



*Legend of the
Five Rings*™

THE STEEL THRONE

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FLIGHT OF DRAGONS

The
Fourth
Year
of the
Reign
of
Toturi I

In the blink of an eye, the dragons returned.

For four years, they had sequestered themselves. During that time, some of the samurai in the Empire had begun to wonder openly if all of the kami—all of the gods and spirits—had abandoned the ancestral lands to the mortals, if indeed the Age of Man had dawned with the ascension of Toturi, the Ronin Emperor. For four long years, not even the most enlightened shugenja could sense the dragons' presence, hidden beyond the immortal veil. In those four long years, the people of the Empire began to turn their back upon the dragons and upon the other kami as well. Perhaps that was part of the plan of the Unspeakable: turn the people away from the myths and legends and traditions that guide them and leave them rudderless in a world where their only duty is unto themselves.

No more. The dragons ripped across the stained skies of Roku-gan at astonishing speeds, bringing terror, raw power, incomprehensible magic . . . and hope.

The dragons had hidden themselves from the Unspeakable

long enough. It was time to fight. Across the continent, the Unspeakable was tearing at the fabric of the world itself, and even the dragons feared what might happen.

The Dragon of Air parted the winds for the others. The Thunder Dragon roiled in its wake, keeping the path clear. Above, the Celestial Dragon illuminated the way for its siblings, while below the Dragon of Earth shook the world to announce their arrival—a deafening, horrifying sound of the lands themselves being beaten as drums. The Water Dragon guided their course as creation itself threatened to collapse, and the Dragon of Fire left a glimmering trail in their wake, an arc of blinding dragonfire for the entire world to see. And, of course, at the center of it all was the Void Dragon, calm, empty of thought, as pure of action as the falling snow.

They moved across the Empire, each dragon a storm unto itself, all seven together nothing less than an apocalypse. Mountains trembled in fear. The oceans withdrew from the dragons' power. Trees broke their own backs to bow before the great spirits. Those humans unfortunate enough to be in the dragons' path prostrated themselves, stammering out desperate, fearful prayers of thanksgiving and fervently hoping that they would remain beneath the dragons' notice.

Of a sudden, the flight of dragons burst apart, each going its separate way, each with its own duties to perform. They had announced themselves. The Empire knew now that they had returned. Still, there was much to do.

The Water Dragon spiraled down into a river, merging with the waters. Once in its own element, the dragon knew no limitations. To the small mortals nearby, it seemed the river itself erupted along its entire length to the sea as the dragon moved through. Fishing boats abruptly soared skyward on the van of a river-long geyser, then dropped again to the suddenly placid water, filled to the gunwales with flopping fish. By the time the fishers could cry out a prayer of thanks to the glassy waters, the dragon was already moving through the ocean.

The dragon turned landward again, following the course of a small stream and sending its contents erupting out of the streambed. Then, abruptly, it surged out of the water and surveyed the land around. This was the right place.

There was a village just off the stream's bank. The dragon looked at it carefully. It was a small village, simple, quiet. The Void Dragon would approve. At the center of the village was a shrine to the ancestors, carefully tended. Feng shui radiated from its rustic construction. This was no immaculate wood shrine, no religious structure so perfectly rendered and polished that it had become sterile. This shrine had been hewn by hand, carved, rubbed with oils, and, above all, revered. Its rough and irregular exterior proved that it was alive to these villagers, a part of their intimate life and not an empty ritual. This was indeed the right place.

The dragon narrowed its focus and saw the villagers, face down in the dirt. It chose one and gave him a nudge, spirit to spirit. He gasped and leaped backward, his face drained of color.

Look at me.

Trembling uncontrollably, the villager looked up helplessly. It seemed as if the stream itself had risen out of its bed to flow into the air, curving elegantly upward. The surface of the water rippled in the breeze, constantly shifting and refracting the light of the sun.

Higher.

The villager craned his neck back, following the arc of the stream as it curved over his head. He saw a pair of forelimbs clasped delicately together, the folds of the liquid skin confusing his mind. Above that, the water formed a dragon's head with long, wavering watery whiskers gracing the muzzle. Water dripped from the whiskers, making the sound of falling rain. He couldn't tell if the dragon actually touched the sky, or merely seemed to.

Look at me.

At last, the villager met the dragon's eyes. Though made of water, they seemed to reflect the light of the sun itself. The villager gave a small, strangled cry of fear. Surely he was about to die. It was not right for anyone in the Empire to look a superior in the eye.

You are the samurai of this village.

It did not seem like a question, so the samurai chose not to reply.

All must serve the Empire in their own way. Your way is to obey the dragon.

The samurai, cringing, nodded.

The dragon reached one of its forelimbs into itself, water merging

with water the way a stream enters a river. It drew forth an egg-shaped ball, made entirely of water. There was something inside, but its image was distorted by the surface of the watery egg, and he could not tell what it was. The dragon held it for a moment, then reached out and placed it upright on the ground in front of the samurai.

I have carried her long enough. Now you will care for her as one of your own.

The watery egg suddenly lost its form and splashed about as if some invisible skein had been abruptly slit open. There sat a woman, trembling uncontrollably. She was pretty and looked rather young, except for the deep, haunting emptiness in her eyes and the hair that had turned as white as snow. She was curled into a fetal position, clutching her kimono tightly about her body.

The samurai noticed that although she had come from the water-egg, she herself was dry. Momentarily forgetting his station, he turned toward the water dragon to ask, but the dragon was already gone, vanished as if it had never been. He was at once startled but also profoundly relieved.

Still too shaken to stand, he crawled over to where the woman sat. She took no notice of him, but stared vacantly into space. Slowly he reached out his hand to hers. As soon as his skin touched hers, she started and gasped. Her head jerked toward him, but not quite all the way, and again, she did not appear to see him.

He took her hand, gently but firmly. He pulled softly, gradually, coaxing her up. She rose, seemingly an activity she had almost forgotten.

Gently he led her to his hut. She followed, taking timid, tiny steps, shaking her head slowly from side to side, with her free hand always clutched across her belly.