

# The World, A Stage

By D.G. Laderoute

*Meanwhile, in the Imperial Capital...*

Bayushi Shoji, Champion of the Scorpion Clan, leapt over the incoming blow, dodging right and striking left as he did. He was as water, liquid movement, placing himself where his opponent's strikes were not. His opponent was as fire, speed and aggression, lashing out with a barrage of attacks that would have quickly overwhelmed a lesser adversary.

Another slash; he dodged again. This time, he kicked outward, his foot slamming into his opponent's shoulder. The woman recovered quickly, but not quickly enough. Shoji's weapon struck through the miniscule gap opened in his opponent's chain of attacks, finding the woman's stomach and driving her back with a grunt. She immediately knelt and dropped her weapon.

Shoji had landed a harder hit than he'd intended, and he lost a moment recovering. Frowning behind his mask, he turned to the *bushi* he'd defeated.

"Well fought, Yunako-san. If you hadn't swung wide on that next-to-last strike, it would be me, not you, now kneeling on the *dōjō* floor."

Bayushi Yunako bowed. "You honor me, Bayushi-ue."

Shoji hefted the *bokken*, the wooden practice sword, in his right hand. The potency of the Shosuro potions that gave strength and flexibility to his right arm, withered since birth, was beginning to fade. He turned toward the rack of practice weapons, meaning to end the sparring bout...but stopped. A thought had occurred to him the previous night, and now was the perfect time to pursue it. He turned back.

"Yunako-san," he said, "retrieve your katana."

"*Hai*, Bayushi-ue."

Shoji waited as the other Bayushi walked across open expanse of the *dōjō* practice hall, her feet whispering through the cushion of sand covering the floor. Placing the *bokken* down, she drew her katana with a whisper of steel, carefully replaced its sheath beside her *wakizashi*, the other blade of her *daishō*, and then returned to face her champion.

"Now," Shoji said, "I want you to kill me."

Yunako bowed. "As you wish, Bayushi-ue." Straightening, she exploded into movement, slashing at Shoji with a cut that would have decapitated him had it connected.

It didn't, but missed by barely a finger's length as Shoji leapt aside. Twisting mid-leap, he struck back with his *bokken*. Once more, he was water; once more, Yunako was fire. This time, however, her strikes were edged with razor steel and the full intent, as Shoji had commanded, to kill.





A vicious cut whistled past Shoji's gut, nearly disemboweling him. Behind his mask, he smiled and jabbed the bokken at Yunako, hard. The other Bayushi sidestepped and struck back like a literal scorpion, with an overhand swing that blurred at Shoji's neck. He twisted and kicked at Yunako's leg, knocking her off-balance enough to let him duck his head under the attack. Grinning now, he followed up with a backhand blow that struck Yunako's arm. As quick as thought, she changed direction, moving with the strike to dissipate its energy. At the same time, she whipped her katana in a wide arc to slash across Shoji's back.

He laughed.

Still water, Shoji threw himself forward, driving his whole weight against Yunako in a way that was earth, solid and inevitable. He was now also fire, as fast as a leaping tongue of flame... air, aware of every movement of arm and hand, leg and foot, every shift in weight, every tension and relaxation of muscle...and void in the union of it all into a single, perfect moment, fully mindful and entirely mindless—

His leap forward and sudden impact against his opponent caused a fractional hesitation in her swing...time enough for him to slam the bokken against Yunako's sword hand, drive his own left hand forward, and snatch the katana from her grasp. He deflected its momentum down, then around and up in front of his own body, letting his weight keep shoving her back and down until he landed on top of her, one knee driving up, against her stomach, pinning her, while the katana finished its new arc and came to rest against her neck.

Blood wept from the touch of steel on flesh, as crimson-bright as the *tsubaki* flower, the red camellia that bloomed in the Imperial Gardens. Shoji smiled again behind his mask, at the appropriateness of it.

For her part, Yunako simply waited, her face calm, almost serene, her eyes focused on something above and beyond her champion. A long moment passed. Finally, her eyes moved to meet Shoji's.

"My honor," she said, "and my life, for the Scorpion."

Shoji kept his gaze locked on Yunako's. Such direct eye contact was a breach of etiquette in court—but this wasn't court. He found no fear in her eyes, no hesitation or regret.

Shoji nodded once and tensed his arm holding the katana—

Then leapt and spun into a crouch, Yunako's blade ready against whoever had quietly entered the dōjō and now stood nearby.

"My apologies, Lord Shoji," Bayushi Kachiko said, a smile playing around her lips. "Am I interrupting?"

Shoji lowered the blade and motioned for Yunako to stand. Reversing the katana, he offered it back to her, hilt first. "I believe this is yours, Yunako-san."

Yunako bowed deeply, acknowledging both her clan champion and, now, the Imperial Advisor. Blood dripped from her wounded neck. "It is I who must apologize, Bayushi-ue, for my poor performance here today. I fear I was an unworthy opponent for you."





"On the contrary, you were most worthy, Yunako-san. I would spar with you again. Tend to your wound, then be here at dawn."

"Hai, Bayushi-ue." Yunako accepted her katana from Shoji, moved to retrieve the rest of her daishō, bowed again, and retired from the dōjō.

Kachiko turned her hinted smile back at Shoji. "Do you intend to make that woman your concubine?"

Shoji retrieved the bokken and returned it to its rack. "And if I did?"

"There are better choices. There is a Shosuro who would be a good candidate, and also a Yogo I could suggest...mind you, best not to actually fall in love with that one, given her family's curse."

Shoji scooped sand from the dōjō floor and scrubbed the sweat from his hands. His withered right arm twinged again, reminding him he needed another dose of the Shosuro potions. "What need do I have for a concubine," he said, stepping close to Kachiko, "when my wife is the most desirable woman in Rokugan?"

"Be careful, Lord Shoji...if your wife hears you saying such things, she may begin to believe them."

Shoji allowed his smile to touch his eyes. "Believing what is true is only sensible."

"Such irony, coming from the Master of Secrets and Lies."

"I do sometimes speak the truth."

The light in Kachiko's eyes became more intense. "And they are inevitably truths that please me."

Shoji allowed the moment between them to linger, then stepped back. "I assume you did not merely come here to watch me spar. Allow me to bathe; then we will speak further. Let us meet by the uppermost koi pond, at the ending of the Hour of the Monkey."

Kachiko brushed a finger along Shoji's palm as she withdrew her hand. "I look forward to it, my husband."



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Shoji watched as the koi swam about the pond in their mindless way, orange-gold, creamy white, and occasionally black. Their movements truly *were* water, a ceaseless, languid flow. Some among the Phoenix believed that studying the actions of koi could reveal insights about the future.





Bending down, he placed a finger into the water, blocking the way of a particular fish. It bumped into his finger, recoiled, and swam another way. Another fish changed its course as a result, and another because of that one, and so on, until the meandering paths of most of the koi had been affected.

The Phoenix may be right, Shoji thought. But merely discerning the future wasn't enough. Changing it, shaping it, as he had just changed the actions of the koi...that was what mattered.

"Your son," Kachiko said from behind him, "would be charmed to see you playing with the fish."

Shoji kept watching the koi. "Dairu is more than old enough to recognize what is play... and what is not."

"So you are tending to the fish, then? We have servants for such things."

As they swam about, Shoji noticed the koi were now avoiding his finger, incorporating its presence into their behavior. He withdrew it and stood. "There is value, sometimes," he said, "in such simple things as tending to fish...particularly when that simplicity is deceptive."

Kachiko moved beside him. "Simplicity is almost always deceptive."

Shoji nodded. A short distance away, a peasant gardener trimmed withered blossoms from a purple sprawl of violets. Farther away, in another direction, a pair of servants carried lumber toward a teahouse undergoing repairs, tucked discreetly among a stand of cherry trees. There were other servants, Shoji knew, elsewhere among the foliage around them, engaged in all of the various labors needed to keep the gardens a place of tailored beauty. Simple people, doing simple things.

And all of it a lie.

They were servants, yes, but they were also agents of the Scorpion. Through their presence and movements, they would ensure that no one would be able to approach him and Kachiko closely enough to overhear whatever they might say—at least, not without them knowing about it. The gardener would turn his attention to a nearby hibiscus, the laborers working on the teahouse would move a particular piece of lumber, and Shoji would know someone was approaching long before they got close enough to be a concern. Small and simple things done by apparently small and simple people, but actually full of meaning—deceptive simplicity, all of it in service to the Scorpion.

"Something troubles you, my husband," Kachiko said.

"Many things trouble me."

"Is that why you were seriously considering killing that samurai in the dōjō?"

Shoji glanced at Kachiko, then began to walk, following a winding path away from the koi pond. Kachiko fell smoothly into step alongside him.

"She needed to see that my intent to kill her was true," he said, "so that I, in turn, could see her reaction to it."

"You were testing her."





Shoju watched as the servants-who-weren't began to move about the gardens, repositioning themselves to accommodate his and Kachiko's movements. "Bayushi Yunako was suggested to me as a candidate for command of the Bayushi Elite Guard. Such a position demands loyalty that is absolute, and a devotion to duty that is unwavering. I therefore told her to kill me, and she immediately brought all of her skills to bear, seeking to do just that. And when I had defeated her, she was just as ready to die by my hand, without question or even understanding why."

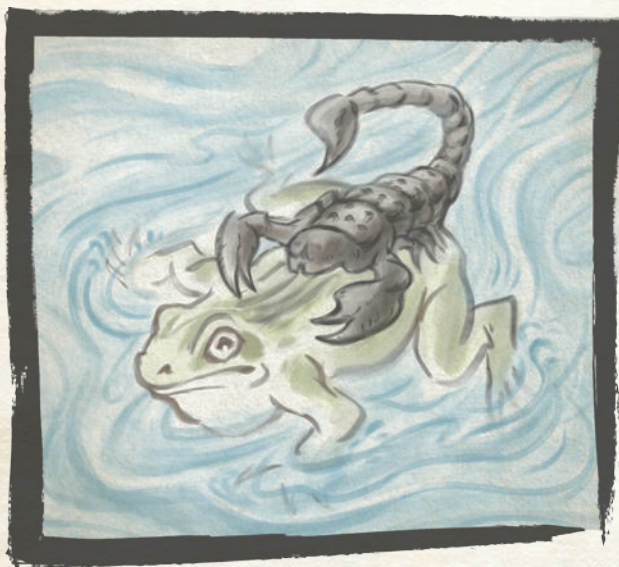
"A dead woman would make a poor commander, no matter how loyal or devoted."

"Then it was a good thing," Shoju said, "that you showed up when you did."

Kachiko smiled. For a while, they just walked among trees in bloom, taking in the colors and mingled scents of myriad flowers. Eventually, they reached a small, arched bridge over a placid creek, one of several that meandered through the gardens of the Imperial Palace. Shoju stopped at the peak of the arch and leaned on the railing, looking along the watercourse to where it vanished beneath a spill of weeping-willow fronds.

Kachiko placed her hand on the railing, just touching his. "And still my words stand unanswered," she said. "Something troubles you...something beyond merely selecting trusted commanders for our clan's military forces."

Shoju watched a solitary rose petal drift along the creek. "I am mindful of a Kabuki play I recently saw," he said. "The attention was meant to be on the actors, of course, who all played their roles with appropriate skill. My own interest, however, kept returning to the *kuroko*: the stagehands, all dressed in black, who moved props about and rearranged the stage and scenery as the play progressed. They dressed in black because they were meant to be invisible and ignored." He looked at Kachiko. "It struck me, though, that the *kuroko* are really the most important of the players on the stage. Their placement of the scenery and props determines the movements of those actors. Change a single element even slightly, and a performer can be made to step into shadow, or stoop slightly, or come somewhat too close to the edge of the stage. This will change how that actor delivers their performance and, with it, the delivery of the play itself."



Kachiko watched her husband but said nothing and waited for him to go on.

Shoju looked back at the drifting petal. "If the Empire is the play, and the clans its players, then ours is at the center of the stage, where the attention is most focused." He turned back to Kachiko. "But is that where the Scorpion belong? Are we not meant to be the *kuroko*, dressed in black and largely ignored, arranging and shaping the events of the Empire, while





all eyes are fixed elsewhere?”

“We have labored mightily to gain the power we now hold,” Kachiko said. “Years of careful planning, of procuring key appointments and influential marriages, of removing those who would stand in our way—all of it has culminated in what we now have. The Scorpion have earned the center of the Imperial stage, have we not?”

“I don’t dispute that,” Shoju said. “We have, indeed, earned what we have. That doesn’t mean it’s what we *should* have.”

“I believe I hear echoes in your voice, husband. Echoes of the *daimyō* of the Soshi and Yogo families...”

“Soshi Shiori and Yogo Junzo have both conveyed their thoughts to me, yes. Both, in their own respective ways, believe that we have accrued power at the expense of what our true role in the Empire should be.”

“And you agree with them?”

Shoju looked for the rose petal, but it was gone, vanished beneath the willow fronds. “I do not immediately disagree with them.” He smiled at Kachiko. “However, I wouldn’t assume a position either way without first hearing what my most trusted advisor has to say about the matter.”

“It sounds like you’re suggesting we surrender power to the other clans, allowing them to make gains in the Imperial Court. And this would be to enable us to work from the margins, from a weakened position?” Kachiko raised an eyebrow. “It is an interesting approach to furthering our clan’s agenda.”

“My distant predecessor, Bayushi Ogoe, did this very thing, did he not? The Scorpion were then ascendant in the Empire in almost every way. By bragging about how easy it would be to defeat the Unicorn, when every other clan had failed, and then losing to them in a truly humiliating fashion, he made our clan appear overconfident and weak. The other clans dismissed us and fell back to fighting among themselves—the perfect conditions for doing the things that our clan does best.”

“The difference,” Kachiko said, “is that the Rokugan of Ogoe’s time was relatively prosperous and stable. The clans found it easy to view the Scorpion as a common enemy.” Kachiko looked toward a stand of maples farther along the path they’d been walking. Her eyes were distant, though, gazing at things beyond the trees. “By comparison, the Empire today is in turmoil. The Crane hover on the brink of famine—a famine that could spread, if harvests so much as falter in another part of the Empire. The Dragon grapple with ever-fewer births among their people, even while this Perfect Land Sect rises among them, preaching heresy and sedition. The Crab fight desperately to hold the Carpenter Wall against the darkness, the Phoenix find communion with the elemental kami ever more difficult—”

“I am well aware of the issues facing the Empire,” Shoju said. “It is because of them, in fact, that the clans turn envious eyes toward us. Take Doji Hotaru. She may be young and





inexperienced in her role as the Champion of the Crane, but she is Doji Satsume's daughter. She will seek power in the courts to offset her clan's weakness elsewhere, particularly in the wake of the Emerald Champion's death. She will likely find eager allies to that end in the Phoenix and the Unicorn."

"The Phoenix are of little consequence," Kachiko said, shrugging slightly, "and there will be no alliance permitted between the Crane and the Unicorn. Moreover, her clan's loss of the Emerald Championship can be our gain. Your brother, Aramoro, would be an excellent candidate, I think."

"Perhaps...but Kakita Yoshi is still the Imperial Chancellor. He will likely be most accommodating when Hotaru wishes to advance her clan's agenda in the courts."

"You can rest assured that you needn't worry about Hotaru or, by extension, the Crane, my husband."

Shoju looked down into the water, taking note of the certainty in Kachiko's tone. After a brief pause to allow her to see he *had* noted it, he continued. "Then there is the matter of the Crab. Hida Kisada begins to mutter darkly about us, over the matter of the Emperor's apparent lack of interest in the mounting threat to the Wall. At the very least, he wonders why we don't use our influence to convince the Emperor that securing the Wall is the Empire's most pressing concern."

"It is unlike Kisada to so openly admit weakness."

"I have offered him aid from our clan, troops and material, but he demands an unacceptable degree of control over them."

"That is just stubborn Crab pride."

"Indeed, but it doesn't change the fact they are another clan beginning to eye our power and influence with growing resentment."

Kachiko said nothing for a while. Shoju felt her weighing something in the silence, as though deciding whether she should speak and, if so, what words to use. Curious, he waited, listening to the soft gurgle of the stream under the bridge.

"Perhaps," Kachiko finally said, "there is an alternative way of seeing this play."

Shoju looked at her.

"Perhaps," she went on, "instead of surrendering power and moving into the shadows like your kuroko, we should do the opposite. Just as I suggested we consider seeing Aramoro made Emerald Champion, perhaps we should be gathering and consolidating even *more* power for our clan."

"That would be a brazen strategy."

"Possibly. But again, this is not Ogoe's Empire. In dire times, Rokugan needs strength and leadership. Dissipating our gains and allowing them to accrue to others simply risks all of the clans being weak, at the very time when at least one of them must be strong."

"Bayushi-no-Kami told the first Emperor we would be his villain," Shoju said, "not the





enforcers of his will.”

“True. But many Hantei emperors have come and gone in the meantime. None have enjoyed the favor of Heaven as clearly as the first. And this one, the thirty-eighth—”

Shoju held up a hand. “Your words are becoming dangerous, my wife, if you are suggesting that the Celestial Heavens have withdrawn their favor from this Hantei.”

“I presume to suggest no such thing,” Kachiko said. “I merely observe that crisis and strife are rising across the Empire. The Emperor needs to be especially strong in such a time. He needs the strength that you have, Bayushi Shoju of the Scorpion.”

Shoju clasped his hands behind his back, his good left holding his withered right. “An absurd thought occurs to me,” he said. “Perhaps it is only because I’m fatigued after my exertions in the dōjō. However, one could take what you just said to mean that *I* could sit upon the Chrysanthemum Throne.” He smiled. “As I said, though, it is absurd to think you could even be so much as hinting at such a thing, isn’t it?”

Kachiko laughed.

“Oh, my husband...do you really believe I could even *imagine* such a thing? That I would see anyone but a Hantei upon the throne of Rokugan?” She laughed again. “When Bayushi-no-Kami said he would be Hantei-no-Kami’s villain, I don’t believe he intended quite *that* degree of villainy. As you said, it is an entirely absurd thought.”

“Perhaps,” Shoju said, his smile vanishing, “you should choose your words with more care, then, my wife.” Looking around, he saw the gardener, now trimming grass beneath a hibiscus... the teahouse laborers, now shifting another piece of lumber. These gardens, like the Imperial Court itself, effectively belonged to the Scorpion. It was almost certain no one would ever be able to overhear them.

Almost.

Kachiko bowed an apology. “You are right, of course, my husband. I will endeavor not to be so careless in the future.”

Shoju nodded and began walking again, across the bridge and toward the stand of maples. Kachiko once more fell into step beside him and they resumed their discussion, talking about the many troubles facing the Empire, and the challenges—and opportunities—they presented to the Scorpion Clan.







Bayushi Shōju - Dutiful Champion of the Scorpion Clan

