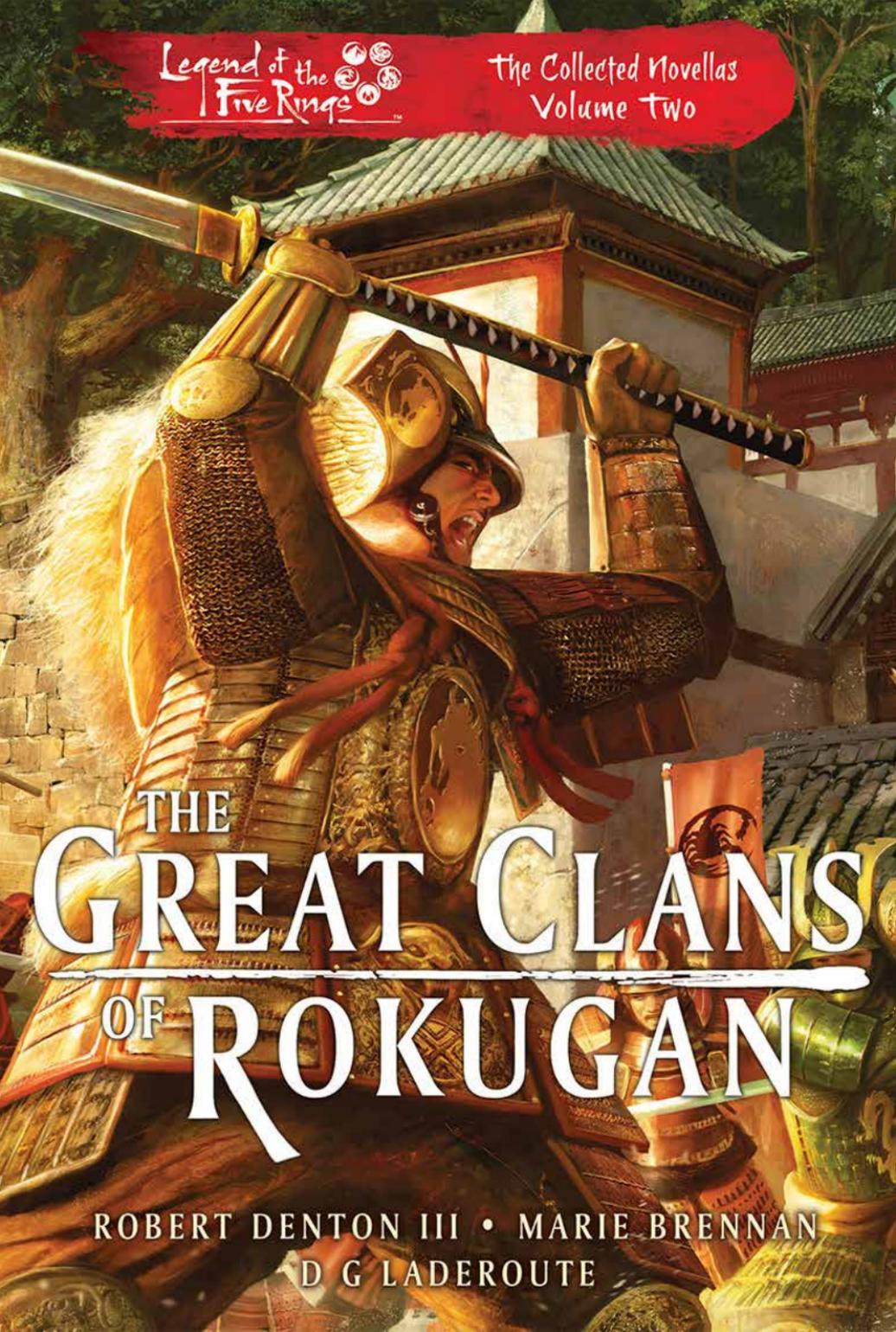


Legend of the
Five Rings

The Collected Novellas
Volume Two



THE
GREAT CLANS
OF
ROKUGAN

ROBERT DENTON III • MARIE BRENNAN
D G LADEROUTE

This is an excerpt from

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DEATHSEEKER

ROBERT DENTON III



As I wrote this book, I thought often of those who stayed beside me when, hating myself, I lingered in a very dark place. Thank you for waiting with me.

*I wrote this for Christen, my wife,
my love, my best friend.*

Special thanks to James Mendez Hodes for his invaluable expertise and guidance on this story.

Content Warning:

This story contains elements of suicidal thoughts and ideation.

CHAPTER ONE

In the dim light, Shiemi regarded her latest death poem. She was no wordsmith, and her simple calligraphy was wasted on such fine ink and crisp mulberry paper. But, she admitted, this was her best effort yet. It was better than the one her father had left behind, even better than the one left by her brother. But then, they'd each only had one chance to write a poetic reflection on their imminent deaths. Unlike them, Shiemi had practice.

Tucking the paper away, she left the incense fog of the tent. The *ashigaru* were on the move, back banners fluttering in the crisp morning air. Samurai officers barked at them from horseback, herding them into rough units. She took her place among them, ignoring the *gunsō* that bowed to her. On the opposite side of the freshly plowed field, a single line of enemy defenders assembled on the top of the town wall. The vast field between them, a "death plain", as the Matsu called it, would give the enemy's archers ample time to shower arrows on any approaching force. The gates would likely be reinforced as well. A frontal charge would be costly.

It seemed someone in town had read Akodo's *Leadership*. Shiemi wondered who.

The gunsō looked over her shoulder, receiving orders signaled by kites, an innovation embraced by their general. She wondered if he was watching her now. He would be leading like an Akodo, from a hilltop in full regalia, command unit surrounding him, banner flying brazenly above his numerous organized forces. Whether or not they managed to seize the town, Matsu Katsuchiyo would irrefutably make his statement: he was a dangerous man to ignore.

The ashigaru parted, revealing Shiemi to their enemies. She imagined how she looked to them: a white-painted face with black lips, stiff hair cropped short, armorless except for lamellar guards on her forearms and legs, her threadbare kimono more patches than silk. And no sword.

Wordless shouts carried from across the field. The defenders broke into a frenzy, pointing, hastily stringing bows. A few vanished beneath the lip of the wall. Abandoning their posts.

The sight of a lone Deathseeker could do that.

She shut them out, tightening the straps of her iron claws as she focused on her objectives. *Cross the field. Scale the wall. Open the gates.*

And if anything went wrong, throw herself into the thickest fighting and let the ancestors decide her fate. Matsu's order, the one she commanded of herself.

Thundering drums. The signal. One final breath.

Go.

Shiemi burst into a run. Alarmed voices rose above the thudding of her heavy feet and the cascading *thwips* of the first volley.

They fell short. She pumped her legs and pivoted, zigzagging.

Arrows dropped like daggers in disorganized clusters. They'd trained to fire on a marching column, but she was a lone target. They hadn't accounted for something crazy. Suicidal.

Their commander is sloppy, came her absent thoughts as she ducked past another volley. Why wasn't he coordinating their shots to cut off her path? But she already knew the answer; intelligence had suggested the local magistrate was away on business, leaving the town's defense in the hands of three young, untested deputies who often squabbled. Katsuchiyo had rewarded well the peasants who provided that information.

An arrow jabbed into her shin armor. She stumbled from the force but recovered. The archer should have been less hasty. *You're not drawing the bow far enough*, she thought. *You're not thinking!*

But a warrior wouldn't need to think. Incoming danger would not have altered their mindset or influenced their actions. And now she could see them clearly, eyes wide like flailing livestock, useless weapons thrashing as though they were drowning. These were papermakers and silkworm farmers. They weren't warriors. A sheep is still a sheep, even if it is taught how to roar.

The gate was close. Arrows rained down, near miss after near miss. She pushed herself in one last sprint beneath their commander's bewildered cries: "It's just one woman! It's only one!"

She leapt onto the gate with a bang. Iron claws raked the

wood, clinging. This was why she'd foregone armor. She scrambled up. By the time she exhaled, she was over the edge.

She was greeted by an arrow, feet away, as the archer let it slip.

It grazed her cheek. *Too bad.*

She kicked out his knee and tore out his throat.

Another rushed forward, machete swinging. She blocked and spun past, slashing open his heel. He screamed. Another scream, and he silenced.

More. Desperate opponents stumbled into her claws. A heavy thud at her side. She pulled, tossing him over. No time to hear him snap on the ground.

Drums. Katsuchiyo's advance. But they were too busy to deal with that, due to the unfortunate circumstance of a Deathseeker rampaging through their ranks.

They broke. Some pushed allies off the parapet. Their leader shouted, unheeded.

Now! Shiemi leapt down to the inner side. Cobblestone punched her knees. Were the town built for siege, this gate would be the first of two, and she would have another gate and a second column of archers to deal with. But it wasn't. She sprinted to the doors and slammed her shoulder into the massive plank barring them.

"Stop her!"

A loud thunk by her ear. An arrow. She spun, lashing out. The closest attacker wrenched back, red grooves in his face. The others flinched. She gave them no time, charging. They fell like wheat to her scythes.

Returning to the doors. Heaving the bar aside.

The gate burst open, the bang ringing in her ears. Soldiers poured in.

The wave of ashigaru wrapped around the town defenders like a massive snake in the square. The battle tide nearly sucked her up with it, but she swam against it, instead climbing the stairs to the parapets. Her gaze snagged on a man in ornate armor barking orders at the panicking defenders, attempting to organize them into a fish-scales formation, where spear-wielders formed a protective shell around a handful of strong combatants. This way, they could funnel opponents into the combatants at the front to be methodically dispatched. But the formation fell apart, the defenders scattering, leaving each other to their own fate. The armored man's face showed only confusion as he was pulled beneath trampling feet.

She shook her head. A town square, where existing structures would have better funneled attackers, was no place to deploy this formation, and fearful town conscripts could never maintain it. Experience would have taught him better. Experience he didn't have.

Akodo's Leadership couldn't teach him everything.

Heavy feet on the planks. A martial scream.

Pay attention! She reared back, catching a downward sword inches from her neck. Steel scraped against iron. She wrenched it away. The blade clattered at her feet.

Her attacker froze. With just the shadow of a beard, and the age of his helmet contrasting against the youth of his face, he couldn't even have been eighteen. He blanched, steeling himself. Accepting his death.

She waited until his eyes opened before stepping back.

"Try again," she said.

Hesitation. Slowly, he recovered his sword. “Th-thank you.” His eyes never left hers.

He was one of the deputies, she realized. This may well have been his first assignment. Without experience, he’d inherited an impossible task. What was an untested youth doing in the middle of this fight? What had he done in his past life to deserve such poor luck?

His was such a young face, so full of promise, trying to look steel-eyed and brave in a helmet and armor that could have been his grandfather’s. Hadn’t her own brother looked just like that before he set off to war?

“You have the reach advantage,” she reminded him. “Use it. Make me cross the line.”

She had to be careful. He might think she was taunting him. But the boy nodded, settling into a two-handed stance that was far better than his first attempt.

“If... if I do as you say,” he managed, forcing calm, “won’t you just counter me?”

“There is no counter for the right action,” she replied. “I cannot fight this battle for you, little cub. Think of your own safety, and you will fail—”

“—Be at peace with dying, and you will taste victory,” the boy finished. His back straightened. He readied his blade and nodded for her to attack.

The gesture held the weight of a story just beginning. He was untested metal, and she the hammer. He would break, or be strengthened. If he defeated her, his blade would shine brightly. His forging would be remembered. As would she.

Maybe it will be him, she thought. She hoped so. The boy needed confidence. Killing a Deathseeker would certainly

give him that. He would enjoy his lord's esteem, his reputation would increase, and she would live on in his legend. To play such a part in a young samurai's story would be a great service to the Lion. That would be the best possible outcome. Dust fell from the opening shutters of her heart as she allowed herself, for the first time in a long while, to hope for it. She raised her claws and breathed deep for her battle cry.

An arrow protruded from his throat.

Confusion flickered across his face.

And then he fell.

Shiemi blinked at the space where the boy once stood. The crunch of his landing punched her gut.

The ancestors might have favored him. He could have won. He could have defeated her. She could have played a part in his glorious story.

A story cut short. A future denied.

And another chance for her death to serve the Lion, torn away.

Who had dared to interrupt? Who—

Matsu Asayo. Katsuchiyo's *hatamoto*, his lieutenant and confidant. She stood just within range of her segmented bow, which she lowered in a gesture dripping with satisfaction. On her chest guard, the claw-arrowhead emblem of the Koritome, the vassal family from which she hailed, boasted of the archery prowess that made her family famous. Yet it was not half as boastful as the woman's smirk, nor her swagger as she stalked away.

So close. She'd been so close.

But why would Asayo interfere? Deathseekers were, by very definition, expendable. They volunteered for the most

dangerous tasks, taking on the burden of risk so others didn't need to. Redemption through one final service to the clan was their goal. Why not wait until the duel had ended?

If only she would burst into flame! If only a collapsing wall would bury her! If only—

Taiko drums. A chorus of cheers. The defenders had fallen. Victory. Sweet, bitter victory.

Descending, she found the boy choking, eyes red, severed bones jutting out beneath the arrow. The fall had broken his neck.

He didn't deserve to die this way, on his back gasping at the sky like a hooked fish. So, she rolled him onto his stomach, which was far more dignified, and drew his short dagger, placing the tip where it would kill him instantly. It's what she would have wanted, if their roles were reversed.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. He was lucky.

Shiemi barely registered Katsuchiyo's voice as she sidestepped a stunned guard, batting aside the command tent flap. The eyes of his command unit turned away from the map on the command table to regard her.

"When the other towns fall," he was saying, "it will foster doubt among his vassal lords. If he cannot protect settlements this far in his own territory, then how can they trust he will protect their estates while they make war on his behalf?"

He paused, finally noticing her.

She slammed two sheathed swords onto the table. Tokens scattered to the floor.

Guards reached for their blades, but Katsuchiyo stayed them with a gesture. Only the crickets filled the lingering

silence. No one moved, except the yokel Asayo, who idly picked her nose.

“It seems Lady Matsu wishes to speak in private,” Katsuchiyo finally said.

The officers filed out. Even the guards left. Asayo remained at Katsuchiyo’s side, as suited a lapdog like her.

As did Akodo Hiroki, Katsuchiyo’s only other Deathseeker.

Shiemi was surprised when she first met Hiroki. He was easily the oldest Deathseeker she’d ever seen, a withered man whose wide frame suggested that he’d been a walking mountain in his youth. A thin scar cleaved a deep canyon into his wrinkled face, a lacquered patch covering his missing eye. His right kimono sleeve was pinned up at the shoulder to conceal the stump. She wondered if he resented whatever had taken these things from him, along with his ability to vanguard-storm the battlefield as demanded by his oath. She’d hoped he would tell her the story. She never passed up the chance to hear an elder’s tale.

But he never did. He was always silent, just as he was now, gazing upon the map from the tent’s far corner, a statue of quiet mystery.

As the last officers left the tent, Shiemi uncurled her fingers, willing herself to relax one tight back muscle at a time. That could easily have been her last breath. She’d gravely insulted the general, not only by disrupting the meeting, but by storming in armed, leading with her right foot. An extreme gesture, but what better way to get his attention than to threaten an outburst in front of his officers? And by showing that she did not fear reprisal, she demonstrated the seriousness of her intentions. Had Lady Matsu not done the same when

she freed Akodo's captured lions and leopards into the Ikota plains, proclaiming them to be under her protection? Or when she answered the call of thunder, striking down Ikoma's son in front of her lord to claim what was hers?

Katsuchiyo lifted the smaller sword curiously. "It is unlike you to take battlefield trophies, Shiemi."

"It is the *daishō* of the boy who organized the village's defense," she said, emphasizing the word "boy".

"A regrettable loss," Katsuchiyo replied, almost sounding like he meant it. He stroked his beard and regarded her not unlike how he'd regarded his pieces on the strategy table.

"So then," he reasoned, "you intend to return his swords to his family, and you seek my permission." He shook his head. "Although you have served my forces well for some time now, it is not my place to give you leave, nor to compel you to stay."

That's not what this is about and you know it!

But she bit her tongue and chose cooler words. "It is customary for the one who felled the warrior to return their swords." At this, she stared pointedly at Asayo.

The woman shrugged. "Yeah, I'm the one who killed him. The boy would've taken her head if I didn't."

Shiemi inhaled deeply to cool the burning coals behind her eyes. "Then you admit to interfering in our duel." A flagrant violation of the unspoken warrior agreement: that the fight would be fair, one-on-one, no tricks. If *bushi* could not count on this assumption, then every match would devolve into chaos, no difference between samurai and brute. That way led to disorganized killing. It led to madness!

"Didn't look like a duel to me. Looked like you were teaching him how to beat you."

How about I teach you a lesson, you uncultured hick? After all, Asayo's country bumpkin teacher had apparently failed to instill when to keep one's nose out of another's affairs. But then, what good would come of such an outburst, when Katsuchiyo held Asayo's archery skill in such high regard, and losing her temper might undermine her point? Shiemi dug in her heels to prevent throwing herself over the table.

"Asayo only meant to spare your life," Katsuchiyo said.

Spare a Deathseeker's life? *A Deathseeker's?*

One whose breaths were drawn in atonement, whose tarnished reputation and stained past could only be washed clean at the end of a reddened blade?

When a Deathseeker joined an army, it was to be in the vanguard, to confront the fiercest fighting. Spurning reward or favor, they searched for a death so glorious, it would bleach away all memory of their crimes.

Death could come a thousand ways. Only a handful could be called "glorious". How many years had she sought them out, casting aside easier deaths in search of the one that would redeem her? The Deathseeker oath was as serious as coming-of-age or marriage vows, as sacred and binding as oaths sworn before the emperor! What place was it of this hayseed, of anyone, to meddle in them?

The worst cruelty is concealed by kindness. Asayo knew what the Deathseeker oath entailed. She knew exactly what she was doing when she'd released her bowstring.

It was an insult. A cruel prolonging of her punishment. Surely Katsuchiyo realized this.

And if he did not, then another Deathseeker would.

Shiemi turned to Hiroki on his stool. "Honored elder,

please explain it to them. Tell them the nature of our oath, so that Lord Katsuchiyo might understand the full weight of the terrible thing Asayo has done.” She glared at the archer. “So they might know what she stole from me.”

Wind rustled the canvas of the tent. The dim lantern light cast irregular shadows across the old man’s scarred face. When he finally spoke, Shiemi had to lean in so that she could hear him.

“In the fifth century, having committed herself to the path of redemption through service in the footsteps of Matsu Kirifu herself, the lone warrior Akodo Kakuime charged headlong into a force of thirty-four bandits. Impaled by their spears, she continued to fight until none of the bandits remained standing. Her incredible final act was witnessed by the poet Ikoma Ojirō who, so moved by her courage, was quoted as saying that as she dove into the wall of spears without regard for her own personal safety, it was *‘as if among her enemies she sought the face of death itself.’* He paused reverently. “Thus did the samurai who follow Kirifu’s example come to be known as ‘Deathseekers.’”

Yes, I know this already. Ikoma Ojirō was one of her favorite poets of the ancient styles. She’d studied his work, knew that play by heart. But she bit her tongue. Hiroki’s age, reputation, and the grievous wounds he’d suffered, all demanded her silence and respect. Even Lord Katsuchiyo said nothing in the silence that followed, not daring to interrupt before the old man had finished his thoughts.

At last, he sighed. “It is a pity Ojirō did not have you there, Shiemi. You could have simply corrected him, that a Deathseeker’s purpose was not to live without distraction

in full recommitment to the clan, but instead to pointlessly throw their life away. But perhaps you have yet to learn what our oath really means.”

The hayseed snickered.

Heat filled Shiemi’s ears as she bit back a snarl. For how long now had she laid her very life upon the altar of battle, as generations of Deathseekers had before her? How many times had she nearly perished to snatch up yet another victory? Was he really defending Asayo’s interference? Was he saying that in all these years of rushing headlong toward death, she was no closer to redemption than when her path began?

If so, then Matsu take his other eye!

“Even so,” she argued. “It was single combat between us. She had no right to interfere. And if you will not reprimand her, then I demand—”

“Enough,” Katsuchiyo spoke. “Asayo was following my orders.”

Had she heard that correctly? Surely not. “You...?”

He nodded. “Yes, Shiemi. I told her to protect you.”

The table steadied her against a disorienting wave. She blinked stupidly, opening her mouth for words, finding none.

Then it hadn’t been Asayo who had just thwarted her. The archer was just the means. It had been Katsuchiyo. Her commander. Her *trusted* leader.

It was bad enough that he’d ordered Asayo to thwart her attempt at a glorious death. But he’d also insulted her martial ability with a simple implication: that she, a volunteer for the riskiest fighting, needed “protection” in the first place.

Katsuchiyo turned to the archer and the old man. “Give us a few moments, if you would.”

Asayo brushed past Shiemi, flashing a smug grin, as a mouse skipping harmlessly between a lion's claws. She didn't even bother to help the old man rise; in the end, Shiemi lent her arm to help Hiroki stand. She fumed at him inside, smoldering from his reprimand, but age and experience still demanded her courtesy.

In the tent corner stood a sake jug and tray. When they were alone, Katsuchiyo uncorked the jug and poured not one cup, but two.

She could not focus on him. Flashes of their mingled past rushed through her mind in an endless stream. Him pulling strings in her first assignment so they might be near each other. Her drilling his ashigaru to his first military victory. Standing for him in a duel against a just accuser. Rooting out spies among his followers. Years of hand-to-mouth scrounging, wandering off only to return to his side, again and again as he needed her. An enforcer. A risk-taker. One who did not flinch. Her hobbies, her interests, fading slowly away with each of his requests. When he'd finally cast his dice across the war table to seize power, he didn't need to ask for her to join his forces. Through it all, there had always been Shiemi's same mute request: *let me die a glorious death in your service, and I will do whatever you ask.*

Then why the betrayal? Had she not served him well? As vanguard, as bodyguard, as...

The map stretched before her on the table. A layout of the next town. Her gaze flicked between wooden representations of his forces. Among them, at the forefront, a single figurine, painted white, representing...

His secret weapon.

Her.

Of course. She'd long lost count of the narrow escapes, the almost-deaths. How many times now had he foiled her redemption, just so he could deploy her again?

He'd been using her all this time.

She made no accusations. Why speak what no one doubts? Instead, she let her gaze, hot and narrow, speak on her behalf.

And his eyes, knowing and triumphant, made no denials.

So. Finally. They understood one another.

He approached, a full sake cup in each hand. "We are winning, Shiemi. The Matsu lords are abandoning my brother. We are proving that he isn't worthy to lead the family." He followed her gaze to the table, eyes lingering on the marker for Shiro Matsu. His intended prize.

Katsuchiyo's hatred for his brother Uniri was no secret to those who served under him. All his life he had been overlooked to lead the family. He was young, male, not famous enough, and too removed from Matsu's bloodline. He would never be considered, even if his aunt led the family. But now the Lion's Pride supported his brother's claim, and he was just as good as his brother. Why then, Katsuchiyo argued, shouldn't he take it himself?

"When my brother is cast down, and I am *daimyō*, I will need strong advisors. I intend to make you my hatamoto. I cannot do that if you are dead."

She searched for words. "A Deathseeker forswears all titles," she recited. "She refuses—"

"Shiemi, haven't you atoned enough?"

Atoned enough? She almost laughed. That was not for her to decide. It was up to her ancestors! She could not set aside

the oath she swore all those years ago. It was unthinkable.

Yet he pressed, "How many years has it been? Eight? Nine? If your ancestors wished you dead, you'd be dead. Not even a Koritome arrow would save you."

Perhaps. She was no philosopher, but that made a sort of sense. There was no avoiding an ancestor's judgment. And it had been years, so many that all memory of another way, of a time before she ever dwelled three feet from death, was like looking through a mist at the battlefields of her past life.

"When this is over, and I am in my rightful place, many things will be within my power." He extended a cup, as one might to an equal. "Serve me, and I swear, you will be made whole."

History recalled a handful of Deathseekers who were pardoned their oath, their lands and titles restored, their disgrace forgotten. It was rare, impossible to hope for. But not unprecedented. Yet only the Lion Clan Champion could grant this. By implying that he would, Katsuchiyo revealed the full breadth of his ambitions.

And she almost believed him. Almost.

But he'd just uttered a promise. And the Matsu made no promises. Their deeds were their words. His had spoken volumes. She would be deaf to them no longer.

She smacked the cup away. He pulled back, lip curled like a hungry wolf. What had she ever seen in him?

"I know everything you've done, Katsuchiyo." She leaned in close. "You will never be worthy to lead the Matsu."

She could feel the heat of his gaze on the back of her neck as she turned away. He could not keep her here, for Deathseekers decided for themselves whom they would serve. But she knew

that, if it was in his power, he would never let this slide. At his first chance, he'd avenge himself.

Or rather, he'd try.

Let him do what he wishes. She accepted whatever would come next.

Then she left to gather her things. There was nothing keeping her here anymore.

CHAPTER TWO

“You’re leaving?”

Word traveled fast, it seemed. Shiemi had few possessions, just a handful of personal items always packed and ready. It took only minutes to grab her things and a share of traveling rations. And a book, her lone indulgence, randomly chosen from the stack she’d accumulated. Yet already, here came Ashi, red-faced and huffing, oversized bundle bouncing against his back.

She gave him several moments to catch his breath. A blacksmith should have more stamina than this.

“You’re leaving?” he repeated, when he finally could.

“Lord Katsuchiyo and I had a disagreement.”

He nodded. No need for anything further. “Where will you go?”

Good question. She wasn’t quite sure. Wherever she went, it needed to be a place in conflict, a place with war.

Fortunately, that left many options. The ascendancy of Matsu Uniri, the first male daimyō in generations, had left the family conflicted. The endorsement of the Lion’s Pride,

without which no Matsu daimyō could claim legitimacy, had done little to convince those who sided with tradition. They bowed their heads in public but whispered behind his back. It was no secret; Uniri's worthiness would be decided by how well he could defend his position. Just as how Lady Matsu repelled vengeful ruffians who had once served her, or how she crossed swords with Akodo before she would bow to him, so, too, would the new daimyō be tested. And by his own brother, it seemed, who had been planning to usurp him for some time.

Shiemi could join the forces of any opportunistic lord attempting a land grab in the resulting instability. There were plenty to choose from. War had spread far across the southern lands. No province was left untouched.

But that would mean pledging herself to another ambitious lord. Another Katsuchiyo. There were so many like him. Her stomach lurched.

So that left just one option. "The Lion Champion is planning a campaign to recapture the Osari Plains. Those joining him gather at Yōjin no Shiro. There will be other Deathseekers there."

It felt right to say it out loud. Yes, that is where she would go.

"You weren't going to say goodbye?"

A rustle through the trees. Copper leaves fell like campfire sparks. "I would always be saying goodbye, Ashi."

He grinned sadly. "As you say."

He was like that, always forgetting what she was. Not all approved of the Deathseeker oath, and even among those who did, few saw past the white-painted face of one who

chased death. They'd both been outsiders of a sort, hadn't they?

If she were to hesitate, it would be for his sake. But she could not change her mind now. There was no backward path for true samurai, and where she was going, he could not follow.

"Well, you can't leave without this." Ashi unstrapped the bundle from his back with difficulty. It was as long as he was tall. "It was requisitioned for you, after all."

She knew what it was. "Ashi," she began, "I am no longer in this army. You cannot—"

"No, *you* cannot!" he blurted. His voice bounced off the trees, resounding.

In the years she'd known him, had he ever shouted like that?

"You cannot," he repeated, slowly. "Not without this. I didn't spend two seasons hunched in the forge, wasting metal on prototypes and scarring up my forearm, just so you could leave this behind!"

He tossed aside the wrapping, revealing a massive, sheathed sword, its long handle wrapped in stingray leather, with a rounded iron handguard cast in the ancient style.

"None of the officers use the old blades, mistress. You alone requested a field sword. I won't see my greatest work melted down to make cookery utensils. Now take it, and if the notion so strikes you, thank me!"

He assisted her in removing the sheath. The blade was heavy with a barely perceptible curve. A gentle swing coaxed three low whistles in tandem. She understood now why the Matsu ancestors once believed such swords to be sacred. "You've outdone yourself," she said.

“You forget, these lands were once of the Kakita. Father made them many blades in his day.” He shrugged. “I learned a thing or two.”

What could she possibly say? Ashi knew this could land him in hot water. Her resignation voided any right to the army’s supplies. But to refuse would disgrace him. And as she inwardly admitted, she wanted something to remember him by. “Thank you, Ashi.”

“Walk with the Fortunes,” he replied, bowing. “And let’s meet again in our next lives.”

The southern dirt road had just come into view when Shiemi heard the scream. She paused as the rustle of bamboo and brittle ferns engulfed the cry. At first, she thought it was a bird, or a fox practicing its human voice, as they were known to do. But then came two more on the wind. Deeper voices, demanding.

Leave it alone, she thought, just as she realized she couldn’t.

Following the noise for several minutes, Shiemi spotted armored figures in a bamboo grove. They were too far away to make out distinctly, but she could see enough: three ashigaru fought vainly for their lives against five superiorly armed opponents wearing the armor of samurai.

Only they were not samurai, Shiemi realized, as details came into focus. A samurai strode like a mighty wolf, but these men fought like rabid dogs. Their blue laminar armor was of Crane make, yet pieces were mismatched and damaged; no Crane would allow themselves to be seen like that. They didn’t wield their weapons properly, and since they couldn’t be of the Mirumoto family, that meant they had stolen them. A crudely

painted hatchet on an attacker's chest plate told all. These were Forest-Killers. Bandits of the worst variety. Animals without remorse.

This grove was far from the Forest-Killers' hidden base in the Shinomen Forest. But they had been spotted in Lion lands of late, due to the failure of the Scorpion Clan to keep them in check. Doubtless a calculated failure, as the Scorpion and Lion did not get along.

The ashigaru fighting the bandits were harder to place. They were not of Katsuchiyo's forces, of that Shiemi was certain. But they were not of the village defenders either. They were better equipped, and trained, unlike the hasty conscripts she'd faced that morning. They wore Lion colors, but no familiar heraldry.

Wherever they were from, they would die here. A spear tip scraped uselessly against armor before an ax cleaved into the defender's head. Emboldened brutes rushed over the dead man, driving a wedge between the remaining two ashigaru. They jabbed and shouted demands Shiemi could not make out. The ashigaru refused to give in. They seemed committed to death instead.

Brave. Especially for peasants.

I cannot help them, Shiemi thought. There was no getting to them in time. And without knowing who they were or who they served, she could be sticking her hand in a hornets' nest, becoming embroiled in matters not concerning her. And a death here, with an ax in her back, was no glorious passing. No, better to report this incident at the next waystation. She would go back to the road, find a magistrate ...

There was a child in the clearing. She just now saw her: a girl,

no older than nine, hands tucked uselessly into a swinging-sleeve kimono. An ashigaru swept defensively between her and the circling butchers, spear shaking in his hands.

Were the bandits attacking a child?

One rushed the girl, sword flashing. He would have killed her, had the ashigaru not leapt in the way. The sword slid into the peasant's belly, up to the hilt.

But rather than fall, the peasant straightened, meeting the bandit's bewildered face. Then, with a pained cry, he spun sideways, wrenching the sword from the bandit's hands. The last defender leapt before the child, replacing the one who fell. He'd protect her to the death.

Now it was impossible to walk away. In the face of such bravery, from mere peasants, how could she do nothing?

Shiemi sprinted as she shucked her new blade and cast the sheath aside. An ax head caught the sunlight ahead. The last defender fell. His eyes met hers as she crashed into the clearing, just as the light left them.

She roared. They spun.

The first lashed out with his blade. He lost his arms, then his head. She ducked a tossed ax and slashed the neck of the second. Arterial blood sprayed into the eyes of the third, who stumbled into her kick. She planted her sword like a flag into his back.

The last two hesitated. Bright fear danced in their wide eyes.

The fools. They'd wasted their opening. Now Emma-Ō would take them.

Leaving her sword, she batted aside a feeble punch. Then she drew the knife from his belt with her free hand, stabbing

it deep into his eye. He crumpled.

The final bandit reached into his kimono collar. She wouldn't give him the chance to draw whatever was there. She flicked her wrist. The knife jutted from his throat. He fell, gurgling, to the dirt.

Silence. Shiemi exhaled and checked her surroundings. But no hidden attackers lunged from the brush. No arrows fell from the trees. There was only the call of the cicadas. The bandits lay still. Their blood would feed the wildflowers.

She finally relaxed, letting her conscious mind return. It was always better to let instinct guide the body in a skirmish, but now she had to tend to the child. Who, at this moment, was regarding the field sword with open wonder.

"Are you unharmed?" Shiemi asked, harsher than she'd intended. When was the last time she'd spoken to a child? She avoided children as a rule, ever since ...

"That's the largest sword I've ever seen."

Not what Shiemi had expected. Unflinching, the child stepped over the fallen bandits to get a closer look at the *nodachi*. She didn't even cast her guardians' bodies a second glance.

It was only now that Shiemi noticed the fine condition of the girl's clothes, the red shimmer in her mop of unruly hair. A noble's child? The girl turned, and Shiemi's breath caught on the girl's eyes. Speckled, the shade of honey. Flecks suspended in amber.

The child's steps disturbed the last bandit, whose hand came free from within his collar. Shiemi saw what he'd reached for in his final moments: a sheet of paper, folded many times, like a fan.

And as it came free, she caught a glimpse of a familiar stamp. Only a handful would recognize the emblem, since its meaning was entrusted only to those who personally served the owner. A lump formed in Shiemi's throat: the secret chop of Matsu Katsuchiyo.

Why would Forest-Killers have a covert message from her former general? Why did this bandit think it would save him? Had they intercepted something damning, and somehow connected it to him? Was it blackmail, or something else?

The folds concealed whatever message it contained. Whatever it was, it didn't concern her. She should leave it be.

And yet she took the paper from his limp fingers. Should she open it? A repugnant thought: the letter was not addressed to her. She wouldn't trust someone who violated a private missive, so how could she justify doing that herself? And hadn't she just washed her hands of Katsuchiyo completely? She sensed in the folded paper a certain pull, a riptide that could yank her back into his current, marching beneath men who didn't respect her.

But then, the bandit had meant to show this to her, as if it would stay her hand. Could she make better choices if she knew what it contained? Could whatever secrets within protect her from his influence? From retribution?

Her thoughts bounced within her head. Decisiveness was virtue, but now...

"Hey!" barked the girl.

Shiemi tucked the message away, unread. Now was not the time.

"Are you a samurai?" the girl asked, golden eyes starry. "You look like one, except your face is painted like a geisha."

Heat rose in Shiemi's cheeks. *What a brat!* "What are you

doing out here? Were these bandits robbing you?”

The girl smiled. An incisor, long like a fang, poked out from her lips. “You *are* a samurai!” she pronounced, then crossed her arms. “Then you will help me! My parents are also samurai, lords of their realm. You will take me home to Footnote Village!”

The lump in Shiemi’s throat fell into her stomach. She could have avoided this. The road had been right there.

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