

Courtly Nets and Hidden Snares

By Mari Murdock

"I plead on behalf of my clan that the Throne intervene in the Lion's ruthless invasion of our lands," Ide Tadaji begged, his petition bloated with melodrama despite the seriousness of his rugged face. "Their raids have turned into savage butchery. The Lion slay peasants, which threatens the harvests. They steal crops reserved for the Imperial tax. They break the laws of Heaven with their warmongering."

"How dare you twist the truth before the sacred Throne of Heaven?" Ikoma Ujiaki barked, his beard bristling and the Lion *mon* on his chest puffing out as he stepped forward. "The Unicorn do us grave insult by pretending that they themselves have not acted in violence along our shared border. They have committed their share of atrocities. They are the ones who make war and relish in it. It was they who first betrayed the trust between our clans by breaking the marriage alliance between Shinjo Altansarnai and our Ikoma Anakazu, a union blessed by our late Emperor himself. As the Right Hand of the Emperor, we Lion only seek to enforce the Imperial law as our honored legacy."

Tadaji's lips puckered, Ujiaki's words twisting his meekness into anger. Yet he did not raise his voice to meet the Lion's timbre.

"My Lord Ikoma. You speak out of turn," he said. "And beyond the truth. Shall I summon your accountants to tell us all how many farmers you slew? How many *koku* you stole?"

"Lies," Ujiaki could not help but hiss before settling back into the decorum of the Imperial audience, but the whole court shifted uneasily in the throne room. The late Emperor had not made any moves to quell the illegal skirmishes between Lion and Unicorn, so all ears strained to know what the Imperial Regent would do. Sitting upon the Emerald Throne, Bayushi Shoji stirred not a thread as the Unicorn representative continued, Shoji's fierce crimson *mempō* hiding every hint of his thoughts.

Kakita Yoshi knew his next move. Like any Kakita born while the gates of Kyūden Kakita were closed, he was cursed to never wield a katana. Yet this had never quelled the warrior spirit within him.



The court was his battlefield. Today, Shoju was his opponent. The Imperial Chancellor watched the Scorpion, the yearning sinews of his heart eager like a bowstring behind a nocked arrow.

All the pieces of my plan are falling into place. I have outmatched you this time, Shoju. You will stride headlong into my snare, and I just wait for the right time to strike.

Tadaji ended his appeal with a deep bow on the floor, his forehead pressed against the mirror-finished wood. The pitiful display stirred anger, frustration, and compassion throughout the assembly. Nearly silent mutterings behind sleeves and shared stolen glances rippled through room. The Imperial Regent lifted a finger for silence, and the room begrudgingly obeyed.

“Ide Tadaji, you do the Unicorn great honor by presenting this appeal before the Throne,” Shoju acknowledged. The Scorpion knew his way well around a politically neutral answer. But that would not save him, no matter his sincerity. “However, on behalf of Heaven, under whose blessing I act as Regent, I must deny your request, though not without compassion. Currently, acting Emerald Champion Agasha Sumiko and the Imperial Legion cannot spare the troops, as they are spread across the Empire investigating the disappearances of Akodo Toturi and Prince Daisetsu, which takes priority before all other undertakings. I must instruct that the Lion and Unicorn resolve this conflict on their own, as befitting the responsibilities of their esteemed representatives.”

Tadaji maintained a stolid blankness in his face, despite the baiting assertion. The whole court suspected Unicorn involvement in Hantei Daisetsu’s disappearance, since he was last seen in the palace in the company of the young *meishōdō* soreress Iuchi Shahai. Embarrassment would end the petition from the Unicorn, though Bayushi Shoju’s carefully worded response avoided an outright accusation. The Regent could not risk offending a Great Clan, not when everyone still suspected the Scorpion of stealing the throne or involvement in Toturi’s disappearance. And the Unicorn representative, to his credit, showed no offense.

As expected, Tadaji got to his feet, bowing once more, and retreated from his place on the floor, relinquishing his speaking place before the throne.

Yoshi tilted his head to glance at the brooding band of Phoenix courtiers, who whispered among themselves as Tadaji passed them. Only Yoshi knew they would speak next.

“My Lord Shoju,” Asako Togama said, stepping forward and bowing. A series of whispered gasps echoed through the chamber.

The old Asako family *daimyō*, dressed in solemn robes, stood resolute before the Regent, his retinue of courtiers behind him. The Phoenix, a clan full of pacifists, often interceded in matters of violence. However, they had thus far been silent regarding the Lion and Unicorn skirmishes, neither side having received the Imperial mandate to declare war. Yoshi had hoped Shoju would not have foreseen a Phoenix intervention, despite all his political prowess.

Though Shoju’s *mempō* showed nothing, Yoshi imagined a scowl. He almost smiled.

You lose your balance, Shoju.



"We of the Phoenix request that you reconsider your decision with regard to the Unicorn and the Lion," Togama continued, his voice calm though his eyes narrowed with reproach. "We do not wish to offend the heavenly decree that establishes your leadership on behalf of the Hantei until Prince Daisetsu's ascension to the throne, but we, as scholars of the celestial ways and speakers for the elements, must remind you to do your duty. As Regent, above all, you must accomplish the celestial will of maintaining peace and harmony among the people of Rokugan. This is the most sacred of the duties of the Throne, and it cannot be ignored."

Yoshi's trap had sprung.

Murmurs shuddered through the court at the unexpected boldness of the Phoenix. Even Ujiaki's usual smugness had melted into disbelief. Yoshi turned his eyes on Doji Fumiki at his side, giving her a nod.

Your turn.



With the swiftness of a sword stroke, Fumiki strode forward to stand beside Togama, conviction gleaming behind her eyes. "On behalf of the Crane, I agree with the judgment of the wise Asako-dono. Lord Shoji, we of the Crane also humbly ask that you reconsider. You know that our own clan suffers alongside the Unicorn and the Lion from the present conflicts."

"On behalf of all those suffering under Heaven," Yoshi said, raising his voice at Shoji, drawing power from the wave of dissatisfied grimaces and suspicious glances that swelled

behind him, all directed at the Scorpion Regent. Shoji could not stand against such a strike.

"We ask that you do your duty to maintain the peace lest you lose the sanction of Heaven."

A muffled chaos exploded behind the sleeves and fans of all in attendance. Yoshi's blow had struck deep. Despite the Imperial decree, despite Sumiko's support, Shoji was losing his grip on the Throne. The Scorpion would fall. Yoshi imagined a frown deepening into the darkest glower on Shoji's face behind the mempo.

Out of habit, Yoshi flicked his eyes to his political rival, Bayushi Kachiko, who sat on the dais beside her husband in the seat of the Imperial Advisor. Yoshi was eager to see the angry fire that would blaze in her own eyes at the upset of sentiments against her clan. But Kachiko had turned away from the room, as if hiding an overflow of emotions.

Both Lord and Lady Scorpion bleed from my cut.

Shoji lifted his hand, earning an imperfect and resentful silence.



"My decision stands," he said, his voice betraying nothing of his unease. "I dismiss the court."

With that, the audience ended, but as soon as Shoji and Kachiko withdrew from the throne room, the courtiers unleashed their impatient chatter. The Regent had lost face. Ujiaki jeered to his fellow Lion, growling every word of satisfaction for anyone nearby to hear. Tadaji and the other Unicorn approached and bowed to Togama, who shook his head in humility. Yoshi and Fumiki had their own admirers among the other Phoenix and a few Unicorn, who moved forward to congratulate the Crane on their bold action. The Scorpion courtiers—and many of the Dragon—had retreated from the throne room almost as fast as Shoji.

Yoshi wanted to ignore it all, out of decorum...but pride stirred within him. He turned away from the other courtiers, his chin lifting slightly. Their existence faded from his notice.

This was my victory. More will come. You will not keep the throne you stole, Shoji. I will not let you.

Fumiki rejoined him as he exited the throne room.

"Kakita-sama," she said, the flush of the audience's events still pink on her cheeks. "Your political maneuvers today were executed flawlessly. Your brilliant cooperation with the Phoenix has garnered honor and distinction for the Crane. I thank you for allowing me the opportunity to work with and learn from you."

"No, it is I who must thank you, Fumiki-san, for treating so successfully with the Phoenix last week. I was worried that they would not have the courage to stand for Heaven's will, but you did well in reminding them of their duty. Together, we have created one more obstacle for the Scorpion to stumble upon. With enough of them, they shall be rendered powerless."

Fumiki smiled. "I owe it to your guidance, Kakita-sama. Though, I wonder if we wander too far down the path of the Scorpion in this."

Yoshi smiled back. He had used her, and she knew it. Fumiki's reputation as the most virtuous of courtiers had helped him swing the favor of the court toward the "Phoenix" concern he had devised. Her meeting with Togama had been only one of dozens of meetings he had arranged between the Great Clans in unusual times and places, stretching the army of Scorpion spies too thin to catch him. And he would organize dozens more to throw them off the scent of his next move. She worried about the morality of the manipulation.

"Oh?" he asked, feigning ignorance. Fumiki reddened.

"I heard the rumors," she started slowly, her white-haired head lowered in humility. "The most untrue whispers about Shoji-sama. About Toturi's disappearance, about a quarrel between the princes..."

She trailed off, unwilling to outright accuse Yoshi of gossip mongering.

"I work to keep the Scorpion's eyes and ears occupied," Yoshi said calmly, cutting off her worry about angering him. "They have controlled and manipulated the court long enough."

"But purposefully manipulating them in return. Is that..." Fumiki paused again.



"Righteous?" he asked, willing himself to keep the mockery and frustration out of his speech. He was angry with Shoju, not this little Crane girl who presented herself as the moral superior of everyone at court. She would learn soon enough what it took to fight against the Scorpion.

"No," she finally answered. "Is that wise? If Shoju-sama truly does wield full Imperial authority, is toppling his power in the absence of the Hantei a wise decision? Would that not cause greater unrest in Rokugan? More war? More chaos?"

Yoshi's face hardened. "Fumiki-san, as Imperial Chancellor, I obeyed the late Emperor Hantei the thirty-eighth with every motion of my body and every desire of my heart. I honor that vow of allegiance beyond his death, dedicating it to his heir. Right now, the Throne's power is frail, as the Fortunes have seen fit to take our beloved Emperor and disinherit his firstborn heir on the same day, so everything I do is to protect their sacred office from those who would usurp it during this time of weakness. I will do this and more if it means checking Scorpion power. Inside and outside of court."

Humility glimmered in Fumiki's eyes. She bowed to him. "Forgive me, Kakita-sama. I did not mean to question your sense of duty. It seems I have yet much to learn from you about courage, and I will strive to do better. Please, count me as your ally. Call upon me if you have need of me again."

Yoshi nodded, and Doji Fumiki disappeared toward her own chambers, her head held high. Turning to look out the nearby window upon the palace garden, Kakita Yoshi spotted the green-sashed servants he had personally placed among the ladies-in-waiting. They followed a few paces behind Lady Kachiko, who had retreated from the court assembly into the garden. She circled beneath a bare plum tree, heading toward the koi pond. She had been spending more and more time outside, despite the autumn frost gathering thicker on the ground every day.

Why so much solitude, Kachiko, when you so thrive among your victims?

He ordered a nearby Crane attendant to bring him a thicker robe from his quarters. He would join her to find out.

Yogo Asami's sandals crunched along the frozen pebbles of the garden trail, barely yielding beneath her footfalls. Soon the snow would come. Soon she could not wander outside lest she risk a chill. Lady Kachiko never got sick, and she, Asami, must likewise never do so.



But she could not bear to be inside. The palace had grown stifling, and the feverish passions raised during the Imperial assembly had nearly forced her to flee. She was not the political mastermind her lady was.

She knew how to behave at court. She knew what to say, when to say it, and how. However, her duty was not to be a courtier, even if she was a good one. Her duty was to be Kachiko. An exactly mirrored image. Without Kachiko's daily companionship to guide her mannerisms and intonations, her vigilant mask was slipping.

The remembrance of her failure during the *otsukimi* poetry reading flicked in her mind like the sting of a bamboo switch. She had accidentally shown Akodo Kaede a look of pity. That look had betrayed her knowledge of Toturi's demise, and the *shugenja* had run to her husband, perhaps to share Toturi's fate. A grievous mistake.

Asami paused on the path, mere steps away from the pond. It had not yet iced over, and she could see the motionless crimson and gold koi, balanced in their torpor beneath the water. They were not dead, yet they would remain lifeless until spring, not eating, not breathing. Simply waiting for spring. She felt her shoulders droop, a gesture she had thought Lady Kachiko had trained out of her long ago.

Forgive me, my lady. I fail you. I have ceased to move, like these pathetic fish.

A light step behind her on the path drew her attention from the pond. Kakita Yoshi parted the small retinue of her attendants as he approached. Kachiko's greatest rival at court.

"The Lord Chancellor is a proud one," Kachiko had told her. "So proud that he never gives up. He uses all my opportunities to embarrass him at court to hone his skills. Beware of Yoshi. Never face him alone."

Asami straightened her posture.

"Lady Kachiko, please forgive my intrusion into your musings," Yoshi said, his usually stern voice softened in a friendly salutation. "It seems we both meant to enjoy the sunshine by strolling in the garden one last time before winter."

He wanted something, yet she could not risk staying with him long enough to find out what it was.

"You do me great honor by accompanying me, Kakita-dono," she said, slightly nodding her head at him, as Kachiko would have done. "Though perhaps it is growing too cold. Surely, the temperate southern coasts of the Crane lands do not prepare you for the chill of these wintry months in the capital."

He chuckled. Uncharacteristically. Yoshi was never jovial with Kachiko. If anything, he was always stern. Always on edge. Always looking for a way to strike back at her. Asami did not like his laugh. Nor the smile that accompanied it.

"You are somewhat right, Lady Kachiko. Some of us Crane find the cold uncomfortable. Like our dear friend Lady Hotaru, for instance, from whom you probably derive this observation. She cannot abide the cold at all." He looked down into the pond, seeing the



slumbering koi. "But I am not like her. You see, just as our namesake, we differ. Some wild cranes migrate to the southern lands during winter. They cannot give up the ease of flying in warm winds and fishing in warm waters. However, some brave the winter, knowing that the sleeping fish are easy prey."

Asami felt her throat tighten. She willed it to ease, drawing her cheeks and unsteady lips in with Kachiko's wily smile. "I see. I had not known that, Yoshi-dono."

"It is my pleasure to enlighten your understanding of the Crane." A spark of delight lit in his eyes.

Asami paused. She had let him win a point against Kachiko. Her lady would not have let his pride go unchecked. A mistake. "Yes, your explanation was an apt one, though perhaps the analogy is a little barbaric."

"I disagree. There is no barbarism in the hunt. Animals must feed themselves, after all."

"Perhaps not. But I think Lady Hotaru's habits betray some cultured truth. There is grace and skill in the live hunt that those who chase motionless quarry do not have. The difference, perhaps, between a crane and a buzzard."

Yoshi's mouth did not harden in frustration as she expected.

"You always take Hotaru-sama's side against me," he said, grinning. "Perhaps you harbor a soft spot for her."

"You are mistaken," Asami began, but her mind went blank. She had not meant to betray Kachiko's weakness for Doji Hotaru. She almost cursed the Fortunes for her ill luck. Yoshi had set a trap by mentioning Hotaru, and she had fallen right in.

"I think not," he said. His voice grew sharper with an impatient eagerness. "But perhaps this affection for Hotaru-sama is only one of many distractions that have preoccupied your mind lately, Lady Kachiko. I worry about you. You have not been acting like yourself."

"Not like myself?" she repeated. A flash of fear jolted down her spine.

Does he know?

"You've grown, dare I say, sentimental?" He seemed to loom closer. Absently, Asami turned away despite willing herself to stand tall against him.

"Yes. Perhaps the court's stresses have weighed on you?" he continued. "The death of our dear friend the Emperor was a severe blow to us all, and surely a great one to the Imperial Advisor. It certainly was to me as chancellor. The Imperial burden now rests on us all more heavily. Especially with the suspicious absence of our Emerald Champion."

"It has been difficult, but Shoju-sama's leadership strengthens us all," Asami stammered. She could not regain the calm of her composure. It was as if she played a game of Go on a board she could not see, one whose grid stretched endlessly. She did not know where to take her next move. And more and more confidently, Yoshi set down his stones.

"Perhaps, but surely, you have heard the reason that Shoju-sama has dedicated so much effort to investigating Toturi's disappearance. Champion Sumiko and Captain Ishikawa believe



that assassins were involved. Perhaps even shinobi.”

Asami’s breath vanished.

Aramoro.

“You look unwell, Kachiko-san.” Yoshi’s voice feigned concern, but his eyes revealed a hunter’s keenness. “I can see why you might be afraid at this news. Shinobi are no mere legend to balk at. Your *yōjimbō* has not been seen at court for several days. You must send for him at once, especially if there are shinobi lurking about Ootosan Uchi.”

“He has been busy with other duties that the Regent has given him.”

“What is more important than guarding the Imperial Advisor in this time of danger?” Yoshi insisted. “Do not tell me he prizes the esteem of his brother higher than his duty to protect you, Lady Kachiko. He cannot shirk his duty—”

“—No. Aramoro is a dutiful servant to the Throne.”

“As dutiful as Akodo Toturi, I see. Conveniently absent in a grave hour of need.”

“Do not question his loyalty,” Asami cried, her words breathy, heavy with threatening tears. She clamped her lips shut. Without knowing it, she had let herself loose. She had not used Kachiko’s voice to communicate Kachiko’s views. Kachiko would never have cared if Yoshi had disparaged Aramoro. No, in that moment, Asami had been herself, Aramoro’s wife, fighting for the honor of her husband.



Yoshi said nothing. He turned and dismissed his and her attendants who edged along the far side of pond, endeavoring to hear their words. Asami nearly bolted after them, but she could not. Yoshi did not even need to block her way, though he did. She was frozen, like the little fish floating below them.

He knows the truth.

Yoshi towered over the woman who was not Bayushi Kachiko as she shrank into herself. He did not know who she was, but the fact that she was an imposter was undeniable. She had revealed herself. This woman did not have Kachiko’s confidence, her poise, her power. She was afraid, incapable, and sloppy. Where Kachiko was heartless, this woman was tender. He would need to find out who she was.

Perhaps Hotaru knows who this body double is. She has spoken more with Kachiko than has anyone else in the clan. But where is Kachiko?

This woman’s courtly graces had been sufficient to fool the court ever since the Scorpion Champion had taken up the regency, but Yoshi’s cunning far outmatched hers. Aramoro’s absence was curious, however...did it mean he was with the real Kachiko, wherever she was?



He looked down at the near perfect image of his rival. This woman indeed looked the part, without illusion or concealing makeup. She wore Kachiko's clothes and accoutrements, her mask, her perfumes. She was an exacting likeness. But this woman had broken under his accusations of Aramoro. She was obviously in love with him. And afraid for him.

Afraid when I mentioned him in connection to Toturi's absence.

Yoshi smiled. As Imperial Chancellor, Yoshi had been privy to the details of Akodo Toturi's investigation with Seppun Ishikawa. With her heart's weakness, this woman had revealed that Aramoro's absence coincided with that of Toturi. Aramoro must have been Toturi's assassin.

A Scorpion assassination plot.

"Forgive me, Kakita-dono," the woman mumbled. "The cold has made me lose myself for a moment. I will follow my attendants inside."

Two red spots still flecked her cheeks to show an embarrassment that Kachiko never would have revealed, yet this woman had straightened her neck into a proud, lofty carriage that mimicked that of her mistress. Whoever she was, she would maintain her guise to the end.

"Of course, Lady Kachiko. Wintry winds stir even the stillest of waters," he replied, his eyes following her as she took anxious steps back along the frozen garden path, away from the pond.

A moving reflection in the water drew his gaze. A pair of winter cranes flew overhead, eyeing the pond only momentarily before continuing on toward the marshy riverbanks north of Otosan Uchi. He watched them vanish behind the palace's gold and green roof. A good omen for victories that day: one against Shouju in court, one against Kachiko's decoy in private. He would not stop until the Scorpion's treason was stamped out for good.

