

## 2020 AND SPRING 2021 STORY ARC

### March 2019, the day after Naka-kon

Ryuji barely refrained from whistling as he walked purposefully down the hallway, moving into the depths of Lord Seiryu's manor. Despite the late hour, he had received permission from Seiryu's attendant to proceed to the inner chamber and provide the report of his mission. So much had happened, but he was eager to report his success. Lord Seiryu would be pleased. When he was pleased, that meant good things for Ryuji. Of course, the converse was also true, which was what made this success all the sweeter.

The halls were lit only by spaced lamps, but the light was warm and even, a sign of the expense paid in quality lighting. As Ryuji approached the door, the guard recognized him. He must have been given word of his arrival however, for he opened the door, and stepped aside, permitting Ryuji entry.

Within, Lord Seiryu sat on low raised dais that ran along the back of the room, on an ornate cushion of deep red velvet, embroidered in swirling gold. His kimono, in contrast, of deepest blue, swirled in embroidered storm clouds in blues and satin grays, and streaked with silver. He watched Ryuji approach with an expectant, but otherwise unreadable expression.

Ryuji paused at precisely the appropriate distance, then bowed deeply. Even in eagerness, the customs of etiquette must be observed. He remained in that position, unmoving.

"So you have returned successfully, Ryuji." Seiryu finally spoke. "Indeed, we expected no less. You may rise and give your report."

Bidden, Ryuji straightened, eager to provide his news. "Your Excellency, as you instructed I infiltrated the ranks of Tomo's inner circle. It was quite easy, and they gave no indication of knowing who I was before I presented your challenge. All of them— except Inari and Tomo— were shocked."

Seiryu nodded. "Excellent work. I... wait." He paused. A subtle frown crossed his face. "Indeed, you said that Tomo was not surprised?"

Ryuji swallowed, but pushed on, determined to remain confident. "Precisely, my Lord. She said that she could sense that you sent me.." Surely Seiryu would not have expected her to be completely oblivious that there was something about him. That would have been asking a bit much from *anyone* trying to infiltrate her group, surely. Yes, of course it would have been.

"This makes things more intriguing, indeed." Seiryu pondered Ryuji's words. "Don't you think so, Lord Byakko."

Ryuji froze, startled. Only then did he realize that the tiger was there, seated off to his left, out of peripheral vision. For his part, Byakko sat on a similar cushion, this one streaked in oranges and greens, his outfit was white, but so striped in silver that it shimmered even in the lamplight as if he wore woven metal instead of cloth. He held a steaming cup of tea, and grinned. His expression, both smug and intrigued, always brought to mind that of a slightly feral

beast. Ryuji refused to shudder.

Byakko shrugged. "Perhaps her power has grown since I saw her last."

"Indeed." Seiryu nodded again. "A comical tale that we never tire of. Say, why don't you regale us with another telling?" His tone became eager, his expression expectant.

To anyone who did not know Byakko, the reluctance would have been visible. As it was, Ryuji did not think even Seiryu noticed it. Or, more accurately, he did not care so long as Byakko humored him with the tale in question, though it was not one with which Ryuji himself was familiar. Perhaps Byakko had been highly embarrassed?

"Since this is your domain... as you wish, Lord Seiryu." Byakko took another long sip, as if wetting his throat, or perhaps for dramatic effect. "Seven years ago, I surveyed my lands in the West, and came across a strange group putting together a large festival. I investigated, wishing to know who was hosting this festival, and why. It was not yet time for any of the festivals we knew of, and it seemed to have a local Kami we did not know. We found Tomo and she... she insulted me... with *cat memes!*" Even at the memory his face twisted in derisive disgust. "Enraged, my honor demanded satisfaction. So a duel was fought. Pity it did not last long. She was no fighter, and a very young Kami. Then, as Tomo lay dying, she managed to give her last instructions to her general before she dissipated into a cloud of feathers and ash."

"It must have been something to see, my Lord," Ryuji burst out. He had not meant to speak, but he had been quite caught up in the story. "But if she was slain, how is she alive now?"

Byakko took another sip. "She got better."

An entirely unhelpful answer. Seiryu offered no further explanation either, looking simply amused.

"She got better... my Lord?" Ryuji urged, showing restraint. It would not do to offend the Tiger.

Byakko became exasperated. He snorted. "Tomo's last words told her followers how to revive her. They gathered her ash motes and feathers so she could be reborn. Do you know *nothing* of the Phoenix? Her mother is Suzaku."

*That* name Ryuji knew. "Suzaku? *Lady* Suzaku?! But, no one has seen her for..."

"A couple hundred years," Seiryu cut him off. Ryuji went silent at once. "Yes, indeed. It is a mystery. She vanished just a few years after the war ended, and yet... *something*, has been protecting the south."

"Yes, mysterious," Byakko agreed before looking at Ryuji directly. "So, Ryuji, what else did you learn about her daughter?"

Yes, his report! There was still plenty of opportunity to impress them both with his

success. "Her whole festival appears frivolous," he continued eagerly. "She claims it is an event to celebrate the 'culture and animation of Japan', but it only pays a token respect to real culture." He gave a small, derisive sniff. "The focus is on shopping, costumes, and something called a 'dance party.'" Ryuji shrugged, as if it were of little consequence. "Tomo herself has some power, but she is, as she has been, mostly harmless." Surely, she would continue to remain so...

## **Tuesday, March 10, 2020**

The sun beat down on her head as Tomo stood in the practice yard, facing Chiori, as she had for the past hour. Pausing only a moment to balance, she moved swiftly into action, her gloved fist hitting a hand-pad on Chiori's right hand, then following up quickly with her other fist to hit the left. She recoiled quickly enough that she saw Chiori's fast swipe with just enough time to duck, hitting the opposite pad once more with a back hand. Tomo moved quickly, but relaxed as Chiori disengaged.

"That's good for today." Chiori began to remove her practice pads. "Good power today, and you're getting faster. We can pick it up Tuesday." Her eyes moved past Tomo. "Hey, you two. Here for strategy or fireworks?"

Inari shook his head. "Nope. Strategy today. We try not to play with fire on the same day as physical work. Strong body, strong mind..."

Gen's smile twisted, a valiant attempt clearly being made to not laugh. "Look at you, trying to sound sage."

Tomo set her pads down with the others. "I'll be with you in a few. I need a quick change. Go ahead and make yourselves comfy." With that, she headed inside heading into the ceramic tiled room that they used for practicing her phoenix powers. No one would bother her here when they were setting up elsewhere. A little thrill filled her, and Tomo quashed it, calming her mind and focusing on what she wanted to do. It was something she had been working for months, ever since Gen had told her how.

Starting at her feet, flames flickered into life in a smooth waving dance, leaving no heat on her skin, they rolled smoothly up her body, until they met at the top of her head in a scattering of golden sparks. In that few moments, her workout outfit had been replaced with her normal clothing. What little dust and sweat that had been picked up during practice was gone from skin and hair. Every lock on her head fell in its most perfect place. Now, she let herself feel the thrill of success. It worked!

Not wanting to keep the others waiting, Tomo turned and headed to the other room, where she found most of her friends getting ready for the strategy session. Today, it appeared to be Go. Gigi and Talitha were already seated at a board of their own, playing intently while Jake watched and waited his turn. Chiori had not yet arrived from putting up their practice gear. Inari and Dan sat at another board, Dan on one side, and an empty space awaiting her on the other.

Inari smiled at her. For a moment, Tomo worried that he knew what she had done even

though this was not supposed to be a fire day. If so, he said nothing of it. He merely gestured to the board. "Let's see if you have improved since your last game."

Tomo took her seat, and looked down at the Go board in front of her with determined concentration. The game began. For several minutes there was silence as the focus was on placing pieces. At least early on, Tomo felt like maybe they were fairly well matched. At least, it was going better than her games with Inari usually did.

Across from her, Dan waited patiently as she considered her next move. Tomo was determined to win. Her focus was broken only slightly by the sound of soft footfalls on the warm wooden floorboards.

"You're here already?" Chiori spoke as she came around into Tomo's line of sight.

Tomo nodded. Changing was so much faster the new way. "Yep. I think I'm beating him this time."

Dan motioned at the board. "Come on," he addressed Tomo. "You've got to focus."

Tomo turned her attention away from the conversation going on above her head. "Oh, just you wait. I've been practicing."

The game continued, and Tomo tuned out the others until she wasn't even sure if they were still watching or if they had gone about other business while they played. It was definitely one of the closest games she had managed against Dan yet, and it seemed to be going precisely the way she wanted. Finally, she set the stone she was certain to be her last, her winning move.

"Ha! Gotcha this time!"

"You sure?" Dan met her smile with one of his own. Then he placed his last stone. "Keep trying, little bird."

Tomo stared at the board hard for several seconds. He was right. Oh well. She smiled at him, giving a small congratulatory nod and shaking off her disappointment. There was always next time. As he cleared the board, she stood and looked around. The others were still in the room after all, talking quietly. At some point, Yamato and Rena had joined them. So it was no surprise that the conversation had turned to convention preparations. She joined them.

Chiori turned to Tomo. "Is everything ready for the Matsuri?"

"Of course!" Tomo assured her enthusiastically. "It's going to be the best one we've ever had."

Yamato nodded. "It will have to be if you don't want Seiryu taking over."

"That's why we've been working so hard carrying out Tomo's plans," Rena replied in agreement.

"What challenges did you choose?" Inari asked Tomo directly as he waved her over. "You are not done for the day. One more match, with me this time."

After losing to Dan, Tomo had no idea how he expected her to beat him, but perhaps that wasn't the purpose of the lesson. Resisting a sigh, Tomo sat back down in front of the Go board as the conversation continued.

"I chose Blitzball for the challenge of the body," she picked up the conversation directly from his question. "The Matsuri for the challenge of culture, and the Summer Mystery for the challenge of the mind. Seiryu and Byakko won't stand a chance against us." Tomo placed a piece on the board.

"They probably don't even know what they are," Yamato scoffed.

"But we mustn't get too overconfident," Chiori cautioned rationally. "They could still put together a powerful team."

"That's why we came up with a way to even things out," Tomo assured her. It was harder to focus on the game while also tracking the conversation. *This* must be the real test. She had to strategize for both at once.

Gen nodded. "That's my part in this. Everyone with incredible powers is going to be under a spell for the duration of the challenges, so the games are completely fair."

Yamato looked regretful. "It's too bad, though. We could have seen some real fireworks if everyone was using their powers."

"We'll fire things up even without my powers." Tomo smiled confidently as she placed a piece, forming a new territory. "As a team we're unbeatable."

"You can count on us too," Talitha promised.

Gigi smiled. "There's no way we'll lose."

"You know we've got your back," Dan promised.

Tomo's concentration wavered as her heart welled with warm feelings at the devotion of her friends. "Thanks, everyone."

Across from her, Inari looked on with amused patience. "This is all very touching, but if you don't keep your head in the game, you will lose more than another round of Go."

Tomo's returning smile was fierce. "I have no intention of losing." She would give everything, including this game, but especially the upcoming challenges, everything she had.

**Thursday, March 12, 2020**

Tomo knew there was trouble the moment she saw Chiori's concerned expression. "What's wrong?" she asked.

Chiori paused as she reached Tomo. "Plague."

"Plague?" Tomo asked, momentarily confused. "Like... the Black Death?"

"Not quite." It was a sign of the seriousness of the moment that Chiori did not chide her for her answer. "The illness reported in distant lands has been found to be spreading across the land. The city is closing everything down as we speak. There will be no Naka-Kon."

"But the challenges!" Tomo objected, feeling a flutter of panic before she shut it down. Control. "Seiryu will not agree to delay the trials. Even if he would, Byakko certainly won't."

"Agreed. However, there is no way to have them now. At least, not where we had planned. How do you want to proceed?"

Tomo swallowed. It was her decision. "We will move the challenges outside the city, and we won't include any of the normal attendees. We cannot risk their lives over this. Send them home if they have not left yet, but thank them for all their work so far. We will meet again when the world is safer." That sounded official and benevolent, right? "Then we will face Seiryu and his team, whomever he brings, ourselves. There are fields outside the city where we can have this competition. We can use the ones that are near Inari's place, if he agrees." Since everyone would have Gen's spell on them, there would be no danger.

"What am I agreeing to?" Inari asked as he arrived.

"Hosting the challenges nearby." Tomo turned to him hopefully. "Unless you think Seiryu and Byakko would agree to postponing."

Inari shook his head. "They will not. In fact, I just spoke to Seiryu. He is open to moving the location, but not delaying the time. We will not have as many allies for the challenges, but your closest friends are with you. We will be enough."

Tomo nodded. "Thank you. Yes, we can still make this work. We will need to fetch the supplies here from the convention as soon as possible."

"I will send the others over at once," Chiori promised. "Most of them were already there to set up. It should not take long to repack what little was already set-up."

Tomo gave her a brave smile. "We've got this."

## **Sunday, March 15, 2020**

One of the nice things about having powers that Tomo missed at the moment, was how she never seemed to be quite so dirty or sweaty, even after a long day of training. As she stood in the middle of the Blitzball court, ready for the final round of the game, she definitely missed that part of being a kami. Only one thing mattered at the moment, however, and that was

defeating Seiryu's team. They were down by two points, and this was it. If they lost here, they lost.

Despite the last minute shuffle, and the lack of the usual convention staff to assist, the challenges had turned out surprisingly well. Tomo hadn't even been concerned about losing the challenge of culture. Her friends had set up a perfect matsuri, with all the games and activities and food stalls associated with such festivals. Inari's fox spirit friends, since they weren't in the city, had been able to throw together both traditional dance, and a fireworks display. It would have been more fabulous if Tomo could have enhanced it with her phoenix powers, but it was traditional and beautiful. Seiryu had declared it successful and enjoyable, and appropriate in the celebration and honoring of the kami. Byakko had grumbled, but had not disagreed.

The Summer Mystery had been a much closer, and more stressful, contest. Set up in tents as the "rooms," it had looked wonderful, though solving the mystery had proven to be even more difficult this year than in years past. Seiryu had brought his cleverest and most intelligent associates, traits that did not need powers to enhance them. His team had beaten Tomo's to the full and correct answer to who had done it, where, and with what weapon only a mere half-a-minute before Tomo's team had come to the right conclusion. They had returned to Gen, to find that they had *just* lost.

So it all came down to this: Blitzball. Tomo was grateful that Inari's training for her, and all the others who took part, focused as much on physical prowess and stamina without powers, as it did in training the mind and her powers themselves. Without kami powers, the game was much more evenly matched. Byakko, always quick to fight, was still a force to be reckoned with. Seiryu was certainly no slouch, though it was clear that he did not spend as much time pushing his physical strength. He probably hadn't had to in centuries. Though handling as much power as he had normally still required great skill and stamina. The weirdest part was seeing the two of them in the same shorts and jersey-knit team tops as everyone else.

Byakko could have been some punk college basketball player. Seiryu sort of looked like a wise professor, amused by being dressed as a common athlete. He did not look ancient, but there was still that ancient weight of his very personality, only slightly diminished by the temporary suppression of power.

Today's had been a very low scoring game on both sides, as both teams had chosen a more defensive strategy. Those who were not used to not having powers, or training hard, worked better as defense, and the rest were less likely to exhaust themselves tearing around the circular court. Or at least, that was the idea. Everyone was panting by this point in the game, and breathing heavily, and sweaty.

A good steaming bath was due for everyone tonight, for sure.

They had agreed to three games. Phoenix team had won the first game Twelve to Nine, mostly by the advantage of knowing the game better than Dragon team. Dragon team had come back to beat them in the second game Eleven to Ten, just edging them out. This third game was their last chance.

Tomo found herself once again across the line from Byakko, whose ability to tear all over the court and score by powering through moves was the reason the score was currently Nine to Ten in Dragon team's favor. Phoenix team was holding their own, but they were definitely getting tired.

Byakko had the ball. The whistle blew, and Tomo anticipated that Byakko would dodge left, which he did. He had been favoring left ever so slightly all evening. It paid off as she ducked and popped up almost underneath him, catching the ball as he tried to send it sailing to a teammate.

Yes! Tomo did not celebrate, but took off towards the other end of the field, dodging two more players before she got a good shot at the goal. The closer she could get in the better to avoid having it blocked in mid-air. She could almost feel Byakko's cat-breath on her neck as she stepped quickly right around the last defender, and threw as hard as she could.

It went in! The score was now Ten to Ten.

Tomo stayed close as a defender retrieved the ball.

The toss-in went to Seiryu, who successfully passed it to another teammate, who immediately flailed and threw it to Byakko as Yamato and Talitha mobbed him. Byakko caught it and took off.

Tomo was hot on his tail, rather literally, but she wasn't going to get there in time. He swiveled and swerved around the defense as if half of them weren't there.

The only reason Byakko didn't score was because Inari blocked his shot at the last moment.

"One more," Inari grinned at Tomo as everyone shuffled for positioning. "You can do this."

The toss-in went to Rena, who immediately threw the ball to Talitha, who ducked as Byakko rushed her down. The ball flew wildly, but Tomo caught it and once more took off across the circle.

Seiryu's defense was ready for her this time, and twice the ball was almost ripped out of her hands as she ran into defensive spirits who were both taller than her. She was walled in.

There had to be a way around. Then there, a flash to her right... She spotted Gigi open behind tall-guy-one's arm, and she threw.

Gigi grabbed it and ran. As the defense turned to chase her, Tomo ducked left and put on a burst of speed, coming to the other side. They reached the goal at the same time, and Gigi was swarmed. Then the ball was up in the air, and Tomo jumped, as high as she had ever jumped without powers, her fingers just barely brushing it as she spiked it down and at an angle. It was a wild hit, but it was awkward enough the last defender misjudged it.

Eleven to Ten! How much time was left on the clock?

Chiori blew the whistle. That was it. Time over. Match done.

If she had been a rooster, Tomo would have crowed. Instead she grinned and shouted as her teammates piled in around her. Victory was theirs!

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It was over. Despite the chaos, and the drama, and the threat of plague, it was over, and they had succeeded. Tomo felt an immense relief as they stood on the field, facing Seiryu. The rest of his delegation had already left.

Seiryu nodded once as they prepared to leave. "We congratulate you. Indeed, it was a battle well fought. You chose the events well. We can see now that you are no threat to us... or your heritage." He bowed. "We shall see you again." With that, he turned, walked towards the trees, and disappeared into the shadows.

After several seconds of collectively holding their breath, Tomo's friends around her burst into exuberant cheers and linked arms, beaming in triumph!

"That was amazing!" Tomo gasped. "Thanks everyone, I couldn't have done it without you."

Gen smiled. "That may be true, but you put a lot of effort into this year's events and it paid off."

"I still think we could have used more explosions and excitement," Yamato sighed.

"No, thank you!" Chiori objected. "We had more than enough!"

"Come on everyone, let's get things cleaned up," Rena suggested. "Then we can really celebrate." As most of her friends went inside, Tomo found that Inari, Chiori, and Gen stayed behind a moment.

Chiori smiled. "You did a good job. I'm very proud of you."

Tomo felt her face warm at the compliment. "Thanks, Chiori."

"Agreed!" Inari's expression was enthusiastic. "I suspect after this, you might just have a chance at beating me at Go, tonight. I'll set up the board."

Tomo laughed. "All right, I'll play, but only if you promise *not* to go easy on me."

Inari's smile turned more competitive. "I would never go easy on you."

"That's the truth," Gen agreed. "Well now, I should go remove the spell. This will take a few minutes." He nodded and then turned and went inside.

"It will be nice to fully be ourselves again. I'll have the Go board and drinks set up by the time you're done." With that, Inari followed Gen inside.

"Are you coming?" Chiori asked Tomo now that they were alone.

Tomo nodded. "I'll be in in a moment." The last couple of days had been a little overwhelming, and there was a lot to process, even in victory.

Chiori lay a hand on her shoulder in understanding, then followed the others inside to leave her with her thoughts.

Tomo turned and looked out at the view around Inari's home, and the glorious phoenix-colors of the sunset. She smiled, finally beginning to feel relaxed and happy again.

It didn't keep her from sensing him coming several moments before Byakko appeared out of the lengthening shadows.

His expression was displeased, and determined. "This isn't over, *little bird.*"

Great. She should have known he wouldn't accept defeat as gracefully as Seiryu. Tomo shook her head and grinned at him. "Oh I think it is, *kitty.* You lost."

"Children's games and mortal pastimes," Byakko scoffed derisively. "They do not test your true power."

"Seiryu agreed to the terms," she reminded him. "My victory was fair."

Byakko rested a hand on his sword. "Fight me properly. I'd like to see if you're any less pathetic than the last time I beat you."

He was going to try and push this? Incredible. Tomo shook her head. "The spell hasn't worn off yet." There would be no point for them to fight without their powers. At least not to prove what Byakko wanted.

Byakko shrugged. "As if I needed my full power to beat you. Choose your weapon."

She wasn't going to talk him out of this and, Tomo had to admit to herself, part of her didn't want to. Since the last time they had truly battled her powers, and her fighting skills, had grown immensely. Her resolve steeled, and Tomo walked to the sword rack outside the side door. Most of them were practice swords, but there was a handful of metal blades as well; sharp and quick. It took only a moment to choose her blade. The wrapped grip of the handle was a vibrant red, and the weight was good for her strength. The length for her reach. When she turned to face Byakko, he had already taken place on the far side of the sparring

circle. She strode to the spot directly across from him.

There were no bows, no formalities. They made eye contact, and she knew it had begun by the shift in the very air itself. The light breeze fell silent. The birds in the trees quieted as the deep orange of late sunset bathed the two combatants.

The first blows came in a sudden rush as they closed at the same time, blades coming together in a flurry of quick strikes, blocks, and a circle of movement. Not a single strike found purchase, and they backed off after several strikes, circling and looking for openings. Tomo stepped deliberately, lightly, ready to move in any direction at a moment's notice, like a bird. Byakko's movements were fast but solid, more grounded. The Tiger stalked.

Tomo kept her breathing steady, calm. Despite the day's activities she wasn't tired. Adrenaline surged through her making her feel almost as strong as when her powers were in effect.. They clashed again once, twice. Each time backing off without a single hit getting through. Byakko looked irritated, but Tomo felt a thrill. She might not be trouncing him, but at least this time she was holding her own.

Inside her, she felt something stirring... her powers beginning to return as they felt like a warmth growing from the inside outward. Before Byakko noticed, maybe she had a chance to deal a decisive blow. She rushed him a fourth time. The Tiger moved to close as well, and as Tomo reached him she dodged his blade, spun like a whirlwind, the air whipping around her, and brought her sword around behind him to strike. White and gold sparks flew from her hair, her body, and the sword itself as she slashed. She heard the sound of ripping fabric. Then she was past him, facing him as Byakko spun to face her, his face furious, eyes glowing.

The blow had not wounded him, but there was a deep slash through his garments. At most she had stung his pride, but it was still far better than their last fight. Tomo grinned as she returned to a prepared stance. "What's the matter, *kitty kitty?*" she taunted. "Got your fur ruffled?" Around them, the wind continued to swirl.

Byakko snarled, and rushed her, much faster than last time. His own powers were returning too. She needed to wrap this up quickly.

Tomo dodged, retreated a few steps, then ducked, blocking his sword barely in time. The clash was met with more phoenix sparks. Her hands, she realized, were also beginning to glow as if the fire within her was visible in her skin.

Byakko was also beginning to radiate power. His fur stood out, his eyes glowing, his own power like electricity in the air. Flashing, slashing, they collided faster, and faster.

Tomo wondered how long they could continue before she found an opening, or Byakko did. Then suddenly-

The wind around them suddenly began to swirl around the combatants, almost picking them up before separating the two and knocking them to the ground..

"This is over!" Inari's voice carried through the near-dark with the weight of authority and power.

Tomo rose to her feet. She and Byakko stepped back almost without thought. Her eyes met the Tiger's. They both lowered their blades.

Inari strode across the ground, his expression grim. "It is time for you to leave, Byakko." He stepped between them, and all Tomo could see was Inari's back.

For several seconds, Byakko eyed Inari as if he might continue the fight. Then he stepped back and sheathed his blade. "That was less pathetic than last time," he addressed Tomo. "You have a long way to go, however. Next time, I won't hold back." He turned on his heels, and stalked away into the night as darkness fell.

Only when the sense of his presence vanished did Inari turn to Tomo. He looked angry. "Are you hurt?"

Tomo shook her head. "I'm fine. Why did you interrupt? I almost had him!"

"Now is not the time, nor this the place," Inari's response was characteristically enigmatic. "Next time, there won't be a spell. Put the sword away."

Tomo wanted to object. The spell had been wearing off. It might have worn off entirely. Then, she would have had the ability to win. It had been so very close. But, arguing with Inari seemed unwise at the moment. She nodded and returned to the rack. When she turned around, she saw Inari bending down. A moment later he stood, holding a feather.

Tomo rejoined him. "That doesn't look like mine," she noted. Indeed, the fight had not scattered any other feathers on the ground. This one was larger, and seemed to glow more evenly, but more calmly too.

"It isn't," Inari confirmed. "But it is definitely a phoenix feather."

Tomo felt the bottom drop out of her stomach at the very implication. "Did Byakko drop it?" she considered. "We have to go after him! He may know something about my mother."

Inari stopped her with a simple look. "Unlikely. However it arrived, it is almost certainly a message of some kind."

"What kind of message can you send with a single feather?"

Inari considered the feather in his hand. "I will need time to decipher it. In the meantime, come inside; your studies must continue. Byakko has challenged you twice now. If it comes to a third, you must not lose."

*Studies* was still not her favorite word. Tomo nodded, resigned. "I told you, I will not lose when it matters." They had not lost earlier today, and when the day came, the Tiger

would regret crossing swords, or power, with her again.

With that thought, Tomo followed Inari into the house.

To be continued...