

# Wind Through Falling Leaves

By Lisa Farrell

*Whoever believes your best interests are their own is as good as a servant.*

– Bayushi's Lies

Kakita Yoshi had made a grave mistake, and now his clan would suffer for it. For too long he had focused on the mocking smile of Bayushi Kachiko, trying to deduce her plans and the damage they would cause. The fact that her schemes had, no doubt for years, been nothing but decoys... Yoshi took a breath. He gazed at the scene before him and composed himself. Cranes and pines painted for the Emperor by a Kakita artisan, the screen's promise of longevity seemed worthless now.

Bayushi Shoji's ambition, his close relationship with the late Emperor, those had always been the real dangers. How long had the Scorpion planned this travesty? For years, Shoji's son had befriended the younger prince while Yoshi wasted time seeking to ally his clan with the elder—how had he missed this? The image of Shoji standing before the empty throne and claiming a regency that should have been Yoshi's would haunt him for the rest of his days. Yoshi looked back down the corridor, but still no one came.

The Imperial audience chamber would be empty by now. Would no one seek him out? So many of the usual faces had been absent, and some of those he would have expected to count on. Even Agasha Sumiko, who had once seemed so incorruptible, supported Shoji. Perhaps she had already grown too fond of her role as acting Emerald Champion, which she would keep as long as Akodo Toturi was gone.

Yoshi had known power would shift, but this...this was not merely the end of an era. It was the end of the Empire that was.

"Apologies, Kakita-sama," came a voice from behind him.

Yoshi closed his *tessen* with a snap as he turned, and the messenger flinched slightly.

"A message for you..."

Yoshi took the scroll between two fingers. It bore the seal of Kakita Ichirō, his nephew, but it had suffered on its travels. The faint odor of grass and smoke reached his nostrils, and he held it at arm's length as he unrolled it.

He read it four times before he made himself roll it up again. Troubles seemed to pile at his feet, each heavier than the last. Was this some test, or punishment? He waved the messenger away; there was no adequate reply to such news. A sharp pain began behind his eyes, and he raised his fan out of habit, though no one but his *yōjimbō* waiting nearby would see him wince.



Behind his yōjimbō, the screen had been painted by someone clearly *not* from the Kakita school. An ostentatious image, with flashes of gold picking out the lions among red-stained grasses: it was distasteful, but it was intended to balance the image opposite. The beautiful on the one side, the terrible on the other.

Yoshi's skills at court, his way with words, those had once been enough. Now, he had no words to fix this, no letter to ink. The only thing he wished to send were warriors and weapons, bushi that could tear the Lion apart. War; but war was not his domain. He had no power on the battlefield.

He could not wait any longer and left the dark corridor to brave the midday sun, the unseasonable heat. He was acutely aware of the yōjimbō following in his wake. He had chosen Kakita Nene as he had it on good authority that she was a fine duelist. She was also a distant relation, and the news concerned her as well.

It was not her right to know, but maybe it was right that she knew. On a whim, he took a detour into a quiet corner of the garden where the acoustics were particularly poor and stopped in the shade of a laden apple tree. He turned to his yōjimbō, whose faltering step briefly betrayed her. He was acting out of character; she would know something was wrong.

Yoshi gestured her nearer, and she took a few small steps toward him.

"Nene-san, you may take the afternoon for personal correspondence." He drew the message from his obi and offered it to her. "When you have read this, you must dispose of it. Rereading will not change the words."

She took the scroll and thanked him, though she would not understand until she read it why he entrusted her with the task. She would have received the news eventually, but this way she could learn it in private. It was a small kindness that would bind her to him. If the clan were to fracture, the more samurai whose loyalty lay with him the better.

As Yoshi turned to go, one of his aides appeared around a turn in the path. Yoshi took a long, silent breath, readying himself to receive more bad news.

"Kakita-sama, Regent Bayushi Shōju requests your presence."





The red leaves of the maples clung stubbornly to their branches as wind rose about them, their rustling like a chorus of whispered complaints. Like the courtiers who had merely fluttered their fans that morning and waited to see how the wind would blow next. Shoji had sent for Yoshi because he knew the court waited to see what the chancellor would do. So, Yoshi made him wait. Let the Scorpion content themselves with whispers for a while.

"Kakita-sama," Ide Tadaji said, pouring tea that smelt intolerably bitter. "Your visit is an unexpected pleasure."

It was not quite a question, and Yoshi let the silence lengthen. He looked out at the garden that was designed to look like a landscape seen from afar. Dunes in miniature on the horizon, diminutive trees, fields of grass. He could almost imagine hordes of tiny horses crossing those fields on their way to war. When the leaves fell, they would make a scarlet blanket over it all, until gardeners tidied them away.

"I was surprised not to see you in court this morning," Yoshi said at last. "But I imagine you have heard the news?"

"If you mean the edict, yes. Is there other news?"

Yoshi sipped the hot tea. Clearly, Tadaji waited for news of Shahai. Her actions left her clan in a very unfortunate position. Maybe it was to be expected that Tadaji had not shown his face at court. Perhaps he was relieved to receive Yoshi in the viewing room where they need not face each other.

"Nothing of note," Yoshi said. "I am here to speak of the edict."

Tadaji nodded and fixed a stern gaze on the garden, as though willing the landscape to change.

"It is clearly a forgery," Yoshi said. "It is bold, even of the Scorpion, to fabricate an Imperial edict. To falsify such a thing betrays the Emperor and his sons, and defies the will of Heaven. Bayushi Shoji has gone too far."

"A forgery?"

"It must be. The Emperor was wise and his judgment sound. He would never steal power from his own dynasty and hand it to the Scorpion."

They sat quietly for a moment, and Yoshi hoped in vain that Tadaji might pour him more tea. The pain in his head lingered like an unpleasant memory. The Unicorn simply sat and waited. He did not deny the truth of Yoshi's words, but did not agree either.

"Until the prince returns to take his place," Yoshi went on, "we must work together to ensure Shoji does not undermine all the Emperor's good work. Already he has begun offering favors to clans he wishes something from. The Crab have their jade. The Dragon bring their army into the capital. The Scorpion, of course, have the regency. Already your clan and mine are overlooked and pushed aside. I know you are troubled over the unfortunate business with Iuchi Shahai, but you must return to court; you must show your face. For the sake of your clan, stand with me."



"I thank you for your advice, Kakita-sama. It is always welcome."

Welcome, perhaps, but would he take it?

"I would like to ask your advice on another matter," Tadaji went on. "When Iuchi Shahai is found, I fear the Seppun will kill her before she has the chance to defend herself. I should like to speak to her and learn the circumstances of her flight from the palace. I can think of no one to appeal to better than yourself."

Tadaji paused and Yoshi waited, trying to appear relaxed though he felt taut as the string on a bow. If Tadaji was not willing to stand with the chancellor, who else could he appeal to?

"I will support you at court," Tadaji said. "Will you support me in this?"

The Unicorn was trying to bargain, and crudely at that. He was desperate, but these were desperate times.

"You know there is no forgiveness for the crime of striking an Imperial Prince," Yoshi said. "That act alone is enough to necessitate Shahai's death. However, time I may be able to grant you. I will ensure she is brought back to the palace for questioning before she is executed."

"For such a mercy, I would be in your debt," Tadaji said.

A debt indeed, and not one payable through political support alone. Yoshi needed more than that. Now was the time to reveal his purpose, and to hope Tadaji was desperate enough.

"Shoju has not only taken control of the court," Yoshi began. "To his clan's army, he now adds the Imperial Legions, and even the army of the Dragon. My clan, already struggling with Lion aggression at every turn, cannot hope to stand against Shoju. Together, however..."

"You are suggesting open war?" Tadaji asked. "Now I am the one surprised, Kakita-sama."

"What I am suggesting is an alliance, a show of solidarity," Yoshi glanced to Tadaji, whose gaze remained directed to the garden. "As to war, I fear it is already upon us. Here, we can undermine Shoju in the court. But out there, both our clans are vulnerable." He gestured toward the garden as though the whole of Rokugan lay spread out before them. "Together, less so. If Crane emissaries were to visit your Champion, an arrangement could be found to benefit us all and give us the strength to fight for the good of the Empire."

"That may be possible," Tadaji said. "I know the situation here is too turbulent for you to make the journey yourself, but I suggest you send someone of high standing to treat with our





Champion. It would demonstrate the seriousness of your intentions. Doji Kuwanan, perhaps?"

Was he hoping for a hostage? Or was the Unicorn Champion so arrogant she would expect Kuwanan to travel all that way personally to arrange the alliance? It did not matter as long as the Unicorn army joined that of the Crane.

"Alas, my nephew is otherwise engaged. However, I do already have someone in mind."

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Fumio rolled into the warm patch of sunlight that had inconveniently moved while he slept, stopping just short of Doji Shizue's work. Shizue lifted the paper and took one last look before putting it safely away.

It wasn't finished, but she had lost her focus. She could not concentrate on poetry while the palace was in such confusion, and Seppun Guards marched from one end to the other, reminding everyone of their presence. Was it supposed to be an assurance or a warning? If Shahai was still in the palace, they would have found her by now.

The thought made her hand stray to the pendant that hung from her neck. She felt the now-familiar weight of it through the layers of her kimono. Nothing but a trinket, yet a constant reminder of her absent friend. The crow had flown, as the court said, and the flight alone marked Shahai as guilty. Still, Shizue prayed she was safe, wherever she was. Prince Daisetsu, too.

The door slid aside, and a servant announced the arrival of Kakita Yoshi. Her uncle usually scheduled their meetings far in advance; something must have happened. Shizue dropped her hand at once, the hope of news robbing her of breath.

"Apologies for imposing on you so unexpectedly," her uncle said, his bow formal but his smile warm.

Shizue gathered herself quickly.

"You are always welcome, my lord," she said. "Please. Let me offer you some tea."

He accepted graciously, and they arranged themselves as a servant produced her favored tea set and placed it between them. Her uncle said nothing while she prepared and poured the tea. The steam rose into the air, carrying the earthy scent of mulberry leaves. Perfect for autumn, a tea to restore body and soul.

Her uncle took a sip and granted his approval with a slight nod of his head.

"How is your health, Shizue-san?" he asked, startling her with such a personal question.

"I am well," she replied. "Thank you."

"That is good. I have come to ask you to undertake a journey," he told her, smiling through the steam. "This might be a prudent time to leave the capital behind, for a little while."

He paused, waiting for her response. It was not a command, but she could not refuse her uncle, *daimyō* of the Kakita and Imperial Chancellor besides.

"I would never disappoint you, Yoshi-sama, if you wish for me to go," she said. "Though if the choice were mine, I would not abandon my young charges at such a time. I have duties

here, and when the court has greater need of their parents' attention, the children have greater need of me."

Her uncle smiled, a tired but genuine smile.

"Your devotion to your students is admirable," he said. "However, I must call you to duty for your clan today. I received news that troubles me greatly, and I am forced to act."

"I know of the edict," Shizue said. "Though I was not there to hear it read. I know Prince Daisetsu is to be Emperor. It seems an odd time for him to be away from court."

"I do not know where he is," Yoshi said. "I think, and hope, that Shojū does not know either, but I cannot be sure. I fear for the elder prince as well, who leaves soon for the monastery."

"I appreciate your frankness, Yoshi-sama. These are dire days. Yet, I cannot imagine what journey you wish me to take?"

"The news I speak of, it is not the edict. No, this news is more personal. It regards our clan." He paused, and she waited. "Kyūden Kakita has fallen to Matsu Tsuko's forces, and the Lion have taken hostages, including my wife."

Kyūden Kakita, the source of so much beauty and skill, where the wisest of the Crane passed their learning to the next generation and ensured the clan's future—where Shizue had found her calling.

"That is terrible news," she said, "and is your son..."

"Still at Shizuka Toshi."

A mercy, one less life to fear for. Shizue said nothing. Somehow, words were not enough. Every bright memory of that place suddenly seemed so dim and distant, and her heart ached at the thought of soldiers tramping through those elegant gardens, those serene rooms. She feared for her old sensei and prayed the kami would keep him safe. His tender years made him no threat to the Lion, but his sharp tongue might get him into trouble. The thought made her want to laugh and cry, so she banished it. Her uncle suffered enough without her adding to his troubles.

Such a loss for the clan could barely be expressed, but if her eyes stung for holding back tears, it was for Yoshi. The personal loss of his wife and castle, that accounted for the shadows around his eyes. She had rarely spoken to his wife, the soft-faced Kakita Barahime, but had seen them together, the stern courtier and the compassionate duelist, as different as night and day but better balanced for it. What chilling fear must grip Yoshi now, beneath his calm exterior?

"The Lion will be satisfied with nothing but war," Yoshi said quietly. "And Shojū gathers armies as though he means to conquer his own Empire. Our clan needs strength of arms now more than ever, and I think you can help me gain the allies we need."

"Anything I can do for the clan and for you," she said. "But how can I help?"

"You will travel to the Unicorn Champion to forge an alliance. You will not travel alone of course, but your presence, as my niece, will impress Shinjo Altansarnai. Or so Tadaji-sama tells me."







Strength of arms, he'd said. He wanted Unicorn bushi firing arrows from horseback. Crane ashigaru cutting down their enemies. The Lion falling, bodies on the battlefield. Mere moments ago, she had been composing a poem about a crow.

"Of course, I will go at once," Shizue said.

Fumio chose that moment to pad toward them, stepping daintily between her uncle and his cup. Yoshi smiled, running a hand gently along the cat's silver back.

"He asks so little," Yoshi said. "A warm place to rest, and a gentle master. If only everyone were satisfied with such simple things. Will you take him with you?"

"No, Fumio will be happier here, I think. This is his home."

"Then I will ensure he is taken care of," he said. "Thank you for the tea. I must go and write to your brother. There is much he needs to know."

"And my sister?"

"Yes. Yes, of course."

Her uncle left, and Shizue went to her desk. She knelt and closed her eyes, trying to dispel the fears she could do nothing about. She had a task to perform and would focus on that, on what she could do for Yoshi, though his final words concerned her. Perhaps it was just that he was dealing with such a personal grief, but it was not like her uncle to make mistakes. Surely, he should write to the Clan Champion first, before anyone else.

It probably signified nothing, and Shizue was in no position to question their uncle in any case. Shizue would compose one last letter at her desk, with Fumio warm on her lap. She could trust in her sister's wisdom.