

Repentance Does Not Come First

By Robert Denton III

His father used to say that it wasn't wise to "gamble as the dice fell," but they were cast now, so there was no longer any room for doubt. From this moment onward, his heart and mind must be in accord. Isawa Tadaka steeled himself and pushed the door aside.

"Tadaka!" Shiba Tetsu rose from his cushion with a bright grin. In the teahouse's muted light, the crest of the Order of Chikai glowed on his crimson robes.

Tadaka returned the smile. "You are a sight for sore eyes, Tetsu-san."

"I'm just glad to see you are in one piece. You take such needless risks these days!"

Tadaka shrugged. "The fruit is at the end of the branch."

They sat before a short lacquered table, Tetsu setting his iron kettle on a bed of hot coals and readying his ladle and whisks. "How is your recovery going?"

"As well as can be expected." Tadaka resisted the urge to touch his bandaged side. "Garanto Province was...humbling."

"So I've heard," said Tetsu, pouring fresh water into the kettle. "How did you find the Kaito?"

"Charming, but naïve."

He laughed at that. "Such is to be expected when one spends one's whole life in the mountains, cut off from the outside world." He flashed a look Tadaka's way. "But then, you wouldn't know anything about that, right?"

"I came down for festivals." A pause. "Sometimes."

Tetsu grinned and readied two cups.

"Even so," Tadaka continued, "I believe they are an underutilized resource for the clan. It is time they took a more active role in Phoenix affairs."

Tetsu's joviality faded. "And...Tsukune-sama? How does she fare?"

Tsukune standing injured on the lip of a stone well. Her sword in her weakened grip.

"Tsukune!"

Tadaka closed his eyes. "It is in the hands of the Fortunes."

The afternoon light seeped in through the cracks in the wall. Neither spoke for some time.

A habit formed over the last month brought Tadaka's fingers to where his straw amulet should have been, and his stomach knotted. Right—he'd left it outside. It was strange how leaving behind something one was accustomed to carrying, no matter how small, could make one feel emptier.

"I should have gone," Tetsu said suddenly. "She was not ready."

Normally, the statement would have been presumptuous, insulting. By saying this, Tetsu

implied that he would have succeeded where Tsukune had failed, that if he had gone instead, he would have talked sense into Tadaka and avoided the entire affair. He'd suggested, inadvertently, that Tadaka's stubbornness, his refusal to listen to the Phoenix Clan Champion, was to blame.

Tadaka couldn't disagree.

"None of us knew what awaited at Cliffside Shrine." Tadaka's chest tightened. "Not even I."

"Even so," Tetsu insisted, "for her to risk the leadership of the clan, to act so hastily..."

"Give her some credit," Tadaka said, voice cracking. "I am only here now because of her."

And she is only there now because of me.

Tetsu avoided his gaze, and only then did Tadaka realize he was wearing his guilt openly. He recomposed himself in the span of an exhaled breath. "Your training served her well," he remarked. "Her swordplay has improved, at least to my eye."

"Would that I could do more," Tetsu whispered. The kettle whistled, and he moved to take it from the coals.

Now was the time. Tadaka took one last deep breath. "Perhaps you could."

Tetsu paused. Although he could not see his face, Tadaka imagined his practiced stoicism overtaking his features, a plain look that betrayed nothing.

"Your skills are wasted day after day in this shrine," Tadaka continued. "You could rise much higher than this. I could see to it."

"Is that so?"

"You know what I am going to ask."

Slowly Tetsu turned, his mouth twitching. "I suspect I do."

Tadaka placed a scroll on the table. It was stamped with the crest of the Council of Elemental Masters. "I need a second for the duel," he said.

Tetsu did not look at it. "I will put a list of recommendations together for you this evening. Many of my students would suit the task."

"I need you, Tetsu-san." He folded his arms, watching the shadows between the cracks of light in the wall. "Rujo will have my father as his second. That is just the sort of move he would make. He seeks to imbalance me, and should it come to that, the Master of Void's word is heavy. But you have officiated at five duels and been in three yourself. None would question your judgment, nor your keen eye. Please, Tetsu. There is no one else."

Tetsu divided one scoop of *matcha* powder between the cups. Silence prevailed.

"I'd expected you to say yes by now," Tadaka joked.

He poured hot water into the cup and stirred the grassy-green liquid with a whisk.



Tadaka searched his friend's face. "Perhaps you are thinking that if I lose, the council will remember whose side you supported. I can appreciate that. I have heard the rumors as well. No one thinks I can best Master Rujo." Slowly, he made a fist. "But I won't lose, Tetsu. It is not my destiny to lose. For the sake of the Phoenix, I must win."

At last Tetsu looked at his friend with sad eyes. "I believe you can win. That has nothing to do with this. We are friends, Tadaka. I won't help you destroy yourself."

The reply stunned him. He shook his head. "It is not what you think."

Tetsu rose. "Are you invoking the Promise?"

Tadaka paused.

At the dawn of the Empire, in its darkest moment, Shinsei went to Isawa for aid. Only Isawa had the knowledge to implement Shinsei's plan, and only he had the skill to forever banish a fallen god. Without him, a war would be lost, and the Empire would fall into darkness. But to do this would cost Isawa everything. He would have to lay down his life—and the lives of countless kinsfolk and children from his tribe—upon the altar of their greatest enemy. To do so was unthinkable, and so he refused.

Then the Kami Shiba, a god made mortal, bent his knee to Isawa. He promised that his line would forever serve Isawa's, if only Isawa would follow Shinsei. Isawa agreed.

To invoke the Promise is to invoke the covenant between Shiba and Isawa, a promise carried across generations. It is the right of any who carry Isawa's name. Regardless of differences in social status or personal standing, or even the nature of the request itself, when an Isawa invokes the Promise to a Shiba, that Shiba must comply. To do otherwise is to lose considerable face in the clan.

Tadaka almost did it. It was there, on his lips, ready to be spoken. He could make Tetsu obey. He knew that if he did, his friend would not refuse. It was the only way. All he had to do was speak it.

But if he did, Tetsu would never forgive him. And that cost was too high.

"I am only asking, Tetsu. As a friend. I would consider it a favor, nothing more."

Tetsu pushed a steaming teacup before Tadaka and smiled. "My friend, I would consider it a favor if you didn't ask."

Tadaka's door was already open when he arrived. His sensei's shadow lay unfurled in the hall; he had spotted it well before he saw Rujo's scowl and the weathered scroll case in his hands.

"Where did you find this?" Rujo asked.

It had come from his family library, a subterranean chamber not even the servants seemed to know about. "You have no right to go through my things," Tadaka murmured.

Rujo's scowl deepened. "I knew it. Those techniques you carelessly deployed—you did not learn them from me!" He shook the scroll case accusingly. "They came from here: the writings of a disgraced madman!"

Tadaka flinched. "They were written in his youth," he insisted. "They relate to purification of the elements, no different than the ways of the Kuni! Read them yourself!"

"That is beside the point!" Rujo thundered. "This preoccupation with dark matters is what concerns me! And I must act on my concerns, even if it pains me to do so."

Rujo had shifted his position, tilting so that his right side, including the arm that held the case, was painted in the glow of the coal box set into the floor.

Rujo intended to destroy it.

Holding Rujo's gaze, Tadaka wormed his prayer beads from his wrist and into his hand. "You don't understand," he whispered.

"Perhaps. But then, I don't need to." With a flick of his wrist, he cast it to the flames.

Tadaka struggled back tears as his master towered above him, leaning close until his cracked and baleful face was all the young man could see. "Thank your father the next time you see him. He is the only reason you are still my student."

And then he was gone.

Tadaka waited several moments before rushing to the coal box. Only then did he dare to see if his offering had been accepted. The scroll case, ancient and dry, was already crumbling away—but the paper within was untouched. Gratefully he retrieved the scroll, whispering his thanks to the kami of the coal box for preserving it. Ignoring the line of blood trickling from the corner of his mouth, he laid the scroll on the table and looked for damage. Having only one copy was too risky; he would have to transcribe it as soon as possible.

After all Tadaka had given to his master, after he'd held his tongue when his own research and insights appeared in his master's latest texts, Rujo still had no respect for his student. He had not even noticed when Tadaka had invoked the kami right in front of him. How great could the Master of Earth be, then?

And for that matter, what could the old fool do to stop him?

The straw amulet still hung from the lowest bough of the ancient oak. Tadaka freed it and tested its weight. Empty, but for the pinch of agar dust still inside. The *kodama*—the tree spirit—had declined his offering.

Tadaka touched his forehead to the tree's trunk and rehung the amulet. "So be it," he whispered. "If not in exchange for a favor, then please accept it as a token of my respect."

A green leaf, fresh and alive, drifted down and grazed his shoulder. Tadaka clapped twice and bowed. Then he removed the straw ornament from the branch again.

Perhaps there was something wrong with the amulet? He gave it another inspection. No, he had not made any mistakes. The ribbon wove itself into the straw just so, the dangling bell glinting and enticing. It was a worthy temporary home for any willing spirit. The problem, then, was the willing part.

Nine days. Not much time left.

Returning the amulet around his neck, Tadaka tried to ignore his sinking feeling. He held nothing against Tetsu, but his friend's declination combined with these recent difficulties did not bode well. Yet there was still a part of him that urged him forward, that insisted it was not his destiny to fail here. He needed only to keep looking, keep trying. The solution would come when the elements aligned...

His ears popped. He froze. The sounds of the Isawa Woodlands returned like the reflection on a rippling pond. What had caused that sensation?

A short distance away stood a tiny stone lantern, no taller than his ankle. It was carpeted in moss, blending in with the surrounding brush, its firebox matted with leaves and long unused. Could it be?

He knelt beside it, removing his cone-shaped hat and lowering his head. "Forgive me," he whispered, "I did not see you there." Reaching into his obi, he withdrew a cone of incense and one of his sulfur matches. He lit the cone and let it weave thick cobwebs of smoke throughout the lantern's firebox.

It was low at first, so soft he could barely feel it. A gentle rumble, growing quickly: a reverberating bass like the lowest note of the koto plucked and left to echo in the hollow of his chest.

Tadaka smiled. "You're awake." Taking his prayer beads, he settled into the lotus position. "Tell me your story, ancient one."

The kami do not speak with words. Not as humans know them, at least. Emotion, sensations, feelings are their language. This is why a shugenja's emotions can elicit unintended reactions; the interpretation of feelings goes both ways. In order to commune, a shugenja has to allow themselves to feel what the kami is saying, relying on the heart to translate.

Tadaka felt as though he were sitting at the foot of a massive *taiko* drum thundering bluntly through his body. There came an emotion for which there existed no human word; he experienced it as a musty smell he could also taste, emanating from the pit of his belly, as if something were fermenting in his gut.

He laid his palm against the lantern's surface. Thoughts filled his mind, but they came not from within him. "You were here long before this kodama's tree. In time, it cast you in shade." He looked up at the oak canopy. It obscured the sky; even now it stole the lantern kami's light. "You've longed to see the sun again ever since, haven't you?"



It was as though the stones beneath his seat had split in two.

It wanted him to tear down the tree. Tadaka considered. A kami of the type of stone from which the lantern had been made, and especially of this age, would be a powerful ally in what would come next. But he couldn't destroy the tree. It may have wronged the kami, but it still had a right to life, and its removal would disrupt the balance of this place.

"Forgive me, ancient one, but I cannot do as you ask. However, I will make you another deal." He pinched another offering of agar dust into his straw amulet. "If you lend me your aid, I will erect a shrine for you on a mountain peak, and you will have all the sun you wish!"

Nothing.

Tadaka lowered his eyes. "That is not enough? You need something more?"

All things are composed of the elements. The human body is no exception. Tadaka knew his offering would have to be great indeed. And he knew none greater than his own earth.

He'd given it before. For this, he could spare a little more.

"Very well," he whispered, and he recalled his ancestor's teachings.

Tadaka wiped a single line of blood from the corner of his lips. Like a chipped tooth, he could feel the space in him that was now empty. He rose shakily. The straw amulet had become heavy, as if filled with stone.

Tadaka lowered his head. "Thank you, ancient kami."

At his feet, the lantern was dull and empty.

The dueling grounds were a wide chalk circle in the Dragon Heart Plains. No one would disturb the proceedings there. Tadaka whispered above the knee-high stack of stones just within the border of the arena. The wind tugged at the tiny shrine's orb-shaped lantern and the thin straw rope encircling it.

On the opposite end of the circle was Rujo's shrine, a *komainu* statue. The sitting lion-dog was adorned with bells and two straw ropes, and the smoothness and detail of the stone just showed that the Master of Earth had more time, more resources.

Isawa Rujo laid his hand on the statue's head, as if to pat it. The wind tugged at his elaborate robes and swept through his wild, grey-streaked hair.

What manner of kami has he charmed for this demonstration?

"Let the duel commence," came the voice of the judge. Asako Togama had been wise long before he was old, officiating many such matters on behalf of the Phoenix. As the daimyō of another Phoenix Clan family, he would be impartial to the proceedings. And yet, Togama knew Rujo much better than he did Tadaka. Would experience favor experience in this matter?

Tadaka approached and bowed to the crowd of witnesses. Due respect paid, he then faced his sensei. Anger crept into his curling fists, but he returned his master's bow regardless.

Rujo's voice was filled with gravel. "It has been some time, Tadaka-san."

"Not enough, it seems." He looked pointedly at the empty space where Rujo's second should have stood. "I see my father could not come."

"I did not ask him. I would never anguish him so." Rujo turned serious. "And you are without second as well, I see."

"I do not require one. There will be no doubt as to the victor when this is done."

"As you say," Rujo replied.

Togama held up his hands. "This duel will resolve the matter of honor between the Master of Earth, Isawa Rujo, and the Scion of Earth, Isawa Tadaka." He kept his words clinical and plain, omitting honorifics to avoid the appearance of partiality. "Enshrine your kami!"

Reverently, Tadaka lowered his straw amulet into the cairn. The kami had grown stronger over the past week, the straw turning green in places, tiny buds sprouting along the formerly dry stalks. Tadaka placed a butterbur leaf on the top to complete the enshrinement, stepping away with two claps. Then, he faced Rujo.

All had led to this moment. He would hold nothing back.

Togama continued. "This duel is complete when two spirits dwell within a single shrine, or when one side yields to the other. May the Heavens favor the rightful party." He abruptly sat, as did the dozen other witnesses. "You may begin."

"Wait." Rujo held out his hand and stepped forward. "A moment, first."

Tadaka narrowed his eyes. The Elemental Master approached, his arms outstretched in an entreating gesture.

"Tadaka, this has gone far enough. Surely after your ordeal at Cliffside Shrine, you see the folly of this path. If we continue, you will lose, and that defeat will be a shadow you drag for the rest of your days. However, if you recant your petition now and accept the judgment of the council..." Rujo's eyes softened. "...Then I will forgive this indiscretion and consider the matter settled. What say you?"

His words seemed sincere—and they were more than many who had slighted the Masters had been offered.

"How generous," Tadaka replied. "All I need do is abandon my destiny, and all can return to how it was. Me, supplying you with my research and insights, and you, claiming them as your own. But then, the victories of the student belong to his sensei; isn't that true?"

Where he'd expected to see the contorting face of anger, Tadaka saw only disappointment.

"Yes. And also his failures," said Rujo.

Tadaka moved first. He darted forward, prayer beads in hand, and focused on Rujo's shrine. Some life flickered within the motionless stone, but he could not sense what it was. Without knowing the nature of the enshrined spirit, he could never coax it out. But Rujo would take a conservative approach. He always did. There was time to—

Rujo broke an offering sachet against the ground and shouted a word of power. The earth



spat forth a spinning boulder, hurling it toward Tadaka's shrine.

Jerking back, Tadaka slapped a holy paper talisman against the ground. It disintegrated in his palm. A wall of stone jutted up in front of his cairn. The boulder broke against it with a thunderclap, the sound of splitting rock deafening the clearing. Chunks scattered across the arena, narrowly missing the startled onlookers.

Behind the thin veil of dust, Rujo's eyes flashed with amusement. Tadaka gritted his teeth. Destroying one shrine would leave nowhere else for the kami to go except for the other's. Rujo had opted for the direct approach.

Fine.

Tadaka unsheathed a scroll from his cache and unfurled it. Rujo's voice rose again, but Tadaka spoke quickly, offering a handful of salt as the words tumbled from his lips in an avalanche. The kami responded to his anger. The air around his scroll crystallized, and the scroll became the handle of a massive stone *tetsubō*. A cry erupted from Tadaka's chest as he swung the club and hurled himself at the komainu statue.

Rujo made a fist above his head. Cold hands gripped Tadaka's feet. The earth yanked his legs, sinking him up to his waist in impacted soil.

Animal panic stiffened his limbs and jerked his back, but Tadaka forced himself to breathe, whispering an *om* with each inward breath. If he panicked now, the kami would react unpredictably. He swung the stone club in tight arcs above his head, hurling it at the komainu.

Rujo clapped his hands, unleashing a cloud of sandy dust.

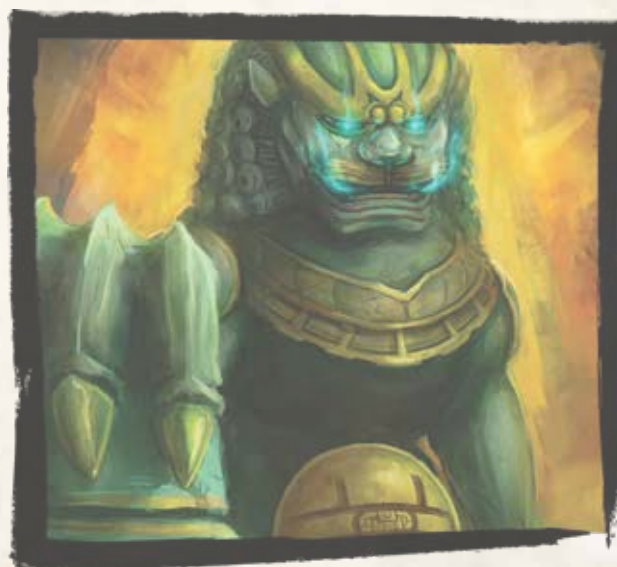
Jagged stone erupted from the earth, spiking the *tetsubō*. It broke into dozens of glittering shards. Chunks of stone fell from the sky. Cracks of splintering rock mingled with the startled yelps of the onlookers, some barely managing to duck out of the way of an errant spinning stone. Rujo shielded his face from bouncing pebbles with a silk sleeve.

Surely Togama would interfere now that the duel had progressed to this point. But as the onlookers ducked to avoid debris, the Asako daimyō merely watched, impassive, displaying no hint of concern for his own safety.

Very well. Onward, then.

Tadaka pushed against the ground. He was stuck in a vise grip, but he could feel the kami swarming within the earth, the vibrations from their movements reverberating in his inner ear. The right offering, the proper humility, and he could convince them to let him go.

From his robes, the chanting Rujo drew a rod of grey agarwood.



Ice ran in Tadaka's veins. An offering of that magnitude was fit only for a very ancient kami. With a loud snap of breaking stone, the komainu statue ripped itself from its foundation, darting forward on four legs and panting like a hungry beast.

So that was Rujo's game. He had planned this all along.

The stone lion-dog thundered across the area, heading for his cairn. The animated statue would easily crush it. Across the arena, Rujo watched with crossed arms and a satisfied smile.

Tadaka's heart beat in his ears. His vision blurred. His muscles tightened, and his jaw clamped shut. His fingers curled around a handful of soil.

No. I will not lose here. Not to Rujo, that smarmy, odious...

Tadaka pulled a single thread of budded straw from his sleeve.

Oh ancient one, I invoke our deal!

Stones cascaded from the sky in a torrent, but the swath was wide, missing the komainu by feet. They carved a deep trench, flying at Rujo. The Elemental Master watched the hailstorm with eerie calm. The crowd gasped. Tadaka's heart froze; due to his anger, the kami had misunderstood his command.

The ground ruptured at Rujo's feet. A column of rock cast him up, the cascading stones smashing harmlessly against the pedestal beneath him. An odd sense of relief washed over Tadaka as he swung his gaze to the animated statue. The stone lion-dog gathered speed as it circled the arena. Its momentum was more than enough to smash Tadaka's cairn to pieces.

Tadaka cursed himself. *Fool! You lacked focus, and now you are undone!*

The earth around him weakened; the grip released. He blinked. Had his curse offended the kami holding him in place? Or had his anger, misunderstood by the kami, frightened them away?

The komainu leapt. With a wordless cry, Tadaka wrenched himself from the ground. There was only time to hurl himself into the statue's path before the world went black.

Tadaka came to on the ground. He'd been out for only a moment. He felt as though his ribs were made of shattered glass. Each breath was agony. He was at the paws of the komainu, which panted above him. Rolling to his back, he looked up into the face of the Master of Earth. In Rujo's hand swung a straw amulet, green and laden with fronds.

The world held still. In Rujo's other hand rested an offering of incense. One gesture, one spoken word, and the lion-dog shrine would boast not one kami, but two. Mere moments, and it would be over. Tadaka had lost.

Yet the incantation did not leave Rujo's lips. Instead, he met his former student's eyes. "Do you see now, Tadaka? Do you finally realize where your pride has taken you?"

A sharp pain lanced through his ribs, but Tadaka ignored it. He kept his voice calm. "I am precisely where the Fortunes will me to be. It is not my destiny to lose today."

Rujo spoke through his teeth. "Still stubborn! You would lose everything—everything—over a denied petition and your own ego?"

"No," Tadaka replied. "But I would for our clan's future."



Rujo hesitated. The air was dense with his uncertainty and the crystallized moment.

"I may have been only a child when Father took us to Crab lands, but I remember what I saw there. Considering what the Kuni sacrifice to hold back that darkness, how far they are willing to go..." His gaze fell heavily upon Rujo's face. "How could the greatest shugenja in the Empire do any less?"

Rujo scoffed. "That is their duty. Not ours." But his façade was cracking. Mention of the Kuni had caused his face to pale, his fists to curl, to shake...

Tadaka moved to one knee. "You're wrong. The Fortunes made us the wardens of the Empire's spirit. We cannot ignore the signs. The elemental imbalance, the increased Shadowlands attacks, the shifting of the night stars...something is coming. It will come from the south. From the Pit. And whatever it is, you know the Phoenix are not prepared!"

"Then let us send someone else!"

All fell silent at Rujo's outburst. Even the crickets were soundless.

"We'll send another," he continued. Pain flickered across his weathered features. "But not you, Tadaka. There is darkness in your heart, as there is in all who share our bloodline. I will not lose my student to that darkness. Not like what happened to our ancestor."

Audible gasps. Even Togama looked away. Tadaka's fingers curled into a tight fist. So that was why Rujo had treated him this way. All these years, when he looked at Tadaka, he saw only their family's shame. Their fallen ancestor, a name none dared speak. Isawa Akuma.

"The shadow his actions cast over our clan remains to this day. In a thousand years, his shame will still haunt our family. I knew when I found you with his scrolls that you were headed on the same dark path! I know you have heard his voice! That is why I spoke against your research. I knew that if you were allowed to pursue it, you would share his fate."

"I am not like him," Tadaka whispered.

"You think your insights are unique?" Rujo shook his head. "Every Scion of Earth has felt this temptation, all the way back to the dawn of the Empire and Isawa's son himself!" He pressed his hand against his chest, wrinkling the emblem of the Earth Master. "I was once where you are! I too heard the Shadowlands' call and believed, for a time, that I could tame it! But I was wise enough to recognize it as hubris. I left my research and walked away."

Tadaka's stony expression faded.

"Now I am asking you to do the same." Rujo lowered the amulet and extended his hand. "It need not end this way. Another may pick up where you left off, and you may yet serve the Phoenix. But you must let it go, Tadaka. It is not for you."

For a long time, no one moved.

At last, Tadaka whispered. "You were researching it as well?"

Rujo nodded.

"You had the chance to equip the Phoenix against the darkness." His words were sharp, accusing. "And you turned away?"



Rujo was taken aback. "I chose to remain pure, for the sake of the Phoenix!"

"Then you failed your duty."

The Earth Master paled. His hand dropped. "Y...you dare!?"

Tadaka stood, slowly, one straightened vertebra at a time. Pain shot through his shaking leg, but he ignored it. "Soil that is too pure bares no fruit. Water that is too pure has no fish. Willing ignorance of what threatens us is not virtuous, Rujo-sama. It is the job of the Earth Master, of the entire council, to know the nature of the shadows so that they might be combated." He was at his full height and looking down at his former teacher. His heart and mind were in perfect accord. "When you turned away, it was not virtue, but cowardice. You avoided the shadows because you feared you would succumb to the call. It was because you were afraid." He held his arms to his sides, like unfurled wings. "I trust in the Fortunes. I trust in the kami. I have nothing to fear. And I will not fail."

A tear ran down Rujo's cheek. "Forgive me, Ujina-dono." He raised Tadaka's amulet.

The moment of Rujo's victory was not yet here. There was only this moment. Tadaka did not hesitate. He offered the only thing he knew the kami would want more than Rujo's offering, as well as the strength to claim it.

The amulet waved weightless in the breeze, dry and empty. Rujo's jaw dropped. The hairs on Tadaka's arms stood straight as he extended his hands. He could feel the resting static in the soil, seeds desperate to be released. He finally knew from whence Rujo's kami had come. What it would want. One final time he met Rujo's stunned eyes. "Let me teach you something."

He brushed his hands together.

The electric blast coated the area in sheet white. There was nothing but the rolling thunder.

Tadaka's sight finally returned, the colors of the bleached world bleeding back into view. The air was stale and smelled of ozone. His master's fallen body lay sprawled at his feet. Rujo coughed and rolled to his side. The komainu shrine was headless. Beyond, Tadaka's cairn was covered in moss and coated with sunset glow. Rujo's kami had come from a mountain. It



yearned but for the latent static in the ground to be released that it might touch the heavens. Tadaka needed only offer it the strength of his own earth to do so.

"Tadaka is the victor," Togama announced. His voice was shaking. Only now did Tadaka realize the old man's face was pale, and all witnesses stared at Tadaka in open horror.

Rujo rasped. "Tadaka...What have you done?"

When he'd hastily offered his own earth to Rujo's kami and his own, he had not cared from where they would take it. Victory was all that had concerned him. Now, weeks later, Tadaka still winced at his new face in the mirror. Scarred flesh twisted around the gaping hole where his cheek had been, exposing his teeth and the bone of his jaw. Clove oil soothed the pain. A balm smoothed the wrinkles of the ruined flesh. But no medicine would restore his features. This wound would never heal.

The door slid open without permission. Tadaka spun. A youth in Shiba trappings froze, paling. "A—a thousand pardons!" he managed, his wide eyes never leaving Tadaka's ruined face.

"It's all right, Yasuhide-san." Tadaka turned back to the mirror and applied a layer of makeup beneath his eye. "You have news?"

Yasuhide swallowed. "*Hai*. Master Ru—" He stopped, then began again. "The rōnin formerly known as 'Rujo' has left Nikesake. He is headed toward the Castle of the Dragonfly and the lands of the Dragon." A pause. "Give the word, and the Sesai family will follow."

There is a darkness within you, Tadaka.

"Leave him be," Tadaka replied. "I wish him good fortune, wherever he goes."

His new yōjimbō shifted. On his kimono, the emblem of the Order of Chikai showed beside that of the Sesai vassal family of the Shiba. "A former Elemental Master is a powerful enemy." To leave alive, Yasuhide's eyes seemed to add.

"He is not my enemy. In truth, I am grateful to him. The old man finally taught me something."

"Oh?"

Tadaka smirked as he sat back on his cushion. "I acted too hastily. I utilized my ancestor's insights without fully comprehending them. That was foolish. I will not do so again."

"Then you are reconsidering renewing your proposal?"

"To the contrary. Because I didn't understand what I'd traded, I suffered this malady. Rujo should have won, but because he didn't understand me, he lost. If anything, the duel proved me right as well." As he spoke, he drew a small cloth and wrapped it around the lower half of his face, concealing his scars behind the thin silk. "If we do not understand the darkness, we won't be prepared to face it."

Tadaka rose, smoothing the robes of his former master. His palms grazed the silver crest of the Master of Earth. Soon he would be in Crab lands, exactly where he was supposed to be.

Ignorance is the root of suffering, not knowledge. But even knowledge can be deployed with ignorance. Do not forget this, Tadaka-san. Do not make my mistake.

"I won't," Tadaka whispered.

Beneath the makeup and the shade from his conical hat, the spider-web scarring around his eye was barely visible. If he'd known what his actions would cost him, where the path would lead, perhaps he would have sought another way. But regret was a sin. A bell could not be unrung. Forward steps were how one learned.

And repentance did not come first.



Isawa Tadaka - The Elemental Master of Earth

