

How the World Ought to Work

By D.G. Laderoute

“Seppun-san,” Akodo Toturi asked, “why, exactly, are we here?”

A restrained patience tightened Seppun Ishikawa’s reply, like he was answering a child. “Once again, Akodo-san, we are going to meet someone.”

Toturi narrowed his eyes. He’d been to the Higashikawa District perhaps one other time in his life, but was put off by its freewheeling, garish, *commercial* character. The racket of street vendors and merchants, hawking what struck him as mostly junk, clamored around them. At least the rabble was good at distracting itself, barely glancing at the two of them, apparently unremarkable rōnin in drab kimonos and broad, conical straw hats.

Toturi kept his gaze on Ishikawa. He was tempted to simply command him to stop being so enigmatic, and actually answer the damned question; being the Emerald Champion, he could do that. But he didn’t, because it might upset their fragile...not *friendship*. *Relationship*, at best. In the past three weeks, that *relationship* had settled into an equilibrium, albeit one as delicate as dragonfly wings. The fact was, Toturi needed Ishikawa. The Seppun provided him a window into the politics and bureaucracy of the Imperial court, one he wouldn’t otherwise have, at least as long as he sought to anonymously track his would-be assassins.

Three weeks had also given them no leads beyond ruling out a few, admittedly unlikely, perpetrators.

Ishikawa slowed as a crowd spilled out of a shabby sake house called *Bitter Oblivion*. The resulting commotion gave Toturi a chance to lean close to the Seppun and speak.

“I would know where you are taking us, Seppun-san. And do not tell me, yet again, it is to *meet someone*.” Toturi glanced around. “This part of the city is reputed to be a haven for criminals—”

“Which is true,” Ishikawa shot back. “We are meeting with one of those very criminals, in fact. He may have information of value to us.”

“We—” Toturi blinked. “Why are we meeting with a criminal? How do you even know such a—”

“Akodo-san, please! This is not a conversation suited for the street!”



Toturi scowled again. He was more than tired of being treated like an errant, annoying boy, and was about to say so. But another voice, loud and slurred by alcohol, cut him off.

"You, Bayushi, owe me an answer!"

"I owe you nothing, Kakita! Now, I await your apology! Otherwise, I will give you something, indeed—the edge of my blade!"

The crowd that had tumbled out of *Bitter Oblivion* had encircled the two speakers. They'd squared off as though to duel, each with a hand on his katana. It might have been a moment of high drama, if not for the way each wobbled on their feet, their words slurred and much too loud.

Snickers from the onlookers didn't help, nor did the fact some were now taking bets. Toturi watched, but Ishikawa leaned in and said, "Akodo-san, this has nothing to do with us. Let us just carry on."

Toturi nodded. It was exceedingly unlikely either of these samurai had permission from their lord to risk their lives in a clash of steel—especially one carried out in a grubby street, fueled by alcohol, anger, and the urgings of drunken onlookers. But Ishikawa, he had to reluctantly admit, was right. This wasn't their affair. He started to turn away.

"It is you who needs to apologize, Bayushi!" the Kakita barked. "Apologize for your entire clan! Honorless dogs, all of you! Dogs and...and opportunists! Usurpers, even!"

Toturi turned back.

"How dare you," the Bayushi growled back. "You have one chance to apologize for the slur you have cast on me, my clan, and my esteemed Champion...who is owed your loyalty, as the Son of Heaven proclaimed—"

"The Son of Heaven? He dies, and then an edict appears, claiming your esteemed Champion is Regent. Yes, how convenient *that* is!"

Ishikawa's voice hissed in Toturi's ear. "Akodo-san, we must go—"

The Bayushi drew his katana with a steely rasp. "The only apology I will accept now, Kakita, is your blood wetting this street."

An excited murmur rippled through the crowd; another, as the Kakita drew his blade. Toturi ignored Ishikawa and stepped through the crowd, putting himself between the two.

"Put away your swords," he said, "before you further dishonor yourselves and your clans!"

Stunned silence.

The stark reality of what he'd just done slammed into Toturi, like a thunderbolt from Osanowo. Such a command, uttered by the Emerald Champion of Rokugan, would have driven them all to drop in abject obeisance and press their faces into the dirt. Uttered by Toturi the apparent rōnin, though...

The Kakita almost sputtered with outrage. "You...you *dare* to meddle in the affairs of your betters, wave-man? You...*dare*?"

The Bayushi just gaped in furious disbelief.

The Kakita swung at Toturi, a blow that would have decapitated him. Toturi dodged, then swept out his own sword and deflected the next blow from the Kakita, and the next. He desperately sought out Ishikawa, but the Seppun was nowhere to be seen. Steel rang as the Kakita struck yet again, and again, he deflected the blow.

Toturi's mind raced. Aside from swallowing his pride and simply fleeing, he had no idea how to end this. He had to keep dodging and deflecting the drunken strikes, or else strike back and possibly kill the man, which he didn't want to do. Nor could he likely talk his way out of it; his words, even if offered in righteous support of the Emperor, the Regent, and the edict he himself had written, would mean virtually nothing, coming from a rōnin. And now the Bayushi closed in as well, sword raised, fury blazing across his face—

"Out of my way! Now! Move aside!"

Voice thundering, Ishikawa pushed into the fray, his Seppun mon glowing white against his green kimono. The crowd immediately scattered, suddenly and intensely interested in other things.

The Kakita and Bayushi both spun around, swords raised—then hastily lowered. Both bowed awkwardly—the Bayushi staggering and almost toppling over—but Ishikawa ignored them, instead grabbing Toturi's arm.

"I am Seppun Ishikawa, commander of the Imperial guard. You, rōnin, presume to threaten these honored samurai? I think not. Now, put away your sword. You are under arrest!"

With a hard yank, Ishikawa unceremoniously pulled Toturi away.

Ishikawa, once more garbed as a rōnin, stopped at a bend in the Street of Possibilities and nodded toward a tea house named *Fortune's Rest*.

"That is our destination, Akodo-san. Inside, you are likely to witness things that are, by any standard of civilized society, certainly immoral, and quite possibly also illegal." His hard gaze bore into Toturi's. "Please tell me now if you intend to pursue each of these sundry wrongs as an Imperial offence. If so, you should probably wait out here."

Toturi met Ishikawa's glare with one of his own. He had to put effort into it, though. He was angry at Ishikawa for *arresting* him, yes. But he was angrier with himself for creating the situation that made it necessary—and, Toturi had to admit, it had been a clever way of defusing something that could have become ugly. Still, he couldn't put aside the thought that the Seppun, having revealed himself, should have at least chastised the Kakita for his subversive words. That such a thing would be said so openly, in a street in the Imperial capital...

"I *am* the Emerald Champion, who, as you may recall, is the Chief Magistrate of Rokugan," Toturi said.

"That is true, Akodo-sama," Ishikawa shot back. "But, as *you* may recall, you are also in disguise—as a rōnin—in order to remain inconspicuous. Intervening in every petty transgression we encounter would seem to undermine that, would it not?" Toturi opened his

mouth, but the Seppun went on. "It would also make us even *more* egregiously late for our meeting within this tea house. So I will ask you again, will you keep your focus on the business at hand once we go inside, or will you wait out here?"

Toturi glared at the Seppun, infuriated at his brusqueness, at the way he kept interrupting, at his general lack of respect. But Ishikawa just glared right back.

What especially galled Toturi was that Ishikawa was, again, right. Choking back his indignation, he finally nodded. "I will accompany you. And if we happen upon a murder in progress, rest assured I will remain a bemused bystander. Perhaps I will even place a wager upon it."

It would have been a biting retort in court. Spoken here, in a grubby alley, Toturi's sarcasm just flopped into the muck, and lay there like something dead.

Ishikawa sniffed and turned away.

The interior of the tea house belied its shabby exterior. Tastefully lit by delicate lanterns, Toturi saw patrons kneeling at polished tables set with passably elegant tea services. The air held a soft, warm smell as they walked through the place, both earthy and spicy. He felt eyes on them and, sure enough, saw at least two transgressions of Imperial law along the way, one involving illicit opium, the other an exchange of what were obviously travel papers between two samurai, neither of whom were likely magistrates. Gritting his teeth, Toturi just walked on, following Ishikawa.



They reached the back of the tea house, where a heimin woman knelt, arranging a freshly cleaned tea service on a tray. Ishikawa returned her bow, then said, "I have a longing for Golden Pearls blend, and I wish for my companion to try Moonlit Snow."

Toturi had never heard of either of these tea blends before, but the woman bowed again, stood, and led them through a silk curtain, then up a narrow flight of stairs. She paused at the top to tap gently on a door, which slid open a handspan. She repeated Ishikawa's request, then moved aside. The woman who'd opened the door, clearly a rōnin, eyed them warily, but gestured for them to enter. Inside, Toturi saw a wiry man with wrinkled skin and white hair kneeling at a table. He wore a plain, brown kimono; a steaming cup of tea, several documents, and a brush-and-ink set were neatly arranged before him.

The room's surprisingly restrained opulence made Toturi think of much finer places. The décor—from artful shoji screens to an impeccably tended bonsai tree—wouldn't have been out

of place in his own home. The old man smiled and gestured at cushions set before the table. "Please, my friends, be comfortable. Asuga, please have the tea my esteemed guests requested brought for them."

The rōnin woman bowed, gave them a final, hard look, then departed.

"Now, then," the old man said, "Seppun-sama I know, of course. And you must be the esteemed Emerald Champion." He bowed deeply. "This unworthy one is Tamanegi, who sits in awe of your most honored presence."

Toturi shot Ishikawa a stunned look, but quickly erased it and turned back to the old man. "And the Emerald Champion is, in turn, most grateful for your unexpected hospitality, Tamanegi-san."

Tamanegi raised a thin, pale hand. "Please, Akodo-sama, your secret is eminently safe here."

"That is correct," Ishikawa said. "Tamanegi-san and I have an..." He looked at the old man. "...understanding."

"Indeed we do."

Toturi allowed a scowl to leak through his composure, a signal of his displeasure he hoped Ishikawa couldn't miss. He was starting to feel as though he'd begun tumbling down a hill, couldn't stop himself, and kept falling ever faster instead.

"Tamanegi?" Toturi finally said, anxious to gain some measure of control. "Onion? That is an unusual name."

The old man smiled beatifically. "But a particularly appropriate one, if I may say so."

"Now that the pleasantries have been exchanged," Ishikawa interjected, "let us get to the business at hand." He turned to Toturi. "You say you were attacked by *shinobi*. I have asked Tamanegi-san to determine if anyone entered into a contract with shinobi open to such dealings."

"How would he know such a thing?" Toturi asked.

"If anyone does, it would be him."

"I appreciate your confidence in me, Seppun-sama," Tamanegi said, but his smile faded. "Sadly, despite extensive investigation, I can report no such arrangements having been made. If shinobi were contracted for the blasphemous purpose of harming the Emerald Champion, there is no indication of it whatsoever."

"How certain are you of that?" Ishikawa asked.

"If one presumes that only the most highly regarded and capable shinobi would even be considered for such a vile undertaking, then I am very certain. There are relatively few of those, and they are all accounted for during the time in question."

They paused as the heimin woman who'd led them upstairs entered with their tea. When she was gone, Toturi narrowed his eyes at Ishikawa. "Are you satisfied with the stunning insights we have gained here, Seppun-san?"

The Seppun sipped his tea. "You really should try yours, Akodo-sama. Moonlit Snow is an excellent blend."

Toturi did, if only because the customs of hospitality dictated it. It just annoyed him further that it was, in fact, excellent.

He sipped again, then put the cup down. Before he could speak, though, Ishikawa placed his own cup on the table and stood. "Unfortunately, Tamanegi-san, we have other, pressing business. Until next time. I know, of course, where to find you."

Something briefly hardened Tamanegi's wrinkled face. Anger? Resentment? Toturi wasn't sure, but it was already gone, replaced once more by that blandly pleasant smile.

"Of course you do, Seppun-sama. May the Fortunes not disfavor you."

Ishikawa actually smiled at the thinly veiled ill-wish, then led the way back to the Street of Possibilities.

Toturi kept his silence for a single block, then could restrain himself no longer and stepped into another dingy alley. Ishikawa glanced back, sighed, and joined him.

"I assume it is now time for you to be outraged at my dealings with Tamanegi," he said.

"How can you associate with such a creature? He is—"

"A vile criminal, yes. And a powerful one. Probably the most powerful and influential in Otosan Uchi, in fact."

Toturi stared. "And you simply...accept that?"

"There would seem to be little point to doing otherwise."

"How can you be so flippant about this, Seppun-san? That man should be held to account for what is no doubt a multitude of crimes!"

"So we should have arrested him, then?"

"At the very least, you should not be...in *league* with him!" Toturi took a step away, then back. "You not only turn a blind eye to blatant wrongdoing, you exploit it. And for what? The sake of expediency?"

"Do you know what your problem is, Akodo-san?" Ishikawa snapped. "You have lived your life apart from the world—first, in the rigid construct of honor that is the Lion Clan; then, in the cloistered confines of a monastery; and now, in the splendid isolation of the Forbidden City. This has allowed you to keep your honor pristine, but it has also made you idealistic, to the point of naïvety."

"So a dedication to a life of honor is naïve, now?"

"It is a luxury, like those rare blends of tea. Something in which one can indulge, but that sometimes one must simply do without."

Toturi sniffed. "I believe you when you say that, Seppun-san—that you actually do consider fine tea and honor to be interchangeable."

Ishikawa just shook his head. "How do you believe the Imperial Guard functions, Akodo-

sama? By standing about, looking menacing, and hoping that is enough?" He shook his head. "No. We are proactive. We seek to deal with threats to the Emperor before they even skulk within sight of the Forbidden City. Dealing with such *creatures* as Tamanegi is part of such proactivity. Almost nothing happens in this city without him knowing about it—and, therefore, without *me* knowing about it."

"That is just an elaborate way of saying that you have no difficulty sacrificing your honor for results."

"If the result is protecting the Emperor and his family, then you are absolutely right."

"You sound like a Scorpion."

"Oh? You mean the clan whose Champion the Emperor saw fit to name as his Regent?"

Toturi glared, but Ishikawa's retort left him without words.

"There is a bitter truth, Akodo-san," Ishikawa went on. "There is how the world ought to work, and then there is the way it does. If you insist on clinging to the first, the second will dance about you like a sword-master and eventually cut you down."

Toturi let out a slow breath. "How can you even trust what this Tamanegi tells you?"

"Because he knows what *I* know."

"And what is that?"

"Every detail of his organization, and every change he makes to it. It is information his competitors would dearly love to have."

"How could you possibly know such a thing?"

"Miya Satoshi provides me with such knowledge and, in return, I provide him with certain information that, from time to time, comes into my possession."

Toturi once more shook his head in disbelief. "Miya Satoshi—the Imperial Herald—knows the detailed, internal workings of a criminal syndicate, here in the Imperial Capital."

"He does."

"And how does *he* know—?"

"I have no idea, nor do I care to."

Toturi thought about pressing at the stunning revelation that the Miya family *daimyō* apparently traded illicit information with the commander of the Imperial Guard, but his capacity for disbelief had become saturated. Instead, he simply gave up and sighed.

"I must return to Kaede, at the safe house," Toturi said. "I shall meet you tomorrow, at the start of the Hour of the Dragon, so we can...proceed with whatever is next."



At the mention of Kaede, Ishikawa's face tightened, but he simply nodded and walked away. It shamed Toturi that the Seppun's reaction to naming Kaede had felt so...satisfying. But it also felt like the only time he'd held any sort of advantage over Ishikawa at all today.

Kaede poured tea—a customary Lion blend—and said, “The conclusion, then, is that these shinobi that attacked you were not mercenaries. So the implication is that the attack was at the direction of a clan.”

Toturi sipped at the tea. It was familiar and...fine. Good, even. But not as good as Moonlit Snow, and that just annoyed him all over again.

He put the cup down and looked at his wife kneeling across the table. “That is one possibility, yes.”

“And another would be?”

“I...do not know.” He rubbed his eyes and sighed. “Moreover, all of the clans have access to shinobi.”

He glanced at a letter on the table; another report from Ikoma Ujiaki, this one detailing Crane efforts to retake Kyūden Kakita. Matsu Tsuko had seized the castle shortly after also seizing the Lion Clan Championship. That was something else Toturi knew he had to address—but only once he had resolved the matter of the attack on him, one way or another. Until then, he must not let it distract him. But that didn't mean it wasn't possibly relevant.

“All of the clans,” he went on, “includes my own.”

Kaede raised an eyebrow. “You suspect Tsuko? Considering her father was killed in a covert attack by the Phoenix...I would be surprised.”

Toturi had to nod. “No, you are right. When the time comes, Tsuko would—will—confront me openly. This was not her.”

“That said, one clan does stand apart from the others in their use of shinobi.”

“The Scorpion. Yes. But what would Shōju's motivation be? I wrote the edict that named him Regent. I can vouch for its legitimacy. Killing me...it makes no sense.”

And yet, Toturi couldn't wholly dismiss the thought, either. The slurred words of the Kakita blustering in the street clung to him like stubborn cobwebs.

The Son of Heaven? He dies, and then an edict appears, claiming your esteemed Champion is Regent. Yes, how convenient that is!

Again, nothing but a foolish, sake-fueled rant because, again, Toturi had written the edict himself. He knew better.

And yet...the Scorpion were ever all about subtle, layered schemes. Could the Kakita's drunken words contain a kernel of truth? Could Shōju have some endgame Toturi simply could not see?

“You are tired, my husband,” Kaede said. “Sleep strengthens not only the body, but also the mind.”

Toturi replied, "I know," but made no effort to move.

"Of course," Kaede said, "speaking one's mind can also be helpful."

He gave a wan smile. "I am caught on the events of the day, like the sleeve of a kimono on a stubborn twig. All of the progress we made today was due to Ishikawa's blatant pragmatism. My determination to do what was right and honorable only seemed to get in the way." He sighed again. "Is Ishikawa right? Have I led such a sheltered life that I am just a naïve idealist?"

Kaede shook her head emphatically. "No. Your commitment to Bushidō is a strength, not a weakness." But then she shrugged. "However, there are many types of strength. Wielding a sword requires skillful judgment to select when to strike, but also physical power to deliver a telling blow."

"So you are saying Ishikawa is right."

"Better to say he is not necessarily wrong. But you need not solely take my word for it. After all, the Tao says, *Men know how the world ought to work, then see the way it really does, and ask, why are these things different?*"

Toturi looked at his wife, startled how her words echoed Ishikawa's. "I do not remember that passage from the Tao."

"I do not believe anyone knows, or even can know, the entirety of the Tao," she replied. "I only just recalled that passage myself. Perhaps the nature of Shinsei's wisdom is such that it comes to us when we need it."

"And do you believe those words, my wife? Are you also a pragmatist at heart?"

"I am many things at heart," she said, smiling. "In this, though, it would seem Ishikawa-san and I are of a like mind."

And I am not, Toturi's thoughts finished. But what he said was, "Indeed. In any case, I believe I shall heed your advice and take to bed. Will you join me?"

"Soon," Kaede said. "I wish to meditate upon the events of the day—including these things you have told me."

Toturi finished his tea, once more finding it—adequate. He kissed his wife and prepared for bed.

As he lay on the futon, the events of the day kept marching through his mind. They strode quickly, though, as though rushing to a particular place.

...it would seem Ishikawa-san and I are of a like mind...

And now she wished to meditate on those events—events that prominently included Seppun Ishikawa.

He heard her words still, even when Kaede finally came to bed, and he pretended to be asleep.