

*Author's note: Space was the primary reason for cutting this scene. That and it robs a bit from the ending.*

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## EMERGENCE OF THE TORTOISE

The  
Twenty-  
Fifth Year of  
the Reign of  
Toturi I

The following years brought peace to the land, and peace itself brought a new growth and vitality to the Emerald Empire. Toturi's judgment had been fair and his reign profitable, and given these benefits as well as his diplomatic, strategic and tactical capabilities demonstrated during the great conflict, he was now known as the Splendid Emperor. No more did anyone question his right or his ability to rule. The Steel Throne infused Rokugan with a new vitality and a bright hope, but over Toturi's household a shadow still lingered.

That shadow was Naseru—now called *Hantei* Naseru—who would disappear every year into the Dragon mountains for several weeks, time spent alone with Hantei under the watchful guard of the retired emperor's spirit samurai.

When with his family, Naseru spoke almost not at all of those visits. The only tangible admission that his parents had gotten out of the young man was after his first visit. Once, just once, Naseru had mentioned that Hantei had

said, "I don't like the way you look at me." Beyond that, the young man said nothing.

As the years progressed, Naseru did not become more withdrawn, as Kaede had feared would happen. Instead, he actually became more jovial, more sociable . . . and more capable of lying while putting forth a façade of utmost sincerity. This was most pronounced immediately after each visit.

The fifth year that Naseru spent with Hantei was also the last. He returned to Otosan Uchi late on a frigid autumn night, a night with no moon where the damp coastal air cut through clothing to chill the bone. As usual, he returned quietly, without announcing his intentions, his itinerary, or when he arrived at Otosan Uchi. He had been gone longer than usual this year—two weeks longer than the norm—and thus as he glided silently through the imperial palace to his rooms, it did not take long at all for word to filter to the emperor and empress.

Toturi and Kaede, hastily clad in robes far too thin to resist the night's cold, intercepted him just as he was about to step into his suite.

"Naseru!" said Toturi warmly, but beside him, Kaede drew her hand to her mouth in a gasp.

Naseru looked up at his father, and Toturi saw that a silken bandage was wrapped around his head, covering his right eye. Naseru bowed formally, a seemingly warm smile on his face. "It is good to see you again, honored father and honored mother. Are you both well?"

Toturi drew closer, though his son had grown so much that he no longer needed to bend down to look him square in the face. "My son," he asked, "what happened to your eye?"

Naseru looked confused for just an instant, and then said, "My eye was taken from me, father. Please do not embarrass me by asking how I failed to keep it."

"Did Hantei do this to you?" asked Kaede moving closer.

She held one hand out toward her son's face, but hesitated to touch him.

"Mother," Naseru said, hanging his head, "did you not hear the request I just made of your husband? He is honoring it. Please do likewise."

Toturi thought a moment, then said, "You need say nothing about it, my son, but if you ask it, I shall have Hantei struck dead for failing to protect the emperor's son, to whom he was extending hospitality and for whose safety he was responsible."

Naseru bowed again. "You are gracious and generous as always, father. However, you need not concern yourself over Hantei."

"Why not?" asked Kaede. "It seems we should. Now more than ever."

"He has returned to Jigoku, mother. Let our ancestors rest in peace."

"How did he die?" asked Kaede, "Did . . . did you kill him?"

"I will not dishonor the dead by speaking of their failures, for I do not wish a ghost in my life," said Naseru meekly.

Toturi looked intently at his son, but he saw only the mask of his face. The mask . . . and the eye patch. A chill draft glided through the corridor. Naseru's inscrutable gaze told Toturi that no more information would be forthcoming.

"What of his personal guard?" asked the emperor. "The spirit samurai? They swore their lives to serve the Hantei . . ."

Naseru shrugged. "What of them?"