

# Brothers of the Monkey

A round-robin story set in Rokugan  
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## Part One

by RICH WULF

**G**ive up!" Kyoji called out. "I know you are here." Kyoji pushed aside a tree branch and stepped onto the road, hand on the hilt protruding from his obi. There was no reply. Kyoji sneered as he searched for any sign of his quarry. He saw nothing.

"The hour is late, Koto," he said. "We must end this."

Kyoji's shoulders slumped. Perhaps he had gone the wrong way. A sound to the left side of the road drew his attention. Kyoji looked that way, nearly missing the blur of movement from above. At the final instant, Kyoji drew his blade in one hand, clumsily blocking the attack. With the loud clack of wood, the weapon flew from his hands. Kyoji and his attacker rolled through the fallen leaves three times before Kyoji finally lay facedown, arm pinned behind his back.

"Get off me, Koto," Kyoji snapped, spitting out dirt. "This is no time for games. Father is expecting us."

"Admit you lost," Koto said with a chuckle.

"I admit nothing," Kyoji said. "You hid in a tree like a Scorpion!"

"Ha," Koto retorted. "And you're as dumb as a Crab. I should accuse you of cheating because you're stronger." Koto rapped his older brother on the head with his wooden sword. "Admit I won!"

Kyoji scowled. "Fine," he grumbled. "You beat me."

"There," Koto said. "That wasn't hard."

Koto released Kyoji and backed away. For a moment, they looked at one another eye to eye. At fourteen, Kyoji was three years older and a foot taller. He fixed Koto with a murderous glare and snatched his bokken from the ground.

"Now," Kyoji growled. "What did you say about me being dumb?"

"Dumb?" Koto asked. "I meant to say slow." He stuck out his tongue and ran.

Kyoji swore and sprinted after his brother, pausing only long enough to kick off his sandals. Kyoji's legs were longer but Koto darted off the road, weaving and dodging through trees. Kyoji slashed branches aside with his bokken. His brother's laughter echoed through the trees. Finally, he saw Koto standing in the open, glancing left and right uncertainly. Kyoji grinned and charged. Koto turned and smiled, dodging to the left. This time his trick did not work. Kyoji anticipated the move. He tackled Koto solidly, not even pausing to think what his younger brother had planned.

Both brothers tumbled down the hillside. Kyoji landed on his back in a large patch of mud. Koto lay several feet away, face down in the shallow creek.

"Koto!" Kyoji shouted, running to his brother's side and rolling him over.

Koto's cheeks were swollen like a pufferfish. His squirted a mouthful of water in Kyoji's face. Kyoji yelped, falling on his behind. When the initial shock faded, he blinked at his brother in surprise. He fixed

Koto with an angry expression, but under the circumstances it did not last. Soon both brothers were laughing hilariously.

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Koto and Kyoji looked pathetic. Their hair hung limp and wet. Their kimonos were soiled and torn. Kyoji's sandals were missing and Koto had lost his bokken. This was to say nothing of the fact they had arrived home hours late. They both stared fearfully at the gates of their father's castle. Neither wished to be the first to step inside.

"Do you think he will be angry?" Kyoji asked.

"Yes," Koto said, "but I shall tell him we were way-laid by bandits, and that though we fought bravely they stole my sword and your shoes."

"He will never believe that," Kyoji replied.

"But he will be even more angry that I lied, so you won't get in any trouble," Koto said. "Then you'll still get to take your gempukku next month."

"You really think he would cancel my gempukku?" Kyoji asked, a note of terror in his voice. The ceremony where a boy became a samurai was sacred; Kyoji had spoken of nothing else for six months.

"It's possible," Koto said seriously. "Real samurai are strong. Even I gave you a beating."

Kyoji glared at his brother. "Listen," he snapped. "I beat you fair and . . ."

Kyoji never finished the sentence. The gates of the castle opened. Toku, Champion of the Monkey Clan, stood before them. The old samurai looked down at the two boys, eyes narrowing in disapproval. He ran one hand over his shaven head and pursed his lips.

"Greetings, honorable father," both boys said, kneeling and bowing far lower than etiquette demanded.

"Bandits again?" he asked wryly.

"A whole horde!" Koto exclaimed looking up at his father with a terrified expression. "The bandit lord Hayato himself . . ."

"Come inside," Toku said, gesturing sharply.

They nodded. Koto kicked off his sandals. Kyoji wiped his muddy feet on the step. They entered the castle and followed their father to his chamber. A roaring fire was prepared in the center of the room. Their baby sister Kiyuko cooed as she played with her dolls. Two plates of food were set out on the table, and the brothers tore into them greedily.

"Your mother was worried," Toku said, sitting down across from them. He plucked the ambling toddler from the floor and seated her in his lap.

"The fault is mine, father," Kyoji said sincerely. "I have no excuse."

Koto looked at Kyoji sharply. "Kyoji remembers it wrong. I got lost in the woods, and he had to find me. Punish me in whatever way you deem fitting, noble father." Koto bowed his head low.

"I have the perfect punishment," Toku said. "I have an errand for both of you."

"A mission?" Kyoji said eagerly. Koto also looked very interested.

"Samurai go on missions, young boys go on errands," Toku corrected in a commanding tone. Any possible intimidation was dispelled when Kiyuko tugged on her father's beard.

"Yes, father," the boys said, failing to conceal their glee.

"Don't be so excited," Toku said with a grin. "I haven't told you the details . . ."

## Part Two

by STAN!

What do you suppose is in it?" Kyoji asked. He held the black, lacquered-wood box out at arm's length. It was not so impressive. In fact, Toku, his father and Champion of the Monkey Clan, owned many such boxes. True, the Monkey Clan mon was layered on the lid in delicate gold foil — but it was not crafted with any particular artistry.

"It doesn't matter," Koto said. "We're just supposed to deliver it to Aoki-sensei. What difference does it make what's inside?"

At eleven, Koto was old enough to recognize when Toku was willing to indulge his sons' mischievous curiosity, and when it was best for the boys to simply obey his instructions to the letter. Kyoji, while three years older, still appeared not to have mastered that skill.

As they walked down the winding path toward Mishima Jingu, the older boy turned the box over in his hands. Even through the silk padding that lined the box's interior, he could feel a small, heavy object moving from one side to another.

"It feels like a rock," he said. Every time he turned the box there was a soft but distinct thunk. "Why would father send Aoki-sensei a rock?"

Koto rolled his eyes in frustration.

"It's not a rock."

"Well then what is it?" Kyoji asked again.

"It's an errand," Koto said, "one we must succeed at in order to gain father's forgiveness. If we can't handle this simple task, father is certain to postpone your gempukku. So let's get whatever it is to the temple quickly."

In all the world, Kyoji wanted nothing more than to become a samurai. He'd worked hard to prepare for the gempukku ceremony. He practiced with his bokken every day, he studied calligraphy and haiku with his tutors whenever possible, and he never missed an opportunity to tell his father how proud he would one day make him. Now, with only a month to go until his rite of passage, fate seemed to conspire against him. Kyoji had to prove his worth before Toku would let him take this crucial step.

"I can't believe my future depends on us delivering a rock to that old witch," he grumbled.

"It's not a rock!" Koto shouted.

Kyoji shook the box harder than before. The clunking noise was deeper, but no less like the sound of a rock bouncing off lacquered wood.

"Definitely a rock," Kyoji said and shook the box even harder.

"Stop that!" Koto urged.

"Why?" Kyoji asked. The boy shook the box again. "It's only a rock." And again. "There's nothing I can do to break a rock."

Sweat poured down Koto's brow. He was as anxious for his older brother to perform the gempukku as anyone.

"Stop!" he said and punched Kyoji's shoulder.

Perhaps it was the evening shadows dimming the older boy's sight. Perhaps Koto was stronger than he realized. Or perhaps failure was simply the boys' karma. Whatever the reason, the punch knocked Kyoji off his stride. The older boy tripped and fell flat on his face in the middle of the path, the lacquered box slipping from his hand and tumbling through the air.

The box bounced once — then again — and one more time, finally coming to rest a few yards away with its top off and lying next to it in the road.

Both boys were frozen with fear — Kyoji sprawled on the ground and Koto standing next to him. Neither one made a sound. They simply stared at the box — the one their father had entrusted to them for safe delivery — laying in the dirt.

Suddenly and simultaneously they sprang into action and ran up to where it sat.

The box was scuffed, the lacquer scratched on every surface and the silk smudged with mud stains, but it was not broken. As Kyoji had observed, it had not been such a nice box to begin with. Perhaps Aoki-sensei would not notice that it was more worn than it ought to be.

"It's empty," Koto said in a hoarse whisper.

Sure enough, with the top off the contents must have spilled out.

"Look around," Kyoji ordered. "Find it and put it back inside!"

"Look for what?" Koto asked, panic rising in his voice.

"How should I know?" his older brother answered. "You wouldn't let me peek inside! Look for something like a rock."

"It's not a rock!"

"I know," Kyoji said. "But it made a sound like a rock. So look for something like a rock that isn't a rock and that has to be it."

As ridiculous as that sounded to Koto, he couldn't think of anything better, so he got down on his hands and knees and began crawling around running his hands over the dirt path. The twilight was fading, so his only hope of finding the missing object was by touch.

"Father will be furious," the younger boy said.

"I know," Kyoji muttered.

"He'll cancel your gempukku for sure."

"I know!"

"We have to find that thing right away!"

"I KNOW!" Kyoji shouted. "Do you think I'm an idiot? I know — hey!"

"What did you find?" Koto asked. He stood up and turned around expecting to see his brother holding something triumphantly in the air. Instead he saw Kyoji still on hands and knees, surrounded by a group of five men. Four of them wore soiled kimonos and seemed to have not shaved in weeks.

"Bandits," Kyoji said in a strained voice. One of the bandits wielded a kama and held the scythe's blade against the boy's throat. Three others brandished tanto and gazed menacingly in Koto's direction.

The fifth man was taller than the others. He was also cleaner, better dressed, and he held in his right hand a large, wedge-shaped rock. The stone had been polished till its surface gleamed, and even from this far away Koto could see words or images carved into its surface.

"Shall we kill them, Hayato-sama?" one of the bandits asked.

Hayato? Koto thought. Bandit Lord Hayato?

"Perhaps," Hayato said. He held the stone aloft and gazed at it intently. "After all, this certainly is a prize worth killing for."

## Part 3

by JESS LEBOW

Kyoji looked up at his brother from his hands and knees. "Father will never believe us this time."

Koto pulled his bokken from the belt around his waist. "Let him go," he shouted.

The bandits laughed.

Hayato tossed the smooth stone in the air, letting it slap the palm of his hand as it fell back into his grasp. "Quite brave," he said. "Aren't you afraid for your brother's life?"

Koto took a step forward, raising his wooden sword. "I said, let him go."

Hayato smiled. "Perhaps your father will believe your tale if I send you home with your brother's head in a sack."

Koto glanced down at Kyoji. The bandit at his throat pulled the blade of his kama tighter against the young man's neck. A thin line of blood appeared, and Kyoji tensed, his eyes opening wide.

"I'll give you one last chance," said Koto. "Release him or die."

The bandits stopped laughing.

Hayato stared down at the boy, his eyes narrowing. He nodded, and two of the grubby men, tanto in hand, marched toward Koto.

"Run, Koto," shouted Kyoji. "Please run."

Koto watched the men approach, shifting his attention from one to another. His heart jumped in his chest. Little bulbs of sweat formed on his forehead, neck, and arms. His skin felt cold, his knees weak. Koto could hear the bandits' footsteps growing louder as they got closer. The wind blew toward him, rustling the leaves and carrying the rank stench of soiled kimonos.

"Run!" Kyoji's voice broke, squeaking a higher pitch.

Koto had never heard his older brother scream with such desperation, and the sound sent a chill down his spine.

The bandits took another step closer.

Koto pushed off with both feet, hurling himself through the air with all his might. The bandits did a shuffle step, surprised by the young man's sudden leap.

Koto landed on his feet, turned, and ran. His jump backward had given him a ten foot lead.

"After him," yelled Hayato.

Koto didn't look back, pumping his legs as fast as he could. Turning the corner, the young man crashed into the brush lining the winding dirt road. A line of trees loomed just ahead. The darkening night grew even darker within the grove.

Koto lifted his legs as high as he could, leaping over the shrubs, crossing as much ground with each step as his eleven-year-old legs could cover. He could hear the bandits enter the shrubs close behind.

Koto pushed himself harder. His lungs burned, and his legs began to feel heavy. The shrubs had cut through his robes, scratching his legs underneath. He ignored the pain, hurling his body forward into the darkness beneath the trees.

His eyes had difficulty adjusting, but Koto could just

make out the stump of a fallen tree ahead of him. Two more steps, and he jumped, curling his body over the downed tree and tumbling to a stop on the opposite side. Tucking himself under the stump as best he could, the young Monkey put his hands to the sides of his mouth, masking the sound of his heavy breathing.

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Kyoji swallowed hard. The blade against his throat bit into his skin. It stung, and he could feel blood trickle down his neck. He looked up at his younger brother. The damn fool stood his ground, bokken in hand.

Kyoji took a deep breath. "Run!" He blurted out the words as hard and fast as he could. The movement made the blade sink deeper into his skin.

Koto leaped backward and took off at a run.

"After him," yelled Hayato.

Two bandits gave chase.

Kyoji closed his eyes. Run hard, brother, run hard.

Kyoji waited. He wondered if it would hurt, wondered how long it would take for him to finally die once the bandit slit his throat. Then he wondered about his father. Would he be disappointed in him for not completing his task? Or would he mourn the loss of his son? That thought filled the young Monkey with indignation.

"If you filthy bastards are going to kill me, do you at least have the balls to challenge me to a duel?"

The blade released from his throat, and Kyoji opened his eyes. Someone grabbed him from behind and pulled him to his feet. He could feel the bleeding line across his neck burn, but he left it alone, instead puffing out his chest and glaring at the bandit lord.

Hayato held his smooth-shaved chin in one hand, the polished stone in the other, watching Kyoji intently. "Do you have any idea what this is?" he said finally, shaking the stone.

"Y...yes," replied Kyoji, not taking his eyes from the man.

"Then you realize that I will have no problem killing you for it." He took a step forward and leaned down into Kyoji's face. "No matter how young you are."

"Then you won't mind challenging me for it," Kyoji sneered. "No matter how old you are."

Hayato turned away and retrieved the now-scuffed black-lacquered box. He placed it on the ground between himself and Kyoji. Then he placed the kanji-covered stone in the box.

"No, you're right," said Hayato, "I won't mind." He pulled his wakizashi from his belt. "Catch." He threw it at Kyoji.

The young Monkey had never touched a real sword before. It was forbidden to do so before gempukku.

Reaching up, Kyoji caught it in one hand. Oh well, he thought. If he wouldn't get to take the gempukku challenge from his father, this would have to serve in its place.

Kyoji straightened his robes and dusted the dirt from his knees. Then he slipped the sword into his belt.

"When you're ready old man," blurted Kyoji, placing his hand on the hilt, "I'll gladly take your life."

Hayato took an easy, practiced stance, bending at the knees and wrapping his fingers around the hilt of his katana. He smiled.

"No, please, brave little boy," he urged, "be my guest."

## Part Four

by EDWARD BOLME

Kyoji stood at attention, trying to clear his mind. It was hard to do, with the unfamiliar weight of a wakizashi pulling at his waist and Hayato's self-satisfied smirk plaguing his eyes.

He paused a moment to assess his situation, a moment of intellectual clarity forced upon him by his dire circumstance. He stood two full paces away from Hayato. The wakizashi in his belt had a short blade, perhaps two spans at best, and wielded at the end of his shorter arms, he could at best cut Hayato's belly at this range. Hayato stood at the perfect distance for his longer adult arms and his doubly long katana blade. With an easy extension of his arm, he could place the prime cutting portion of his blade at Kyoji's neck.

Kyoji nervously edged forward. Hayato edged back.

Kyoji sucked on his lips, trying to bring some small measure of saliva into his mouth. It didn't work. Hayato nodded ever so lightly, a knowing expression in his eyes.

Kyoji edged forward again. Again, Hayato casually edged back.

Damn. Hayato was choosing the distance, toying with him.

In an instant, Kyoji saw what would happen, as clearly as if he were an Oracle himself. He would try to draw the wakizashi. He might even start to swing. And by that time, Hayato's blade would slice neatly through Kyoji's neck, and a godless bandit would kill the heir to the Monkey Clan daimyo.

He would die as a child by the hand of someone not even worthy to be human. Such shame. As if in confirmation, a trickle of blood slithered down the base of Kyoji's neck. It paused, then rode down the length of his collarbone to stain the collar of his jersey.

Kyoji thought of his little brother, and hoped that he'd had the speed and agility to get away from the bandits. He wondered what Koto would do in this situation, facing a duel he couldn't possibly win.

And then it came to him. He'd do the same thing he'd done to his older brother, time and again. Koto would change the rules.

A daring plan arose in his mind. Kyoji's eyes grew solemn as he steadied himself. Seeing this, Hayato dropped the smile from his face, and his eyes grew as still and focused as a candle's flame.

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Koto lay as still as a rabbit as the two bandits leaped over the log and moved on in the direction he'd been running. Turning his head, Koto saw them scanning the woods and conversing quietly with each other.

As gingerly as he could, he reached down and felt around for a small rock. Finding one, he carefully pushed himself up onto his knees, pulled back his sleeve with his other hand so it wouldn't flap and make a noise, and tossed the rock in a high arc toward some bushes.

For a moment, he wondered if his aim had been off in the dark, but then he was rewarded by a small crack farther away. The two bandits moved toward the sound quietly. Koto watched as they moved on, then slithered back over the fallen tree to the far side.

Once out of their sight, he crawled back toward the brother he'd abandoned on the road. When he felt he was far enough away, he stood and began to trot in the wooded margin alongside the road. He had to find out what had happened to his brother.

Then he heard a scream pierce the darkening sky.

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Kyoji twitched his hand and immediately dropped low, diving forward.

Hayato's arm struck like a viper, blazing his blade free from its sheath. With the hiss of a typhoon, the razor's edge sliced through the air right where Kyoji's neck should have been, slicing instead through the hair on the back of the boy's head.

Kyoji tumbled just as he had been taught by his sensei, his left hand grabbing the polished rock as he rolled forward. He curled up loosely, rolling just to the left of Hayato's legs. As he finished his roll, he uncurled, finishing on one knee just behind the bandit leader. Even as he came to a halt, his right hand drew the wakizashi and cut Hayato's hamstrings from behind.



The other two bandits were startled, and, for a brief precious moment, they stood unmoving as their leader crumpled with a pained and angry yell. It seemed like it took forever for Kyoji to lunge to his feet and run for the wooded margin, and the boy realized that he understood at last what his father meant when he referred to “living a lifetime in the blink of an eye.”

From the ground, Hayato cursed him and barked orders to his two remaining men.

Kyoji glanced over his shoulder; one bandit was helping staunch the blood, while the other turned and gave chase. Kyoji ran into the brush lining the road, crashing through and into the woods. He turned vaguely in the direction of home, lacking any better ideas.

With the gathering dark, the chase quickly slowed down to a brisk jog. Kyoji continually sought low-hanging branches to duck under. Although the whipping wood slowed the pursuing bandit down, his longer legs slowly closed the gap on the uncertain young samurai.

He heard the bandit’s breathing grow louder, the footsteps closer.

Then, of a sudden, a shadow moved just to Kyoji’s right, and a loud percussive crack split the darkness, followed by a heavy thud. Kyoji spun around to see his younger brother, bokken in hand, standing over the unconscious bandit. The ronin thug lay on his back, and even in the fading twilight, Kyoji could see the rapidly darkening bruise that ran across the man’s face.

Panting, the two boys studied each other, too terrified to laugh, too proud to cry. Somehow, both of them knew that they had crossed some threshold together, and they would never truly be children again.

At last Koto straightened up. “Better make sure he can’t follow us,” he said. He kicked the sandals off the man’s feet and gave the ball of each foot a vicious whack with the bokken. “There we go. With those bruises, he won’t get very far. Father’s samurai can arrest him when we finish our mission.”

Mission, thought Kyoji, not errand. He smiled a lopsided smile. “Well,” he said, “we’d better press on.” So saying, he absently wiped at the oozing blood on his neck with his left hand.

“Whoops,” he said, and tried to wipe his hand on his jersey so that the blood would not soil the polished rock. As he inspected his hasty work, the two boys saw the symbols carved into the rock begin to glow with a soft light.

## Part Five

by REE SOESBEE

Like a man dying of thirst, the rock seemed to absorb the faint sheen of blood that lay upon its smooth surface, letting it pool within the faint symbols and then fade to nothingness.

“It’s evil — it’s maho, black magic,” Koto whispered. His voice shivered with the fear that he tried to suppress on his features.

“Shut up,” his brother scolded, quickly dropping the strange rock back into the laquered box. “Father would never have such a thing. It can’t be maho.” But even Kyoji couldn’t deny what he had seen. The blood had vanished into the rock, and now the dark stone seemed to pulse with energy. “It can’t be . . .” he repeated to himself, trying to keep the faith within his words.

“It is maho,” the voice was soft and feminine, “and it is dangerous.” Kyoji spun around on the side of the road, his hand instinctively reaching for the short sword at his side. In the shadows, a female form slid from the darkness. Her hands lowered an elegant bow that had been raised and pointed past them toward where they had come from. “Your father would be proud of you.”

“I don’t know who you are, but if you try to stop our mission, you’ll get the same treatment as Hayato.” Kyoji threatened, his chin raised and his hand on his sword-hilt.

“If I had been near you earlier, Hayato would have an arrow through his heart instead of sword-wounds in his legs,” the girl countered. Now that Kyoji could see her, he realized that she wasn’t much older than he was. In fact, she sort of looked like . . .

“Ishimiko?” Koto said, gaping at Kyoji’s side. Kyoji elbowed his little brother, trying to force him to show some dignity, but the younger boy leapt forward toward their childhood friend. “Ishimiko! I thought you were training with the Wasp Clan! You are so much taller! You’ve grown. Tell her, Kyoji, she’s grown, just look at her.” He bowed eagerly, reaching forward to clasp her hand in a gesture of familial closeness that embarrassed them all.

Despite his brother’s enthusiasm, Kyoji was trying to look anywhere but at Ishimiko. At fifteen, she was tall and slender like a bamboo reed, her long black hair tied back in an elegant maiden’s foxtail — usefully enough, which wouldn’t interfere with her archery. She wasn’t the gangly little girl he’d thrown into the mud a few years ago. Now she was . . . well . . . gorgeous.

“What are you doing out here?” Kyoji grumped.

“Looking for you. My father sent me to find you and make sure you made it to the Little Tower.”

"If Aoki-sensei knew we were coming, then why didn't he come to meet us himself?"

Ishimiko rolled her expressive eyes. "We saw the bandits on the hill near the Little Tower," she referred to her father's private dojo and family residence. "They were looking for something. Aoki went to make sure they were dealt with, but he couldn't spare the men to come and find you. Your errand is very secret, and both your father and mine have gone to a great deal of trouble to keep it so. Now come, quickly. We must get back to the Little Tower before Hayato's men find us."

"We don't need your help," Kyoji said. "Father sent us, and we can make it."

"I'm not offering help, honorable Kyoji," Ishimiko bowed with respect to the young man, and his eyes widened. She was a samurai — she'd already had her gempukku, but she was bowing to him? "Your fighting prowess proves that you do not need a protector. But as the daughter of Aoki-sensei, I humbly ask that you allow me the family prerogative to guide our feudal lord's son to our home. As a matter of hospitality."

His pride assuaged, Kyoji nodded curtly. Koto smiled.

Kyoji gathered the lacquer box and closed it gently, staring for a moment at the gold foil monkey on the top of the box before handing it to Koto. "You carry it. I have to keep my sword ready. If those bandits are nearby, then we might need to fight, and I have to be ready."

Slowly, they followed Ishimiko through the forest, staying off the main roads of the Monkey lands. The journey was rough, but the three stayed close, picking their way through brush and low forest branches until they reached a hillock near the small keep.

The Little Tower was a low building, with a central dojo-platform built to train as many as twenty men, and a circular ring of buildings that served as housing both for Aoki-sensei, his family, and the men under his tutelage. The walls were elegant rice-paper and wood, painted with images of swordsmen. To one side stood a stone tower — very ancient, and very strangely built into the walls of the main house. It was this tower that gave the monkey dojo its name. Some said the tower was a remnant of ancient Naga architecture, but Kyoji had never taken them seriously. Usually, the lane before the dojo was lined with softly glowing lanterns, and the little lake to one side would shine in the starlight.

But this night, the Little Tower was not so peaceful.

A huge group of bandits — easily 20 or 30 men — surrounded the small dojo, their torches casting shadows against the rice-paper walls of the Little Tower. Six bodies, bloody and pale against the dark ground, lay near the lake. One floated in it, his head neatly removed from his sinking corpse. "Father's

watchmen," Ishimiko's voice was cold. "Hayato's men. Without him, they will be as ravening dogs. Father has only a few men, perhaps enough to defend the tower, but not enough to send for us. We cannot enter the Little Tower this way."

One of the bandits raised a glowing staff above his head, chanting to the boiling thunder in the sky. A faint green bolt shot down, piercing the clouds and setting the corner of the houses on fire. Kyoji could see servants in the keep rushing about to put out the blaze before it could spread. In the flickering light of the evil flames, Kyoji saw the bodies of the dead men begin to rise from the ground with terrible movements. Zombies.

"We have to get the rock to Aoki-sensei," Koto said uncertainly.

"There is another way. The tower has a secret passage that begins in the deep woods, a few li from here. But if my father was murdered by those bandits, then there is no use taking the rock to him . . . and we're all as good as dead."

"What is the rock?" Kyoji asked.

Ishimiko paused before answering. "It is a Corpse Stone, an ancient relic of Luchiban. In the wrong hands, it is very powerful. My father knows how to destroy it."

"If it is so powerful," Koto blurted out, "Why were we given it? Isn't that an important mission — wouldn't a samurai be given the rock?"

Ishimiko leveled a stoic gaze at the young boy. "It isn't deadly by itself. You can't possibly hurt yourself with it — it doesn't work that way. It only has one charge left within it. But if that single burst of power is used by one who knows how, it could defile the Monkey lands for miles around. They would be marked with Taint forever.

"If Toku-sama sent the rock with an honor guard, then the bandits would simply have attacked and taken it. It is a great prize for them, and they will make a good deal of koku by ransoming the Corpse Stone. Imagine the blackmail they would get, if these bandits took the stone into Otosan Uchi — or Kyuden Kakita!

"So your father sent his own sons, two boys just before their gempukku. He hid the rock from the eyes of Hayato's bandits by sending a large honor guard south at the same time. But somehow, Hayato discovered the truth."

"Kyoji, your father trusts you. As does Aoki-sama. Now we have to prove them right." Ishimiko's regard was warm, and Kyoji felt his face flush.

"Aoki-sensei can destroy this rock?"

Ishimiko nodded. "If we can get it to him, he can. It will be dangerous, but my father will be waiting for us on the other side. We cannot let our fear hold us back."

Kyoji turned back toward the Little Tower, watching as the bandits howled and cheered in their depravity. There were seven hours to go before dawn, and that sorcerer was already chanting again. “Take us to the passage, Ishimiko. I am not afraid to try.”

## Part Six

by ALLISON LASSIEUR

The three crept through the woods for what seemed like forever. The half moon gave such a weak light that the forest was nothing but blue shadows and darkness. Every snapping twig and rustling branch made Kyoji’s heart stop. Was it a bandit? A zombie? He sucked in his breath, clutched the battered lacquered box beneath his robe, and followed Ishimiko and Koto.

Ishimiko finally stopped. “There it is,” she said in a low voice. In front of them a large boulder glowed blue in the faint light.

“The door is here somewhere.” Ishimiko slung her bow over her shoulder and bent down, poking through the dirt, twigs, and other debris near the rock’s base. Without a word the brothers knelt and began searching as well. Soon Koto’s fingers brushed something familiar — smooth bamboo slats.

“Found it,” he said softly. Instantly Ishimiko and Kyoji were at his side. The three of them uncovered a small trap door. With a heave they dislodged it from the soil and cast it aside. A small hole gaped at their feet, clods of dirt tumbling into the darkness. A tiny light shone at the bottom, far away.

“There should be a ladder leading down,” Ishimiko said, running her hand along the side of the hole. “Yes, here it is.” The feeble moonlight barely illuminated the first rung of a thick, sturdy rope ladder. She looked at Koto. “You first,” she said. “We’ll be right behind. Hurry.”

Koto swallowed hard and stepped onto the ladder. It swung crazily when he put his weight on it. He closed his eyes and hoped the hole wasn’t too deep.

Suddenly a shout came from the woods. Kyoji looked up to see lanterns bobbing toward them like angry fireflies. The crash of underbrush told them that a group of bandits was closing in.

“Go!” Ishimiko shouted. She jumped onto the boulder and cocked her bow in one smooth, graceful move. Kyoji barely had enough time to see the first arrow fly before he, too, grabbed the ladder and plunged into the dark hole. Above, he heard the low thwang of a well-tightened bowstring and the startled yell of a man who had not expected an arrow in the darkness.

Kyoji scrambled down the ladder. Suddenly his legs met air and he lost his balance, tumbling off the ladder and falling squarely on top of something soft.

“Get off!” Koto yelled. Kyoji did a fast shoulder roll and sprang to his feet. Koto jumped up as a rush of a falling body and a thud on the floor beside Koto announced Ishimiko’s arrival. She jumped up and pulled a small cord dangling beside the rope ladder. The ladder snaked to the floor in a heap.

“That should keep them off us long enough to get to the tower,” she said. A small lantern sat on a rock outcropping, illuminating the tiny space. Ishimiko picked it up and sprinted through a large crack in the rock wall. The boys followed.

They raced through the tunnels, breathing hard. Ishimiko expertly chose passage after passage, clearly familiar with the confusing maze of tunnels. As they entered yet another tunnel, a noise behind them made Koto’s heart sink. A triumphant shout echoed through the caves — the bandits were on their trail, and closer than they thought.

“We’re here!” Ishimiko cried, skidding to a stop.

Sure enough, the cave dead-ended abruptly into a set of wide stone steps leading upward into the darkness. At the top was a square glow of light — a rice paper door.

In her excitement and relief, Ishimiko took the steps two at a time, disappearing into the dark shadows. Koto was right behind her. Kyoji paused, gasping, to catch his breath before he ran up the steep staircase. Without warning, three large figures bounded out of the darkness, their katanas glinting in the lantern light.

Kyoji spun around and drew his weapon. To his utter astonishment, it was not his familiar bokken but a wakizashi that slid from his obi. It was the one that Hayato had graciously lent him hours earlier. He must have replaced it without thinking as he fled the bandits! An expression of pure bliss crossed Kyoji’s face. He charged the bandits with a yell.

Kyoji’s fierce attack caught the three bandits completely off guard. Kyoji watched the wakizashi move as if someone else were wielding it. He felt nothing except the whish of air as the weapon sliced through his enemies. A deep belly gash appeared on one, seemingly out of thin air. A hand, with the katana still firmly gripped in it, went flying through the air of its own accord. And the third bandit found himself bleeding profusely from a cut in his leg. In a moment it was over. The three men lay crumpled on the cave floor, moaning and bleeding.

A loud commotion from above made Kyoji look up. Bright light was streaming down the staircase and a group of samurai rushed toward him. They stopped when they reached the bottom, astounded at the sight



that greeted them. They looked from Kyoji to the heap of bodies and back again. Kyoji looked at the bandits, then noticed something that made his heart freeze with fear. The lacquered box lay smashed on the ground, the silk lining in tatters. The stone was gone.

Two of the samurai escorted Kyoji, still clutching the blood-soaked wakizashi, up the stairs. After the darkness of the cave, the lights of the Little Tower hurt Kyoji's eyes. As they adjusted, he could see Koto and Ishimiko standing among a large group of samurai and others in a large room. One man broke from the group and rushed toward him. It was his father, Toku.

"What . . .?" Kyoji began to say, but the strength of his father's hug cut him off. Kyoji dropped the bloody weapon and buried his head in his father's robes. Although this sort of display was usually frowned upon, neither cared.

"My brave son," Toku said, releasing Kyoji.

"I am sorry Father," Kyoji said. "I failed to complete the errand you gave me. I lost the stone somewhere, either in the forest or the caves. I have dishonored you."

Koto stepped beside his brother, his lower lip trembling with fear but his chin held high. "I, too, should be ashamed, Father. We failed you. Now everyone will be turned into zombies!"

The two brothers stood with their dirt-streaked heads bowed. No one in the room moved or spoke. The silence dragged on for so long that Koto, his curiosity getting the best of him, slowly lifted his eyes. Then he nudged Kyoji, who looked up as well.

Toku was smiling. The group behind him was smiling. Ishimiko was grinning from ear to ear. Toku put his hands on each boy's shoulders. Koto and Kyoji looked at each other in astonishment and confusion.

"It was a test, Kyoji," Toku said gently. "For your gempukku."

Kyoji didn't understand. "But my gempukku isn't for another month," he said.

"You are headstrong and independent, my son," Toku said gently. "You are also easily distracted." The older man gave Koto a sideways glance. Koto suddenly

became fascinated with a silk thread on his robe.

Toku continued to Kyoji. "I gave you this errand to test your ability to complete a simple task in an honorable way, something you may face as a samurai. I also wanted you to learn to work with others toward a common goal, which is why I sent your brother with you. Aoki-sensei and I agreed to this together. He was to report back to me how well you completed the task.

"But the Corpse Stone, the bandits . . ." Kyoji sputtered.

"Not a Corpse Stone," Toku explained. "An ordinary rock imbued with simple magic to unnerve you, in case you opened the box. No one knew this except myself and Aoki-sensei."

"But the bandits were not part of the plan," he continued. "They somehow heard of your errand and thought the stone was real. When we heard they were near, Aoki-sensei sent Ishimiko to find you before the bandits realized their mistake."

"But the zombies!" Koto said.

"There were zombies, conjured by the bandits as they surrounded the tower," Toku replied. "But our samurai destroyed them, along with the bandit horde, when you were in the tunnels."

Toku smiled again. "You both fought well and I am proud. You faced the bandits with courage and honor. But," he said, facing Kyoji and narrowing his eyes, "where did you learn to wield a blade like that?"

"In truth, Father, I do not know," Kyoji replied. "The blade seemed to dance on its own in my hand. I have not touched such a blade before, Father, on my honor."

Toku was impressed. "You have the makings of a fine samurai," he said. "Both of you. But for now we will rest here a few days, then we will return home. Your mother has many special celebrations planned."

Kyoji caught Ishimiko's eye, and she winked at him. That strange fluttery feeling in his stomach started up when she looked at him, but he grinned anyway. Then Koto elbowed him in the ribs and he looked down, annoyed.

"See, I told you it was a just a rock," he said.



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