

# The Cornered Lion

## Part II

By Robert Denton III

A troupe of performers had invaded the Dancing Koi Market in the Kanjo District, causing the already-busy marketplace to swell with even greater numbers than usual. This suited Toturi's purposes well, a fortuitous turn suggesting he hadn't *completely* lost the Fortunes' favor as of late. Actors and poets competed loudly with the cries of merchants to weave a heavy blanket of noise above the throng of peasants, who crowded to the left side of the street in a congested mass, leaving the right mostly clear for rickshaws and samurai.

Among them, Toturi chose a small stand of puppeteers and stood at the back of the onlookers. The actors were cloaked in black with their faces obscured in dark silk, making them virtually invisible against the stage's backdrop, dark except for the emblem of a Cat in the top corner. A minor clan, he supposed, seeing the mon with a feeling of vague familiarity. He watched one of the puppets dangle loosely from its strings with a piquant sympathy that could only come from shared experience. Strangers cloaked in black were controlling its fate.

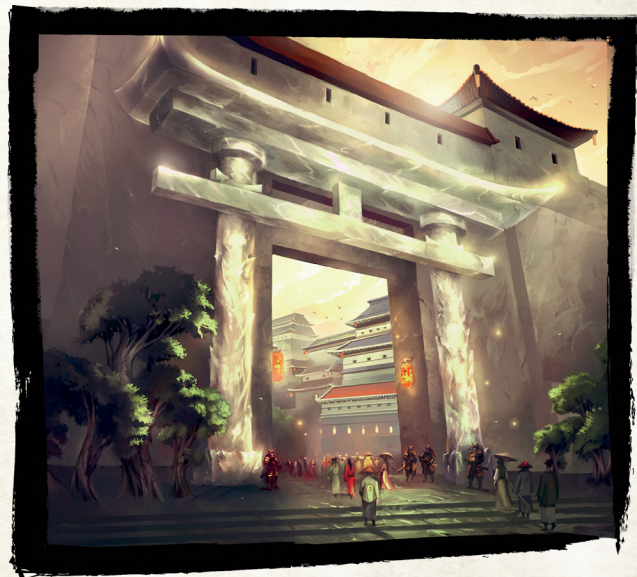
At once, he became aware of eyes upon his person, like a feather's touch on the back of his neck. His hand hovered above his sword as he discreetly scanned for anyone not watching the show. Toturi wore a simple kimono with no trappings of his office, but that would not stop his enemies from recognizing him, were they to somehow spot him here, so far from court.

He relaxed only slightly as Seppun Ishikawa approached, the crowd parting for him and the emblem of the Seppun Honor Guard. His hands were tucked into his sleeves, pointedly far from the twin swords tucked into his obi.

"Good day, Toturi-sama," he said, coming to stand beside the Emerald Champion. His casual bow drew little attention. In other circumstances, Toturi might question the gesture's curtness.

"Good day, Ishikawa-san," he replied. "Are they both yours?" His eyes flicked to the nearest rooftops, where there existed only a hint of movement and shadow.

Ishikawa banished his momentary surprise with a deft sigh. Was he impressed or annoyed that Toturi had noticed the spies? "The Hidden Guard perform their duties."





Toturi withdrew his hand from his sword.

“Apologies,” Ishikawa continued, “but we could not take the chance that your message was forged. Rumors persist that you had died.”

Toturi smirked. “An...exaggeration.”

“Have you had rice?” Ishikawa asked. The common parlance with cold delivery, an inquiry of well-being with little substance except to be polite. “There is a nearby cart selling dorayaki, if you don’t mind a snack.”

“Dorayaki, you say?” A gong-shaped pancake with sweet azuki bean paste. They were normally reserved for festivals, but Toturi had heard of no such celebrations. “What is the occasion?”

“A royal gempuku. Any day now, Prince Daisetsu will graduate and take his new name.”

*When you can find him*, Toturi thought. It made sense that Ishikawa would wish to perpetuate the falsehood that Daisetsu was still in the Forbidden City, and that he hadn’t in fact been kidnapped. Toturi wondered how many would actually believe that story, all things considered.

The pastry cart stood away from the market throng with an almost-suspicious absence of customers. The owner ladled batter onto a gong-shaped pan and made two pancakes, not asking for payment as he handed them over. Ishikawa ate in silence, observing the fish and frogs in a nearby koi pond as the city moved around them. By the time Toturi had finished telling his story, his own pancake had grown cold.

“So you suspect the Emperor’s death and the attempt on your life are connected?”

Toturi nodded. “The timing is suspect. But perhaps I am mistaken.” He watched Ishikawa carefully. His next words came with all the weight of the opening move in a game of shōgi. “After all, the palace wards would have alerted the Hidden Guard if this were so.”

*There.* A twitch of his eye. The Seppun followed a spotted koi as it danced in the pond, eyes darting within a stone expression. It seemed to Toturi that he was inwardly debating, deciding whether or not to speak.

He finally whispered, “The wards do not work.”

Toturi’s mouth went dry. *How could this happen?*

As if reading his thoughts, Ishikawa continued. “The kami residing within that room are absent. The Seppun have confirmed this. The wards can do nothing without the kami. It was previously unthinkable. But our suspicions now are that the ways of the Iuchi are what robbed the sanctum of its spirits.”

*Then the Phoenix were right to warn us of the Unicorn’s ‘name-magic’*, Toturi thought. “Then it is possible that some terrible fate befell the Emperor without the Hidden Guard knowing.”

“Keep your voice down,” Ishikawa hissed. Peasants stirred around them, heeding no notice.

Toturi swallowed the urge to remind Ishikawa that he was addressing the Emerald Champion. Ishikawa was the one who had investigated the scene of Toturi’s assault. He needed to know whatever the Seppun knew. Even more, he needed allies.





"Ishikawa-san, I cannot allow such a bold assault on the Emerald Champion to stand. To do so would forever embolden the office's enemies, for then others could say attacks on the office would fear no retribution. For the honor of the office, I must find the assassins and drag them into the light, where they can meet the Emperor's justice. An attack on the Emerald Champion is an attack against the throne itself."

"This goes without saying."

"But to do this, I need the discretion and full cooperation of the Imperial Guard. Of the Hidden Guard." He took a breath. "And of their captain."

After a long while, Ishikawa finally spoke. "Did Kaede suggest this?"

Was it so obvious? Toturi contained his urge to chuckle. "She did."

The Seppun stepped abruptly away. They stood on opposite sides of the tiny pond, the curve of the bridge between them. Toturi could only see his back.

"And why would I agree to help someone who has so completely failed the Emperor?"

Ishikawa's words were stinging venom. Toturi's chest collapsed into his heart, squeezing it tight, his cheeks flushing with heat. It did not matter that the accusation was correct, that Toturi had been impotent in the most important duty demanded of his station. It was an insult. It must be met with steel.

Ishikawa's hand moved to his sword. It was no secret that Ishikawa had studied at the prestigious Kakita Dueling Academy. Was he baiting Toturi into a duel? Was that what he wanted? Toturi searched his memories, scrutinizing every interaction with Ishikawa that he could recall. When had he offended the leader of the Imperial Guard? And why pick a fight now?

At last, Toturi spoke. "If I have failed, Seppun-san, then so have you."

Ishikawa spun. There was fire in his eyes, a snarl on his face, and death inches from his quivering hand. But he knew Toturi was right. In the light of their mutual failure, there was little reason they shouldn't both die here and now.

And yet something held him back. Whatever the offense, deep down, Ishikawa had to know they were stronger if they worked together. That he needed the authority of the Emerald Champion just as much as Toturi needed the Imperial Guard. That they didn't know who their enemies were, but they could know their allies.

*Then make him see.*





“Why hesitate?” Toturi shouted. Eyes and faces turned. Ishikawa was visibly stunned, his face reddening, and yet Toturi continued, his voice cutting above the din. “If I have offended your honor, then draw your blade here! I would be proud to die having crossed swords with the Captain of the Imperial Guard, and I would be honored to send you to Meido! Honor would demand nothing less than blood!”

A cold wind rippled between them, stirring the leaves. Not even the koi dared to move.

Toturi straightened and extended his hand. “But if you believe, as I do, that we may yet serve the Son of Heaven, then I beg you set your sword aside. I beg for your aid.”

The nearby peasants calmly walked away. Carts were lifted and pulled. Soon, the entire area had emptied. None risked being present for whatever would happen next. Toturi waited.

Ishikawa did not move until the last soul had left the square. Only then did he tuck his hands once more into their sleeves, approaching Toturi with a peaceful gait. Even so, his face was hard, and only now did Toturi recognize the disdain suspended in the man’s brown eyes.

“You have it, Toturi-sama. For this purpose, we will work together.” Ishikawa leaned in, his voice just above a whisper. “But endanger Kaede’s life again, and I will end you.”

Toturi remained in place long after Ishikawa had gone, a stoic reed in the cold wind that touched his very bones. Absently, he felt the sensation of having achieved a victory, but it was as shallow and artificial as the pond at his feet. He knew more now than he had before, and some things he wished he didn’t.

