

The Last Leaf Falls

By D.G. Laderoute

“An Emperor died in this place, Champion,” Agasha Sumiko said, squinting up from where she knelt in the wind-tossed grass. “A fitting place for us to meet, is it not?”

Toturi shielded his eyes and looked across the Bay of the Golden Sun. Otsan Uchi sprawled to his left, the Forbidden City and the top of Seppun Hill protruding from the pall of smoke from thousands of lanterns and fires, like islands rising from murky water. To his right, eastward, the Towers of Dawn and Sunset flanking the bay’s entrance, and the endless ocean beyond, were lost in haze.



It was said that, during the ancient Battle of White Stag, Emperor Yugo-zohime had sat in this very place to witness the assault from a powerful gaijin fleet. After Yugo-zohime’s death at the hands of the invaders, her successor had issued an Imperial edict meant to safeguard the Emperor against a similar disaster.

Toturi turned back and knelt beside Sumiko. A fitting place, indeed. A dead ruler, and an Imperial edict—the very things now at the heart of the current crisis.

Sumiko said nothing, and merely stared across the wind-tossed bay.

Toturi found Kakita Yoshi near a koi pond in the garden of the Crane embassy, the pale blue of his garments stark against maples the colors of flame. The Imperial Chancellor stood with his hands behind his back, bouncing a ball from foot to foot, to knee, to shoulder, to foot again.

Kemari was a game popular among courtiers, particularly as a pastime during the long, dark days of Winter Court. Toturi had been taught it, and had played it, but Yoshi appeared particularly adept at it. The Kakita saw him and said, “Akodo-sama, the ball is”—he bounced it off a knee, toward Toturi—“yours.”

Toturi received the ball on his instep, then returned it to Yoshi with his opposite knee. Yoshi received it and served it back.

The ball bounced back and forth. Each time, though, Yoshi returned it a little more vigorously. Eventually, Toturi lost control, the ball flying off into some late-blooming azaleas.

"Well played, Champion," Yoshi said, retrieving the ball. "You almost had that one."

Toturi bowed his thanks. "You are a most skillful player, Chancellor. I am much less familiar with the game, I'm afraid." Toturi narrowed his eyes. "Indeed, I have always understood that kemari is not meant to be competitive, but apparently I am mistaken."

Yoshi smiled. "There are winners and losers in all things—including kemari."

Toturi nodded, but only to show that he understood Yoshi's assertion, not that he necessarily agreed with it.

Yoshi tucked the ball under his arm. "May I offer you the hospitality of the Crane?"

"I would be grateful to receive it."

He followed Yoshi to an unremarkable door opening into an equally unremarkable room in the embassy building. It was decorated with impeccable taste: rice paper screens, *sumi-e* ink paintings, and flower arrangements, each individually beautiful, but also collectively arranged with perfect regard for how the energy flowed through the room—and all of it utterly generic, just sterile perfection.

Yoshi gestured to a sky-blue cushion beside a mahogany table. A steaming tea service was already set, and the Kakita set about serving them both.

The tea was, like the room, both perfect and instantly forgettable. It was so unlike the tea served to him by the criminal master Tamanegi, whom he had met while in the company of Seppun Ishikawa some weeks earlier. That brisk and unusual taste still seemed to tingle on Toturi's tongue.

"So," Yoshi said, "how may I serve the esteemed Emerald Champion?"

"By first satisfying my curiosity at our *not* meeting in the Forbidden City, but here, so well removed from it."

"This is a more discreet location."

"By which you mean it is not subject to the scrutiny of Scorpion agents?"

Yoshi raised an eyebrow. "That is a very direct assumption."

"Almost being assassinated tends to make one direct."

Yoshi stared at Toturi for a moment, then placed his teacup down with a delicate tap. "Very well. Indeed, I assume no word or deed in the Forbidden City goes unheard by the Regent. That is far less of a concern here."

"You seem uncomfortable with Lord Bayushi Shoji's appointment as Regent."

"I would never question the will or wisdom of the late Son of Heaven," Yoshi said, his eyes narrowing, "and find it surprising—"

"Please," Toturi cut in. "You oppose his appointment as Regent. I wish to know why."

Again, Yoshi simply stared at Toturi for a moment. "Very well, we shall continue being direct, then. I am deeply concerned by his appointment, yes."

"Again, why? His appointment was legitimate. I myself wrote the edict proclaiming it, at the behest of the late Emperor."

"I know that, Akodo-sama," Yoshi said, then arched a delicate eyebrow. "I would assume that is why he sought to have you killed—by his own brother, in fact."

Toturi stared.

Too slow, Lord Lion...

As a child, Toturi had been vexed by a particular finger puzzle, right up to the abrupt instant he wasn't, and the solution was simply there. He now had another such moment. A *shinobi* of great skill had attacked him. Bayushi Aramoro, despite being the Imperial Advisor's bodyguard, had almost certainly been trained in *ninjutsu*, as was not uncommon for Scorpion warriors. And that voice he had been trying so hard to place—*Too slow, Lord Lion*—most definitely had been that of Shoji's half-brother.

Which meant that Shoji had, indeed, sought to have Toturi killed.

He looked back at Yoshi, asking the first question that came to him. "How did you come to know this?"

"I have learned that the woman sitting in the place of the Imperial Advisor is an imposter. That has given me a certain...*leverage* over her."

Any other time, learning that the Imperial Chancellor was coercing an imposter pretending to be the Imperial Advisor into compliance would have been...mind-boggling. But Toturi's capacity for shock was all but saturated. He finally just asked, "Where is Bayushi Kachiko, then?"

"I do not know. Absent, as part of some convoluted scheme, no doubt." Yoshi's face became even more grave. "There is another matter of concern, however. Agasha Sumiko has revealed to me that the ancestral sword of the Hantei, Kunshu, has been sent to Yogo Junzo."

Toturi blinked at the sudden change of subject. "The Ruby Champion has already brought this to my attention, but I haven't yet had the opportunity to speak with her about it. Is this related to Kachiko's absence, somehow?"

"Again, I do not know. What I *do* know, however, is that the blade has been cursed, having drawn the blood of the Emperor."

Toturi stared, unable to find words. Yoshi waited.

He finally found his voice. "You are certain of this?"

"I am making these dire claims to the Emerald Champion. I would not do so if I were not certain."

"So...Shoji has usurped the throne, then." As soon as he said it, though, Toturi shook his head. "No. This makes no sense. He would have soon been Regent regardless...the Emperor was about to abdicate in favor of his younger son, Daisetsu."

"I do not presume to know the mind of Bayushi Shoji. Whatever his reasoning—which, again, was no doubt convoluted—he murdered the Emperor. Whether his hand literally wielded Kunshu, or did so figuratively, he wielded it nonetheless."

"But...then why kill me? I am the one person who could authoritatively prove the legitimacy of the edict declaring him Regent."

"You are also the only person who could authoritatively declare it a forgery, since it was supposedly written in your hand." Yoshi offered a thin smile. "As I said, there are always winners and losers, Champion. As a loose thread in Shoji's monstrous tapestry, it seems you were meant to be one of the latter."

Toturi folded his hands in his lap. Monstrous. A perfect description. Shoji was guilty of a crime that Imperial law didn't even contemplate. Even *treason*, the most egregious Imperial crime possible, seemed to fall woefully short.

Toturi stood, because he could not sit. He paced to the door, looked into the garden for a moment, then back to the table.

"Shoji must answer for this, with steel," he said. "I am the Emperor's champion..."

As soon as he'd said it, though, Toturi heard other voices speak up—Seppun Ishikawa; his own wife, Kaede; even Shinsei, the Little Teacher, in the *Tao*.

There is the way the world ought to work, and then there is the way it really does.

Before hearing those words, Toturi would have been utterly convinced of the rightness of challenging Shoji. But now...

He let out a breath and shook his head. "No. Should Shoji win a duel against me, it would forever establish the legitimacy of what he has done."

Yoshi touched his teacup. "The outcome of a duel reflects the wisdom of the Celestial Heavens. You doubt their judgment?"

"Of course not, and if they offer it, so be it. But I will not seek it—at least, not by crossing steel with Shoji."

"So what will you do?"

Toturi looked back into the garden. "I do not know."

What had begun as reflection had become words spoken aloud to Sumiko. Now, Toturi fell silent and just looked across the Bay of the Golden Sun. Lady Sun shone down with glorious splendor, turning the waves to liquid gold. But the cold wind persisted, hissing across the rock, through the yellowing grass.

"I, too, did not know what to do, my Champion," Sumiko finally said. She turned and looked at Toturi. "But I must do something, and I cannot do it alone. This is why I asked to meet you here. I have a great favor to ask of you."

Toturi had been about to question Sumiko about Kunshu, but he put the matter aside to answer her. "And what is that?"

"I wish for you to stand behind me as I betray my lord."

"Grandmother," Agasha Sumiko said, "I am ashamed."

She looked up from the cracked stone of the ancestor shrine's floor, through a soft haze of incense smoke, at the tiny altar.

"I do not know what to do. That is why I have come for your help."

She placed an old *tantō*, still sheathed, on the shrine. Her eyes stung, but not only because of the pungent smoke. "I have learned that I am accessory to a terrible crime. But my duty to the Throne remains clear." She blinked. "So I am ashamed, because it is not my place to question such a duty, only to discharge it as best as I can. But I am also afraid that I will fail to do so, because my spirit is not committed—"

"Presumptuous of you, isn't it?"

Sumiko turned, startled that someone had entered the shrine without her being aware. But the old monk's bare feet had made barely a whisper on the stone; now, he stopped, leaned on a walking stick and offered a stiff bow to the shrine, then straightened and leveled his dark eyes on Sumiko.

"Excuse me, Father," she said, "but this—"

"Is a private moment, yes." The monk narrowed his eyes, turning crow's-feet into a maze of wrinkles. "It is difficult, though, to hear a samurai not only prophesize failure, but do so regarding her duty to the Throne itself."

Sumiko stiffened. "I did no such thing."

"You said that your spirit is not committed to your duty, implying that you are likewise not committed to your lord, who presumably assigned it to you."

"I second-guess no one, particularly my superiors—"

The monk waved a hand. "Of course you did." With a grimace, he knelt beside Sumiko, his knees cracking like dry wood. "I am Katsu, of the Ten Thousand Temples."

Sumiko frowned. To intrude—indeed, *eavesdrop*—on someone seeking guidance from a revered ancestor was not merely rude: it bordered on insult.

"And you are?" the monk asked.

Sumiko's frown hardened. "I am Agasha Sumiko, the—"

"Ah! Granddaughter of Agasha Ichika." The monk gave a slow nod. "This is interesting."

"How so?"

The monk tilted his head. "Do you remember your grandmother?"

"I was young when she died, but... of course. She was a renowned Emerald Magistrate, and someone I admired—" Sumiko stopped. Her fists had clenched, her willingness



to offer courtesy to this intrusive man, elder monk or not, nearly gone. "Why are you asking this? And what business is this of yours, in any case?"

"Your relationship with your grandmother is none of my business, of course. My relationship with her, however, is a different matter."

"Your relationship?"

The old monk nodded. "Your grandmother fought to maintain law and order in the Empire, and I likewise fought for these things alongside her."

Sumiko stared.

Katsu smiled. "Yes, this old man was once a samurai, adept in the way of bow and blade. That was, as you might have guessed, more than a few years ago, now."

"You were her colleague? A magistrate?"

Katsu nodded, then pointed at the tantō Sumiko had placed on the shrine, her only physical connection to her grandmother. "That was her blade, yes? The last time I saw it drawn, it dripped the blood of..." He paused. "Two," he said, then raised a finger. "No...*three* bandits. One of them might have been a *rōnin*." He shrugged. "It was a long time ago."

Sumiko looked at the sheathed tantō. "I did not know that. What else can you tell me about her?"

Katsu smiled. "Many things. Most would be outrageous. Some would even be true." He winked.

Sumiko smiled back, but it faded. "You were close to her...*more* than just comrades-in-arms."

"We were...friends, yes."

The way he said *friends* spoke volumes about his true relationship with her grandmother, but that was none of Sumiko's concern. What was, was the fact that Katsu was here, now, in this ancient shrine tucked away in the back of the gardens of the Dragon guest house, in the Forbidden City. A mere coincidence? Or something more?

The monk, it seemed, was thinking the same thing. "I said that meeting you here, now, while you are seeking guidance from Ichika-shiryō, was *interesting*."

"It is," Sumiko said, then looked back at the altar. "Unfortunately, I do not believe my grandmother has any answers for me, regarding what troubles me so."

"I do not know the details of whatever torments your spirit, nor do I need to. But do not be so sure your grandmother has no answers for you." Katsu extracted a small scroll case, lacquered and plain, from a pocket in his robe. He opened it and produced a wrinkled sheet of paper, which he carefully unrolled. It was yellowed with age and brittle, and there was faded calligraphy on it.

"What is that?" Sumiko asked.

Katsu offered it to her. "Read it."

Sumiko gingerly took the paper. It was a poem written in the tanka style, similar to haiku, but longer and more complex:

*A maple tree grows
Upon the place of my pyre
So my love knows truth:
Beauty from sorrow, changing
Fate after the last leaf falls.*

She looked at the monk. "Who wrote this?"

"The same hand that wielded that tantō also penned those words."

"My grandmother?"

"I said that meeting you was interesting," he replied, taking the page from Sumiko and placing it beside the tantō. "Now you see why. In part, anyway."

"In part?"

The monk nodded. "I have made the journey from my monastery to this shrine, your grandmother's favorite, every year since she died. That poem has been my companion each time, to place on this shrine." He gave a rueful smile. "But the journey is getting too difficult for these old bones, so last year was to be the last time."

"So, why did you come this year?"

"Because I had a dream. In it, your grandmother appeared as I remembered her, young and full of fire. In the dream, she asked me to make this journey one more time." He smiled again. "I never could refuse her. So here I am. And here you are. Now, isn't that...interesting?"

Sumiko stared at the old paper on the shrine, her thoughts tumbling like a fast river over rocks. Her grandmother had been a dedicated magistrate, and a skilled warrior. But she had also penned this poem. And, through a dream, she had asked Katsu, her friend, to bring it here one more time, and he had done so on this day, while Sumiko was here...

"I must admit," Katsu said, his face wistful, "I had assumed I knew who she meant by her *love*. It turns out that she meant you."

But Sumiko shook her head. "Not only me, Katsu-san. I am sure of that."

"I...would like to think you are right."

Sumiko looked at the paper. "It is strange. I really did not know my grandmother well. As I said, I was still quite young when she died. And yet, I feel closer to her than to...to anyone else." She looked back at Katsu, but also saw her grandmother, a formidable, no-nonsense woman, to whom even her gruff and equally formidable father had readily deferred.

"Once," Sumiko went on, "she caught me stealing sweet red bean paste. She told me I had broken the law, and must be punished, so she *arrested* me. Then she sat me by the fire and sentenced me to listening to her stories." Sumiko smiled. "As a punishment, it failed, because

they *enthralled* me. But they also taught me about truth, and justice, and honor. She is the reason I am a magistrate. I wished to carry on her legacy.”

Katsu pointed at the poem. “She seems to believe that you have, and that you will keep doing what is true, and just, and honorable.”

“I would like to think *you* are right, as well...that she wrote this poem to express her affection for you, but also to be the answer I seek.”

“And what answer is that?”

“That I can no longer serve the Throne.” She turned to Katsu. “And that means it is time for the last leaf to fall on my pyre.”

The old monk unexpectedly took her hands in his. “Do not rush to such dire judgment. Changing fate does not mean ending it. The truth she wished to share with you spoke of beauty after sorrow. There is still more good you can do for the Empire.”

Sumiko nodded sadly. “There is, but not as long as I profess a loyalty that is false...a dedication to a duty I do not believe.”

“There are other ways of expressing your repudiation of such things.” Katsu pushed his dark gaze into hers. “Remaining true, just and honorable need not cost your life.”

Sumiko looked down at the tantō and poem. “If I simply speak out and walk away, I may preserve my own integrity, but what will ultimately change? Such things can, after all, be manipulated, twisted by those with the means and motives to do so to serve their own ends.” Her hands shook, his frail bones trembling with hers. “And yet, I cannot allow things to simply remain as they are, because then I would be living an egregious lie.”

“Your grandmother punished you with words, and look at what effect they had upon you. A life dedicated to justice and a daughter that she would look upon with pride. Do not underestimate the power of words. To the right audience, what is said can change even the darkest fate.”

Tears welled in Sumiko’s eyes. “But what would be left for me, even if my testimony is believed? What I have done is unforgiveable.”

“You do not walk this path alone,” Katsu said. “And as for after? There are many monasteries that would be blessed with your wise experience and counsel. Does the Tao not say that *the river that flows through life neither begins nor ends*? Perhaps you will be the next Katsu for the next Sumiko.”

For a time, Sumiko sat quietly and looked at the poem resting in her lap. Katsu moved one arm, adjusting his fragile knees beneath him.

Then, she did something unthinkable: she leaned into his arms and began to cry. His embrace was gentle and comforting. Like her grandmother’s had been.

Sumiko ducked away from a gust of cold wind that swept across them from the Bay of the Golden Sun. When it abated, she looked back at Toturi. "Autumn is ending, Champion. It is time for the last leaf to fall."

Toturi said nothing. The placid certainty in Sumiko's eyes showed him that she had made her choice. He envied her that calm conviction, that clarity regarding the rightness of what she intended to do.

He stood and walked close to the cliff's edge. For a long time, he simply stared down into the wind-whipped surf, pounding against the rocks below.

With nothing more than words, Sumiko intended to upend the political balance of Rokugan. Perhaps she would find the personal peace she sought through atonement for her part in Shoju's treachery, but the strands of consequence that would follow her words were tangled into knots that Toturi could not unravel. They all shared only one outcome: uncertainty and peril lay before the Emerald Empire.

Was this truly where they now stood? On the edge of a precipice, and all they could do, now, was choose the circumstances of their fall?

Toturi turned back to Sumiko. "What you propose would endanger the future of Rokugan."

"If I do nothing, the same is certain," Sumiko said. "Who now is left to oppose Shoju's monstrous crime, if not the late Emperor's chief servants? By standing by him, I have lent him an air of legitimacy and credibility. Through my resignation, I will take away much of his power over the Empire. Through my words, I will force the Empire to witness him as a traitor and a murderer. I do not expect forgiveness for my complicity in his treachery, but if I can undo some of the harm that I have caused then I am duty-bound to do so."

Toturi looked back, across the wind-tossed Bay. *A monstrous crime.* It was the same way Yoshi had described what Shoju had done.

He pulled his gaze back to the hard stone of the promontory, at the edge of the cliff just a few paces away.

At the edge of the abyss.

An Emperor had died here...

He turned back again. "You are not the only one who has served him as Champion, however."

"I am not asking you to give up your position as I am, Akodo-sama. Your service to the Throne since the murder of the Emperor has not been publicly known. Mine has. If you return to the court supporting my accusations, it could be enough to break Shoju's grip on the Empire."

Toturi knelt back beside her. The Scorpion Clan Champion would not simply allow the court to turn against him. Not when his brother's blade had shown Toturi his cruel intentions.

This is not how the world ought to work.

"You would not ask this of me if you were not truly committed to it," he said. "Shoju is

cunning, and I fear..." He stopped, poised on the brink.

He could still step back...

"As you said, my investigation has kept me out of the court and uninvolved in Shoju's schemes. I may have been Rokugan's Emerald Champion, but I was never Shoju's Champion. I failed in my duty the night that the Hantei was murdered." Toturi breathed deeply, and for a moment silence hung between them. "Together, we will face the usurper, and play the roles we must play in this terrible thing."

Together, they would plunge into that abyss.

Agasha Sumiko acknowledged the Seppun Honor Guard flanking the entrance to the Imperial Court Chamber as they bowed, but did not trust herself to return it. Toturi did so for them both, then slid the great rosewood door aside, leading the way in.

Kakita Yoshi, the Imperial Chancellor, was standing, in the process of convening court. Apparently annoyed at this interruption, he turned a glare upon the door from where he stood upon the great dais, one level below the Emerald Throne itself. But when he recognized the late arrivals as the Emerald and Ruby Champions, whatever he had been about to say remained unsaid. Instead, he raised his fan and waited.



The rest of the Imperial Court—a multitude of courtiers and diplomats, scribes and attendants and messengers, all arrayed in a precise assembly according to ancient custom—immediately awoke into a cacophony of gossip: whispers like a breeze through leaves. Many had likely assumed that with Sumiko taking on the duties of the Emerald Champion, Toturi was dead, yet here he stood. Only the place of the Imperial Advisor sat empty.

Sumiko ignored them all, and steadfastly kept her gaze fixed on the only person who mattered here.

Bayushi Shoju, Imperial Regent, sitting upon the Emerald Throne.

As Sumiko and Toturi approached the dais, the whispers fell quiet. Kakita Yoshi stepped aside, the faintest hint of a smile visible at the corner of his mouth.

They stopped short of approaching the throne. Sumiko felt Shoju's gaze upon them and lifted hers to meet it.

"Champions," Shoju said, "I assume you bring urgent business to the attention of the court."

Sumiko answered by releasing her cloak, allowing it to drop to the floor and reveal her katana and *wakizashi*, still sheathed within the folds of her sash at her left hip. An explosive burst of whispers, that cut off just as suddenly, left a ponderous, expectant silence, like the instant between the flash of lightning and the roar of thunder.

"Bayushi Shoji-dono," Sumiko began, her resolve echoing in the expectant air. "I reject your appointment as Regent. You have climbed to the Throne over the body of the Son of Heaven, for whose death you are responsible."

Shoji abruptly stood but said nothing. Sumiko did not hesitate or allow him such an opportunity.

"Kunshu, the ancestral blade of the Hantei is now cursed. You have sent it away, into hiding, because it was used to slay the Emperor."

Silence—

"Your regency is a Scorpion Clan Coup. And I have been complicit."

—like the instant—

"In atonement for my part in your sins, I am no longer Agasha Sumiko, and you have no Ruby Champion. Perhaps, in following Shinsei's guidance, I will be redeemed in a future life."

—between the flash of lightning—

Steel rang in Sumiko's hand as her katana exited its sheath.

—and the roar—

"May you never find peace as your enemies hunt you down for the treachery you have performed against the Emerald Empire."

—of thunder.

A snap echoed in the emptiness, and Sumiko's shattered blade clattered to the ground.

The Bayushi had taken a step, as though to descend from the dais, but now stood frozen as Toturi stepped forward.

"As the righteous and noble Agasha Sumiko was complicit in your monstrous crime, so, too, am I," Toturi said, pushing his gaze into Shoji's. "I penned the edict placing you upon the Throne at the Emperor's behest. But they were your words, not the Emperor's...your will, enacted through the manipulations of the Son of Heaven perpetrated by you, and your wife, the Imperial Advisor. And that is why you sought to have Aramoro, your half-brother, kill me...so there was no risk I could attempt to undo your monstrous deed."

Toturi withdrew his sheathed wakizashi and tossed it unceremoniously to the floor.

"My lord, the Emperor," Toturi went on, "is dead. You killed him. And now, because of it, I have no lord."

He turned his back on Shoji. As he did, his gaze passed over Kakita Yoshi, whose face was hidden behind an upraised fan. Toturi did not have to imagine the grin that certainly hid behind it.

There are winners and losers in all things, Yoshi had said.

Which am I?

The question rang in Toturi's mind as he and Agasha Sumiko walked away, their backs to the Throne and the court. The harsh echo of their footsteps upon the stone gave way first to whispers—and then to growing pandemonium.

The Imperial Court of Rokugan collapsed into chaos.

Toturi ignored the racket, the gaping stares, the urgent questions, a shout from Ikoma Ujiaki. He just walked on, past the clamoring ranks of courtiers, toward the man waiting for them by the great Court Chamber doors. Seppun Ishikawa nodded to Toturi and Sumiko as they approached, then gestured for the Honor Guard accompanying them to slide the doors open.

Two individuals, each bereft of family or title, passed through them. Neither looked back.

