

# Service and Sacrifice

By Mari Murdock

Ikoma Ujiaki waded through a boisterous river of Lion *bushi*, courtiers, and *shugenja* thronging the sake house. The scents of wine and perfume choked the air as the serving girls floated between tables, bowing between passes of porcelain carafes. Ujiaki spied a lone samurai tucked into a corner, her blank face undoubtedly a mask. He knelt on the cushion beside the low table, arraying himself opposite her, and gave a polite nod as an apology for his intrusion.

“Akodo Matoko-san,” he cleared his throat, surveying the battlefield of empty sake bottles crowding the table. “You seem...distracted from the festivities. Are you fretting for Akodo-ue’s nuptials tomorrow?” *Or dreading, perhaps?*

The retired sensei did not reply, but merely gritted her teeth. Ujiaki followed her gaze to the sake bottle between them, which was painted with small cranes circling the kanji for “grace.” He called a servant to their table.

“Hatsuko,” he growled, but avoided the rudeness of actually pointing at the bottle. “A different bottle. Now.”

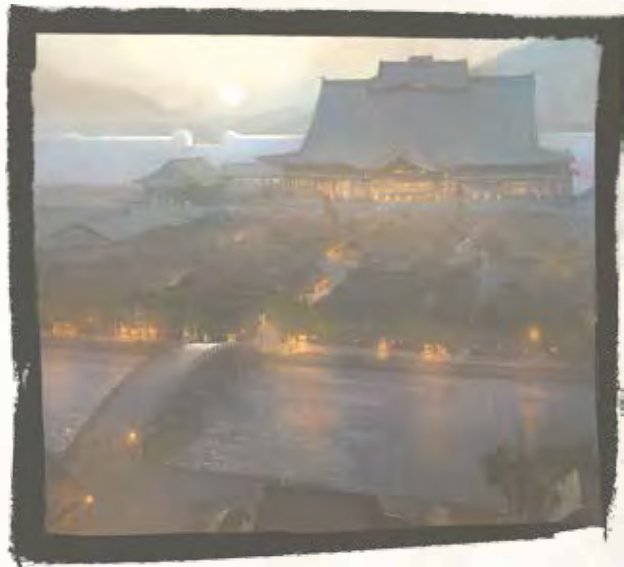
He thought he saw a flash of a knowing smile on the serving girl’s lips, but the immediate innocence of her apology smothered it. “My deepest apologies, Ujiaki-sama. I beg forgiveness from our most esteemed Lion Clan patron. I shall bring one worthy of you and your guest.”

“Most esteemed?” Matoko snickered, her voice deep with reluctant amusement, as Hatsuko whisked away the bottle and brought a new, undecorated one.

Ujiaki bristled but kept his emotions on a tight leash. “Diplomats frequent these establishments to discuss strategy. Fine sake is a potent lubricant for negotiation.”

“Ah, of course,” Matoko responded, drumming her strong fingers on the table. “I have my battlefield, you have yours.”

“Indeed.” Ujiaki stroked his wild beard smooth. He had not expected such condescension from her, but he found the words for the proper counter. “And how goes your personal battle, Matoko-san? They speak of nothing else these days at the Lion embassy. I hear your husband



Daidoji Utsugiri has abandoned you to join the Crane army. I hope his actions have not rallied your sympathies against us in our dispute with the Crane.”

Matoko’s face stiffened at his assault. The lantern light cast shadows in the lines of remorse around her mouth, although it was promptly swallowed up by her anger. *She’s had too much sake to keep control over her emotions.*

“I am sworn to the Lion—to Akodo Toturi-ue, Ujiaki-sama. And my *former* husband’s acts are none of your concern.”

“On the contrary,” Ujiaki pressed, maintaining his momentum. “Military conflicts define my relationships at court. War makes enemies of friends and family for us all. I suppose it is only natural for you to want the Lion to hesitate instead of crushing those who would insult our clan with impunity.”

Matoko leaped to her feet, ready to draw her weapon, but she steadied herself as the patrons nearby eyed her outburst. She reseated herself, her eyes watering from the sting of shame. “That was a coward’s blow, Ujiaki,” she hissed before downing another cup of sake with a grip near strong enough to shatter the tiny porcelain vessel.

Ujiaki smiled at the victory. “Yes, forgive me, Matoko-san.” He poured her another round.

“We all live and die for the Lion in our own way,” she mumbled, as though she were attempting to convince herself. “We will sacrifice whatever it takes in the service of honor.”

“Yes. You have. Your break from your husband offers proof enough of your loyal sacrifices for our clan.” Ujiaki scanned the room one more time, ensuring they would not be overheard before continuing. “If only others were so eager to declare their loyalty as swiftly as you. There are those among us who still...treasure their connections with the Crane, even in the face of ultimate betrayal.”

Matoko frowned. “Are you talking about Lord Toturi?”

As she followed the path he’d left for her, Ujiaki stroked his beard once more. “But then again, it can be hard for childhood friends to grow up and let go for the sake of the clan.” Still avoiding Toturi’s name directly, he continued, “Perhaps he belongs in an Asako monastery. He’s more Phoenix than Lion anyway—a hesitating philosopher would be perfect for a pacifist clan of librarians.”

“Toturi-sama is our leader,” Matoko insisted, too tipsy to keep up the subtleties of Ujiaki’s feint. “These internal disputes only make our clan weak. We must move past them. He should have our support in his new role as champion. Let him grow into the leader he is to become.”

“I wish there were more time for patience,” Ujiaki lamented. “But a looming war requires immediate action. Loyalty. Service. Sacrifice. From all of us. Like yours.”

Matoko looked beyond him, to young Mikiu who sat several tables away. Matoko’s daughter laughed with a crowd of young bushi. The young warrior had just passed her *gempuku*, and the cloud of her current familial troubles had vanished in the camaraderie of her new companions. After studying the happiness on her child’s face, the retired sensei shook her head and let out a

labored breath.

“I believe in Toturi-sama, Ujiaki-san. Our honor comes from obedience, to our Emperor and to our champion. We would all do well to remember it.”

Ujiaki hid a grimace beneath a friendly smile and bowed to her, the stalemate in their discussion itching like a bead of sweat. Silence hung around their table until Hatsuko suddenly dispelled the tenseness with a tray of fresh bottles.

“I am sorry that the sake is not agreeing with you. Our illustrious owner has requested I bring you some of our house *koshu*. We were saving it for the celebrations of the Emerald Championship tournament, but perhaps it will be more pleasing to our loyal Lion Clan guests.” She set several bottles down before leaving to serve other tables.

*Of course.* “The Emerald Championship,” he chuckled to himself. How could he have not seen it before?

Matoko took the cup, suspicion crimping her eyebrows. “Hm?”

The Office of the Emerald Champion was the greatest honor the Emperor can bestow on a clan—and with it came the Hantei’s favor.

Ujiaki grinned. *Of course we shall compete in the tournament, and our clan boasts many of the strongest and most experienced warriors and magistrates. But there stands one who needs a chance to prove himself useful. Someone who would not be missed during his constant journeys throughout the Empire...*

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Akodo Toturi’s face rippled on the surface of the ablution fountain. *Arasou. Hotaru. Tsuko. And now the Emerald Championship tournament.*

He dashed his reflection away by dipping the copper ladle into the font, drawing the cold water over his hands to purify them.

*And Kaede, my bride.*

Each of them was a wave spreading across the Empire, and before long they would return, like the ripples bouncing off the stone walls of the fountain.

“Ah, Akodo-ue. You are quite early.” Akodo Kage’s long white hair spilled down his shoulders over a spotless, black dress kimono tied with a brown and gold *hakama*. The sun winked his wrinkled yet sharp eyes, and he smiled warmly as he approached. “Nervous on your wedding day?”



Toturi nodded. His aged teacher would no doubt have the wisdom he needed. “It does not feel like a wedding day. I have too much on my mind.”

“What troubles you?”

Toturi took a deep breath before looking up into the branches of a red plum tree, the leaves waving in the breeze like bloody hands. “Arasou.”

Kage did not seem surprised.

Toturi continued. “He should be here, accepting Kaede into our family beside me. He always teased me about Kaede, and now the day is here where that actually means something.

“Hotaru, she—”

Toturi didn’t have words, and Kage seemed content to let silence fill their place. The warm wind rustled the leaves gently, like the whispering of spirits.

*What will you do?*

He had yet to speak to Hotaru—or even see her—since that day. He could not know whether she was still in Toshi Ranbo, or if she had already returned to the Imperial Capital.

“I wonder, will I face her in the Tournament of the Emerald Champion? Or her uncle, Kakita Toshimoko, perhaps the most famous duelist in all of Rokugan?”

How could he possibly defeat the Grey Crane, if that was who Hotaru tapped to compete?

And if by some miracle he should win, Toturi would face even larger questions.

The shrine darkened as a rain cloud passed in front of the sun, and the skies churned, as if they were as tumultuous as his thoughts.

“I thought it was just Tsuko, but now... It seems they are trying to banish me to the court.

“Every day that I do not declare open war against the Crane, the deeper the chasm grows within the rising factions in the Lion.

“The worst part of this is that the paths are all clear. There are simply...too many.”

Kage gave a polite laugh and tapped Toturi’s forehead with his fan. “Toturi-kun, your mind has always been a labyrinth.”

“It’s my curse.”

“Never,” Kage chuckled. “Arasou would always tell you that you thought too much, but that is exactly why he is where he is and you are where you are.”

Toturi frowned, his shoulders growing rigid at the comment, but Kage’s shrewd smile hinted at a lesson in the words.

“Toturi-kun,” Kage continued. “Do you remember when you first met Isawa Kaede? Her father brought her with him to Castle Akodo to negotiate the final details of the betrothal. You were about eight, possibly nine.”

“I was eight. I remember because Arasou had just had his sixth birthday.”

“Ha, your memory is the keenest of blades. You and Arasou were spear fishing in the garden pond—much to the servants’ consternation—and having a small, strange Phoenix girl join your party was just the oddest sight. Poor Lady Kaede knew nothing about catching fish, and Arasou

laughed right in her face. He told her he could catch ten before she would even catch one.”

“He was just showing his Lion pride. Father taught him to be stronger, faster, and more fearsome than those of any other clan.”

“Perhaps, but for some reason you did not learn those lessons. You did not see a rival in Kaede. You saw a young bird who would learn to soar among the Heavens, not a lion cub who could hunt and wrestle. You also saw a sad little girl who perhaps could not catch a single fish before Arasou caught his ten. Do you remember what you did?”

“I helped her catch one.”

“You did more than that, Toturi-kun. You called out to Arasou, ‘I see a huge fish over there!’ and he crashed around the back end of the pond like a bucking horse. His splashing scared the all fish toward Kaede, and she speared one.”

“There was a big fish. I wasn’t lying. Arasou even caught it.”

“He did, but you made it happen. More importantly, you helped Arasou and Kaede both get fish.”

Toturi recalled Kaede and Arasou as children, smiling—Arasou with his toothy arrogance over his massive trout and Kaede with her innocent delight at her delicate stickleback.

“Your brother had his place. He fulfilled his role well. He was a powerful, assertive warrior who led the charges and spilled enough blood to be the fiercest and most formidable Lion Clan Champion we have yet had. However, his focus was only ever on the task at hand, his eyes on a single catch. Likewise, you have your place. You see not just one fish at a time, but the pond, the shore and the fisherman in it. For you, the situation branches far past the single path, beyond the current battle into the dozens that branch after it. Your perspective transcends clan squabbles, revenge, rage, and foolish mistakes.”

Kage folded his arms over his chest as he always did before the final words of a lesson. “There are those who can crash after the single fish and get it, and then there are the rare few like you, who can see where those people must go to achieve greater things. This is why you were chosen. And this is why you would be the best Emerald Champion the Empire could hope for.”

The memory glistened for a final moment in Toturi’s mind before vanishing. The kind old man nodded his encouragement, as he always had in times of trouble. Toturi bowed to Kage. “Thank you, sensei. Your wisdom has again guided me to the right path.”

Kage laughed an aged yet hearty laugh. “Don’t lie, Toturi-kun. The right path has always been before you. Sometimes, you just need a push to take the first steps. Now go and join your life with that of the young bird who has become a brilliant phoenix. And remind Kaede that she is getting the kind brother.”

Toturi bowed a last time before making his way under the *sakaki* trees where the wedding procession would start. A nervous tremor had entered his hands, seeming to fill his stomach with stones.

*This wedding is so inopportune. Too soon after Arasou’s funeral, during my power struggle with Tsuko and the others, while on the brink of war... Perhaps it should have been postponed...*

*But it is too late.*

Ikoma Ujiaki, Akodo Matoko, and the rest of the Imperial Lion Clan contingent joined him. The temple bells rang out, as if to herald this moment and all the change it would bring.

Isawa Kaede entered the temple courtyard wearing a flowing white kimono with red rimming the flowers, leaves, and birds with crimson streaks. A wedding headdress crowned with a golden phoenix hooded her dark hair, from which strings of pearls hung on either side of her face.

Beside her walked her father and lord, Isawa Ujina, the Elemental Master of Void. A young *bushi* trailed behind them, as if she were horribly lost, until he recognized her from the dōjō of the Akodo Commander School—and the tell-tale hilt of Ofushikai.

Kaede bowed to Toturi, offering a graceful, nervous smile before turning to face the approaching shrine maidens.

Toturi's sight lingered a final moment on his bride. He watched the ease with which she glided through the temple etiquette, the social obligations, the nobility of the occasion. She could easily make friends of ten guests before he could gain the good opinion of one.

*I am lucky it's her. I don't deserve a bride such as she.*

He took his place at Kaede's side, and the procession marched through the gates to the outer shrine.

Halting at a flaming brazier, they all bowed as a vermillion-clad *shugenja* approached with a long, flowering cherry branch in hand. He chanted to the kami, his pure voice singing the purification prayer to earn their favor as a blessing over the union. Toturi glanced at Kaede. She was poised, lost in the spirit of the chanting, a gentle light entering her eyes as she sensed the presence of the kami. The warmth of the communion softened her face, and Toturi could still see the traces of that little girl from long ago, now blossomed into the loveliness of her adulthood.



At a prompting from the *shugenja*, Toturi recited the ceremonial vow. “I will be your husband. I will honor you and accept you into my home. I will protect and provide for you, my wife.”

The shrine maidens brought forward three cups of purified sake. Toturi sipped from each before offering it to Kaede. Then the priest threw the cherry branch before their feet, mumbling a prayer to ignite it as a final offering to the kami. As the flames consumed the wood, Toturi reached his hand out to Kaede, which she tenderly took in her own, their fingers clasped. Her skin

was warm. The shugenja struck up a final prayer of blessing, and a shower of cherry petals rained down from the surrounding groves. The prayer ended, and the bride and groom were one.

The priest bowed to both of them, and Toturi and Kaede parted to reunite with their respective clans before the reception. Toturi felt his lungs unclench, and he sighed, as if he could suddenly breathe again. He made his way to his clansmen to see Ikoma Ujiaki's bushy brows barely conceal scowling behind the rest of the Lion representatives, all gloriously adorned in their ceremony regalia.

*Our clan needs unity, even if it means taking myself out of the picture. The schism can heal if I move on as Emerald Champion and hand some of the reins to those below me. Perhaps then we can steer away from war together, and they will have felt they had a hand in the decision.*

*The Lion cannot afford the price of war. Rokugan cannot afford a war now.*

He made his way through myriad congratulations from all around before turning back to see Kaede and her family approach him. She had taken off the outer white kimono and was now completely clothed in brown and gold, a yellow lion *mon* embroidered on her obi.

"My husband," she called. Was that a hint of happiness in her voice? "Shall we continue to the palace for the celebration feast?"

He nodded, offering his arm. She placed her hand on it, and they led the procession from the shrine. The weight of her hand comforted him.

*Our marriage is a union, a peace offering for the ties between Lion and Phoenix, he thought. I am no longer a single man, a single soldier. I must look beyond myself to see the larger picture.*

He looked up the Road of Fast Hopes to the Imperial Palace, which glistened in the morning sun.

*I must be ready to serve all of Rokugan.*