



Impossible Duty

Tariq Ali

*The new gods fall from the heavens,
conquering hearts,
seizing minds.*

*The land suffers.
The children of Earth
weep that they were born.*

*Men become monsters,
and the greatest monster
will call himself Emperor.*

*He and his children shall rule
for a thousand years,
until all our memory is lost.*

*Yet, one of the new gods took pity,
promising to save our traditions
even as everything else perishes.*

*This shrine represents her promise.
No matter how cursed her promise is,
It is better than extinction.*

— The Ceremonial Robes

I wish I could say that the screams and yelling above-ground woke me from my slumber. I wish I could say such a thing, because it means that I am as I used to be. That I still am the old Yoshiaki you once knew, Urabe-kun. But you get used to the violence.

Who could have imagined that we would be engaged in combat with such things? These spirits — tsukumogami — I would have once just thought them harmless pieces of old clothing, caught up in the ghosts of the past. But they meant something once, and that purpose, long forgotten, has filled them with the ambition that their owners might have held. Owners that lived a thousand years ago, in the Empire of the Five Rivers. Their clothing, their memories, remain preserved, though they should have gone to the earth. And preserved in all their arrogance and the anger of neglect. We were meant to admire them, honor them. But we did not. And now, they wish us to pay.

These robes...their magic is strong, and their tactics brutal. They can kill with a single thread. They do not grow tired, or eat, or sleep. Fortunately, these tsukumogami war upon each other far more than they war upon us. The leader of our 'allies', Kinutanuki Yoite, is tireless in her incessant micromanagement. I must come to her bidding, or be kicked by sandals without a foot, until I rise as summoned to attend. The war between Yoite's tsukumogami and the robes continues unabated. Harmony means accepting your place in the natural world.

None of that even disturbs my sleep now. Instead, it was the tanuki shrine-keeper who awakened me. He greeted me dispassionately, dragged me from my bed, and ordered me to perform the morning rituals — which mostly involved playing games with said tanuki. I followed his orders without question, just like I follow the orders of all superiors. Then the tanuki gave me a tea set, dismissed me for the day and returned back to his duties.

I found this shrine after fighting a hard-fought battle against the ceremonial robes. The tanuki shrine-keeper tolerated my presence — he simply switched loyalties from the ceremonial robes to the Phoenix clan. The shrine itself is colored in a deep shade of blue, like an emotionless river that silently judges you for your sins.

The daily rituals are a chore. It is the nightly rituals that I admire. While bushi and ceremonial robes clash above ground, inanimate objects gather here below ground to put on a repetitive play. Only two people watched this play yesterday — the tanuki and I. Afterwards, we discussed the play for hours, discovering new nuances and details within the same repeated performance. It was the same as it had been each day for the last week.

During one of our discussions, the tanuki told me that this shrine is dedicated to Fukurokushi, the Fortune of Wisdom and Mercy. I believe him. The tanuki also claimed to worship Fukurokushi. I had to laugh. If the tanuki truly worshiped the Fortune, the tanuki would realize that this whole pantomime is senseless rote. Wisdom and mercy require more than mindlessly following duties. Unless... the tanuki knows this is all a joke and is trying to send me a message — one tinged with cruel irony.

Today, I prepared to leave this underground shrine to perform my current duty: kami relocation.

The Empty City is devoid of kami, beyond the tsukumogami of course, because the Paranoid Hōsōshi intentionally made this land barren. Such an action protects this place from the plots of the Dark Brother, but it also renders our shugenja ineffective. To remedy this flaw, I use my body to transport in kami from nearby areas. This is a long and arduous process, as the Paranoid Hōsōshi frequently attack me and the new kami. This is very discouraging.

As I poured myself a cup of tea, I dreamt of venturing out of the Empty City to the Barren Swamps or the Misty Plains. I dreamt of talking to the kami for hours, to gain some illusion of bliss in my non-blissful life. I dreamt of taking those friendly spirits to the Empty City, and of defeating the Hōsōshi that stands in my way.

A human voice broke into my pleasant thoughts.

"Kaito Yoshiaki? Are you free?" It was strange to hear Isawa Hifumi speak to me, staring at me as I began to sip my tea. He used to speak to Shiba Yohana instead, isolating himself in a room to meditate on higher issues. When Shiba Yohana died, it left him adrift. He's coming to me, now. He must be desperate.

"I am free. Would you like to drink some tea? It's from the Swamps."

Isawa Hifumi nodded and sat down at the opposite end of the table. We both drank our tea carefully. Hifumi does so out of politeness, but I must avoid offending the spirits. Our allies are particular. Finally, Hifumi broke the silence. "I think we're losing the war."

"Yoite is a fool," I responded. "I told Yoite that we just need to wait twenty years—"

"Not the war against the ceremonial robes." Isawa Hifumi sighed. "The war against heresy."

I paused. That war? I had forgotten about it — I was too focused on affairs in the Empty City. "Have we found heretics already?"

"Yes. Those who follow the creed of the Aimi. Those who want to subvert society and establish a brutal theocracy, one that worships Lord Moon."

I look at Hifumi blankly. "That's—That's not possible. Back on the mainland, Shiba Yohana manipulated those moon cultists into fighting each other. The Aimi imploded."

"The Aimi organization, yes. But you cannot kill an idea. Before that civil war broke out, the Aimi sent preachers to Crane lands. These preachers killed each other. Yet I am certain their books have fallen into the hands of the Crane's expedition fleet, insidiously converting people to a dead organization. These new heretics lie low. For now."

"You have proof?" I asked.

Hifumi glared at me. It is easy to forget my place when speaking to my betters, in this strange world.

"I apologize. I did not mean to question you. What is written in these books?"

Isawa Hifumi's anger did not diminish, taking my words as though I did not understand the severity of the issue. "I do not know. Every night, I think about these books, pondering what might be inside." Finally, he sighed. "One of my agents I sent into the Crane, a firebrand and true believer, identified one of these new heretics — a samurai named Fujihiro Saito. If we could arrest Saito, we might coerce him into revealing the location of the Aimi books. But the Crane protect Saito and have sealed their borders."

I never really liked Shiba Yohana, but at least she had a reputation for effectiveness. Now, that reputation is in tatters. If Yohana cannot kill ideas, what was the point of destroying the Aimi organization? And now we are being dragged into a border skirmish. My own anger threatened to overcome my reason. "You want me to stop worrying about the situation in the Empty City. Send me off to Crane lands. Throw away my work here."

Now, Isawa Hifumi was the one to keep face, sipping his tea. "The ceremonial robes threaten our presence in the Empty City, but these heretics are a potential threat to Rokugan."

"What if we find another heretical movement in Sanctuary, my lord? Should I immediately flee Crane lands? How many more tasks are you going to put onto me before I collapse?"

Isawa Hifumi tried to take another sip from his tea cup, but his hands trembled. He put the cup down. "There are ways to eliminate heresy. Permanently. Shiba Yohana found one such way, but there were certain...limitations. I believe Asako Reina will find a more acceptable approach. Once that happens, Sanctuary will be freed, and we can then focus on liberating the Empty City. Your reassignment to Crane lands is temporary. Find the Aimi books and—"

"You do not need to worry about the Aimi destroying Rokugan. Rokugan is already dead."

Silence enveloped us. Hifumi merely sipped his tea, observing my self-incrimination. I do not consider myself a heretic — my beliefs are purely orthodox. Yet Hifumi might have a different opinion now.

I fumbled upon the exact words, something that might acquit myself in his eyes. "Rokugan died when we cruelly abandoned the mainland, and, like cowards, fled to Sanctuary. This mass migration led to the hollowing out of the Imperial bureaucracy. A child Empress now sits on the throne, a mere puppet of the Crab. Without a firm hand to arbitrate disputes, injustices regularly occur. The Lions' violent oppression against the Scorpions. The Crabs' grievous insult against the Unicorns."

Hifumi nodded. "I heard about these border skirmishes." Hifumi poured himself a third cup of tea. "Yet, I was told a different story — about how the Unicorn send nightly attacks against the Crab and how malicious Scorpions injure the Lions."

"What about the pirate raids of the Mantis? Where is the justice in their armed robberies? Rumor has it that the Empress endorses these raids, claiming that the Mantis are defending their honor. Does that sound reasonable? Or a sign of cowardice?"

Isawa Hifumi tried to take up his tea again, but then let his hand fall. "To go against the judgment of the Empress is to engage in heresy. Granted, the victims of the raids have the right to defend their honor as well. The enemy of fire is fire."

I glance at my own cup. I set it aside, tired of its sweet lies. "My point is that Sanctuary burns. The clans focus on their petty affairs, their ambitions unchecked. Not even faith would keep us unified — the clans will simply use the kami against each other."

"You speak like an Otomo." Hifumi laughed bitterly, but it was followed with a frown. "But if you speak the truth, then I don't need to worry about the Aimi destroying Rokugan. Orthodox, pious Rokugani destroy themselves all the same. If you speak the truth."

"And if I speak falsehood?"

"Then these are just minor border skirmishes, used to resolve disputes. We no longer need the Imperials. The clans know how to self-regulate themselves. Besides, the clans share the same culture. That is all we need to share."

"Do you think I speak falsehood? I wish I did. I wish you were right, that culture is the only thing that matters, that Rokugan is immortal and nothing can ever kill it—"

Hifumi stood, thunder growing in his eyes. "My duty is to protect the Empire from heretics. I foolishly fulfill that duty, believing that everyone else will fulfill their duties!" Snatching up his cup, he threw it at the shrine's walls, shattering it into pieces. He then sighed and slumped back into his chair, looking downwards.

"Is that...is that all we do? Fulfill duties?" I tried to ignore the tea-stained walls and the loss of composure. We are all pushed to the edge here.

"If I had no duties, Yoshiaki, I would not know what I would do in my life. It would be devoid of purpose or reason — just a mere mortal following temporary desires." Hifumi raised his eyes. "I think you feel the same."

I nodded. "We need to step away from all this. The heresy, the ceremonial robes. We are slowly killing ourselves. And there is a difference between a heroic sacrifice and a pointless sacrifice."

Isawa Hifumi glanced at the shards of the teacup against the wall. "Asako Reina once told me about the performances of the spirits here. She said you can show me one of them."

"She's a historian. She likes studying the secrets of the past, even if they are irrelevant to the present."

"Maybe. But, take me to one of these performances. As a goodwill gesture towards Yoite. Show that we are willing to understand the ways of the spirits and honor the Empire of the Five Rivers, if she will allow us to follow our own ways."

I smiled. "Of course. But, please, my lord, first, will you help me fight the Hōsōshi?"

Night. Above ground, the ceremonial robes were conducting an aggressive assault against the Phoenix bushi. But below ground, the short skirts, silken chairs and floating teapots collaborated together to put on yet another brilliant performance, one that has been carried out flawlessly for centuries. The tanuki, Isawa Hifumi and I watched the play, our eyes transfixed on the orderly movements of the actors.

The play followed Hikari, a battle-hardened ceremonial robe. She lived in a utopia — or at least, so the actors' gestures claimed it. She gave praise to the society as a glorious system worth fighting for, despite providing no evidence at all backing her statements. Since she is the only person that speaks in this play, no one can contradict her.

Hikari is alone. Her friends and family have perished in a battle against the Dark Brother. She has followers, yes, but they do not speak. They do not act. They obey, without question, logic or sense. They are little more than scenery — mere puppets to Hikari's whims. This is the utopia that Hikari lives in. And, so Hikari cries in the night, as she can never acquire any more glory. She prays for hope.

One day, that hope appears. Some puppets rebel against Hikari's utopia, turning into monsters. Maybe these monsters seek freedom. Or power. Or both. The motives are irrelevant. They are rebels, and rebels must be destroyed. Hikari smiles. For the first time in her life, Hikari is happy. Hikari and her loyal puppets fight against these disloyal monsters.

Forever.

When Hikari dies (and she inevitably dies), the utopia crumbles. Yet, she resurrects, and the utopia reborn — as well as the monsters. Hikari is ready to fight. And die. And fight. And die. And fight. And die. It's a very brilliant play about wisdom, mercy, and perseverance. I do not understand why Isawa Hifumi screams.