

In the Garden of Lies (Part I)

By Marie Brennan

In the City of Lies, it was almost refreshing to see a dispute settled with the clean strike of an *iaijutsu* duel.

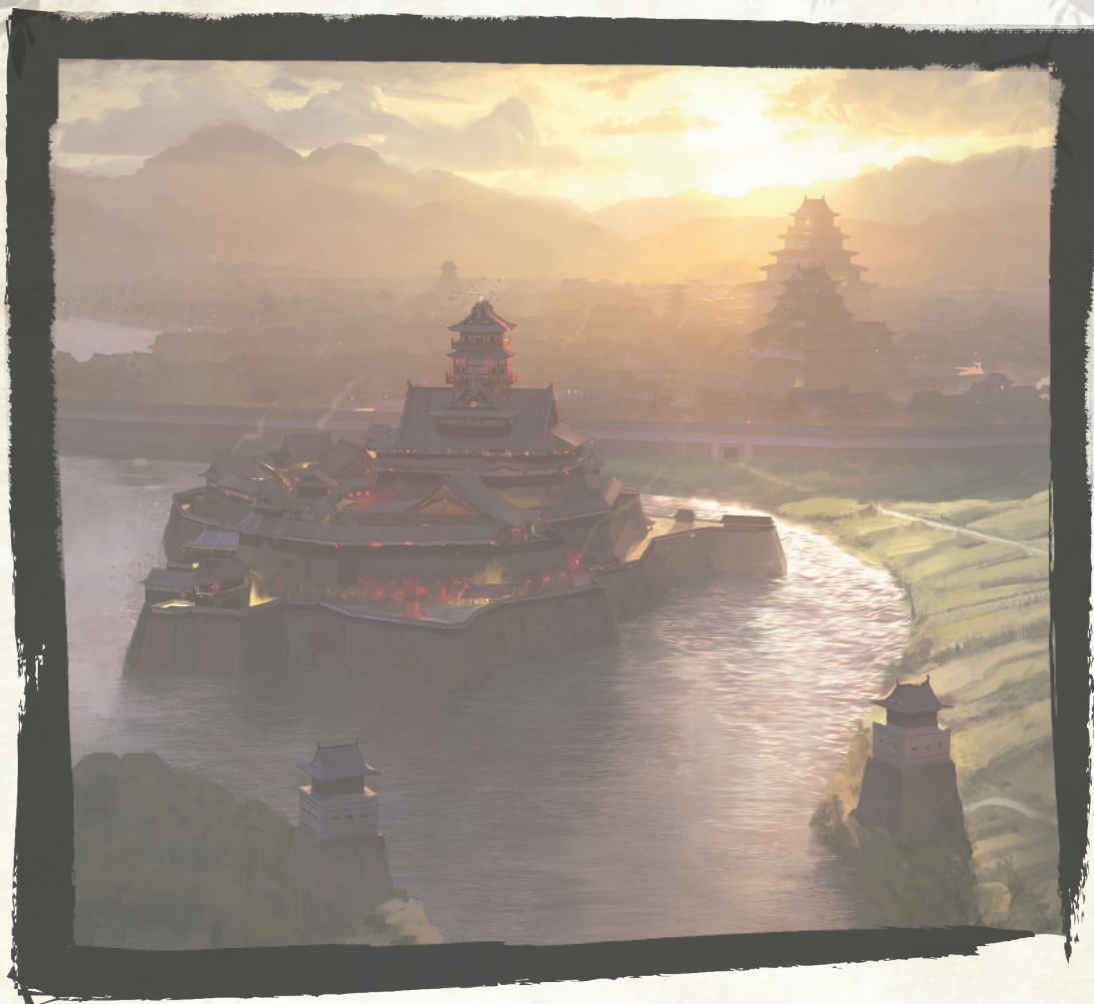
Yogo Hiroue had suggested to his lord that it might be advantageous for them if Bayushi Gensato threw the fight. “After all,” he’d said, “Kitsuki-san will hardly be inclined to stay at your party for long if she’s humiliated by defeat at his hands.” He thought, but did not say, *she knows your reputation too well*.

The city’s governor, Shosuro Hyobu, had dismissed this notion with a single flick of her fan. “Kitsuki-san may not be trained as an investigator, but she is a master of the Mirumoto technique—however unorthodox her style may be. If Gensato does anything less than his best against her, she will know.”

So now the two *bushi* stood facing one another in the night, feet carefully planted in the gravel of the courtyard, the torchlight around them casting shadows that danced even while the sources remained still. Hiroue made a show of examining Kitsuki Shomon’s stance, but it truly was a show; he was at best an indifferent swordsman himself. Like all Mirumoto-trained bushi, Shomon stood ready to draw not only her katana but also her *wakizashi*. Any unorthodoxy beyond that, however, was invisible to him.

She was a stocky woman, and would have been considered plain among courtiers, but Hiroue always felt that skill created its own kind of beauty. With a few wind-blown strands of hair across her face and her eyes fixed intently on Gensato, she made a striking picture. He could believe this was the woman who, in defiance of all convention, had established a dōjō in Ryokō Owari that accepted any student: not just fellow members of the Dragon Clan, not just clan samurai, but anyone with the right to carry *daishō*, down to ronin. She even spared some of her time to instruct peasants! Not in swordsmanship, of course; any peasant found with a sword would be executed, and the sensei would be lucky if she had the opportunity to erase her shame with seppuku. But Shomon taught them the basics of jūjutsu, as if she were a monk of the Brotherhood, claiming that it improved their bodies and spirits. If it also helped those peasants protect themselves against the ruthless “fireman” gangs that held so much of the city in their grip...surely that was coincidence.

Given that many of those gangs were in the governor’s pay, Shosuro-sama had surprised nearly everyone by permitting Shomon to run her dōjō as she saw fit. But Hiroue knew that Shomon, with the typical unpredictability of a Dragon, had offered to share the fate of any student who used her teachings to transgress. So far, at least, Shosuro-sama had not made any attempt to turn that against her.



She had even given Shomon this chance to demonstrate the value of her ways, to silence the whispers of her critics. A dozen samurai stood around the dueling circle, waiting to see who would prove the greater, Shomon or Gensato. They were too respectful of the duel to gossip, but the sound of a fan snapping open cracked the stillness, shockingly loud. Hiroue didn't look away from the duelists, but he noted the offender from the corner of his eye: Bayushi Masanao. The man would pay for that disturbance later.

Not that it had disturbed either of the duelists. Gensato even had a faint, cocky smile on his face. It was on the governor's orders that he had publicly disparaged Shomon's style, saying that it could not be worth much if ronin could learn it. Shomon would never have accepted a casual invitation to a party at the governor's mansion, but she could hardly refuse the chance to defend her honor. According to the custom of iaijutsu, the upcoming strike would settle the dispute one way or another.

Gravel crunched as one of the duelists shifted their foot, too minutely for Hiroue to see. He found himself holding his breath in anticipation. *It's so much more interesting when I don't know how it will end.*

There was no cue to move. He almost didn't see it happen. The two duelists were standing just out of blade's reach; then there was a brief, explosive flurry of steel. When it ended, they were on opposite sides of each other, swords out. The tableau held for a moment before Gensato relaxed and bowed to Shomon. A small patch of darkness stained his left sleeve. "I stand corrected, Kitsuki-san. Please accept my apology. You have truly shown me the strength of your blade."

Like a proper Dragon, Shomon was too self-controlled to gloat. She returned his bow. "There is nothing to forgive, Bayushi-san."

The gathered observers murmured to one another, already discussing the political implications of the duel. Shosuro-sama glided forward with a smile, ready to congratulate the victor.

Hiroue did not join them. As the governor's guest, Shomon could not leave the party immediately without giving insult. But he doubted she was the sort to enjoy Shosuro-sama's sophisticated entertainments, either. Sooner or later, she would seek out a quiet corner to regain her peace of mind.

Retrieving his shamisen from a servant, Hiroue went to find a suitable corner, and wait.

The shamisen still lay in Hiroue's hands, but many long minutes had passed since he last strummed a note. The instrument had served its purpose, luring Shomon to find the source of the delicate music floating through the nighttime peace of the governor's gardens.

The place was lovely even in the spring darkness, but nothing compared to its splendor in the daytime. Then again, perhaps it was just as well that Shomon was seeing the gardens only at night. The peasants of Ryokō Owari referred to the governor's lavish manor as "the house that opium built"—although never where they thought a samurai could hear. They weren't wrong, but the truth was no defense against a samurai's fury. Especially not in Scorpion lands.

Hiroue had been in the gardens many times before, but he found himself in unfamiliar territory now. Ordinarily he had a well-practiced arsenal of tricks for occasions such as these: The "accidental" brush of his layered sleeves against his target's hand. Eye contact that lingered just an instant too long for propriety, but not so long as to be off-putting. The gradual dropping of his voice, until it rested comfortably in a low rumble that suggested the languor of the bedroom. Gestures that drew attention to his hands—he had cultivated his musical talents in the direction of the shamisen because it gave him a chance to display his most beautiful feature. He had deployed these tricks against countless men and women, and very few of them had proved resistant to his charms.

With Shomon, he had abandoned that approach mere minutes into their encounter. Seducing her might be possible, but it would take far longer than he could spare, and any attempt to rush the process would only drive her away. Instead Hiroue had directed the conversation toward religious matters—and he was getting trounced.

“Winds blow, nations change, fortunes rise and fall, but the simple folk will always be asked to shoulder the weight,” Shomon said, quoting the Tao. “And the Single Leaf Sutra reminds us that the strength of a chain depends on its weakest link. If *heimin* are asked to shoulder so much weight, should we not devote our efforts to making certain they are strong enough to bear it? Indeed, we demand the merits of Bushidō from them in countless ways, only we do not give it that name. We expect courage from *ashigaru*, duty and loyalty from laborers, reverence and courtesy when they are in the presence of their superiors. Honesty is just as meritorious in a peasant as it is in a samurai. But they lack instruction, and without knowing the pitfalls, how can they choose the correct path?”

Hiroue was fairly certain the last question was another allusion to the Tao. He would have liked to respond in kind, but none of the quotations that came to mind pointed in the direction he needed. Instead he was forced to resort to plain speech. “But the correct path of a *heimin* is different from a samurai’s, is it not? What if, by instructing them in the precepts of Bushidō, you lead them away from their proper dharma?”



She scoffed at the question. "Tell me where it serves the Empire for a peasant to be cowardly, or cruel, or dishonest. The nature of their duty is different from a samurai's, that I would not argue—but virtue is virtue. And true virtue is the center from which all else proceeds."

Hiroue almost smiled. He was no swordsman, but in conversation as in combat, there were moments where the opponent's guard slipped and left the perfect opening. "What of the notion that we live in an age of declining virtue?"

He said it as a phrase rather than a proper name, Suijindai, but Shomon followed the reference regardless. She came bolt upright on the bench. "Individuals may fall from the path of honor," she said, biting off each word, "but those who say that means honor itself has lost value are only making excuses for their own weakness. The way of Bushidō was given to us by the Kami Akodo himself, and it is a bulwark for our spirits regardless of the age. If we fall short of its ideals, then we simply must strive all the harder to improve ourselves. As the Arrow Sutra says, 'the path across the plain is easy, the path to the peak hard; but only from the peak may we see far.' To claim the plain will lead one to a higher vantage point is nothing more than delusion."

Her vehemence took him aback. Hiroue had seen the reports, patchwork and incomplete, about the controversial sect that had taken root in Dragon lands. They called themselves the Perfect Land, after the paradisiacal realm they claimed waited for believers after their deaths. One of their core tenets was that Rokugan had entered the Age of Declining Virtue and that samurai were the cause, having strayed from their proper path.

The reports spoke of peasant armies assembling in the mountains to the north. Here in Ryokō Owari, Kitsuki Shomon openly trained heimin in hand-to-hand combat. It wasn't difficult to imagine she might have something to do with the sect. But judging by her reaction, the notion was nothing more than that—imagination.

Still, he had to be sure. "Don't the Dragon say there are many paths to the same destination?"

"Some paths are false ones," Shomon snapped. "My own student—"

Hiroue flung up a hand before she could finish that sentence, looking past Shomon, into the darkness of the gardens. "Hush! I hear someone."