

*Seppun Kuron's note: I have heard this tale from several sources, but it seems to fantastic to be true. I take no responsibility for its veracity, leaving that up to the listener to decide.*

The storm above wailed like a banshee. Lightning flashed constantly, winds howled and the rain of blood pounded down. Akahito was soaked with the stuff, but the initial panic and disgust had passed. With grim resolve he surveyed the ranks of men and spirits arrayed against him. The men were dressed in the colors of the Phoenix and Crane, but their eyes were empty pools of red. The spirits were men in armor, crackling with dark radiance. Above them, Shiro no Hantei's walls and buildings were illuminated with a sickly green and red glow that was slowly increasing. How, how had he ended up here? Two days ago he was crossing the border into this province looking for his daughter. Then he had come across those two Lion...

\*\*\*

Doji Akahito, general to the Crane, sat in his opulent command tent looking with some trepidation at his two "guests." Ikoma Tokatsu was a dignified looking samurai, although weathered from several weeks of hard travel. He was explaining the plight of his wife, Ikoma Elani. She had been kidnapped in a manner that Akahito had found all too familiar.

His traveling companions, however, was Kitsu Barako. The woman was skinny, scrawny even. She had long, matted black hair and wild dark eyes. She was clothed in a strange kimono made of leather straps and scraps of torn cloth. She kept muttering, either to herself or someone just to her left or right that didn't seem to be there. She would occasionally look up and nod at something Tokatsu said.

"...and the clues pointed here, to Hantei province and Shiro no Hantei," finished Tokatsu. "Barako insisted on accompanying me. She said I would still need her help, even after the initial investigation."

"That's a right, little lion," chirped Barako, in a song-song voice. "The way went north, then east, then down down down..." she returned to muttering.

Akahito looked at Tokatsu, an eyebrow raised. Tokatsu seemed a little embarrassed.

"Well, she's Kitsu," he said, as though that explained it.

"And that means..." asked Akahito.

Tokatsu sighed. Looking sideways at Barako, he began to speak. "The Kitsu had a difficult time during the plague. In addition to every hardship faced by the other families, the Kitsu started to go...mad. Some went catatonic, after screaming fits where they demanded to be left alone. Others were lost, pleading to people or creatures no one could see but them. We think it had something to do with their role as guardians of the spirit world, and-

"HA!" snapped Barako, suddenly focused on the conversation. "What do-a you know? All those, all those gone, so many-so fast. Heh. You'd go mad too! They couldn't fit! Spirits-a-spirits everywhere and everywhen. But Barako was smart! She found a way to a-quiet them down!" with that she deftly removed a long pipe from a fold in her clothing and lit it with a flare of magic.

“No!” shouted Tokatsu. He reached over and snatched the pipe. The sickly sweet smell of opium wafted over Akahito. “We need you here, focused!”

Barako fixed him with a murderous stare, Akahito looked up to his guards, whose hands drifted to their weapons, but then she cackled in glee.

“So-be-so! We’re getting close! Can you smell the Heavens? So thin, so thin.” She reached out, as if caressing something invisible in front of her. “Just a taste away,” she whispered. She grinned manically, her voice returning to normal, “But its going to be confusing! Spirits coming here, looking for a way out, a way in, but going to find a way DOWN.” She cackled again. “Don’t worry, Barako find their way for you! Bloodspeaker, the spirits say some call her. HA! She talk to the blood of the ancestors, if dat what they mean!”

\*\*\*

She did indeed lead them to Shiro no Hantei, despite a haze that seemed to play havoc with every scout’s sense of direction. There, the sun had fallen from the sky and a moon of blood had risen in its place. She had shouted through the rising storm, looking upon Shiro no Hantei, “It is going someplace, someplace soon, someplace bad. Jigoku is a parchment width away. It is the maiden, the mother, and the crone! That is the way! If they all cross over too, much much problems!”

Akahito had ordered her and Tokatsu, with a dozen of his finest Kenshinzen, to infiltrate the city and rescue the hostages. His forces are small, but he will do his best to buy them the time they need to return all the kidnapped victims. He offers them luck and tells them, he will ensure that they have the time they need, even if it costs him his life. He shouts orders to his men over the crashing of the thunder and the roar of the storm.

Whomever his opponent was, he has some understanding of tactics. The Phoenix samurai support the blood-tainted shugenja, and the Crane bushi block any flanking attack. Akahito’s men struggled to understand his orders through the flashes of lightning and the crashing thunder.

Akahito sought for a banner, or a command structure that would lead him to the general of the opposing force. But the flashes of lighting illuminated nothing but the murderous, blood-soaked faces of his enemies.

Akahito’s men were barely holding ranks. Faced with the vision before them, battered by winds, and drenched in blood, he had trouble maintaining order. The opposing force came in fast, the spirits of the dead howling with unearthly furor.

As the blood-soaked forces collided in the crimson mire that before the city, the dark spirits and possessed warriors fought with a supernatural strength. The Crane Samurai were cut down by the Phoenix, but the Kenshinzen duelists dodged through the blasts of Phoenix magic and parried blade after blade of the phantoms.

Akahito lead the Kenshinzen in against the corrupted shugenja. The Phoenix sent whirlwinds of blood-filled air that knocked the duelists aside, but Akakhito and his retainers burst amongst them like Gajin Pepper, shredding their ranks. Crane bushi struggled to defeat the skilled Phoenix samurai as thunder roared overhead.

Akahtio looked over the battlefield at Shiro no Hantei. The glow about the city was increasing. His own troops were falling. What were the Lion doing?

\*\*\*

Tokatsu dodged another strike at his head and sunk his katana to the hilt into the back of black-robed cultists. Around him the Kenshinzen were dervishes of steel, clearing a path into the courtyard of the Taoist Temple. He wiped blood from his face and looked around for Barako. Where was she? She had guided them here, then disappeared.

A Crane screamed as a dozen cultists, crazed bald-headed men and women armed with short jagged blades, pulled him down. Tokatsu took a step to help him, but turned away in horror as stomach, intestines, and liver were thrown outward by the maddened ravagers.

There was a cackle overhead, and Barako, standing on the tiered roof of the temple, sent a blast of fire to collapse the entrance arch on another dozen oncoming cultists. She lept down

“Birdies! Birdies! To me! We flee!” she shouted, grabbing Tokatsu by the arm and pulling him into the inner courtyard. The 6 Kenshinzen that remained followed grimly, one remaining to guard the door.

The inner courtyard was a large, roofed meditation garden in the center of the Temple. The roar of thunder was so common it was beginning to sound eerily like a heartbeat, magnified a hundred times. The Kenshinzen fanned out defensively, as Barako looked around quickly.

Suddenly, a tear opened in the very air, and a man stepped forth. He had long black hair tied into a braid. His clothes were sleek black silk and marked with kanji of death, madness, and despair. His eyes were empty pools of blackness.

“Oh ho! What’s this, an invasion of Lion,” his terrible voice boomed. With a laugh he waved his hand and a Crane warrior’s torso burst in half in an explosion of viscera and blood. The remaining Kenshinzen attacked him.

Tokatsu gripped his blade, but suddenly Barako was in front of him. With a guttural sound, she spit a mass of saliva and flem onto his forehead. Before he could react, she stuck a prayer strip to it. Suddenly, Tokatsu knew where he had to go. The ritual was at the heart of the Temple.

“Go quick!” Barako hissed. “I’ll try and hold him!”

Tokatsu fled as the dark warrior beheaded a Crane with his eyes.

\*\*\*

There was a wailing that was filling the sky. No, it was in his head. Akahito shook it, blood flying everywhere. He was drenched in it, and so were his men. He felt exhausted. He blinked his eyes through the gloom as the Hantei defenders moved in.

As the Crane grew weaker, their enemies grew stronger. The dark spirits, especially, were energized. Even more shadowy shapes could be seen all about, as the spirit bushi harried the Kenshinzen holding the center of Akahito’s force.

The Crane duelists fought with honor, but in the end they were overwhelmed. Akahito looked about as even his scouts fell in battle to the blades and spears of the enemy.

In a desperate maneuver, he lead the remaining bushi in a wedge, hoping to break through the lines of the enemy. The Phoenix samurai threw themselves into the way without any thought to their own lives, their blank faces joyous as they cut down. But the line held.

“Rally, my kinsman!” Akahito screamed! “Fight on! The night is dark, and the time is dire, but fight on!” Dark shapes swarmed about him as he shouted. “Fight for courage! Fight for the Kami! FIGHT FOR THE CRANE!”

In a burst of light, the shades of the dead Crane warriors that were drawn to his call threw off the dark veil that had choked them. Warriors who had died a peasant’s death to the plague suddenly found themselves with a second chance for honor. With a cry, their shimmering gold forms charged the massed defenders.

\*\*\*

Tokatsu runs down the hallway. He seems to be in a daze. Dark shapes arise to tear at his armor and he strikes them down. All sounds are distant to him. He hear’s what he thinks is Barako screaming. He glances down and a jagged knife is stuck into his shoulder. When did that happen?

He bursts into a circular room. Horrible kanji are drawn in blood on the floor and walls. He cuts at the cultists who lurk hear, removing arms and heads. One reaches up and snatches the prayer strip from his face—

PAIN FEAR PANIC burst into his conscious mind like a flood. Screaming in agony, he lodges his katana in the skull of the cultist in front of him. Sobbing, he finds he is too weak to remove it. Grabbing the prayer strip, and casting about desperately, he sees a sheathed blade on the alter, and snatches it for defense. He remembers that he must open the door in front of him...

Staggering, he wrenches it open. It is liking looking into a deep, dark pool. The room beyond is distorted and hazy. With a start, sees three figures beyond, and that the dark haze is slowly oozing out of the doorway.

Gritting his teeth, he presses forward. Suddenly, it is like pressing through a mob in a storm. He feels as through thousands are clawing at him, trying to stop him. A horrible discordinant noise fills his head. He cannot breath, he cannot see, he cannot go any—

With a sob he collapses just inside the door. He is bleeding from the eyes, ears, and nose. His hair has gone gray. He looks up, and sees—

“Elani?” he whispers. His wife, her short brown hair smeared with blood, her simple brown robes torn, runs light to him and hugs him about the neck, sobbing. Behind her are a short, elderly looking woman and a teenage girl with long auburn hair. All three women look as through something horrible had been done to them. The girl is catatonic, rocking slowly back and forth.

“Elani, love, we haven’t much time,” he pants. “The city is going someplace. I think this is the center. You three, they”

“they used us,” Elani says, her voice breaking. The older woman comes over and nods, scowling. “In a ritual. It was awful. What they did, I can’t” she sobs again.

“How did you get in?” says the older woman. She is wearing a tattered monks robe, and her head is shaved. “We cannot leave. The barrier is too great.”

Tokatsu blinked through his own tears, and then looked down at the prayer stripped clutched in his hands. It was blackened, as through burnt around the edges, and was quickly darkening further. "This!" he shouted, struggling to get up. "I can pass through with this! I might be able to bring you back with me. But we have to be quick. Come, Elani-"

"Take the girl," croaked the Crone. Tokatsu stared at her in disbelief. "Take her first. She is young. She has her whole life ahead. She did not deserve what was done to her."

Tokatsu looks to his wife, and though tears pour from her eyes, she is nodding. "Take her first. But come back for us!"

Tokatsu stands, mouth agape. The prayer strip is getting hot in his hands. The crone helps the maiden up and leads her over. The mother steps forward and kisses Tokatsu lightly.

"I'll come back for you," he whispers. "If not here, then wherever you go. I'll find you."

"I know you will," she whispers back, as he takes the girl in his arms and steps back to the doorway in an explosion of light.

\*\*\*

Startled by the appearance of his spirit allies, Akahito is again outmaneuvered by his opponent. The city beyond starts to pulse with light at the rate of a heartbeat. The storm overhead is cacophonous.

The spirits of the Crane leap to the forefront to defend their living brethren. They fight the battle they were denied, and as they are struck and fall into wisps of golden light, they achieve the honorable death destiny cheated them before.

Akahito struggles against the crimson mud that now bogs down the living on the battlefield. He has been cut across the back and thigh. His voice has gone hoarse. Through the blood that fills his eyes he sees the scouts clash with the Phoenix samurai, but are unable to force them back. He collapses into the mud, his mind darkening around the vision of his daughter.

He is lifted upright by the golden form of the Crane spirits. They point toward what used to be the city. Now, there is only an empty plane of mud, blood, and despair. His daughter is gone.

The dark spirits dispart, tied to the city, they have followed it. So do the souls of those possessed, and as one the Crane and Phoenix warriors fall to the blood-soaked earth and lie unmoving.

"Do not worry, my kinsman" says the spirit beside Akahito. "You have freed us. Your fire has burnt away that which drew us to the darkness. We wish to give you our fire in return. As the spirits fade away, they step into Akahito. He feels his strength returning, and a strange sense of peace. As the last spirit is gone, his voice echoes "Look! Someone comes..."

Akahito looks up to find Ikoma Tokatsu trudging through the mud, blood-spattered, exhausted, gripping a strange katana in the sheath before him like it was a viper ready to strike. But he quickly forgets that as he looks upon the face of Sanako, whose eyes finally show life when she hears her father cry her name.