rough green paper. Despite his peculiar surroundings, he could not help but consider this place an improvement after his seemingly endless encounters with the broken spirits of Gaki-dō.

"You like?" asked a shrill voice by his ear, so startling Tokei that he nearly toppled from his stone. A short, plump creature hovered in the air beside Tokei on flapping wings far too tiny to possibly bear its form aloft. When it saw Tokei's reaction it bared its small, sharp teeth in a broad smile and bowed in midair.

"A mujina," Tokei said, glancing about quickly to see if there were more. He knew enough about mujina to know it was a bad idea to turn your back on them. They were generally harmless, but at times their pranks could go too far.

"You like birdie?" the mujina asked again, pointing at the toy in Tokei's hands. "I make birdie."

"It is a very nice... birdie," Tokei agreed, smiling politely.

"Birdie?" the mujina replied. "What birdie?"

Tokei glanced down at his hand. The lump of horse dung and leaves he had tossed aside had somehow replaced the origami bird in his hand. Tokei tossed it aside with a curse. "So I am in Sakkaku, then," he said, rising from the stone and wiping his hand on the earth.

The mujina nodded rapidly.

"Do your worst, trickster," Tokei spat. "I was tortured in the pits of Jigoku. Your foolish tricks can do little more than annoy me."

"Oh," the mujina looked crestfallen. "Sorry, thought you'd enjoy joke."

"I do not appreciate that sort of humor," Tokei said.

"Really?" the mujina looked confused. "If no like jokes, then why in Realm of Tricksters?"

"I assure you it is only temporary," Tokei said. "As soon as I can find a passage leading from this place to a more peaceful realm, I will do so."

"Oh," the mujina said. "Easy. Go that way." It pointed to its left with a wide smile.

Tokei looked at the mujina for a long moment, then walked in the opposite direction.

The mujina giggled, just loud enough for Tokei to hear.

Tokei stopped, sighed, and walked in the other direction.

The mujina giggled again, louder.

Tokei stopped, sighed again, and kept walking.

The mujina happily followed, at a safe distance.



CHAPTER FOUR:

# MEIDO, THE REALM OF WAITING

## THROUGH BLOOD AND THUNDER PART FIVE

"Where am I now?" Tokei asked, glancing about in confusion. The mujina's endless pestering had turned him around completely. At least the creature had finally abandoned him, and he seemed to have passed into yet another realm at some point. Tokei was uncertain how he felt about the creature's absence. If the mujina had grown bored, that was fine. If the mujina had been frightened, the Tokei was concerned — anything that could frighten a mujina was not to be trifled with. Then again, this could be yet another joke at his expense.

All about him was still, unmoving, unchanging. A slight haze seemed to cover everything, like the smoke after a great fire; yet Tokei could smell no fire, or anything at all for that matter.

A lone samurai stood at a crossroads in the distance, leaning heavily on a long spear. Tokei headed toward him. The samurai peered up at the shugenja's approach. Tokei could see no face behind the helm — the armor was entirely empty.

"Why do you come to Meido, Morito Tokei?" it asked in a sepulchral voice that was neither male nor female. "This is not your time."

"The Gray Realm?" Tokei whispered. "How do you know my name, samurai?"

"I am Emma-O, and I know all that passes through my borders," it replied.

"The Fortune of Death," Tokei exclaimed, bowing deeply. "Forgive my ignorance, great one. I seek only to return to my own realm, Ningen-do. Any aid you can provide..."

"You no longer belong to Ningen-do, Morito Tokei," Emma-O howled with a savage intensity. "You have wandered too long, and your own realm no longer has any claim on you... but there is always room for you here."

"With all due respect, great one, I am not yet dead," Tokei replied. "I can change that, if you wish," Emma-O replied, lifting the spear and pointing its tip at Tokei's chest. "The choice is yours. There will be no pain."

"I choose to live," Tokei replied, facing the Fortune of Death without fear. "I must find my way back where I belong."

"You may find the outcome of such a choice surprising, Tokei-san," the Fortune said. "One day you may look back upon this day and wish you had chosen an endless expanse of gray over the fate that lies in store for you."

"I may," Tokei said, "but if I surrender to death now, I know I will regret my choice."

"You are wise, mortal," Emma-O said with a chuckle. "I will help you."

"You will return me to Ningen-do?" Tokei asked, hopeful.

"No," Emma-O replied. "I said that I would help you..."



CHAPTER FIVE:

# YOMI, THE REALM OF BLESSED ANCESTORS

## THROUGH BLOOD AND THUNDER PART SIX

The disorientation of moving between the realms did not improve over time. Tokei's head swam as the earth solidified beneath his feet. He was grateful for the feel of solid ground once more, even if he could tell that he was not yet in the mortal realm. After the melancholy wastes of Meido and the desperate hunger of Gaki-do, any change was welcome. When he finally regained his senses, he took in his new surroundings with a sudden gasp of surprise.

At first, Tokei thought that he had returned to Ningen-do at last. His surroundings were strangely familiar: rolling hills, vast plains, mountains dotting the horizon and a great forest in the distance to the west. Slowly, though, he realized that this was not the mortal realm he knew. Details were somehow too crisp, too clear. The wind was too sweet, the textures flawless. This place was simply too...

"Perfect, my student?" Tokei jumped, spinning on his heel to seek out the source of the words. Off to his left stood a strangely familiar figure, an aged man with a curious smile and a faint glowing aura. The man stood with his hands tucked into the sleeves of his kimono and looked at Tokei expectantly.

"Master Kuro-sama!" Tokei exclaimed, laughing in surprise. Remembering himself, the shugenja knelt before his former sensei, touching his forehead to the soft grass of the hill on which they

stood. Even the ground is perfect, he thought to himself. "Master, it is beyond joyous to see you once more."

"Rise, Tokei," Naka Kuro said, reaching down to clutch his student's elbow. "There is no need for such a ritual here." He spread his other arm wide to include the beautiful landscape before them. "Here, all men are equal unless they choose to serve another."

"What is this place, master Kuro-sama?"

"This is Yomi, the Realm of Blessed Ancestors. The final reward for samurai who revere the Celestial Order. It is the home of all the souls who have fulfilled their ultimate destiny."

"It is beyond beautiful," Tokei said breathlessly. "But... it is not right. I do not belong here."

"Not yet," Kuro said with a small smile. "You are as astute as ever, my student. You have unfinished business in the mortal realm."

"Then why am I here?" Tokei asked. "I felt almost as if I were being drawn..."

"If the connection between two souls is strong enough, one can draw the other from the depths of Jigoku itself," Kuro said. "I brought you here."

"Why?" Tokei asked.

"I once told you I had nothing more to teach you, Tokei-san," said Kuro. "But only because neither of us was ready. Now, however, there are lessons you must learn if you are to truly take my place in Ningen-do." The old man smiled and beckoned Tokei to follow him.

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Tokei was no longer certain how long he had been in Yomi. The days melted together seamlessly, and the idyllic surroundings dulled the senses, making one less aware of the passage of time. Kuro had insisted it was merely an effect of the realm on the Tokei's still-living soul and that it would fade in time. Tokei was less certain.

"Kuro-sama, there is something that I have wished to ask you."

"Of course, Tokei."

Tokei hesitated for a moment. "My allies from the Clan War," he said finally. "Are they among the honorable departed here in Yomi? Are they yet alive? Or are they... elsewhere in the realms?"

Kuro laughed. "Always thinking of others! You are a delight to such an old soul as mine, Tokei. Of whom do you wish to know?"

"My brother, Morito, of course. And my friends Toku and Ginawa."

"All three are yet alive, and still very much active in the affairs of Ningen-do. You might be somewhat surprised what those three men have become in your absence. All of them have met destiny in their own fashion, and embraced it."

Tokei smiled. "And what of Toturi?"

Kuro nodded sagely. "Toturi has passed on. But he is not among us. He has been granted passage into the Celestial Heavens."

"Into Tengoku? I did not think that mere samurai could easily pass into Tengoku."

"Samurai, no," Kuro said. "Emperors, yes."

"Toturi... Emperor?" Tokei stared into the distance, stunned. "How long have I been away from the Empire?"

Kuro said nothing. Tokei did not pursue the matter. He was not sure if he truly wished to know. Instead, he returned to another topic that he and Kuro had been debating for days. "Master," he objected for what felt like the hundredth time, "I am not worthy to take your place. I cannot be the Naka."

"You will," said Kuro, his voice certain. "Your travels through the realms are changing you in ways you do not yet comprehend. But you soon will come to understand the power that lies at your command. More importantly, you will understand that the true use of power is not to use it at all. It is the wisdom that power brings that is the true measure of a man. The first human chosen to bear the title Naka understood this. I eventually came to understand it as well." He fixed Tokei with a stare, and smiled. "The essence of the Naka is understanding. You will be the Naka."

"I am not ready," Tokei repeated. "I do not even know what it means to be the Naka."

"Yes you do. You proved it that day the village of Nanashi. Your travels through the realms are changing you in ways you do not yet understand," said Kuro. "But you soon will come to comprehend the power that lies at your command. And more importantly, you will understand that the true use of power is not to use it at all. It is the wisdom that power brings that is the true measure of a man."

Tokei could think of nothing to say, and so he said nothing. He merely sat upon the cool cobblestones of the shrine in which he and his master had conducted their studies, gazing out over the beautiful landscape. He sat for several long moments, weighing the implications of Naka Kuro's words. "You have never spoken anything but the truth, master," he finally responded. "I trust your wisdom." He smiled warmly at his sensei, then briskly rubbed his hands together. "Now, what more shall we learn today?"

"Nothing." There was no mirth in Kuro's smile now, only sadness. "Your time with me is finished. You must move on now. When you finally return to Ningen-do, your travels shall be complete. As the Naka, you will be the most

enlightened, and perhaps the most powerful, within Rokugan. It is a great burden, but one that fulfills one's soul completely. You shall be the guardian of the mortal realm. You shall be Naka Tokei."

"Will I be able to see you here if I need your guidance?"

"You will not, and you will not." A glint of humor returned to Kuro's eyes. "We shall see one another again only when your destiny is fulfilled and you join me here in Yomi. And your destiny shall be great indeed."

Tokei looked troubled for a moment, then tentatively asked, "What is my destiny, Kuro-sama?"

"You are the only one who can discover that truth, Tokei. Now you must journey on. The Celestial Heavens await. You must seek the wisdom of the seven dragons before you return home."

"The Elemental Dragons will speak to me?" Tokei asked, surprised.

"Or they will devour you," Kuro said bluntly. "Either way, you will find wisdom."

The two walked together in silence for some time until Tokei asked another question. "What was your destiny, master?"

Kuro's laughter rang out through the hills. "To find you, Tokei."

With his master's laughter fresh in his mind, Tokei strode into the mists that symbolized a passage to the next realm, and disappeared from Yomi.



## YOMI AND THE CELESTIAL ORDER

Yomi, the Realm of Blessed Ancestors, is the ultimate reward for a samurai, the result of a life lived in perfect harmony with the tenets of bushido and the laws of the Celestial Order. Only the souls of those who have lived a proper samurai life may enter and receive their final reward: the ability to pass on wisdom to their descendants, bringing honor and glory to their family and clan.

CHAPTER SIX:

# TENGOKU, THE CELESTIAL HEAVENS

## THROUGH BLOOD AND THUNDER PART SEVEN

A sea of stars surrounded him in every direction. A great road curled from above, as wide in places as a city. Tokei tried not to stare upward as he approached. The size of the great ivory spirals was almost more than he could comprehend. He kept his gaze focused on the star-speckled earth and continued walking forward. If this was truly Tengoku, it was indeed a strange place. Of all the realms he had visited, this one was perhaps the least like his home. Even Jigoku seemed somehow more familiar than this.

"Who comes?" a voice demanded.

Tokei peered up. At the base of the road, a massive figure waited. It resembled a samurai-ko in heavy armor, but sleek ram horns curled from either temple. Her eyes burned with a dark flame as she barred the road to the Celestial Heavens. He knew it to be an oni — it had to be. The thought of an oni in this place worried him greatly. What had happened here?

"I am Mor... Naka Tokei," he said, still not accustomed to the sound of the name. "I have been sent by Kuro, he who was once Naka."

"You would approach the Dragon Road, mortal?" she snarled, hand resting on the hilt of her heavy blade.

"I would," he replied. "I must speak to the Elemental Dragons."

"Bah," she said with a sneer. "You are unworthy."

Tokei frowned. "Perhaps," he said. "Yet I have traveled a long way. I require their wisdom and guidance."

"You do not deserve it," she said bluntly.

Tokei scowled. All of the exhaustion, frustration, and anger of his long journey came forth in one moment. "You would tell me where I do not belong, demon?" he said. "We are far from Jigoku."

"And yet you carry more of that foul realm in your heart than Okura-san," boomed a voice throughout the heavens. Tokei glanced about for its source, staring up into the dizzying spirals of the Dragon Road. Their heights were so staggering they almost seemed to move.

Tokei suddenly realized that the road was moving. It curled down toward him, and at its end the head of an impossibly large dragon looked down at him. In its eyes, he saw entire worlds reflected. Tokei fell to his knees, the strength draining from his body.

"You are not ready to set foot in the Celestial Heavens," the great dragon said. Its lips did not move; its voice seemed to emanate from within Tokei himself.

"Kuro-sama told me that the Grand Master must understand the Heavens," Tokei said, surprised he could speak at all.

"And the Grand Master is never ready," the dragon said. "I could show you the way... but you must be prepared to set aside all that is wicked in your soul. The pain you will face will make what you endured in Jigoku seem as nothing in comparison."

"I am prepared for pain," Tokei said with grim resolve.

"That was never in question," the dragon said, "but a brighter light casts a deeper shadow. Will you be prepared to face what you find within yourself after looking into the light of the Heavens?"

Tokei paused. "I... do not know," he said.

"A fine answer," the dragon said. "Step onto the Dragon Road, Naka Tokei, and earn the name you now bear."



CHAPTER SEVEN:

# CHIKUSHUDO, THE REALM OF ANIMALS

## THROUGH BLOOD AND THUNDER PART EIGHT

Naka Tokei struck the earth heavily, the air forced from his lungs. He could taste the blood in his mouth. That was something of a relief, for a long time he had felt almost as he were no longer truly real. Now, as he sat up against the trunk of a very real tree, he looked at his palms and fingers with nervous glee.

It was good to be whole once more... or something like it. He felt something missing deep inside after his time with the great dragons. He felt more powerful, but somehow less human. He looked at a small hare perched in the grass nearby. It regarded him with curious eyes.

"I am home," Tokei said. "At last."

"I don't think so," the hare said.

Tokei blinked.

"You are the new Naka?" it asked, sitting up on its hind legs, its paws folded upon its chest.

"I am."

The hare's eyes narrowed. "I see."

"This is Chikushudo, is it not?" Tokei asked.

"Yes."

"And this Realm lies close to the mortal Realm?"

"Yes."

"So I could pass into my own home through here."

"No."

Tokei scratched his beard curiously. "Why not?"

"You are not welcome in the Realm of Animals," the hare said. "You are the one who created the Nightmares."

"I do not know what you are talking about," Tokei said, "but I have been away from my home for too long. Show me the way or stand aside, rabbit."

"How sad," the hare said. "I thought the Grand Master was supposed to be wise."

It was then that Tokei felt all the eyes upon him. He looked about the forest. Foxes, birds, hounds, even a badger and a pair of wolves surrounded him. They all watched him with strangely human eyes.

"Let me pass, spirits," Tokei demanded, rising to his feet. Wisps of energy surrounded his fists at his silent command. "I am needed in Rokugan."

"Maybe your journey isn't done yet," the hare said.

"You cannot comprehend my responsibilities, rabbit," Tokei replied, glancing around at the advancing creatures.

"Human problems," the hare chuckled. "Don't bother trying to reason with the others. Most of them can't even understand you, Naka. They just know that you're trouble."

"I do not wish to harm you," Tokei said as the creatures advanced.

The hare only laughed.



## CHAPTER EIGHT:

TOSHIGOKU, THE  
REALM OF SLAUGHTERTHROUGH BLOOD  
AND THUNDER  
PART NINE

"I am quite tired," Tokei growled, "of being the whipping boy of the Spirit Realms." The Grand Master of the Elements spat sand from his mouth and rose to his feet. "The Oni Lord was an acceptable defeat. The mujina, perhaps, under the circumstances... but a rabbit?" Tokei sighed. "This surely must be a lesson in humility."

Tokei glanced around. It was then that he realized that he was seated in a field of gray sand, surrounded by the bloody corpses of countless samurai.

"By the Fortunes!" Tokei exclaimed.

Then the nearest body moved. Then another. Tokei backed away across the battlefield as the corpses twitched and moved. As they staggered and rose, their wounds sealed with a sickly ripping sound. The battered samurai looked about, seizing their damaged weapons from the filth and ash. As soon as they rose, they leapt into battle once more, tearing into one another with a berserk ferocity.

"Toshigoku," Tokei whispered, blasting a trio of spirit samurai from his path with a column of flame. "The Realm of Slaughter." Each day, Kuro had said, the spirits of those consumed by vengeance and murder fought one another on these blasted plains. Every day, the dead rose anew to fight each other. According to Kuro, many of the spirits from this Realm had escaped through Oblivion's Gate some time ago. One of them, the dreaded Iron Chrysanthemum, had nearly torn apart the Empire with his lust for power. The dead spirits of Toshigoku were every bit as deadly as the demons of Jigoku, if less unified and focused.

A harsh inhuman shriek echoed across the fields of slaughter. Tokei turned quickly to see what new threat approached. In the distance, he saw a pack of creatures as tall as ogres. Great horns curved from their foreheads. They wore blackened armor, and their sharp, curved blades carved through the spirit samurai. These creatures, a strange mix of beast and man, fought as a cohesive unit, showing no mercy to any in their path.

"What are they?" Tokei asked, staring out at the creatures.

The air seemed to ripple before Tokei's eyes, and one of the creatures appeared before him. This one's skin was covered in complex scar designs, with rings and fetishes piercing its flesh. It held a long spear casually in one hand, covered from shaft to blade in mystic carvings. The creature locked eyes with Tokei for a long moment, then bowed.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Grand Master," it said. "We are the Tsuno. I am called Nintai."

"I am Tokei."

"I know." The creature's eyes gleamed.

"You dwell in this Realm?" Tokei asked, regarding the creature warily.

"We travel the Realms as we wish," Nintai said.

"An enviable ability."

"We could show you our ways. There is much we could learn from each other, Grand Master."

Tokei looked toward the field of battle, where the rest of the Tsuno continued to cut down the spirits of Toshigoku. "If you can travel the Realms freely, why would you come to a place like this?"

"Many reasons," Nintai replied. "To begin with, the constant fighting is excellent practice for our troops."

"Your troops seem rather bloodthirsty," Tokei said, noting the glee with which they dismembered the samurai troops.



"Tsuno do not waste their energy showing mercy to those beneath us. I believe that is something upon which we can agree, is it not?" Tokei looked at the Tsuno.

"During the Clan Wars you were as bloodthirsty as we," he said. "You smote the armies of Jigoku, the goblins, the ogres, the oni, the undead, without a care."

"They were not worthy of mercy," Tokei replied.

"Nor are humans," Nintai said, looking pointedly at Tokei.

"I am a human," Tokei said.

"No. You are no longer human. You are a Grand Master, as far above these dogs as we are."

"You know nothing about me," Tokei said with a sneer.

"Is that so?" Nintai seemed to smile. "You might be surprised at what lies within you, Tokei. I have seen it. The Maw has seen it. Why do you think Okura refused to allow you entrance into Tengoku?"

"What?" Tokei exclaimed.

"No one escapes from Jigoku, Naka Tokei." The Tsuno laughed. "Not unless it suits Jigoku's purposes."

"So you have come to taunt me?" Tokei hissed.

"Perhaps," the Tsuno said. "Then again, perhaps I only wished to warn a fellow master of the Realms..."

A savage explosion erupted to Tokei's left. The Grand Master glanced in that direction, shields of Air spirits appearing to shield him from the damage.

When he turned back, Nintai was gone. The armies of the Tsuno had vanished like smoke on the wind.



## YUME-DO, THE REALM OF DREAMS

### THROUGH BLOOD AND THUNDER PART TEN

Tokei stood at the center of a great field of poppies, a carpet of red leading to the horizon on every side. The land was serene, surreal, beautiful. Every sight, smell, and sound seemed to lull him to sleep. He pushed the feeling away; he could not afford weakness in the Realm of Dreams.

"Face me, creature!" he shouted, spittle flying from his lips. "Face me!"

Laughter echoed across the poppy fields; the same maniacal laughter that he had followed across the fields of Slaughter into this Realm. The spirits slain by this creature did not rise again like other denizens of Toshigoku. This beast consumed the souls of everything it faced. In the Realm of Dreams, what sort of damage could it cause?

"What damage indeed?" the creature replied. "Much, I hope."

"Show yourself!" Tokei demanded. As his anger flared, the landscape twisted. The poppy fields faded and were replaced by a blazing desert.

"So you could destroy me?" the voice replied. "What purpose would that serve? I would only be created anew, now that we know the way... now that you have shown us."

Tokei sneered and shouted a complex spell. Rains of fire and air flashed out from his position, suddenly congealing around a tall figure. Tokei's quarry was stripped of its invisibility, standing revealed on a nearby sand dune. It almost resembled a man, but

was too tall, too thin within its robes of black and deep red. Its face was covered with horned ridges.

"You found me," the creature said, disappointed. "I thought I'd have a chance to toy with you a bit longer."

"No more games, Hakai," Tokei replied. He unleashed a mighty beam of green light toward it. The creature's figure withered and tore apart. A moment later, only ash remained.

As Tokei caught his breath, the landscape changed again. He now stood at the heart of the Emperor's throne room in Otosan Uchi. A strange place to be, considering that he had never seen the Emperor's throne room before. It appeared exactly as he had imagined it in his dreams. He slowly ascended the steps toward the throne, shoulders relaxed. Then, suddenly, one hand shot out. With a strangled cry, Hakai appeared seated in the cracked Emerald Throne, its throat clenched in the Grand Master's hand.

"I could smell you," Tokei hissed. "What are you?"

Hakai's eyes narrowed. The room darkened. Long, hooked chains descended from the ceiling, clinking ominously. In the distance, the walls of tortured men hung on the air. Tiny dark creatures scuttled about in the corners of the room. Tokei ignored the shifting environment, focusing instead upon Hakai, squeezing just tightly enough that the creature could barely speak.

"This place has changed, you know," Hakai said hoarsely. "Your memories are out of date, Grand Master. Not that I can complain. They served us well enough."

"What do you mean?" Tokei demanded.

"I am an Onisu," Hakai replied. "A creature forged of the nightmares of samurai. We are pieced together from baku — dream spirits — and oni. I am Hakai. I represent death and destruction. My brethren represent similar forces."

"There is no such creature," Tokei replied. "Baku cannot be corrupted."



"Not without effort," Hakai answered. "With the wisdom the Dark Lord Daigotsu gained from the Tsuno, it was simple enough. He reached into the Baku from dreams, and used you to channel raw power from Jigoku itself."

"You claim I created you?" Tokei shook his head. "You're lying."

"Really?" Hakai coughed. "Tell me, Tokei, how much of your time in Jigoku do you really remember? Do you really believe the Maw would have allowed a mere ninja to rescue you from the Pit?"

"What are you saying?" Tokei demanded.

"No," Hakai said with a grin. "That's all you get for now."

"I will kill you."

"What do I care?" Hakai asked. "The Dark Lord will create me anew. You have shown him the—"

Tokei twisted his hand. With a loud snap, Hakai twitched and fell limp.

Leaving the Onisu's corpse in the Emerald Throne, Tokei continued his journey, dark thoughts weighing heavily upon his mind.

## CHAPTER TEN:

# NINGEN-DO, THE REALM OF MORTALS

## THROUGH BLOOD AND THUNDER PART ELEVEN

Tokei shuddered, his eyes adjusting slowly to the shimmering light. Uncertainty was the worst part; he never knew quite where he was. Sometimes he was unsure if there ever had been a man named Morito Tokei.

How long had it been? How long since that fateful day in Nanashi Mura? If he had known what was truly about to occur... well, who can say what he would have done?

In his strange journey he had seen sights of wondrous beauty: the animal spirits galloping across the great plains of Chikushudo. The noble ancestors of Yonri. The glittering palaces of the Elemental Dragons. He had also seen things that had scarred his soul: the blood-crazed legions of Toshigoku, Realm of Slaughter. The ravening hungry spirits of Gaki-do. The indescribable pits of Jigoku. The last memories he wished deeply he could rid himself of, but they were a part of him now.

Through blood and thunder he had come, and he was no longer the man he had been. He was Naka Tokei now, for better or worse, for now and forever.

Such was the price of wisdom.

There was much pain in the mortal world, but also so much left to do. As much as he had learned, as much as his power had grown — now greater even than his teacher's — he was uncertain if he was prepared to face that which waited for him in Ningen-do. He knew he was unprepared... but the one who awaited him, if she were willing...

What he wished was irrelevant. Kuro had taught him that much. "The only matter worth considering is necessity," the old man had always said. "The rest can take care of itself." The necessity at the moment was for him to return, to pass on what he had learned.

And he must do so now, by whatever means were available.

Tokei reached out with the heightened senses of a true Master of the Elements, seeking his path through the Realm of Dreams, seeking the heart of a like-minded mortal.

He found something, and focused upon it. Not knowing who he had found, or who had found him, he drew himself through the ether.

With a sudden thud, Tokei struck the ground headfirst. Blurred vision and a throbbing pain in his skull reminded him what it felt like to be mortal, aspects he had not missed. With a painful grunt, he sat up and looked at his surroundings.

Tokei found himself in a darkened temple, facing a small shrine. In the deep shadows, a figure knelt in supplication and prayer. When Tokei appeared, her eyes widened in alarm. One hand darted to the katana beside her.

Tokei lifted his head, and for the first time, their eyes met. A flicker of recognition passed between them, a karmic connection stronger than simple memory. Her hand fell away from the blade.

"Pardon my arrival—" Tokei said, his voice rough. "I am—"

"I know who you are," the young samurai-ko replied. "I have studied the allies of Toturi the Black. The histories record your death."

"Mortal history records a number of peculiar things," Tokei said. "The wise trust only what they know."



A look of confusion crossed her features. She opened her mouth to protest, but the Master's grim eyes silenced her. There was something there, something older than she could name. It awed and frightened her at once.

"What is your name?" he demanded, breaking the tense silence.

"I am Miyako, daughter of Lord Toku, your old comrade. You stand in his castle, the Vigilant Keep of the Monkey."

"Indeed," Tokei smiled, and extended a gentle hand toward her. "I am indebted to you, Miyako-chan. You shall be my finest student, if you would have me. It is the least I can do."

She looked at his hand curiously.

"Pardon me," he said with a chuckle. "Shaking hands is a custom of my former clan. I hope I did not offend you, Miyako-chan. It has been quite some time since I had to obey the normal rules of etiquette."

"Of course I am not offended," she said, accepting his hand warmly. "I would be honored to become your student, but I fear I have little to offer you. I am no shugenja. There are others in the castle, the Fuzake family—"

"I am not looking for an apprentice, Miyako-chan," Tokei said. "I seek only to share what I have seen, to share the wisdom of the Spirit Realms."

"Of course, Tokei-sama," Miyako said with a bow.

Tokei began his story.

## NINGEN-DO AND THE CELESTIAL ORDER

Ningen-do, the Realm of the physical world in which the Empire of Rokugan is located, is at the center of the Spirit Realms. It stands between the dark pits of Jigoku and the holy Realm of Tengoku. Ningen-do is a testing ground for mortal souls, a Realm that measures each spirit to determine its worthiness for the next life. It is also the primary buffer against the Realm of Evil, the battleground that prevents the demonic oni from devouring all else. Ningen-do is a remarkably jealous Realm, and attempts to claim all who enter it. When the children of the Sun and Moon fell from Tengoku, they became bound by the power of Ningen-do and could not leave until they were released by death.

### CLOSE REALMS

Ningen-do is closer to more realms than any other Spirit Realm. Chikushudo, Gaki-do, Meido, Sakkaku, Yomi, Yume-do, and Jigoku all border on this Realm. As a result, the Realm of Mortals is often visited by spirits driven by mischief, conquest, or simple curiosity.

### DISTANT REALMS

Tengoku is distant from Ningen-do. The only known passage is in the throne room in Otosan Uchi, where so many Fortunes have been proclaimed by the Emperors. Toshigoku is also mercifully distant from Ningen-do. Were it not, the murderous spirits of that realm would have massacred the population of Rokugan long ago.

### BARRED REALMS

None.

