

# The Specters of War

By Lisa Farrell

*"Not every question has a perfect answer, but every answer has a perfect question."*

– Shinsei

Toturi woke to a shrill wail, like the keening of some mournful spirit. He sat up, chilled despite the summer warmth of the room, but the sound stopped abruptly as he moved. He was alone with the shadows, their shapes weak in the moonglow through the screen. His sword rested on the stand by the door, but he did not reach for it. No sound save for the distant buzz of insects outside, and no movement. The wail was already a memory, a fragment from a dream perhaps. He put a hand to the mat beside him, and found the space cold.

*Where is Kaede?*

He rose silently and pulled on his robe, moving towards the screen, instinct telling him where she would be. He slid it aside, revealing an expanse of silver and grey. A lone figure sat on the veranda, her black hair hanging loose down her back. Her white kimono shone in the moonlight, as though she were a ghost.

"Kaede," he began, "are you well?"

She did not turn, so he moved to sit beside her, crossing his legs under him. It was her fourth broken night. He wished he had awoken, as he had the previous times, and held her.

*She does not have to face her troubles alone.*

She remained motionless with her head bowed, her face partially hidden by her hair. Even the air was still, offering little relief from the heat. She seemed to be listening; not to him, or the continuous chirp of the crickets, but to something beyond.

"Kaede."

He put a hand very gently on her shoulder, startling her.

"Toturi, forgive me."

She turned to offer him a bow, and her face was calm, if pale, as she sat back on her heels. Her eyes shone but there were no tears, no sign that the unnatural sound had come from her.

"Were you dreaming again?" he asked quietly, aware that conversation at such an hour might draw notice.



“In a manner of speaking.”

“You have not gone to the Realm of Void.”

“No, husband. Yet, in my sleep... I travel not to Yume-dō, but nevertheless, my soul wanders. I have seen them: spirits, walking through the fields, searching for something. I must go to them.”

“Let us talk inside,” Toturi said, before she could say more.

She obeyed, returning with him into the Palace of the Emerald Champion. He closed the screen against the night and lit a lamp, while Kaede settled herself on the tatami mats. He would have fetched tea for her were he not afraid to leave her alone.

“I must go at dawn,” she said, as he knelt before her. “I must go to Toshi Ranbo.”

That city haunted his dreams as well, though for different reasons. His brother’s memory was itself like a ghost, and Agasha Sumiko raised the subject of the city’s fate at every meeting.

“Perhaps they are but dreams,” he tried to reassure her. “Your sleep was not troubled until you received the letter from your father. Your thoughts dwell on spirits—that is all.”

“Four nights,” she whispered. “And this time, I saw a face.”

“Whose face?”

“I cannot be sure.”

She bit her lip, her eyes distant. Toturi waited, but did not press her.

“Our *shugenja* must go at once,” she said. “With or without me. Have you approved my honored father’s petition?”

“Daidoji Uji holds the city now,” he explained. “The Iron Crane could take offense at assertions his *shugenja* have failed to appease the fallen. That’s why I must refuse the Phoenix petition.”

“You have decided this?”

He nodded, although there was still doubt in his mind. She did not question his decision, but she gazed thoughtfully at the floor for a long time.

“Then I will go alone,” she said at last. “He cannot take offense at a single visitor. He will have to welcome the wife of the Emerald Champion.”

“No,” Toturi said. “I forbid you to go.”

The cicadas’ song filled the silence.

*You are too precious to risk.*

Her face remained still. “As you wish, husband.”

She gave him a formal bow and moved to leave. But he could not bear to let her depart with his harsh words hanging between them.

And so, he was resolved. “I will go,” he said. “I will go to Toshi Ranbo, and see for myself that the spirits are at peace.”

He had considered such before, but now he was left with no other option. It was the only way to satisfy the Phoenix without offending the Crane.

“Thank you,” she said, her voice trembling.

His chest ached to see her so desperately seeking control.

“You’re exhausted,” he said. “Try to sleep.”

She did not leave him that night, and they slept with the lamp burning.

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Toturi rolled the seal gently, leaving the image of the Imperial chrysanthemum in emerald green on the scroll. The weight of the seal in his hand was still unfamiliar, cumbersome—as was the power it symbolized. Power granted him by the Emperor, the Son of Heaven himself, and all it took was the press of his mark to paper to change the fate of a samurai, a family, a clan. It was not a mark to make lightly. He watched the emerald paste dry. It shone in the sunlight pouring in the screen beside him, glistening slightly, like the precious stone ground to make the pigment. He pushed the scroll aside with a sigh; he had many more to read and consider.

“The Ruby Champion has arrived,” came the servant’s voice.

The rest would have to wait until his return. Toturi cleaned the seal carefully and replaced it in its box before nodding to indicate his readiness to greet Agasha Sumiko.

The Dragon warrior shuffled across the threshold and bowed low. As she sat back, she revealed a face impassive as ever, yet her cheeks were flushed and her hair unusually disordered. Unless she had been training in the kimono she wore, she had taken to heart the message that the matter was urgent.

“Champion Toturi, the servant led me to believe my presence was required at once.”

Her words were perfectly polite, but the emphasis on the word “champion” sounded forced.



“Sumiko-san, thank you for coming so promptly. I wished to talk to you before I left, and I leave soon. Until I return, you may act with my full authority.”

Sumiko’s face remained composed, her eyes on the mat before her, but her reply betrayed her surprise. “Of course,” she said. “But where do you go?”

“I go chasing ghosts,” he said, and this time she forgot herself for a moment, and her eyes met his.

“Ghosts?”

“My wife has been troubled by dreams of Toshi Ranbo,” he told her. “Since she heard the rumors of restless spirits beyond its walls, her own thoughts have become restless. She has asked to go herself and investigate the possible disturbance, but I cannot allow her to travel. At present, her health is delicate.”

He paused as the wind rustled the scrolls on the table beside him.

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From Sumiko's approving nod, she had probably guessed his reasoning. Hotaru would not have sought war had the Crane Clan Champion stayed in the city, but he did not know enough of the Daidoji daimyō to be sure of his actions. Already the threat of war loomed between Lion and Crane, and between Lion and Unicorn. Toturi would not allow the peaceable Phoenix to be dragged into the conflict as well.

"While I am there, I will speak to General Daidoji and determine his intentions. I hope to find a way to secure the fate of the city, without the need for war."

"I hope your wife feels strong again soon, Champion," Sumiko said. "I am glad she has convinced you to act, though I could not."

*Even now, Sumiko believes I do not listen to her.*

There was nothing challenging in her demeanor, only in her words. Yet the play of her hair in the wind made her stillness seem forced. All Toturi's life, his thoughtfulness had been mistaken for inaction, or worse, indifference. He had hoped Sumiko might understand, but not all Dragon samurai had the patience of monks. Perhaps if she had, she would have never made her way to her current position in the capital, where few Dragons dwelled.

"You could not convince me to claim the city for the Emperor against the Emperor's wishes," Toturi reminded her. "That does not mean I wish to see war between the clans."

Toturi glanced at the lacquered box that contained the seal of his office. It would take a demonstration of his trust to earn hers. He would not be away for long; she could not undo all his work in so short a span, even if she wished to.

"Toshi Ranbo is on the minds of many," Sumiko said, reclaiming his attention. "There are rumors now of new mines near the city, gem veins recently discovered. Even the possibility of jade will tempt the Crab."

*Why did she not tell me this before? I cannot listen if she does not speak.*

"The conflict between Crane and Lion," Toturi said, his tone carefully neutral, "has already caused enough strife. Then there was the Unicorn petition that would have brought the city under Imperial Control...and Scorpion influence. And now the Crab will also want a say in the city's fate."

Sumiko said nothing. Perhaps she did not trust him enough to speak plainly. Perhaps he should have invited her to share sake in an evening, as Kitsuki Yaruma did. The trust of a long friendship could not be forced, but Toturi needed her support in his new position.

"Sumiko-san, in your conferences with the Dragon Clan ambassador, has he given you any reason to suppose your own clan takes some interest in the city as well?"

"My lord, we meet as friends. We discuss trivial matters over sake. We talk of home, we talk of the weather. He has made no mention of Toshi Ranbo." She paused, a question left unasked. He did not tell her the rumors he had heard; they were only rumors.

*She thinks I question her loyalty, but she must earn my trust as well.*

His own loyalty to the Empire was still questioned by some, and he had yet to prove it.

"Since that Unicorn petition," he began, "the question of Toshi Ranbo's governing has been

a topic of discussion throughout the Empire. It is a strategic military location for the whole of the north. The fate of the city weighs heavy on my mind, and now that even my own wife..."

Toturi caught himself. He would not tell Sumiko all his fears.

"Until I return, you may act with my full authority," he repeated. "My leaving is no secret, but I would rather it did not become court gossip either. Keep things running smoothly, as though I were still here."

*And better that Matsu Tsuko does not hear of it until I've returned.*

"Thank you, Champion, it shall be done." She paused. "May I offer some advice?"

He nodded. "Please do."

"Be sure to ride in the armor of your office, or they will kill you before you reach the gates. The Iron Crane will not hesitate to act if you approach in Lion colors."

*Does she think me so foolish as to ride in brown?*

"I do not wish to appear as though I ride into battle," he said. "I am only taking a small company."

"You still will not seize control, for the Empire?"

"The Emperor does not wish it," he said, in a tone he hoped was final.

"But the Empire may require it."

"There can be no distinction," Toturi said, but he did not rebuke her. He did not wish for all their conversations to end in argument. He took the hefty box in his hands and offered his seal to her for safekeeping, though he felt the gesture spoiled by the turn the meeting had taken.

Sumiko received it graciously. No doubt the weight felt more familiar in her hands than his, since it had been in her care after the death of his predecessor.

"Until you return," she said.

Toturi nodded, ready to dismiss her, but she went on.

"Champion, I hope you find what you seek," she said. "But I fear you are searching for the perfect answer. Sometimes there is none, and you must still make a decision."

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He rode through the summer haze, sweating under the lacquered steel and leather armor of the Emerald Champion. His horse's hooves disturbed the dust of the road, and flies buzzed in lazy circles around its stoic head. Soon the shape of Toshi Ranbo would appear on the horizon, a walled city with the jagged shrine to Bishamon rising above the walls to claw the sky. Would the gates be opened or closed at his approach?

In another life, he might have come as a Lion warrior looking for vengeance. Arasou had died outside those gates, a casualty of war, and his death had not bought his clan a victory. Tsuko would have Toturi retake the city for his brother's sake, but he saw no honor in bringing war—needless war—to Rokugan.

As the road rounded a bend, the sight of the city's walls greeted his traveling party, five



hand-picked assistants to the Emerald Magistrates. Toshi Ranbo's gates remained closed, the only sign of life the birds wheeling over it like flakes of dark ash drifting on the wind. There would be watchers on those walls, waiting to see what the Emerald Champion would do. Toturi did not approach the gates. Instead, he signaled for his company to wait, and he rode his horse from the road onto what had been a battlefield.

The field had become a flowering meadow, with specks of yellow shifting

in the breeze, like tiny funeral lanterns floating on the green sea of the grasses. He reigned his horse and slid to the ground, the only sound the shrill of the cicadas. The Crane had been most efficient at their attempts to purify the battlefield, erasing any traces of death. They would not have neglected the rites for the fallen. His own brother had received all due ceremonies, and he was sure Tsuko had performed her duties to the departed as well. There should be no spirits tethered to this place.

He faced west and recited a quiet prayer for the dead, cutting the air with his fingers in the sword mudra as they'd taught him at the monastery, to warn any unwelcome spirits to depart. The sun was warm on his face, and it would not be long until he returned and could assure Kaede that the dreams that disturbed her in the night were nothing more than fears.

He turned back to the city, where the gates now hung open. A company of Daidoji Iron Warriors rode out with their banners held high, their grays and blues muted by the brighter blue of the sky above. The last time Toturi had seen the Daidoji crest was on the day he lost his brother, the day Hotaru slew Arasou. Now, General Daidoji Uji came to meet him personally, dressed for war. Five riders trotted behind their commander to match the number Toturi had brought. Toturi mounted his horse and rejoined his companions as the riders crossed the field.

Uji did not speak until they were face-to-face, and the horses still and quiet.

"Emerald Champion," Uji said, his voice barely above a whisper, his steely gaze showing none of the deference of his words. "Welcome to Toshi Ranbo."

"Lord Daidoji, we have come seeking neither hostilities nor hospitality. I come to see again the place my brother, Akodo Arasou, fell."

Uji only nodded.

"Some shugenja have come to me voicing concerns about troubled spirits." With the centuries-long vacancy of the Office of the Jade Champion, heresies and sorcery fell under the purview of his office as well, but he dared not level such dire accusations so soon.

“Our shugenja have not been troubled,” the Crane said, “but come inside, see the city and its shrines for yourself.”

Toturi nodded. Without another word, Uji turned and rode back towards the gate, his guests trailing behind him. They passed through thick walls, built solidly of stone and wood, designed to withstand a battering. Inside, servants relieved them of their horses, but not their weapons.

“Let me take you to the shugenja, Champion Toturi,” the Iron Crane said. “Your retinue may stay here to tend to their horses.”

It was not so much an offer as a demand, but an endurable one.

Toturi walked on with his guide through the narrow streets. The path they took was curious, twisting and turning through the city. Crane bushi in full armor stood guard and marched on patrol, while *ashigaru* sparred in a training ground. All paused to bow as he passed, and kept their eyes down.

Uji walked in silence, his route taking them past a shrine to Hachiman, Fortune of Battle. The arch gleamed red, freshly painted—the color of blood. Beyond it, the large shrine to Bishamon loomed. For generations, Crane and Lion warriors alike had entered the Fortune of Strength’s sanctuary to petition him for the fortitude to hold the city.

They passed golden *komainu*, built by Toturi’s clan. The garden surrounding Bishamon’s shrine was ordered and elegant, yet it lacked the beauty of the typical Crane garden. Pine, bracken, and medicinal plants were cultivated there by Lion and Crane in turn.

“Lord Daidoji, I would speak of worldly matters before we enter this sacred space.”

Toturi kept his eyes ahead as they stopped on the path, though Uji’s gaze lingered on him.

“You are ready for war,” observed Toturi. Again, the Crane only nodded. “The Emperor forbids war between the Great Clans.”

“We do not seek war,” Uji said, “but we expect it.”

“The Lion have withdrawn their forces...”

“War is coming, Champion,” Uji said. “We are ready, and that is no crime.”

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The sun was sinking as they rode out of the city. The horses had been rubbed down and watered, and now they trotted with fresh vigor. Someone was watching him, but he did not look back to the walls. His eyes found the forest where he had waited to join his brother’s troops that day they tried to take the city, tall cedars swaying in the wind. Ankle-deep mist lay upon the ground, and it clung to those trees, wreathing them, hazy and ghostlike in the growing darkness.

For a moment, the failing light seemed to glint off a single eye watching him from the trees. Then it was gone. There were no restless spirits here; the Crane shugenja had insisted on that. There were only memories, his brother’s face with one eye glazed, one transfixed by the arrow that slew him. Toturi would carry that image with him forever, though the sound of Arasou’s voice might fade from his mind. Still, he could almost hear it now.

Like Tsuko, Arasou would see only one path, and call for vengeance.

They were almost out of sight of the city. Another glint in the trees; it was not merely a memory. Someone watched them.

*Someone from the city? Or something else?*

Toturi slowed his horse to a walk, and one of his companions moved to ride beside him, while the others hung back.

“Did you see it, Kāgi-san?” Toturi asked.

The *yoriki*'s nod was barely perceptible.

“Daidoji?”

“No. A scout. Not from the city.”

A chill dread settled inside him that had nothing to do with the coming dusk and possibility of wandering spirits. Was an army marching on the city already?

“Find out whose,” Toturi said.

Kāgi slipped from his horse, leaving the beast trotting riderless as the samurai ran swiftly and silently into the trees. No scout or spy would evade Kitsuki Kāgi, an adopted Dragon who had learned their Method. It was only a matter of time before the young man was named a fully fledged Emerald Magistrate in his own right.



## The City of Toshi Ranbo



Toturi and his retinue rode on, as though nothing had occurred. He heard no marching feet, no creaking armor but their own, yet he expected each bend in the road to reveal a host of bushi on their way to Toshi Ranbo; what would he say to them?

And if it was an army, how were he and five samurai going to walk out of this alive? Could they rely on honor to protect them from a general ambitious enough to tempt a war?

Had Tsuko persuaded his generals to reclaim it? Did the Unicorn seek it as a trophy in a war against the Lion? Had the desperation of the Crab led them to wage war for jade? And surely the Phoenix would never forsake their pacifist ideals and force their way into the city in search of ghosts...

Until Kāgi returned, these thoughts were but fears, useless to a samurai. Toturi focused on his breath and the rhythm of the horse beneath him.

Perhaps Uji had been right to prepare for war; perhaps it was inevitable. Perhaps there would be new ghosts made upon that battlefield before long.