

2022 Naka-Kon Story – Part 1.

Chapter 1

Inari had to admit that Byakko had great taste when it came to location. High up in the mountains, surrounded by a forest of aspen and other trees just turning all the brilliant hues of autumn, the tiger's house looked out over a deep valley below, cradled among the peaks. The highest ones were above the tree-line and already shimmered with white. The warm sun coupled with a brisk breeze was a welcoming change from the still-too-warm not quite fall of the central plains.

The house itself—not that Inari was sure he would call it a *house*—was a different matter of taste. Not that it was bad, but it was less traditional than he had been expecting. Inari decided, as he looked up at the multi-storied structure, that it looked like what might happen if someone blended an ancient shrine and a ski chalet. It was the spotless hunter green Aston Martin parked under the covered drive between the garage and the rest of the building that told him he was definitely in the right place. A completely unnecessary mode of transportation for a Kami, but a stylish indulgence.

Inari was not sure how to feel about Byakko's insistence that this meeting happen here. It might be a gesture of trust. That, or he wanted an advantage over Inari in case he did not like the direction of the conversation. Still, Inari had agreed. What they needed to discuss was too important.

"Admiring the view?"

Inari turned back towards the chalet, where Byakko had emerged, his traditional outfit almost at odds with the surroundings. Not that Inari blended in either, but Byakko's mostly-human staff—with the exception of several snow

yokai—did not even blink as they went about their work.

“The last time you invited me here you had a cabin.”

Byakko shrugged, grinning toothily. “This is more comfortable, and in the winter, I have all the company I could want. Besides, it’s a steady income most of the year. Winter is just the best season.”

“You have guests now?” Inari asked, startled. This was not nearly as private as he had been anticipating.

“Mostly hikers and seasonal photographers.”

“And none of them find the aesthetic... odd?”

“It’s all part of the theme. We’re the only ski chalet with an Asian flare. They love the hot springs.”

Those had definitely not been in operation the last time Inari had been here. “I’m sure they do.”

“But you didn’t come to chat about my humble abode.” Byakko’s expression became more serious.

“Where would be safest to talk?” Inari looked around, and while Byakko’s servants—employees? --certainly didn’t seem to be paying any attention to them, he certainly didn’t want this conversation overheard.

“Byakko looked thoughtful, then nodded as if to himself. “Follow me.” He turned down one of the nearby paths that led into the trees, and not toward the building.

Curious, Inari followed. He was even more surprised when, as soon as they vanished into the tree line, Byakko changed into his full tiger form, and took off at a long lope through the trees, leaving the path entirely.

In moments, Inari had transformed into his fox form, and followed. It was the only way to have any hope of keeping up. Not that the tiger ahead of him was running at top speed. Not by a long shot. Inari supposed, smugly, that it was

probably the tiger's distended gut that was slowing him down. It couldn't be more than a day since Byakko's last meal then, if he was still digesting.

Though it still took all of Inari's speed and agility to keep up as they turned uphill, bounding around the trunks and over small boulders, further up the ridge.

Somewhere along the run, there was a subtle shift in the air around them, and while they did not leave the mountain, Inari became aware that they had entered sacred space. Only then did Byakko begin to slow, coming out on a rocky ledge with an even more breathtaking view of the valley. In a moment, he regained his more human form.

Inari followed suit. "You're getting slow."

Byakko shrugged as he sat down cross-legged on the rocks. "It's not my fault you came after a meal day."

"The luxury to gorge, a chalet with hot springs. One might mistake you for a pampered house cat."

"I needed to regain my energy."

"Your fight with Tomo took it out of you that much?"

Byakko snorted. "Hardly. I had... unexpected company to contend with when I got back."

Inari waited for elaboration, but received none. So either Byakko had come home to an unexpected enemy, or an unexpected liaison. Knowing tigers, either might have burned out quite a bit of energy before it was done.

He did not ask for elaboration. Instead, Inari pulled the feather from his pocket. "Do you recognize this?"

Byakko took it from his outstretched hand, turning the feather over as he examined it intently. Then his eyes widened. "This is Suzaku's."

Inari nodded. "I found it on the ground outside, after you left my house. It's—"

"Not just a feather." Byakko nodded, sensing precisely what Inari had. "How did Suzaku's weapon come to be here?"

"I have no idea," Inari admitted. It took several seconds of intense concentration, visualizing the weapon in its other form, before he could coax the feather to become the distinctive ko-naginata he had last seen in Suzaku's hands. That was all he could do with it, too. If he had tried to strike at anyone with it—such as Byakko—it would have fought him, and refused. Only Suzaku, or her bloodline presumably, could wield it.

Byakko knew this as well, and did not even flinch as Inari held the weapon. "She must have meant it for Tomo then. What does the girl think?"

"She doesn't know." A moment later it was once again a phoenix feather, beautiful but inert. "I haven't decided how to deal with it yet."

"Afraid she can't handle it?"

Inari shook his head. "No. I think it would not have appeared if she were not ready for it. I just wish I could be sure of who sent it. My instincts say it could only come from Suzaku, but how realistic is that?"

"It could be a trick," Byakko acknowledged. "Or a trap. Though I do not sense anything to fear here either."

A fact that was quite reassuring. "I actually feel better, confirming that. It is definitely a sign, even if we do not know what of, just yet. Tomo has reached the limits of what she can learn, as she is, with regular weapons. She will have to learn the use of this one, and how to harness both her powers and her skills with the blade, simultaneously, to reach the potential she may need. If Suzaku's blade is here, now, then it stands to reason that Tomo will need to be good enough to control it, to wield it fully, to face whatever is coming next. Do you

agree?"

Byakko looked like he wished he could object, but he sighed, and nodded. "I see no other signs in it either. She must be trained in it. Yet she will find that difficult, even though she has improved since our last bout." The last came out with a sour expression, as if he clearly hated admitting it.

They agreed on that. Now, Inari hoped he wasn't about to blow this entire thing with what he was going to ask next. "You're right, Byakko. As much as she has improved, she has a long way to go, and while I can give her the training, she still needs in her phoenix powers, there is little more I can teach her about weaponry. To master this weapon, she needs a devoted warrior who far exceeds her skills, one who can push her to excel and make her work for it."

"At last, you admit you are not the expert in all things." Byakko chuckled, the sound nearly a rumbling purr. "Where do you propose to find a fighting master to teach that stubborn little bird?"

"I am looking at him."

Byakko froze, for a moment his grin looking as if he thought Inari was joking, then it fell away as he realized the seriousness of what was being asked. "Be serious."

"I am absolutely serious." It was a risk, a big risk, but the time had come and he really could think of no one better. "Can you think of anyone else with the ability to give Tomo the training she needs in this, both the technical and the level to challenge her?"

It was not just an appeal to vanity, though that was usually a good ploy with Byakko, but the truth. Inari would not have come to Byakko to train Tomo if he'd had a better option. Besides which, getting Byakko on their side in this would put any further confrontations between the two more directly where he could supervise. At least, that was the plan.

For a very long few minutes, Byakko sat beside him in silence, wrapped in thought, and Inari wished he had the ability to read the tiger's mind. Would he be *willing* to set aside his issues with Tomo in order to train her? Surely Byakko was smart enough to see that if he took a hand in her training, he might be able to train out of Tomo the things about her that bugged him. Or at least, he would think that. Inari wouldn't place bets against Tomo in that regard.

"What are your conditions?" Byakko asked finally. "I presume you have them."

"You don't work with her alone, especially not at first." That would have to be the first rule. "As much to keep her in line as anything else. Leaving her alone with you, I'm not convinced she wouldn't be tempted to try to fight you full out again before she is ready. Likewise, it's safer for both of you. Her powers are growing, and while they are more under control, bringing them into this, getting her to have full control of both her abilities *and* her combat skills—especially with this weapon—will have inherent risks. I won't pretend that I entirely trust this yet, but I truly think it is the best option."

Byakko did not look at all surprised by the condition. Clearly he had expected as much, though he did not look offended. "As I certainly have no wish to have my fur singed off, that condition is logical enough. Are there others?"

"We discuss the training regimen and agree to it together. I won't try to tell you how to do your job if you don't try to tell me how to do mine. But if we don't work some of this out as a team, the chances of success drop dramatically. Not only from a safety concern, or training success, but in having Tomo's cooperation. She needs to feel confident in this, and—as difficult as this might be—she will need to see a fairly united front on our part for her to accept you as a teacher."

“She would be wise to be skeptical.” Byakko nodded. “Very well, Inari. I am willing to try it, but only because what little we know points to something far more dangerous than we have faced in recent days. If that saucy little bird is going to have to come into her own for reasons beyond either of us, then I am the best weapons instructor she could possibly have. Besides which, it would be a nice change of pace to have her learn a little more respect for the rest of us.” His chuckle sounded like a deep purr, only far more dangerous.

A knot in Inari’s insides loosened, if only slightly. It was still a risky plan, but it was a promising beginning that Byakko was even willing to try it out. “Thank you, Byakko. When do you want to begin?”

“Sooner is definitely best. In this case, we may have need of some haste.” Byakko looked pointedly at the feather still in Inari’s hand. “I will come to your place at the end of the week. If we’re going to do this, I’d rather she accidentally destroy your place than mine.”

“Your concern is touching.” Given Inari really preferred to have them in his territory instead for this, he did not voice any objection. His smile turned smug. “Better work off your meal before you come. If Tomo caught you in this state your last fight would have ended quite differently.”

Byakko stretched. “No fear of that, old fox. I could trounce the child while in a meat-stupor. To train her, I will come only at my most ready. Be sure she is as well. I will not do permanent damage to her, but I will *not* go lightly.”

Inari stretched as well, coming lithely to his feet. There was no need to go back down to the chalet to leave. He could go home directly from this point. “We’ll be ready.”

Tomo felt an eager curiosity as she arrived back at Inari's house for that day's training after her work shift at the arcade. He had mentioned that morning that he had a surprise for her this afternoon, and it had been all she could do to focus on her other tasks until it came for the afternoon session. Especially since she had no idea what type of training they would be doing. Would it be something new having to do with her Phoenix powers? While Inari's expressions were often mysterious, he had looked more contemplative even than usual when he had said it was a surprise. Maybe it was something she *wouldn't* like. In any case, the only way to find out was to be there, and she had made a point of being on time.

Even so, Chiori was waiting for her, looking vaguely impatient.

"Chiori! Do you know what this afternoon's training is going to be?" Tomo asked as she reached the door.

"Only Inari can tell you that," Chiori replied with a small shake of her head. "However, he did say to dress for combat practice."

Combat? Maybe this had to do with her abortive fight with Byakko a few days ago. Either she had impressed him, or she had done worse than she thought and he was going to correct every mistake she had made. Tomo hoped it was the latter. She had certainly not felt nearly outmatched, not like the first time they had fought years before.

"Thank you, Chiori. I will."

"Good. Meet Inari in the practice room as soon as you are prepared."

Tomo tried not to get too lost in 'what if' thoughts as she hurried to her old room and changed out of her work uniform and into one of her outfits she wore

for combat. She still kept several here for convenience. It meant she didn't always have to stop by her apartment to change on the way. No loose flowing pieces. No complex lacings or details that could be ripped off, snagged, or otherwise used to trip her up. Once the fitted ankle and wrist guards were in place. She tied the sash at the waist, and put her hair up out of the way in a long braid behind.

Not wanting to keep Inari waiting, she went straight to the practice room.

Inari was already there, seated on the floor, legs crossed. Immediately Tomo noticed something odd. *Inari* was not dressed for combat. So, if this was going to be a combat practice, he was almost certainly not her sparring partner. Perhaps they had not arrived yet.

Tomo sat properly in front of him, resisting the urge to blurt out her dozen or more questions. She schooled herself to calm, and at least an outward semblance of patience. If she wanted to be treated as something more than a child, she was going to have to convince her teacher—and everyone else—that she had matured. "I am here as you requested."

For a moment, Inari's expression flickered with amusement, then it was once again serious. "Today we are going to be trying something new. I have two pieces of news for you. Well, three, really. The first is actually an object of some importance that I wish to give to you."

A gift? That was not what Tomo had been expecting, but maybe it wasn't that, given Inari's face. "What is it?"

Inari pulled something out of his sleeve, and suddenly Tomo found herself staring at a feather on his outstretched palm.

A phoenix feather? Why would he give her one of her—the thought stopped as Tomo took a good, hard look at it. "That's not one of mine," the thought came out of her mouth with a small gasp. It was the other one he had shown her the other day.

"You are correct." Inari nodded. "It is one of Suzaku's feathers. I have confirmed this. It appeared very recently, and I can only assume that it is meant for you."

"Thank you," Tomo replied, though she was still puzzled. It would be nice to have something of her mother, but it hardly seemed to warrant the build up this morning's request had implied. When Inari said nothing more, she reached out and picked up the feather out of his hand.

The moment it touched her palm, it transformed! Elongating and shifting, glowing with phoenix fire and in a brief second that felt much longer, she found herself holding a truly spectacular naginata. Instinctively, she took it in both hands. She had certainly trained with a naginata before, but this was not just a regular weapon, any more than it had been a regular feather. "This is mother's weapon!"

Now Inari looked more openly amused. "You are, again, correct. That it has appeared now can only mean, as best as I have been able to discern, that you are considered ready to learn to use it. Only Suzaku, or you, can wield this weapon, for it requires the powers of the phoenix to be held by the user, and to be controlled for it to be used to its fullest extent. In a human hand, it would remain a feather. In the hands of another Kami, we can see it for what it truly is, but we cannot wield it."

What, or who, considered her ready? Her mother was the immediate thought that came to Tomo's mind. "It feels powerful," she admitted. There was a connection between it and her. It pulsed within her just holding the naginata. "Being able to carry it around as a feather seems very convenient."

"It allows you to never go fully unarmed. Given your propensity for drawing trouble, and its appearance now, you need to master it as quickly as possible."

"So we *are* starting today then."

"We are. However, that brings me to the second piece of news, which is that I will not be your primary instructor in the martial arts any longer."

Tomo couldn't help staring at him. Who else could possibly teach her? As much as she loved and appreciated her friends, no one she knew could be a better teacher than Inari. "But who will teach me then?"

"*That* is my third piece of news." Inari's face became firmly serious again. "I have found you a teacher whose skills in combat exceed my own. One with the will, strength, and skill to keep from being overpowered by you—or killed, as you learn to master this weapon. You will be learning to fight with a weapon and your powers simultaneously, requiring precision control of both. A less teacher, and combat partner, would not be able to do it.

I *will* still be mentoring you and teaching you control over your powers," Inari went on before she could object, and his expression softened a little, as if to be reassuring. "But it will take two teachers, together, to take you in the next step to reaching your full abilities."

Where had Inari managed to find a teacher like that? It could not have been easy. What he was implying about her current skills—had she really gotten that good?—but also how much more she could become, was both inspiring, and slightly frightening. "When will I meet this new teacher?" If Inari was not dressed to fight, then surely this teacher was here somewhere.

"Today."

At Inari's word, as if on cue, the shoji screen behind him slid open. Her teacher stepped into the room. Her senses filled with alarm. Byakko!

Tomo was on her feet, weapon in front of her before her instincts realized that this was not an attack of opportunity on the tiger's part.

Both Inari and Byakko stared at her for just a moment then—to her surprise—both of the other Kami shared a look, and chuckled.

"I told you," Byakko's chuckle sounded more like a throaty rumble.

"And did I express a word of doubt?" Inari replied. Then he turned his attention back to Tomo, who was starting to feel embarrassed. "Good reaction time," he commented glibly. "Now show a proper greeting for your new combat instructor."

Tomo clenched her mouth shut for a moment, just to keep her jaw from dropping open. Only a few days ago... No. Calm. Focus. She loosened her tight muscles, and lowered her hands. The naginata did not turn back into a feather as she knelt, however. Not until she set it down on the ground and fully let go of it. "I welcome you," she said tersely. "And I... thank you for the offer of your time to train me." The expression on Inari's face made it clear that anything less respectful would be a huge mistake. How had Byakko even been *willing* to do this? He hated her. Though, as much as she hated to admit it, he was still better than her.

Byakko made a small nod in return. "I accept your gratitude. I am in agreement with Inari's assessment that the appearance of Suzaku's blade means that it is imperative that your skill with it grow quickly. We also have an agreement that I will work with you as your master in weapons-work to make this possible. However, there are conditions."

Of course there were, but what deal would Inari have made with him? "May I ask what those are?" She tried to keep her tone respectful.

"First, that you will refer to me as Master Byakko when we are on the training grounds. Second, that you will follow my instructions without objection or hesitation. You *may* ask intelligent questions. Third, that you will not attempt any new skill *however ready you think you are* until I have specifically stated that you are trained enough to do so. My purpose here is to make you good enough that nothing can kill you unless you make a mistake. And if you learn properly, you *will not* make a mistake. I expect you to put every bit of your effort into learning

what I have to teach you. This will not be easy. This will not be *fun*. It is absolutely essential. If it were not, I would not be here. Is that understood?"

Clearly. Tomo could still hardly believe this was happening. Every part of her wanted to insist loudly that this was ridiculous, and foolish, and how could Inari *possibly* have thought that Byakko was a good choice of teacher for her? Or that Byakko thought this was even a good idea either? But... she did not. She trusted Inari, and he would not have *asked* Byakko to teach her if there were someone else more qualified, or even close. He was trusting Byakko, and if she trusted Inari, she was going to have to do the same. Sometimes, you had to work with people you didn't like. "I understand... Master Byakko."

"Good." He nodded, with no apparent satisfaction. "Then let us step outside, and begin."