



Rift to Tōshigoku

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Twenty minutes. It had been twenty minutes since Asako Reina handed Isawa Hifumi the documents. Yet, still, Hifumi watched her, studying her, analyzing every word, every gesture. She had tried explaining, then pleading, shouting, then retreating into bitter surliness. Now she stood silent, twitching, trying to read the expression in Hifumi's eyes, the way he held the documents in his hands. Documents that all centered around a single point, a single objective — how to save the Empire-In-Waiting. Permanently.

Reina felt the problems of the Empire-in-Waiting crawling across her skin like tainted insects. There was no doubt that this tiny Empire would crumble. Everything fails to live up to its potential, due to that hated disease – "human nature". And this Empire-In-Waiting was collapsing faster than expected. The Empress supported the Mantis pirates. Her champions turn a blind eye to the secret conspiracy she'd detected called The Pact. The Crane ignored...no, defeated, the inquisitors sent to prevent vile elements from spreading within them. The Imperials failed as arbitrators. A single shove, and the clans would declare independence and abandon the traditional courts. And once that happened, Reina had no doubt the beliefs of the ancestors would be tossed aside, replaced with new beliefs. Disturbing beliefs.

Beliefs...like the beliefs you now hold. You hate who you are, and what you will become. You want to save yourself...to stop yourself from falling further. Even if that means sacrificing everyone else.

*Control. We **must** have control. We must if we are to save the Empire. Shiba Yohana offered another approach. Kill the gods and acquire new ones? Undead inquisitors, villains who will enforce orthodoxy at swordpoint? Immoral! My approach....*

...is also immoral, but at least your sensei would approve.

Hifumi set the documents aside. "You went missing for three days." His voice held no trace of emotion. His eyes were cold.

"I know." Reina gazed at the floor, as if she was staring deep into Jigoku itself. "It was necessary."

Still no emotion. "I sent you to spy on The Pact, to discover if they have been ensnared in the mechanisms of the Lying Darkness. I sent you study claims that they have among them ones who are Void-touched. Find their secrets."

"I did all that."

"While you were gone, the Empty City was attacked by traitors aligned with Asako Kousuke and Shiba Kei. We rooted them out, of course."

Reina twitched again, but said nothing. *If Hifumi truly thought I had betrayed him, then I wouldn't be standing here today. But I should have been here.*

*You were not here. You ran. The rebels are looking for **you**. They want to **stop** you – they attack out of desperation. They know you are right.*

Hifumi laid a hand on the pile of documents and charts Reina had presented.

"This document. This thing you describe. This 'Rift to Tōshigoku?' Tell me of it." Hifumi flicked his fingers again through the pages, but it was clear he did not need to read it again.

"I needed the knowledge. And I now have it." Reina laughed. "And now...now you have it too."

A flicker of distaste flickered across Hifumi's cool features. "I sent Shiba Akane after you, you know. She was about to give up, but then a pillar of flames appeared from the ground. Unnatural flames. And then you ran out of these flames, screaming maniacally."

Reina said nothing, feeling the crawling insects again infect the room with their indolent somnolence.

"It took hours to calm you down and verify that you were not some spirit wearing your form. When you finally recovered, you wrote...this." He tapped the stack of documents again.

"The documents explain everything."

"Perhaps." The Phoenix leader's voice was cold. "Tell me of Kaito Urabe."

Urabe. I remember Kaito Urabe. He was the one who showed me the path.

Kaito Urabe was a wide-eyed, innocent, and naive youth. He had a round face and chipmunk cheeks. Long bangs framed his wide black eyes, the black hair tied into a black foxtail at his nape. Cheerful, brave, generous — all the gifts of a talented samurai, save for a single phobia — the sky. He felt a sense of spiritual unease looking at the sky, fearful of what secrets lurk there. Reina had dismissed it as baseless paranoia, perhaps a side effect of too much time indoors as a child.

Urabe painted landscapes — landscapes that no one had ever seen. Strange areas — a cavern of stolen hopes, a temple of lost deeds, a mysterious path of reflection. Urabe would never finish a single painting. He enjoyed creativity, never the finished product. But those half-complete paintings, Reina had found, reveal unknown lands, later discovered. Predict events, later revealed.

Reina suspected, on discovering Urabe's talent, that Urabe was himself a Void acolyte. Too weak to truly be considered Ishiken, but here, where the veil between the Celestial Realms was so thin, the void itself inspired him. What to paint, when to paint, how to paint, why to paint. Whatever the void told him, Urabe obeyed.

Your order monitored Kaito Urabe constantly — they wanted to "learn" from him. The Order had knowledge, but only because they stole it from others.

The Order. It had been so long since she acknowledged others, besides the Path of Man. Beside the Henshin Order...

Ishiken, even mere acolytes, generally came from the Isawa family. Outsiders were treated with suspicion. Kaito Urabe, resenting this discrimination, avoided the Isawa, and eventually contacted Shiba Ryuu, who took an interest in Kaito Urabe's artistic talents. Urabe would regularly sell his half-completed paintings to Ryuu.

Ryuu was part of The Pact, a group of famous explorers, Reina believed, had been touched by the Void, using Urabe's paintings to locate interesting territories in Sanctuary. Their explorers would develop high-quality maps to sell to the Miya cartographers. And from there, the images were passed on to fallen, weak, selfish, corruptible people.

The Pact. Did they really even need Urabe's paintings? Or did the darkness without a face tell them where to go, what secrets to show? Reina had never learned. Yet the paintings were still important — for they were part of a causal chain of events. She did not know if The Pact wished the expansion across Sanctuary to bring those lands into existence, to bring people into the clutches of the darkness more easily.

If the void allows us to conquer everything with a snap of our fingers, then there would be no more rules in the Realm of Mortals. Reality itself would shatter. Urabe plays a role. An important role. A beautiful role.

But then came the day when Urabe broke free, and drew a horrible landscape, an all-consuming revelation that scarred his mind and left him dazed for days. The void-touched artisan could not bear to burn his masterpiece. Urabe had fled, trying to find the perfect place to bury his art underground, where no one could find it. That was where Reina had found him.

Concealed knowledge might as well not exist.

It was the plains of last judgment, a forlorn area associated with death and destruction. He thought nobody would dare go there. He was wrong.

But I waited for him. I am not afraid of death, only ignorance.

Urabe drew his blade, his hands shaking. Reina did not know whether he was trying to threaten her, himself, or the precious artwork. "This painting will cause a catastrophe."

"As opposed to the catastrophe that we already face? You'll let that be?" Reina drew her own katana, but did not move towards him. She did not dare.

Urabe did not move. "The lesser of two evils is still evil. Let me avert this current catastrophe, and the future shall handle its own affairs."

"To keep your hands clean, you'll let the future fall?"

Reina could be persuasive when she needed to be. She spoke of duty, but it was not enough. She spoke of glory, and almost reached him. "You have talents, Urabe-san. You can do things that even the spirits can only dream of. But only, and **only**, if you used those talents."

"You're talking about ishiken, and we left them all on the mainland. I'm just a mere acolyte...a lowly painter for The Pact."

"And you can be more than that."

Let Urabe fill in the blanks with his hopes and dreams. You learnt well from your sensei.

Her conscience reproached her; she pushed it down with practiced ease.

"I don't want to be." Urabe's hands trembled. "I've left so many paintings behind. They are more than enough to speak to me. But I can not let this happen. No one can see this painting. Ever." He lashed out at her then, a clumsy blow that he had put his entire weight into. She sidestepped easily.

"Truly, you could have been great."

Urabe succumbed to the praise before he succumbed to Reina's katana. There was no snow on the plains, and yet the air was cold.

Later, much later, Reina unfurled Urabe's dreaded painting. It consisted of a series of tall mountains, towering over the rest of Sanctuary. Urabe named the tallest mountain "Eagle's Rest Peak".

Whoever climbs it will see everything.

Reina carried a spyglass with her and used it often, searching for the horror that Urabe hinted at. But, she found none. At the top of Eagle's Rest Peak, she used her spyglass: from there, one could see the whole world. She could see the border skirmishes of the Crab and Unicorn, the trade deals being made in Yatakabune Port, the creation of orange dye by Phoenix peasants. She felt could see anything on the ground. Every virtue, every vice. Everything.

Then, Reina turned her spyglass to the sky, and felt that, for that moment, she was falling into infinity.

There seemed no veil between the realms, each reeling one into the other like the fold of a fan. Panic enveloped her as the sky changed colors. One moment, it became calm and tranquil, just like Meido. A second moment, orderly and structured, like Tengoku. A third moment, confusing and bizarre, like Yume-dō. Turning away, she looked down to see Sanctuary enveloped by these overlapping realms, shifting, changing, morphing – even though it was always this way, and would always be this way. Reality shifting and changing in ways Reina had never imagined.

Looking back at the sky, the Asako saw a flow tinged with red. She smelled ash and blood, while hot winds brushed her face.

Tōshigoku, the Realm of Slaughter. Of course it was revealed here, to only her. Asako Reina. She wondered how many times has this "realm" brushed up against mortals, how much influence it had on Sanctuary.

We were so close to its violence, so close to its hatred and endless battle, and yet we did not know, too busy enjoying "reality" to realize its multifaceted nature.

Tōshigoku beckoned. The mountains around her dissolved into chaotic violence that she refused to understand.

Reina dropped the spyglass and lost consciousness.

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With new eyes, Asako Reina awakened in a brightly-lit corridor. The floor was littered with the rotten skeletons of the human defenders of Sanctuary, still wearing the armor of the Empire of the Five Rivers, the armor the robes kept forever polished in the Empty City. Perhaps, once, these were scouts who made it to Eagle's Rest Peak, who had seen what she had seen. Or maybe they were the spirits of Tōshigoku itself, who had murdered each other just a few hours before.

Either way, Reina paid her respects to the dead before walking past their dry bones and towards what at least seemed a light.

As she walked, she noticed beautiful paintings on the walls. Paintings of herself, eating some good food. an Empty City Archivist looking through some books. A samurai from the Dragon, Mirumoto Rei, training a group of students. The Empress at the bow of her flagship, approaching the hidden island. A man's blood dripping into a bubbling hot spring. Reina could not help but stop to admire, to stumble upon the last, herself, in this exact corridor, looking at these exact paintings. She saw everything, but could not understand. In that moment, she did not care.

There are no secrets here, no lies or deception. This corridor is an art gallery, carefully curated by wise deities. Each painting, a theme, an idea, a belief. The art gallery is merely context, to justify the paintings' existence. But each painting...so wonderful!

Reina reached out a hand to touch one of the paintings, but flinched. It burned! Then, she had to look even more closely. The paintings appeared so old and ancient, yet they portrayed events that happened just recently in Sanctuary.

Reina's heart started to beat faster. She began running towards the light, ignoring the paintings on the walls.

I cannot retreat from revelation, I cannot retreat from truth, I must face it head-on, even if it will kill me.

Ahead, she was confronted with burning flames, reaching to the top of the corridor's ceiling. The flames shifted between purple and red. Reina lifted an arm to shield her eyes.

The flames spoke. "We always expected you. We will always expect you."

"Who are you?" Reina shouted, turning her face away.

"A wound. The boundary rips. A wound that cuts deep into Sanctuary itself. A wound you have opened."

"Where did you come from?"

"Darkness, despair, resentment. These burn the souls of men in fires that will not die. Here they burn still."

"Tōshigoku, the Realm of Slaughter."

The flames did not answer to affirm her conclusion.

Reina slowly lowered her arm, her eyes burning. "And you're influencing Sanctuary. The endless war in the Empty City, first between the Robes and Yoite, and now between Hifumi and the rebels. The clans fighting each other — Unicorn and Crab. Scorpion and Lion. It's all because of you, isn't it? Driving us ever more to our doom?" She wanted to weep.

The flames did not respond.

"Are there more of these wounds? More of these gates? Not just to Tōshigoku, but to the other Spirit Realms?"

The flames laughed. "The veil is thin, easily broken. You disturb what has been at rest for a thousand years."

This would explain the many supernatural oddities in Sanctuary. "How do I repair the veil? Heal these wounds?"

"You cannot eliminate these wounds. To wound, to destroy. That is what you are."

"How do I mitigate these wounds then? The wounds here, they seem more severe, more...destructive."

"You will not. You have come to us, with your blood and your hate. We see. We know the footsteps you have taken to reach this place. And we can follow your footsteps back."

Some last black well of horror emerged in her spirit before Reina made her final realization. "I could let you destroy me. Destroy myself. You could not follow me then."

"It is not enough. Centuries of war, the forgotten battles of spirits who no longer remember the purpose of creation. Someday, somewhere, another will die. Then another. It is only a matter of time. We will find a way." The flames almost gloated.

"We could destroy the Empty City and the fighting between the spirits."

"Perhaps."

"Not enough? Must we destroy all fighting, all bloodshed? Everywhere?" Suddenly the idea was so beautiful, so perfect in Reina's mind.

A thousand years, frozen like a spider in perfect amber, waiting for the beautiful day when the reign of the Dark Brother has past and the descendent of Shinsei arises to call all of us, all of our strength, and power, to stand the forces of Jigoku on that day, the Third Day of Thunder. The last day of Thunder. We could be heroes. We would all be heroes. And, until then, perfect....crystalline...stillness. Waiting for the moment to arise.

No risk to the veil between the worlds. No bloodshed. No heresy. No decay. No death. Frozen, until a new age would come again.

She wanted to laugh. She wanted to weep.

If Urabe were here, he would urge me to wage a war against these wounds. Deal with the situation you are in now. If necessary, destroy the Empty City, seal this breach. Yet, I cannot do that. The Empty City is the source of our power, our strength. Such a spiritual battle would cause the Empty City, at least, and all its troubled spirits, to crumble into dust and leave us with no political base. I will not let that happen.

Sanctuary is known for its oddities. The names of the Fortunes. The Scorpions' war against the moving golems. The fertility of the Lion lands. The Crane's war against nature spirits. The Dragons' relations with the ningyo. The deities that inhabit the Unicorns' endless caves. All strange things — were they all wounds caused by their own arrival? Should she....could she... let these wounds fester? Or administer a deadly cure?

No, neither! There must be a third path. A path that allows us to retain the supernatural, while still breaking the cycle of the Empty City.

The flames flickered. "You must act. The world burns around you."

Was that me, or the fire?

The flames vomited out a black book. Reina grabbed it with both her hands. On it was one word — *Onyx*. She hesitantly opened the book, and started reading, not feeling the sweat that poured down her forehead, the fires that flickered around her.

Onyx seemed merely a beautiful artbook with printed words, beginning with timeless paintings of the very creation of a Celestial Order, then the origin of all the things of the Empire. Humans and spirits, the divine and the mundane. Everything. They were beautiful, with no past and no future — just an endless present.

Is this real? Illusion? Is there a difference?

These paintings. This was the reality of the world. Everything else was merely scenery in an elaborate art gallery. Humans? An audience that the paintings are poured out for, in a world that mutilates itself in its performance, over and over again.

There, the Empire burns with the forces of Jigoku, a scene applauded by the Elemental Dragons. But then, burned to ashes, and then revived. Empires built anew, ever-changing, ever open to wounds, to defeat. An Onyx Empire in the ashes of Otosan Uchi. Another generation of grist for Tōshigoku's mill.

Her own empire, damned from its moment of creation. Humans, a mere byproduct of reality, transient things to be used, abused, and tossed aside. Human nature is real. Humans are not.

Reina did not want to know more. *How many Celestial Orders are there?* Her loyalty lay to her own order, even if it, too, was no more than an illusion.

"How many worlds are there?" The Asako yelled to the flames. The flames laughed, but they laughed in Reina's own voice. She already knew the answer. Go to the ocean. Count the drops of water. For each drop of water, that's one Celestial Order.

The illusions stripped away. Reina had thought she would scream. Instead, she smiled. The solution seemed so clear. If art is the reality, then make art.

Freeze the pictures. End the story. Right here. That which does not change cannot decay.

But how?

The world is mutable. Those who are extremely skilled with the Void — the ishiken — can shape the world, just like the paintings of Onyx. And if they shape the world properly, then humans can become more than mere scenery. Humans could then transcend their human nature, and turn into deities, eternal and unchanging. No past regrets. No future to be afraid of. Only an eternal present. Frozen into art.

By turning everyone into divine paintings, by freezing Sanctuary outright, we solve all our problems. We would break the cycle of violence without endangering the Empty City, because everything would be frozen in place — and the spirits cannot fight if they are frozen in place. Sanctuary would no longer have to worry about internal turmoil, supernatural incursions, and heretical plots — because all these situations require change, and change does not exist in a frozen state of affairs. No more border skirmishes. No more injustices. The ends will finally justify the means.

All she needed was an Ishiken.

I can save countless lives. Even my own.

When she was finished, Reina threw Onyx back into the flames. It was eagerly consumed.

"Turn around."

On the walls, Reina saw a new painting that looked like something immortal. A divine being. Like herself, but not — only someone that looked just like her. In her hand, she held a candle. It was made of ice.

The voice, the flames perhaps, but different, answered a final time. "The story may shift. The ending is the same. There is no forgiveness. We have always existed. We will always exist. We are the reality of the blood on your blade. The hatred in your hearts. You may try to stop it if you wish. You will fail."

A thousand visions of blood and death poured out on an endless sea of violence spilled out before Reina as the paintings dissolved and panic poured itself into her soul. They were still there, behind her eyes, but she could not see.

She awoke in darkness.

And too much light.

Isawa Hifumi frowned, flipping one page of the book of scattered pages in front of him. "You painted this?"

Reina nodded warily. *We must freeze it all. We must make it perfect. Perhaps he will listen. Even if he opposes me, he must listen.*

The Isawa continued. "We have reports from Lion lands of a group of invaders on a boat, dark cloaked figures who look just like the ones you painted. The Lion killed them all."

"More violence! It will bring the Realm of Slaughter closer."

Hifumi ignored her, flipping the page to the next picture. "Your pictures. Some depict things that you could not have known, but are true anyway. Can you account for this?"

"The pictures don't matter. They only show more violence." Desperation rung in her words. "You know I am telling the truth! We can save the Empire! Freeze Sanctuary... Now, at this moment. Bring an end to it until we are needed."

"You are insane." There was no judgement in Hifumi's tone. A mild, clinical sadness. "Your plan would perhaps save the Empire. But only by hollowing it out." Hifumi steepled his fingers as he played with thoughts. "How do we save the Empire from its inevitable fall? How do we stop the intrusion of Tōshigoku on Ningen-do, if all that is required is any act of violence? Is an act required? Or are thoughts enough? If one were to erase human intellect, revert back to animalistic urges, would that stop the corruption? Would that be enough? Or if we were to turn into plants, liberated from free will? Or maybe... is fear and what your fancy is of Shiba Yohana's path of action and heresy sufficient?"

Reina fell to her knees before Hifumi. "You understand, then, don't you? Why we must do this? To save the Empire! We will be heroes! WE will be the Thunders!"

*Humans **don't** want to be heroes. Heroes suffer and scream. All so that future generations can exploit and misuse their legacy. People want to enjoy life — not protect it.*

Every plan has trade-offs, trade-offs that are disgusting and disturbing. He understands your plan. But he rejects it.

Just like you.

Isawa Hifumi looked down at the kneeling, sobbing woman, crawling across the floor towards him. Pity welled up in his heart, a place where he had thought pity had faded to logic long ago. Asako Reina had been a friend, once. A trusted ally. Alas, she had become too obsessed with the Void, the secrets of this city. Now she returned, robes still bloody from killing that poor artisan, Kaito Urabe.

And maybe she had done worse.

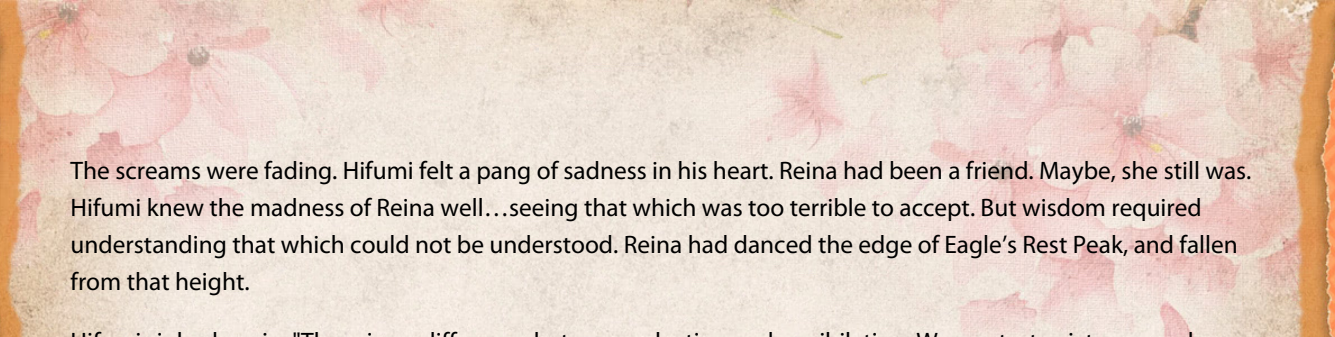
"You are mad." He made a gesture towards the silently watching Shiba Akane, who summoned three guards from the hallway. "Do not fear. You will be spared for your crimes, in order to be studied. But you will not be allowed to go free."

The guards caught Asako Reina up by the elbows before dragging her from the room. She did not resist. But she screamed and sobbed as they pulled her away, pleading for Hifumi to listen.

He sighed deeply.

There was truth in Reina's words. The veil was thin here. It could have been torn. There was enough bloodshed, even before Urabe's death, to have wrenched it free.

There had to be another way to prevent the veil from tearing further. To save the Empire-to-be from the Realm of Slaughter. Something more sensible than Reina's madness. But it would not be found like this. In the meantime, the Empress must be warned. And whatever it was that Reina saw from Eagle's Rest Peak must be found. And controlled.



The screams were fading. Hifumi felt a pang of sadness in his heart. Reina had been a friend. Maybe, she still was. Hifumi knew the madness of Reina well...seeing that which was too terrible to accept. But wisdom required understanding that which could not be understood. Reina had danced the edge of Eagle's Rest Peak, and fallen from that height.

Hifumi sighed again. "There is no difference between salvation and annihilation. We can taste victory...and victory tastes bitter."

