

2022 Naka-Kon Story – Part2.

Chapter Two: One Year Later

Tomo barely felt the late summer heat, even with the scorching wind that did nothing to cool the air around her on the sparring grounds outside Inari's house. It was there, but heat was a friend of the phoenix. The training she had been put through most of the past year had not only increased her endurance, her skills both with her powers and the martial arts, and her control... but through all of that, she had found that the heat was a friend.

She was certain that Byakko still did not feel that the heat was a friend. Even out of tiger form, he clearly preferred someplace more inclined toward being comfortable in fur. Still, he never showed any signs that the heat affected him in practice, or made him any less formidable as a teacher and opponent.

One that after almost a year she still could not get him to crack a smile or laugh, or even relax around her or the others. Tomo had been certain—given how naturally she seemed to make friends with and charm those around her—she would be able to win over even Byakko given enough time and effort.

So far, it seemed those efforts had been in vain. Though if she won today's sparring match, that might just change. "Remember," she called across the grounds, "if I win, you promised."

Byakko nodded gruffly as he brought his blade into position. "If you do, I will volunteer at this autumn festival of yours." The tone was begrudging.

Tomo was certain Byakko did not think he could lose, and that he had only agreed because she had asked so many times. He probably thought this would be the end of it, but she had no intention of losing. After being driven relentlessly by both Byakko and Inari for months, she finally felt like all of her abilities were coming together. The night before, she had managed three perfect strikes using her mother's blade, her phoenix powers coursing through it,

in practice katas. This would be the first time she was permitted to use them full out against an opponent, and Byakko was the only one she was allowed to try them on.

Tomo spun the handle of her naginata loosely in her hands, a perfect circle just to loosen her fingers and make sure her grip was firm, then she brought the long-handled blade up into a proper ready position instead, posed to attack or defend as needed. Once she would have simply presumed her first move should be to go on the offensive, but she was smarter than that now.

She took a breath, steadied herself, and allowed her power to flow through her, building like water in a well-spring, then released carefully into the naginata itself. The head of the weapon began to glow a soft orange-gold, the only outward sign of the force of the roaring fire it held.

Tomo had learned early that the weapon had obviously been designed for this. Byakko had allowed her to attempt it with a regular naginata, and the weapon instead of glowing, started to smoke until the haft burst into flames. One day, she might be able to do this with any weapon, but there would always be the risk that it couldn't withstand her abilities for long. She looked at Byakko, and indicated she was ready.

Byakko gave her a simple nod. "Begin."

The beginning of the fight was almost no difference than the practice matches they had done when she first started with him, a little more formal than katas, and with an opponent, but they moved more quickly through the forms she had learned as she picked the right ones to counter attack his moves: Rippling Wind, Lotus on the Water, Mountain Tumbles, Moon in the Clouds.

The naginata whirled and jabbed and slashed and blocked, as she and Byakko stalked each other around the field. Everything outside that space melted away in the face of the Tiger's onslaught. Through it she focused the tiny bit of her mind needed to keep the power flowing through her weapon. It had taken nearly all of her when she started.

Back and forth they went, locked in the rhythm of battle that was more like a dance. They knew each other's moves so well, except that the strikes were deadly. With the phoenix power inside it, the naginata was strengthened, impossible to break, harder to block, the blade did more damage when it hit, denting metal or breaking wooden hafts. At least, on a regular weapon. She had learned that Byakko's sword was as much an extension of himself, as this naginata was of her. Were it not, she would likely have destroyed it already. Only against opponents that were kami, or other beings more powerful than regular humans, should these powers even be used.

The fact that she might need them in the future made Tomo wonder what they were facing, but it was a thought pushed to the back of her mind. In this moment, her only goal was Byakko.

She spun, pivoted, and went on the attack with Thundering Skies, and their weapons clashed, and the head of the naginata shifted from golden to white, as the power strengthened and the heat inside grew ever hotter.

Not that either of them had hit their opponents yet, only their weapons. Weapons that stood up to an insane amount of punishment. Where Tomo struck, Byakko's weapon now hissed, and turned momentarily black as if singed before returning to its normal luster. Both weapons would have been dented into uselessness if they were not kami weapons.

There was no time to think, just move. Beyond practice, Byakko pushed her faster, quicker, Tomo attacked with all her strength, footing solid, when she hit the ground. As her phoenix power flowed, she barely seemed to touch the ground when she leaped and dodged. Looking for openings, not that Byakko ever left them, but she thought she was finally giving him a real fight, pushing him back a step, then too. He might be leading her into a trap but it didn't feel like it. She was winning! A thrill of pleasure translated into a small surge of power.

The blade responded by glowed brighter, and shifted blue as she struck, the naginata skipped on the blade as Byakko barely blocked. Tomo pressed,

but halfway through her recovery for the next move she heard a violent roar of anger, pain, and realized she was open as a slashing surge ripped past her midsection, and sent her tumbling into the dirt. Hand barely grasping her weapon, she gasped as the air was forced from her lungs on impact with the ground. No time. She flipped over, startled to find that the front of her shirt completely ripped away, and her undergarments, cut neatly though somehow without slashing her skin... leaving her fully open and exposed.

Above her, Byakko's expression of twisted, pained fury closed her throat. His sword was pointed down at her, and then she could see the smoking wound on the top of his hand, smell the burnt tiger fur and skin scent of a strike to the hand. If he had not been who he was, that injury would have been enough to cripple him... or take the hand.

Byakko's eyes glowed with a rage that was nothing to do with a warrior.... The sword trembled.

Byakko could not remember having ever felt such pain. It consumed him, and his instincts had taken over, if only for a moment. But that moment was enough. As he stood there, sword pointed at his opponent, his faculties returned to him and horror crept into his soul at what he had done. Losing control against a student. His hand still burned with phoenix fire, but it would heal quickly.

Horror....at the lurid scar across Tomo's exposed torso. A scar he had put there himself, he realized, the first time they fought, when he had-temporarily-killed her when she was younger, more foolish...and well, annoying.

The scar... It was gold. The entire scar, rippled across her chest like a line of kintsugi.

Even reincarnated she carried the permanent scar of his weapon upon her flesh.

His anger evaporated, replaced by an odd feeling of shame. It was not an emotion he felt often.

Tomo shifted uncomfortably and moved to cover herself.

Byakko realized then that she thought he was staring not at the scar, but at her chest. He averted his eyes, and dropped his weapon. Holding out his uninjured hand to help her up, he grimaced. "You win."

Her slender fingers took his large paw of a hand, and he felt her pulling up against his strength. When he brought his eyes up again, she was standing, holding her shredded clothing around her with surprising dignity.

Perhaps he should not be quite so surprised. "I'm sorry," he said then, a bit gruffly still.

Tomo shrugged. "It's my fault. Do you need healing?"

Byakko looked at his hand. The lurid burn was already healing some, but he had the sense that Tomo felt that she had messed up somehow. "It's nothing," he replied. If it scarred, perhaps it would be a useful reminder to him. "Hurts, but it's not serious. If I had blocked you properly your weapon would not have made it that far down the blade. You struck first, so you have won. I will... help you with your festival."

Tomo's face lit up in that way it did that he had discovered most people found endearing. She looked both happy, and relieved. "Thank you, Master Byakko. I know exactly where I want you."

Byakko hoped he did not live to regret this.

Chiori breathed in the crisp, chill early autumn air that morning as she made her way towards the main shrine. Her favorite season, her favorite weather. Why then, did she feel so uneasy? Something was off, but she could

not yet put her finger on what, though she was certain that it would come to her with time. She prayed the answer would not itself too late.

The daily offering had already been made at the kamidana today, but today was cleaning day; one of the twice yearly ritual cleanings of the inner area of the main shrine, where the most sacred objects were held. It was essential to reinvigorate the energy of the whole area. Far more than just the daily sustenance provided from the regular offerings.

Chiori opened the shrine and set to work, carefully removing each object, cleaning and polishing, and adding the seasonal offerings. Salt, rice, and water; the essentials of life. Sake, to represent the enjoyment of life. Sasaki branches; representing life itself.

Each of the sacred objects required particular care. Chiori carefully wiped the mirror behind the sacred objects with a polishing cloth. Looking in it to be sure there was not a single smudge, Chiori blinked. For just a moment, it was as if there had been a hint of someone else's face, not her own. Familiar somehow, and yet unknown. Hmm... I must be imagining things. It was silly, of course.

The ofuda remained in their various places creating a barrier of protection. Tomo's jewel sitting in its resting place, waiting for the next Naka-kon. The sacred weapon, in red feather form, rested on a pillow of red silk. Only Tomo ever removed it from this shrine, when she used it for her training. Otherwise it was safely locked away inside the shrine, where no one with ill intent could reach it, and no one innocent might accidentally harm themselves.

As she sat back, Chiori's hand brushed the feather ever so slightly. Suddenly, the world lurched, and Chiori's vision narrowed. What was going on? Then the vision engulfed her, if vision it was; a chaos of images without clear connection, yet strikingly vivid.

Who? Tomo, perhaps? Older, powerful, calling out a message with words she could not hear. Flame, everywhere, dancing gold, and red, and white, the background for clashing weapons, and an echoing chorus of song. The feather

spinning before her, the jewel glistening. A hissing sound as if extreme cold had met extreme heat. Reflections everywhere... reflections within reflections back into infinity, then a blast of cold, and darkness. Then warm again, in the darkness there was no fear, only a clear voice, still faint beneath a roar of noise, but important. Protect and lead. Those clear words, strange and mysterious in their simplicity. A directive... and flames.

Chiori opened her eyes expecting to be on her back, but she wasn't. She was upright. The world was fully normal around her. Not an item out of place. The cool air outside held no sound, but a rustle of wind in leaves, and a few chirping birds. The smell around her was mostly of polished wood.

In her mind, the images were already fading slightly, but not fully. Had it been a real vision? It felt much like one, and yet both more vivid and complex than any she had before. The important parts would stay with her, and sort themselves out with thought and meditation. There had been a sense of urgency in it that seemed more in the moment, but nothing that would happen in the immediate future, surely. Tomo was not nearly that mature. Perhaps, however, this was the key to her feeling of unease. That, at the least, was vaguely reassuring.

Clearing her head, Chiori continued her work. Once all of the items in the shrine were now back in their proper order, Chiori closed the doors. She would not open them again for another six months. "See you in the spring." Smiling, she gave the doors a final loving pat.

Byakko did not bother to hide the disgruntled scowl on his face. After all, it fit perfectly in character with his role. Perhaps it was only appropriate that Tomo had particularly wanted his help in the Kimodameshi. Not that the one she had arranged for the human attendees of Naka-kon would be nearly as terrifying, or legitimately dangerous, as the tests of courage Byakko had put Tomo through

as part of her training with him over the past year. Tomo's tests had included actual ancient temples, high mountain passes, deep caverns, and a few strolls through some of the most dangerous cities in the world... at night. Not that Byakko had ever been too far out of range should she come to actual risk of death, but Tomo had handled her challenges well.

He understood that the purpose of this one was supposed to be a thrill, and a bit of fun, as much as people challenging themselves. For some reason some humans enjoyed being scared. The fact that they were actually perfectly safe in a Convention Center probably had a lot to do with that. Byakko found it a little ridiculous, but he had promised to help, and he had tried not to feel pleased at how happy it had obviously made Tomo. Formality and distance between them was a key part of the Master and Student relationship in his mind. Tomo by her very nature seemed to encourage walls to crumble, and naturally inspire loyalty. Her ways with those who followed and loved her were so different from most kami. But... he had to admit that it seemed to work.

Even on him, it seemed as Byakko stood there dressed up as an oni, complete with a ridiculous mask.

"You're the big scare at the end," Tomo had told him earlier, grinning.

"And I am in this costume because..."

"If an actual Tiger leaped out at humans, you might really scare them to death. You're too intimidating." Tomo's smile somehow made it a compliment. "We want to scare them a little, not terrify them into having heart attacks or wetting themselves. They're only human after all."

"A fair point." Still, Byakko felt a bit silly in the get-up he wore now, as he waited, lurking behind a black sheet and waiting for groups of people to come by. Perhaps it was the fact that they were supposed to drive him off with "soybeans" (which were actually glow-in-the-dark ping pong balls) that made it the most ridiculous.

Still, he had given his word, and it was a point of honor that he would fulfill his part in Tomo's festival. Something he had learned over the years, in competition against her, was that she put huge amounts of effort, planning, and care into these things, and she was in fact loved for it.

Byakko knew what they would encounter of Tomo's friends and Inari's helpers—all costumed—set up to scare people. The kitsune that checked them in passed them to a tanuki who would explain how to disarm the other yokai in the maze, and giving them special talismans to protect them from harm. Then they would be passed to the Ao Andon who was their guide through the maze. An ironic choice, since she would be more interested in scaring them than keeping them from being scared were it a real one. The paths of black sheets were occasionally lined with kodama (made from glowing bobbleheads), to set the stage and allow people to have a general view of the path so they weren't stumbling through the walls and disrupting the maze.

Their first encounter was a very sticky artificial spider web, and he could hear startled squeaks and ewwws as they reached it. Beyond that was a hungry kappa who was not as terrifying as Byakko would have made her. She kept demanding food to a point he found comical. They back tracked from there, and took another path as the walls moved behind them, blocking them from leaving. From there they would encounter spirits of past adventurers, and a giant Tengu. The only way to pacify him was with a coin, but he would still refuse to let them pass. Backtracking again, the wall had would moved again. A group of Kodama surround a large glowing mysterious object, and eyes would emerge from the wall panels as they neared Byakko's hiding place near the end. It was his job to jump out and terrify them, before the Ao Andon instructed them to drive him off with the soybeans.

With Byakko's keen hearing he did not need any signal that they were coming. Not that humans were very good at being at all sneaky or quiet. If they

were really trying to get through a maze of yokai he was certain they would all be dead by now.

Still, when they came even with the mark that was his cue, Byakko leaped from the darkness in his costume, and let out his second-most terrifying snarl, allowing his claws to show on his hands, and sure that the low glowing lights and the horrifying face of the mask would be enough.

They hadn't seen or heard him coming until he appeared, and the shrieks of startled humans were supremely satisfying. Byakko snarled again as the Ao Andon frantically—she actually sounded startled herself—instructed them to fling their soybeans.

Byakko winced and howled as the ping pong balls bounced harmlessly off him, though he swiped at them again for good measure before spinning and vanishing back into the darkness.

He listened with smug satisfaction as they hurried out, and he could hear them talking about how legitimately terrifying the final yokai had been.

A few minutes later, the next group came through, and he got to repeat his performance.

Finally the last group had gone through before their scheduled break. All in all, he had to admit that it wasn't so bad a way to spend an evening, even if he spent most of each several minute maze run sitting in the dark, waiting. Not that he wasn't an expert at holding still for long periods, crouched, and completely silent. With his vision, it didn't seem all that dark to him either. From his hiding place, he had been able to fully see the expressions on the teenagers he had just terrified.

As the evening grew late however, he began to have other reasons to be vaguely impatient. His stomach growled, and he was just thinking he could use a break to find a bathroom when another volunteer approached him in similar costume. "I'm here to give you a break, if you need one," the human male whispered. "I've been substituting for everyone to make sure we all do."

"Thank you." Byakko said simply, swapping out with the younger male. Many of the human volunteers had no idea who he really was, and he had elected to keep it that way. They were much more relaxed around him, and it disrupted things far less, than if they knew that he was here in some capacity other than to fight or compete against Tomo.

Tomo grinned as she slipped on the Ao Andon costume and stepped up toward the front of the line. After spending most of the evening socializing with her followers and making appearances around the convention, she was looking forward to giving a few groups a treat, and seeing how the Kimodameshi had really turned out for herself. Particularly her "star actor." As she escorted her group through the maze, she had to admit that everyone had outdone themselves this year. It was even better than last year! They were really into their roles, and the costumes were much more authentic, if they just held back enough to avoid being too terrifying in some cases.

As they neared Byakko's hiding place Tomo did her best not to look like she was anticipating him. It would be no fun to ruin it. The group she led were properly scared and jumpy now, having made it through the previous yokai.

They turned the final corner and... nothing. For several seconds Tomo stood there, waiting. Where was Byakko? Or anyone. Even if he were not here surely he wouldn't have left without getting a replacement! Or would he? She began to steam inside. If he had just abandoned his post...

An eerie blue glow came around the corner ahead of them. That... wasn't right. A moment later, another Ao Andon appeared. Only Tomo could tell immediately that this was not one of the costumed volunteers from the department running the event.

Glowing blue, in a pale blue-white kimono, with long black hair and sharp

teeth and horns... a real Ao Andon stood before her. Something was wrong, very wrong. Byakko was not here, or the yokai would not be. The shrieks of fear behind her were normal now, but if any of the people with her found out this was a real yokai...

"Move aside." The Ao Andon's voice was raspy and soft. "The humans are mine. Their fear is mine."

Thinking fast, Tomo summoned her phoenix powers, pulling in, and emitting a white glow. It wasn't quite the glow of the one in front of her, but that might be all to the better. Hers was not creepy. "Wrong. Their fear is mine," she spoke up clearly and firmly, hoping the humans bought the act. She was dressed as one, she might as well play the part. "I cultivated their fear, and I claim it. Find your meal elsewhere."

To the humans, her glow was an effect. To the yokai, it was a threat. Tomo's power was far greater, and she could banish it easily with even a fraction in use, and no physical weapon needed.

The Ao Andon made an odd hissing noise, and darted forward as if to attack. The group of people behind Tomo shrieked again at her sudden movement, and began to throw their ping pong ball 'soybeans.' They bounced off and seemingly through the woman with no effect.

Tomo ramped it up, and struck with a tiny portion of her power. She didn't want to kill the yokai. Normally she was on very good terms with the local yokai. What was going on here?

The yokai shrieked and stopped, giving Tomo a furious glare, but it did not retreat.

"Do not test me," Tomo spoke up again firmly. Her gaze sent a message. I don't know what's driving you to this, but do not make me do what I must.

The message in her gaze seemed to reach her. Struggling, the yokai screamed, and spun, and vanished. Only to Tomo's eyes and powers was it clear that the Ao Andon had really just vanished and not by ducking around a

curtain.

Behind her, there were sighs of relief and murmured voices.

“Oh my gosh that was terrifying!”

“It looked so real.”

“I felt like it was actually going to eat me.”

“Can we go for drinks after this? I could use one.”

Tomo took a deep breath, and then turned, keeping in character. “We have defeated your final threat. We must continue quickly, before any other yokai impede you in your quest.”

She had just gotten them to the exit when Byakko, Chiori, and Inari all reached her at nearly the same moment. Thankfully there was a scheduled break after that group and they had a few moments to speak. Tomo led them around a corner to a quiet backstage spot before telling them what had just happened—which explained the odd presence they had suddenly felt and come running.

“My replacement is all right,” Byakko told her, though he looked discomfited. “He was unconscious, but it was more of a sleep. He will wake shortly.”

“And remember nothing except dozing off,” Inari assured them. “We’ll see to that.” Inara’s deep scowl was far more concerning to Tomo than Byakko’s. The tiger was always frowning. “I don’t like this.”

“You think?” Tomo quipped. “It makes no sense. The yokai around here are all friendly.”

“Maybe this one was not from around here,” Chiori suggested. “You said it seemed compelled and clearly you did not recognize it. So, it seems probable that it came from elsewhere.”

“The question becomes, what or who was compelling it?” Inari’s ears twitched thoughtfully.

“Given how much fear we’ve generated, it’s not so strange that it was an Ao Andon.” Tomo would have been more surprised if it had been some sort of yokai unlikely to be drawn to such an event. “It still seems odd though that it only arrived while Byakko was not there, and right as I was the one leading a group through.”

“Definitely not a coincidence,” Inari agreed. “Though I cannot imagine how anyone could have timed it that perfectly even if they had known your schedule for the evening. Byakko’s break was unplanned.” He looked consideringly at the tiger.

“I don’t like your implication, Fox.” Byakko’s scowl deepened. “I did not plan this. Tomo has passed all my tests, and this would have been a very poor one in any case.”

“Unless someone compelled the yokai who does not know Tomo’s full strength.” Inari nodded as if to himself. “Chiori, you will help me while I do a spiritual investigation of the area as soon as the Kimodameshi is over. There are still groups to come through, and they’ve paid. The last thing we need is for anyone to think anything is wrong, especially as no one has been harmed.”

“I will return to my place.” Byakko stood, and picked up his mask. “If there are any other... visits tonight, more kami are better.”

Chiori nodded. “We will continue. For the rest of the evening, we will also be sure the charms are properly blessed.”

Tomo began to feel better. There was a plan. No one had been hurt, and while everyone was taking this seriously, no one was panicking. Or worse, trying to protect her. “Chiori and I will continue leading groups for the rest of the evening. Whatever happens, we can handle it as a team.”

To be continued...