

In the Garden of Lies (Part II)

By Marie Brennan

The gardens of the governor's manor were quiet. The sounds of laughter and music from the main building seemed very far away. After a moment, Yogo Hiroue lowered his hand and exhaled, tugging the embroidered sleeves of his kimono back into place. "Please forgive me for interrupting you, Kitsuki-san. I heard someone passing nearby and did not want them to misunderstand our conversation, hearing only part of it."

Kitsuki Shomon relaxed slowly. She had not reached for her blades, but he had no doubt she could have drawn them in the blink of an eye if a real threat had emerged. "Thank you, Yogo-san," she said. Her voice was much softer now than it had been a moment before. "As you can tell, this is a matter on which I feel passionately—but I should not allow that to make me speak without restraint. It..." She hesitated, then went on. "It is a pleasure, and a rare one, to speak with a member of your clan without feeling I am being manipulated like a puppet on strings."

He pitied her. Kitsuki Shomon was a good and honorable soul; she did not belong in the City of Lies, with its opium trade and its fireman gangs and its courtiers who knew there were ways and ways of manipulating someone, not all of them obvious.

Then again, reflecting on what she had said concerning peasants and Bushidō...perhaps she felt this was exactly where she needed to be. Bringing the light of honor to a place that saw it so rarely.

If so, he wished the Fortunes' blessings upon her. She would need them.

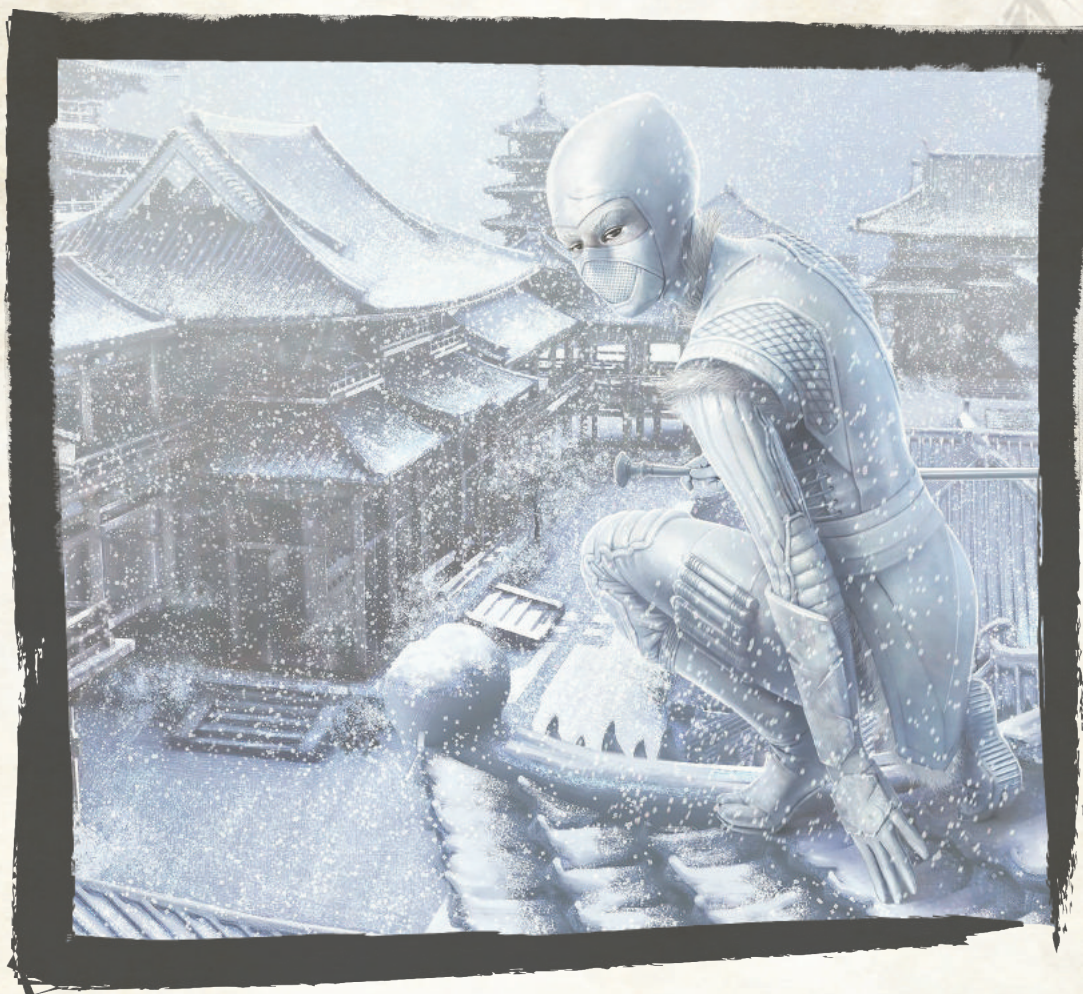
Shomon rose from the bench and bowed. "I have taken too much of your time," she said. "And I would not want to give offense to the governor by vanishing from her party for too long."

Hiroue rose as well, laying aside his shamisen. "There is no need to apologize, Kitsuki-san. I attend many of these parties, but I cannot say I've ever had a conversation quite like this one. You have given me a great deal to think about." He glanced toward the main building and contrived to look a touch embarrassed. "I will wait here a while longer. If we were to return together, someone might draw the wrong conclusions about where you have been—and what you have been doing." On any other night, with any other target, those conclusions might be correct.

But not tonight, and the consideration made Shomon smile. "Thank you," she said fervently. "Again."

They exchanged bows one last time, and then she turned and made her way through the gardens, back to the bright lanterns of Shosuro-sama's party.

Hiroue waited until she had vanished inside, then sat down and began to play idly on the shamisen. He truly did enjoy music, and the sound would mask his next conversation against any prying ears that *shouldn't* be nearby.



Not even one leaf rustled as Shosuro Miyako materialized by his side. She wasn't dressed in the stereotypical garb of a *shinobi*, but the muted grey of her *jinbei* blended seamlessly into the darkness. Hiroue didn't even know where she had been hiding. None of the stones or trees or bushes looked large enough to conceal a woman, no matter how small and wiry. But then, he was not trained for such things.

"Why did you interrupt her?" Miyako asked. "There wasn't anyone approaching. And she was on the verge of saying something about her student."

Hiroue shrugged and turned one of the shamisen's tuning pegs a minute degree. "We already know about her student. They fought, and Satto left. According to current reports, she's now very highly placed in the Perfect Land hierarchy up north. Kitsuki-san's gratitude is worth more to me than any additional details she might have been able to offer about a woman she hasn't seen in years. You see, I have now shown myself to be that rare breed of Scorpion: a man she can trust."

Miyako snorted softly. She worked in the shadows and Hiroue in the light, but that didn't make him any more honorable than she was. "So what was the point of this, then, if not to find out more about Satto?"

"There have been suspicions that Kitsuki-san's argument with her student was staged, and that she's been using her dōjō to recruit new followers to the Perfect Land, training them for rebellion. If that were the case, it might indicate that the leadership of the Dragon Clan supports the Perfect Land in secret." With any other clan, Hiroue would have dismissed the idea out of hand. The preaching of the sect's leaders challenged the very foundations of samurai dominance, blaming them for the Empire's mounting problems. But the Dragon tolerance for eccentricity often led in surprising directions, and their clan champions had given some inexplicable orders in the past. Hiroue could not put anything past them—not without investigating first.

This time, the investigation had led to a dead end. "She sounded sincere," Miyako said.

Hiroue nodded. "I think she was." *Either that, or she's a good enough liar that she should be invited to teach our own students.* "It doesn't completely rule out Dragon support for the sect, of course—but I think Kitsuki-san's dōjō can be crossed off the list."



“So what now?”

He laid one hand on the shamisen’s strings, silencing them. “Now...now you go north.”

Miyako was very good at stillness, but she turned to look at him. “My lord?”

“We know little about this sect, but what we *do* know worries me. I’m sending you to the mountains. Disguise yourself as a peasant, infiltrate the sect, and get as close as you can to their leaders. I want to know what their goals are, and whether they have ties to the Dragon beyond Satto having trained with Kitsuki-san.” It could be useful leverage. The Scorpion could sell what they knew, or offer to remove the threat...or, if necessary, create a spark in just the right place to turn this pile of tinder into a wildfire. Whatever served their purpose best.

But only if they had more information.

Miyako bowed, lower than she ordinarily would. Her diction fell to match, into the speech of a peasant. “I hear and obey, m’lord.”