

Like Seeds on the Wind

By Marie Brennan

The house had once been the finest in the village, with a tiled roof and sliding doors of paper instead of wood. Now, the tiles were cracked and fallen, and dirt and dried leaves had piled up in the corners, blown by the wind through the gaps where those doors had been.

Floorboards dipped perilously beneath Satto's feet as she wandered through the abandoned house. She could hear her companions talking outside, making arrangements for the days to come—including the question of where Hige-sensei would sleep.

With any other group, the answer would have been the house Satto stood in. The floor might sag, but it was still in better condition than any other building in what had once been White Flower Village. But it had belonged to the village's samurai overseer, and Hige-sensei was too humble to lay his head anywhere associated with the domination of the samurai class.

A torn screen stood partially shut, closing off the next room. Satto forced it aside and wrinkled her nose at the smell that wafted out. Some wild animal had nested here—probably a raccoon dog or fox.

The overseer had taken nearly everything with him when he left, but a few objects remained: a handful of old pots in the kitchen, a low table with an unsteady leg. She nudged one foot through a pile of debris at the bottom of the display alcove and found a fallen wall scroll, crumpled into a stiff pile. The paper was old and brittle, cracking as she unfolded it, but the kanji were still legible:

Straightened circumstances are the armor of an unmarred soul.

The creak of the floorboards warned her that someone else had entered. Satto looked up to see Ichirō.

He was new among them, and young enough that Satto's impulse was to think of him as a boy. But Ichirō believed in the tenets of the Perfect Land Sect as fervently as any of them, in the mercy of Shinsei and the death of virtue in the world. He'd seen the death of that virtue firsthand.

"What did you find?" Ichirō asked.

Satto's lip curled. "Confirmation of what we already knew: that whoever lived here was a hypocrite."

She passed the fragile scroll to Ichirō, who studied it with a keen eye. "This mark here." He tapped the red *chop* in the bottom-left corner. "That's the seal of Agasha no Seiya Fukuai. Not the most renowned calligrapher in Dragon lands, but well respected. I doubt Mirumoto Hyōgin was the sort of person to collect her work. This must have been a gift—something to impress his guests with. Not that he would have had many guests out here."

"You sound like you knew him."

"Only by reputation. He wrote a letter every season petitioning to be reassigned to someplace less obscure." Ichirō's jaw tightened. "It must have seemed like a blessing to him when the village declined enough that he could argue for it to be abandoned."

More than a few villages in Dragon lands had met that fate. As their population shrank, the samurai were forcing peasants to leave their homes and move to other settlements. Those callous measures wound up benefiting the Perfect Land Sect: Hige-sensei and his followers could spread their theology in neglected valleys, then let their converts carry the message when the samurai relocated them.

Ichirō tossed the scroll back into the alcove, careless of the damage. "A better man would have taken this with him, as a reminder not to crave riches or attention. Such things will strip a man of his honor even faster than cowardice."

"Honor," Satto said contemptuously. "If samurai spent less time thinking about honor, they might be better at doing what's *right*."

"Honor *is* what's right," Ichirō shot back.

A silent laugh huffed out of her. He'd been raised a clan samurai, steeped in the philosophy of Bushidō and its tenets. Satto had been born a *rōnin* and had only ever known the code from outside its walls. She saw with a clarity Ichirō might never achieve.

But that didn't stop her from trying to open his eyes. "I used to believe that," she said, "until compassion moved me to help a peasant who swore he was in desperate circumstances. I even convinced my sensei to assist me—because honor said it was the right thing to do."

She smiled thinly at Ichirō. "Do you know where we were?"

His brow furrowed as he tried to remember what he'd heard about her past. "Ryokō Owari?"

"Also known as the 'City of Lies.' We found out later that the peasant we helped was a smuggler. The whole thing was a trap to get my sensei in trouble." Even now, the memory made Satto's shoulders tense. "The Scorpion understand honor better than anyone. They know that Bushidō is a system of control: exploited by those who don't believe in it, to manipulate those who do."



Moments like this were what made her see Ichirō as a mere boy. He wasn't much younger than her, but he didn't hesitate in striking back. "So, you no longer believe in compassion? Honesty? Justice?"

"I didn't say that. But Bushidō makes false promises, claiming that if you just adhere to its requirements, everything will turn out as it should. The truth is that ruthless people just leverage those requirements against you so that everything will turn out the way *they* want."

She'd tried so hard to make Kitsuki Shomon see that. *We didn't knowingly do anything wrong*, she'd said. *Why should we bear the punishment for it?* If Shomon had just allowed Satto to fix the problem—

But no, Shomon believed in honor so much that she even taught its tenets to peasants. She'd insisted on giving honest testimony, despite knowing it would damn her. Meanwhile, Satto fled.

She didn't hear until months later that Shomon had volunteered to accept the punishment for both of them.

And the Scorpion had wasted no time in exploiting that even further. Shomon had been allowed to keep running her dōjō...after she swore that, if her teachings led any student of hers to transgress, she would share their punishment as well.

Kitsuki Shomon was a beautiful, shining example of honor, and Satto pitied her.

Ichirō had no good response. Instead, he shifted uncomfortably, then said, "We're needed outside."

Satto was more than ready to leave the stinking confines of the house. Out in the sunlight and fresh air, they found that the debate over Hige-sensei's lodgings had been settled in favor of a tent set further back in the village. His was joined by a few others, indistinguishable in fabric or size, because the leader of the Perfect Land Sect had no interest in luxury or ostentation.

He didn't need a fancy scroll to remind himself of what was right.

"Will anyone come?" Ichirō asked, turning to scan the half-collapsed huts of the abandoned village. "No one will be able to obtain travel papers, not for something like this. And the patrols will stop them if they don't have papers."

More naiveté. Ichirō hadn't been among them for that long; he underestimated just what devotees of the Perfect Land were capable of. She said, "The *heimin* know more back paths and game trails than samurai patrols have ever dreamed of. Don't underestimate Hige-sensei's followers, Ichirō-san: his people will come."

They had chosen the village with care, picking one far enough out of the way not to attract notice, while still being within reach for the peasants who would risk arrest and flogging to hear Hige-sensei speak. The abandoned field just south of the houses was shaped like a huge, shallow bowl, allowing everyone to see and hear the sect leader without him having to seat himself on a platform above them all.

Now that field was overflowing with people. Despite the risk, hundreds of people had made their ways through the mountains to this spot, bringing with them bundles of food and gifts that Hige-sensei invariably refused: another act of humility that only made them admire him more.

Satto wanted to count how many there were, but she had to keep her eyes on the various approaches from the east. Ichirō and two of Hige-sensei's other lieutenants were doing the same to the north, south, and west. The peasants might have succeeded in making their way to the abandoned village, but that didn't mean they'd done so without being noticed. The eventual interference of samurai was not only a possibility, but a near certainty.

Her vantage point, high in a birch tree, let Satto see far into the distance while still being able to make out Hige-sensei's words, unless the wind blew against her.

The beginning of the speech was familiar material: his usual exhortations about restoring virtue in this, the Age of Declining Virtue. Satto wondered whether Hige-sensei was deliberately ambiguous in his phrasing. At past gatherings, some people had taken "restoring" to mean that samurai would reform, ending the injustices that made the lower classes suffer. Others took it as a promise that the samurai would someday be overthrown. It would be clever of him to let both parties continue to believe their interpretation—a way of attracting a broad base of support without committing to any single path of action.

No, Satto decided. In his own way, Hige-sensei was every bit as sincere as Kitsuki Shomon. He believed in his own message, and the strength of that belief carried others with him.

As it had carried Satto herself.

Then, Hige-sensei's voice changed, and Satto found herself paying closer attention.

"My children," he said, "I have something to tell you. Last night, in my meditations, I

entered the Perfect Land."

An awed wave of murmurs rose from the crowd.

Hige-sensei, cross-legged on a simple mat, spread his hands in benediction. "Yes, my spirit journeyed into that blessed region of Tengoku where Shinsei awaits the faithful, and there I spoke with the Little Teacher. With only a few words, he enlightened me, showing me the true power of the *kie*."



The murmur shifted, from gasps and surprise to the mantra of their sect: *Shoshi ni kie*. “Belief in the Little Teacher” or “absolute trust in the Little Teacher” depending on how it is written.

Achieving Enlightenment didn’t require long hours of meditation or esoteric practices. It only required Shinsei’s aid.

“These words he has taught us do not only have the power to save individual souls!” Hige-sensei said, raising his voice so that it would carry over the growing rumble of the kie. “Spoken by a true believer, they will carry the soul of that believer into the Perfect Land after death, to gain Enlightenment at the feet of Shinsei and escape the suffering of this world. But the Little Teacher told me that the kie will also be the salvation of Rokugan itself!”

Satto’s head whipped around. Saving the Empire? She’d never heard Hige-sensei speak of that before. And if he’d been deliberately building toward such an idea, she and the others would have known.

A shiver danced across her skin. This morning, she would have said that salvation for Rokugan was as much a delusion as Shomon’s belief in honor. But, if Hige-sensei spoke the truth...

Many of his listeners were bent to the ground now, their hands outstretched and heads pressed to the dirt, their recitation of the kie aligning until it seemed like the entire field spoke with one passionate voice. The swelling wave of their faith seemed to lift Hige-sensei up, though he remained seated on his mat.

He cried out, “Today, we are few in number. But if we spread the blessing of the kie—if enough people across the Empire recite those words with pure hearts—then Shinsei himself will return to Rokugan and usher in a new Age of Celestial Virtue!”

Satto gripped the tree as if it were trying to throw her off. The return of the Little Teacher? Impossible! He had come at the dawn of the Empire to instruct the holy Kami, beginning the first Age of Celestial Virtue, but that was a thousand years ago. After that, he had vanished—some said to visit foreign lands and bring them Enlightenment, others said into the Void. The teachings of the Perfect Land revealed the truth: that he now dwelt in Tengoku. Regardless of the answer, surely he was gone and would not return.

But it was even more impossible to look at Hige-sensei’s expression and not believe.

Could that humble man truly have reached the Perfect Land in spirit, and received this message?

The people in the field certainly believed he had. They were crying out in joy, giving thanks to Shinsei, shouting the kie as if volume alone would be enough to beckon him back. Satto saw parents embracing children, weeping into the rough fabric of their kimono, rejoicing in the knowledge that their sons and daughters would be spared suffering not only after death, but in this life.

A gust of wind made the branch beneath Satto sway, sending apprehension through her like a spike. That feeling doubled when she realized—*the path*.

She'd stopped watching.

Satto wrenched herself around again. In the distance, she saw movement: a faint cloud of summer dust, rising up from a road that should see no traffic now that White Flower Village had been abandoned.

Her heart hammered against her ribs. The samurai were coming.

No one who traveled with Hige-sensei was unfamiliar with woodcraft. They moved swiftly but silently, avoiding ridges where they might easily be spotted, following a creek to break the trail.

Fading into the distance, Satto could hear a powerful mass of voices speaking in unison:
Shoshi ni kie. Shoshi ni kie. Shoshi ni kie.

Despite the need for stealth, most of the people with her whispered the same words. Hige-sensei mouthed them silently, his face marked with tears. They arose from both sorrow and joy, Satto thought: sorrow for the fate of those left behind, and joy at this evidence of their devotion.

He hadn't wanted to leave. Unlike the false monks who preached on city street corners or plied their deceptive theology in villages, Hige-sensei held to his philosophy even in the face of danger. Had his lieutenants permitted it, he would still be in that field, leading his followers in their recitation of the kie.

Of course, he had advised those same followers to leave. They had risked themselves by coming there, but that did not mean they had to die for their faith. Some of them listened, slipping away through the trees, scattering to the four winds like dandelion seeds.

One old woman spoke for those who remained. "If the samurai kill us," she said, "then Shinsei will welcome us into the Perfect Land. And maybe our example will teach them the true way."

Satto doubted it. She'd known too many samurai to believe they would learn anything from



peasants, especially those dying on the edges of their swords. But Hige-sensei had blessed that old woman and all who stayed with her, instructing them not to offer any resistance, but simply to stand their ground and keep praying. His parting words to them were, "May the power of your dedication hasten the Little Teacher's return."

Soon enough, the voices passed out of hearing. Because Satto and the others had gone too far? Or because something had silenced them?

She strained her ears, but heard no clash of metal, no screams other than those of hawks. Even the repetitions of the kie in their own group had gradually stopped as they bent their attentions to the difficult task of traversing the mountains, back toward the village they had claimed as their current base of operations.

They hadn't been foolish enough to hold the gathering too close to base. It would take at least three days to return, traveling cross-country. A hard three days, too, because they hadn't spared the time to break the tents down before leaving the village. When they stopped for the night, they had nothing more than pine needles for their futons and branches for their roofs.

No one complained, least of all Hige-sensei. Everyone merely set to work gathering wood for a tiny fire, water for cleaning, and what wild food could supplement the rations they carried.

Satto took the opportunity to draw Hige-sensei aside. She had been with him longer than just about anyone: not since the beginning, but those who were there before her were almost all gone, dead or arrested, or sent out to bring the teachings of the Perfect Land to other parts of the Empire. Hige-sensei never disdained chores—he was digging up reeds from the bank of a creek so they could boil and eat the roots—but despite his humility, he took persuasion much more readily from people he had known a long time.

"Sensei," she said, "your news of Shinsei's eventual return is truly wondrous."

Sadness had weighed upon Hige-sensei for much of the day, but a little of his usual twinkle returned as he prompted her. "I can hear the 'but' in your words, even if you have not spoken it."

"However, I would respectfully advise you not to talk too openly about your visit to the Perfect Land. Not yet."

He handed her a bunch of reeds, an unspoken request for her to wash the dirt from their roots. "You fear reprisal from samurai."

Satto began scrubbing. "Sensei, the kie cannot spread if we provoke them too rapidly. The Phoenix have already outlawed it in their lands; if the Dragon do the same, we will face great difficulty."

"Why should anyone try to suppress the hope of the Little Teacher's return?" Hige-sensei knelt alongside her with another bunch of reeds. "That was rhetorical, child; you needn't answer. I know why people in power might seek to prevent such a wonderful thing. But whether I speak of it or not, the news will not be kept secret—not when I have shared it with so many people."

Only if they survived, Satto thought.

She could not bear the thought of watching Hige-sensei die, cut down where he stood by some angry samurai, or worse, dragged off for public execution. He would face it with dignity, and his example might inspire a few...but without him, the Perfect Land Sect would fall apart. He was the soul of their way—and no doubt that was why Shinsei had spoken with him.

She would do whatever it took to prevent his death.

But Satto had learned her lesson with Shomon. Hige-sensei did not need to know what steps she took to protect him.

If that meant there would be no place for her in the Perfect Land—or in the redeemed Empire he envisioned—that would be a small price to pay.

“I understand,” Satto said. “But still, Sensei...please be cautious.”

He patted her sleeve with one damp, muddy hand. “Trust in the Little Teacher, child. It will be enough.”

