

Legend of the
Five Rings



*It Refused to
Remain Dead*

ROBERT DENTON III

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It Refused to Remain Dead

BY ROBERT DENTON III


Just as Shinjo Isamu dared to hope that tonight would be different, a pinpoint of purple flame appeared in the distance. He might have mistaken it for a traveler's lantern, but who would traverse these fields so far from the road at this time of night, through sheets of sleet and puffy snow? Only a fool, like him – or something that hunted such fools. The fireball seemed to grow as he watched. It was crossing the plain. Fast. Very fast.

Isamu's resolve nearly crumbled in the urge to run. But what good would that do? He wouldn't get far fighting the wind and the deep snow, especially after a day of trudging across these fields. No. He'd have to make yet another stand.

Distantly, his ears pricked up on a human scream.

Within the flames galloped the charred silhouette of a massive warhorse skeleton. Steam erupted where the lavender fire vaporized the falling sleet. The creature's invisible hooves left slushy pools in its wake, its bones littering the snow with a trail of ash. The screaming grew louder. It never broke for a second.

Isamu bit his lip until blood trickled down his chin and



froze in his beard. His muscles protested as he unslung his “horse butchering” saber, hoisting it to a ready position.

The curved steel reminded him of the merchant’s smile from earlier that day. Isamu assumed it was stolen from a fallen samurai; selling it was a violation of edict, but what did Isamu care under these circumstances?

He was cast in the light of the fires, now. The scream split his ears. Falling snow reflected purple light like a thousand tiny mirrors. His joints locked at the sudden stench of charred bones. *Calm*, he told himself. *Calm or you’ll miss*.

It crossed the last stretch in a heartbeat.

It dove upon him like a meteor.

Isamu ducked aside and brought the sword down.

The steel shattered.

Blisters erupted on his cheek. Heat ripped air from his lungs.


Sprawled prone in cold snow, he braced for death.

Silence.

He laid there, cheek cooling in the snow, sleet soaking heavy into his padded clothes, waiting. When he finally lifted his head, there was only a pile of smoldering bones, chipped and glowing like dying coals.

And the broken sword. The heat may have overcome the cheap steel, but it had bought him more time.

But how much? Twenty-four times now he’d slain this revenant. It would just reappear, as it had the night before, and the night before that, over and over since he’d first stoked its anger. It didn’t matter how many times he killed it. It refused to remain dead. He needed to get somewhere it couldn’t reach him, somewhere he could think, recover his strength, his senses. His eyes burned, his joints ached, and he



was so tired, and the snow was soft. He could lay here just a few moments, cooling his burns. Just a few brief—

A pop, like kindling. One of the bones twitched.

Sighing, Isamu dragged himself to his feet and walked north into the hammering sleet.



Isamu nearly wept at the sight of the old temple. Beyond, the Dragon Clan foothills grew into mountains that sunk into a sheet of clouds.

According to his betrothed's letters – ex-betrothed, he reminded himself – monks of the Little Teacher could lift karmic curses and pacify feral yōkai. Normally, he would have sought a Priest of the Lords of Death, but that path was long closed to him. Better now to be far away from his people. Far from home, like a proper Unicorn.

He banged on the temple doors until his fist was red and sore.

Finally came the creak of a pentagonal window above him. The bald face peering down had deep cut wrinkles and an expression that danced between annoyance and curiosity.

“Thank the Fortunes,” Isamu shouted, bowing stiffly. “I feared no one would answer. I am a wayward traveler from Shinjo lands. I was caught in the storm and ran out of food. I humbly request shelter within your temple.” Not the full truth, but not a lie either.

The monk tilted his head, saying nothing.

Isamu imagined that he must look like a frozen rat. Or a bandit. He licked his cracked lips. “I have gold. I can pay for my food, and I won't eat much. I won't linger, either. I need




only a day or so. I will even leave my weapons outside.” He gestured to his *dao* and wakizashi, the symbols of his station. “I see you are beneath the Dragon Clan’s protection. Our clans are friends. You can let me in without reprisal.”

“Why would you lead that cursed thing here?”

Any warmth within Isamu extinguished with those words. How did the monk know? He recalled his betrothed once said Shinseist monks could read a person’s karma. He suddenly felt like a child caught in a lie.

Nothing coaxed Isamu’s anger like embarrassment. Even as a child, a mere snicker at his expense would flare his temper.



Lately, it seemed anger was the only thing he could clearly feel. Any other emotion was just some tired version, some echo of what he should have felt, like something inside him was missing.

Now he grasped for the closest thing to patience.

“It’s a revenant,” he said. “It’s been chasing me for months. If I rest, it catches up to me. It blames me for its death, but I promise, there was nothing I could do!” He bowed again. “Please. I’m safe on consecrated ground. I need just a few days to rest.”

“So then,” the monk said. “You seek to escape your just punishment.”

The audacity! Rage lifted Isamu’s head, curling his lips into a snarl.

The monk’s eyes flashed. Isamu cursed – the monk had seen his naked anger.

“Well,” said the old man. “Normally, only monks can enter the temple. But perhaps if you showed humility, we could make an exception.”


Did the monk want him to beg? Such was beneath Isamu’s station. How dare he make such a humiliating demand?

But what choice did he have?

Slowly he knelt, then prostrated, planting his head into the snow. Hot coals turned in his belly. Such a display. Such unseemly desperation. *You did this to yourself*, he thought.

The monk nodded. “One moment, while I consult with the Abbot.”

Isamu sat back up and waited, snow clinging to his beard. He broiled in his anger until finally the monk reappeared, tossing a small bag beside him.



“Road provisions,” the monk said. “Enough for a day or so. You will also find a strike-ring and some dry kindling. More importantly, I included a standing bell, which should hold malicious spirits at bay.” He gestured beyond. “That way is the road. Follow it, and you will find a shrine maintained by the Dragonfly Clan. They should help you.”

Isamu reeled. “You said if I showed humility, you would—”

The monk shook his head unctuously. “Were it up to me, I would. But that would violate the temple’s sanctity. I will pray for your safety.”

If Isamu had a bow, he would sink an arrow into this geezer’s face.


“You are sending a man to his death!” he cried.

“What can death take from a brave samurai?” The monk raised a vertical hand in apology. “I wish you good fortune.” The window clattered shut behind him.

Without thinking, Isamu scooped up the provisions bag and hurled it at the door. It burst, scattering its contents to the snow.



Isamu’s dream began as it typically did: in a saddle on Hikari’s back, struggling to manage his beloved horse and his bow at the same time. The string slipped, biting into his cheek. He didn’t recall the name of the boy who laughed, but he remembered his heart pounding, as if to escape the growing heat. He didn’t ask Hikari to collide into the other horse, throwing the boy down. Nor did he ask Hikari to trample the boy’s hand. He stared at the red grass, avoiding his classmates’ shocked expressions.



“The horse knew you were angry!” his father shouted, when they were finally alone. “She did what she thought you wanted! You must control your anger if you are going to be an outrider. You’ll endanger everyone if you don’t, like your grandfather did.”

The only thing Isamu knew of his grandfather was that he’d left the Unicorn in disgrace. That his anger, somehow, had caused something bad to happen.

After, Isamu crept into the stables and fed Hikari cubes of her favorite melon. He brushed her coat, blew air into her nostrils, and promised never to confuse her again.

Then he was galloping over pristine snowy fields, the color of death. Steel raked his flanks as screams rained down. The word “coward,” cold as sleet. He galloped until his heart burst from his chest, catching fire, engulfing him...

Isamu jolted awake. He blinked at his meager camp: smoke rising from an extinguished campfire towards a starless sky, covered in clouds. There wasn’t even the moon to shine on him. So why could he see so clearly?

His shadow was cast before him. A different light then, from behind.

A purple light.

Isamu spun into the heat, a charred horse skull plunging inches from his nose. A human scream engulfed him. He fell backward from snapping teeth.

With one hand, he whipped up the standing bell. The other struck it with a stone.

The reverberation shattered the world. The ground broke. Icy water locked his joints. He gasped, and the water rushed into his mouth. Steam burned his face.


He sunk into the darkness and did not fight for life.
His hands pressed into a wooden floor, water-logged and splintered, as if trampled by many hooves. Was it a trick of the light? Was he still dreaming?

In his waterlogged vision he beheld a horse's silhouette. Hikari. Although he could not see her face, he felt the gaze of her chestnut eyes.

*Master Isamu, she spoke, I don't understand what I did.
I didn't mean to make you mad.*

Isamu screamed.
And blinked.





He was draped across a snowy bank, soaking in frigid water. He'd wittingly set up camp on a frozen pond.

Isamu dragged himself into the snow. He'd lost the bell, but he didn't have the strength to swim for it. He needed to shed his wet clothes. He needed to start a fire. He needed to get away from the revenant's bones.

But he didn't do any of those things. Instead, he sobbed until his eyes burned, feeling emptier than ever before.



The Moto's language used the same word for "anger" and "insanity." By Isamu's estimation, this accurately described what he decided to do.

His pounding on the temple doors once again provoked the window open. The same wrinkled face once again peered down.

"You again?" came the monk's voice. "Why haven't you—"

The noose went over the monk's head before he had any chance. A hard jerk on the rope wrenched the old man down. He crunched into the snow and was still.


Without the snow's cushion, surely he would have broken his neck. Only a low groan proved he was still alive.

Isamu leapt upon him. His scimitar stopped against the injured man's throat.

Alarmed faces appeared in the window above; monks of various ages casting concerned eyes down at the unexpected hostage, then to Isamu's blade.

"I'll kill him!" Isamu shouted. "If you don't let me in, I'll open his neck!"

The monks exchanged looks.



Then, one of them reached out, grasped the window, and closed it.

As the cold wind soaked into Isamu's bones, the old monk unwound a string of wooden beads from his wrist and clasped them. He whispered: "I praise the Little Teacher's wisdom on this, my day of thunder. Empty of regret, I commit myself to the next life and smile, for death can take nothing from me." The monk repeated this mantra, again and again.

They weren't coming for him. They'd left the old monk to die.

"Have you gone mad?!" Isamu shouted. "Is it really better to let this man die rather than crack open your doors for a stranger? What sort of people does that make of you? What kind of base creatures would do nothing when they could spare a precious life? I..."

Distantly came a human scream.


He didn't need to look to know that purple flames had burst over the horizon. He didn't need to hear the clatter of invisible hooves and charred bones. He knew it galloped closer, faster, steam rising from its ashes in the snow.

Tears stung Isamu's eyes. "I just need a moment of kindness. Just one moment. I only need one soul – *just one* – to spare me a heartbeat's worth of grace in a cold world so obsessed with punishment!"

"I praise the Little Teacher's wisdom," the heedless monk uttered, "on this, my day of thunder."

Isamu closed his eyes. It would be only seconds before the revenant reached him. This time, he wouldn't fight.

With a low boom, one of the temple doors opened. The old monk went silent.



An elderly woman stepped barefoot into the snow. Although her robes were the same as the old man's, hers was the color of saffron instead of a midnight sky, and she wore a patchwork outer-kimono with only a left sleeve.

"Abbot," the old monk croaked. "Please stay inside."

She was the abbot? Instinct renewed Isamu's grip on the blade.

"I've tried to be reasonable," he began. "I'm—"

"Shinjo Isamu of Kōryo Province," the woman said. "I will not stop you from entering, although by doing so you ruin this temple's sanctity, and it cannot protect you in any case."

He paused. How did she know his name? Had they met before? And why couldn't this temple protect him?

She nodded, as if sensing his thoughts. "This is a Shinseist temple. Only a Fortunist temple hinders the type of ghost haunting you. Although I fear even that would do you more harm than good."

Was that true? Had he misremembered? Suddenly, he wasn't sure. His thoughts were smeared across his mind while his nemesis drew ever closer.

"We don't have time," he insisted. "The revenant will kill us all!"

"No, Isamu. Not while we converse like this, and if you can remain calm."

Her words seemed to slow the snowfall. Behind him, the skeletal horse stood silent. Its flames licked the air, but it did not move. It just watched.

Isamu's grip failed. The monk tumbled to the snow. What was going on?

Sadness overcame the abbot's features. "You're much like

your grandfather when he arrived all those years ago. Is that why you came all this way? Because you believed we lifted his curse?" She shook her head. "We didn't, Isamu. His ghost overcame him. But I have hope that you can avoid the same fate."

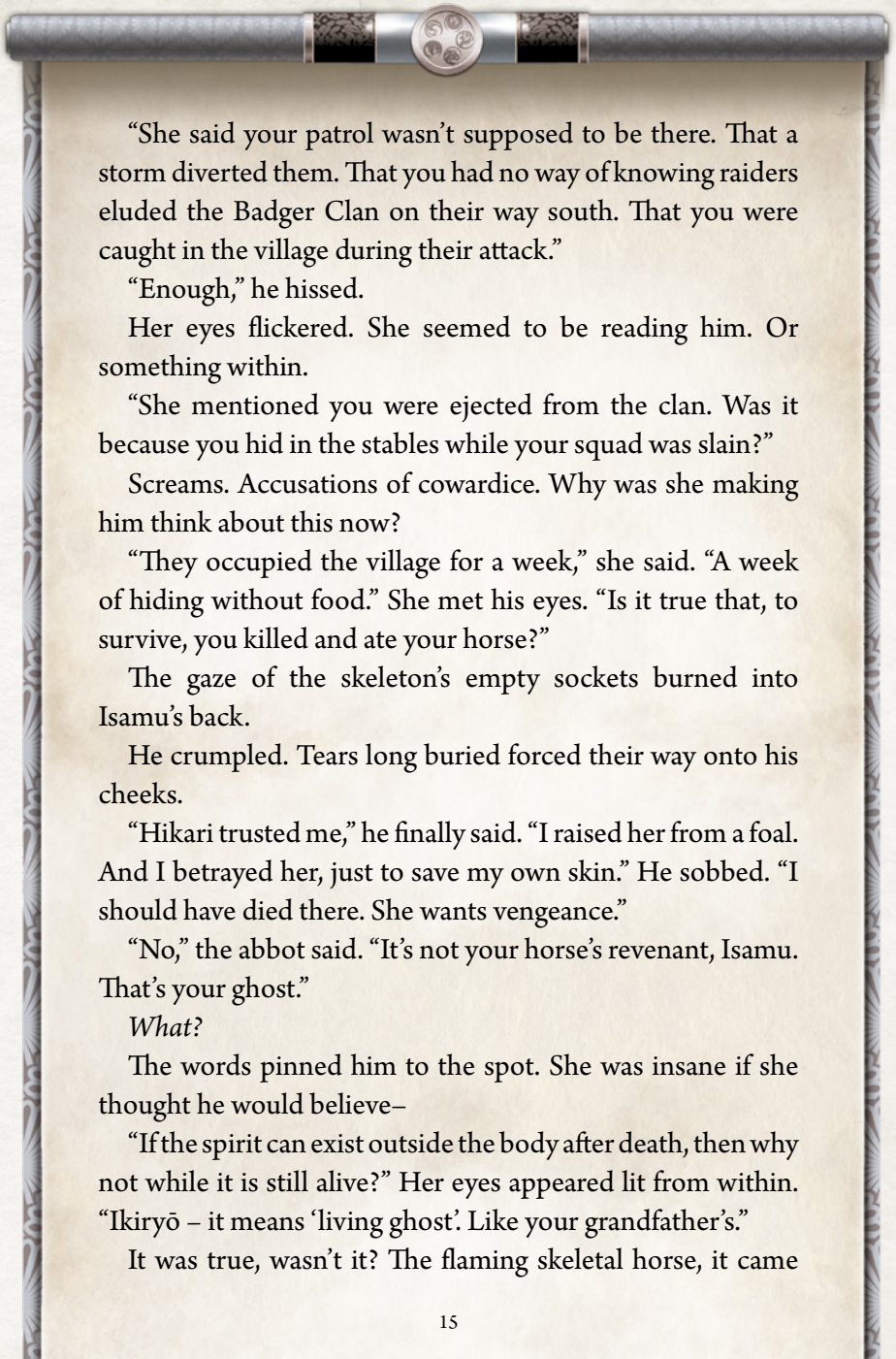
What did his grandfather have to do with this? Sharp pain grew behind his eyes, frustration kindling his anger.

"You don't know me," he spat. "You don't know anything."

"Are you not Shinjo Isamu, lone survivor of the raid at Floating Rock Village? That is what your betrothed said, just before she answered the call of the Togashi Order."

She was here? He pressed his palm into his throbbing head. "That's... that's not—"





“She said your patrol wasn’t supposed to be there. That a storm diverted them. That you had no way of knowing raiders eluded the Badger Clan on their way south. That you were caught in the village during their attack.”

“Enough,” he hissed.

Her eyes flickered. She seemed to be reading him. Or something within.

“She mentioned you were ejected from the clan. Was it because you hid in the stables while your squad was slain?”

Screams. Accusations of cowardice. Why was she making him think about this now?

“They occupied the village for a week,” she said. “A week of hiding without food.” She met his eyes. “Is it true that, to survive, you killed and ate your horse?”

The gaze of the skeleton’s empty sockets burned into Isamu’s back.

He crumpled. Tears long buried forced their way onto his cheeks.

“Hikari trusted me,” he finally said. “I raised her from a foal. And I betrayed her, just to save my own skin.” He sobbed. “I should have died there. She wants vengeance.”

“No,” the abbot said. “It’s not your horse’s revenant, Isamu. That’s your ghost.”

What?

The words pinned him to the spot. She was insane if she thought he would believe—

“If the spirit can exist outside the body after death, then why not while it is still alive?” Her eyes appeared lit from within. “Ikiryō – it means ‘living ghost’. Like your grandfather’s.”

It was true, wasn’t it? The flaming skeletal horse, it came

from him. Was him, in a way. This was why he felt so empty. Because he *was* empty.

“An ikiryō seeks to destroy the object of its master’s anger. And you are angry at yourself! It will never leave you alone until you forgive yourself for what you’ve done!”

But Isamu barely heard her. He stared at the monk prone in the snow. Who had humiliated him. Who said this was a just punishment. Who’d read his karma. He’d known all along, hadn’t he? He’d known, and he said nothing. Nothing!

The horse knew you were angry! She did what she thought you wanted!

The skeletal horse trampled the monk, engulfing him in flames.

The abbot’s calm shattered into pure horror. “No! What are you doing? You don’t understand—”

How easily he stoked that flame, now. Why had he fought it before? He’d tried to kill his rage a thousand times. A thousand times, it refused to remain dead. And if the world wanted him angry, then so be it.

After all, he mused as the flaming ghost trampled the abbot on its way into the temple, in a world like this, anger was the only thing that made sense.



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