

The Price of War

By Mari Murdock

Some weeks later, in contested territory...

Matsu Tsuko crouched within a thick copse of trees, waiting in ambush with nearly a dozen other units of Lion Clan samurai. The dense foliage hushed the screams and steel clanging of the fighting below, but nothing could rid the air of the raw-iron smell of blood. The scent tickled her into a fury, her legs itching to spring, to attack. She eyed her commander, Akodo Toturi, but the smoothness of his face betrayed no hint of his strategy as he watched the battle from afar.

What is the fool waiting for?

Tsuko's contingent had arrived nearly an hour ago, ready to reinforce the dwindling forces of Akodo Arasou, the Lion Clan Champion, in the territory dispute with the Crane Clan. In an act of insolence, the Crane had bolstered their occupying forces in Toshi Ranbo, the northernmost Lion city, to force a Lion army away from the contested grain-laden Osari Plains in the south. Arasou had been campaigning at the foot of the city for several weeks, building siege weapons, and needing reinforcements only to make his final push to retake the city and ensure the Crane could not use it as a staging ground against them. Arasou's older brother, Toturi, had been summoned from the monastery to answer that call for aid...yet...

Why does he hesitate?

A small Crane contingent sped past their hiding place, bearing torches, intending to sneak behind Arasou's forces and set fire to their battering rams. She clutched her katana and waited for Toturi's golden signal fan to herald the charge. However, he remained still.

"What are we waiting for?" Tsuko hissed, the heat of her blood curling her fingers tighter around her katana until her fist shook. "The Crane are right there!"

Toturi did not answer, merely lifting his fan parallel to the earth, the sign to wait. Tsuko turned away in disgust, shifting her attention to her comrades-in-arms, their anticipation as palpable as her own. Down the line, Matsu Gohei grinned, unnervingly jovial in the face of danger as ever. Just behind her, Kitsuo Motso's boots creaked as he fidgeted, likely attempting to figure out what Toturi was thinking.

As if thinking works. She glared at Toturi again. *Weakling. Arasou wouldn't wait on a sly calculation. Victory is only moments away!*

Tsuko strained to see Arasou in the faraway skirmish. The fiery gold glint of Arasou's helmet caught her eye as he sliced through a Crane *ashigaru* in a single stroke. The Crane's shoulder and head parted, and Arasou powered through the gap straight into another Crane warrior, smashing into his face with a fierce blow and bellowing in a ferocious battle cry.



Tsuko's place was by his side, fighting toward victory, not hiding in a thicket like a shy mule with a cowardly master.

Despite Arasou's ferocity, the torch-bearing Crane had proved enough of a distraction to pull the Lion from the city's walls. In that moment, a deluge of Crane spearmen poured through the gates, crashing into the forces at Arasou's back like a blue wave over golden sand. Screams shook the sky as the spear line slammed into the Lion troops, dividing them from their battering rams. Arasou signaled for a regrouping retreat, and the Lion samurai fell back, running past the trees of Toturi's hiding place with the Crane spearmen in furious pursuit.

"Toturi!" Tsuko hissed as the Lion and Crane armies passed by, but Toturi still did not flinch, merely watching. She raised an arm as if to strike him, but Motso snatched at her elbow.

"Patience, Tsuko-sama!" Motso muttered, struggling to keep his grip on her arm as she wrenched it from his grasp. "Our commander is waiting for the Crane momentum to swing past recovery!"

Suddenly, Toturi flicked his fan, signaling the charge. Battle cries rang from the forest as the Lion reinforcements burst from the trees, finally joining the fray. They caught the Crane in a tight pincer attack as Arasou, seeing the fresh Lion troops, pressed his forces hard in retaliation. Tsuko cut her way through the battle to where Arasou slashed through three Crane ashigaru, making short work of them despite his battle fatigue.

"You are late," he boomed to Tsuko, smiling, Crane blood and dust spattered all over his handsome face. He spun with dexterous footwork to counter a nimble Crane samurai's slash at his throat, finishing him with a swift strike.

"Your brother was hesitating," she yelled over the clashing steel, deftly slicing through a Crane samurai who stumbled too close to her. The body fell with a heavy crunch, and she leaped over him toward a Crane who danced around Motso, threatening to take off his head with her graceful *kata*. Tsuko crashed into her, disrupting the pretentious fluidity of the Crane fighting style and landing a killing blow.

"Toturi-kun thinks too much!" Arasou laughed, leaping forward to meet two more Crane ashigaru in their frantic attempts to regain the upper hand. "I always tell him that!"

"That's why you're clan champion instead of him!" she called back, turning to face a spry Crane samurai in blue-lacquered armor. Tsuko charged, challenging the graceful agility of the Crane with a violent thrust. Despite Tsuko's superior strength, the Crane's deft spins and parries deflected all the blows away, and his armor mitigated the power of her strokes. A quick cut sliced across her arm, her shoulder, her side, her face, but she smiled despite the pain.

We are the teeth of the Lion!

Tsuko hurtled forward to crowd her opponent's defensive stance, overpowering it with brute ferocity. With a loud cry, Tsuko slashed at a weak spot at his throat, and he fell to the ground.

Drum beats sounded from atop the walls of Toshi Ranbo, and the Crane responded with a retreat. Tsuko wheeled around to find Arasou again, ready for orders of pursuit, but Toturi had



gotten to his brother first. Tsuko ran to catch the last of their exchange.

"...siege would be better," Toturi insisted, again the calmness of his face clashing with the violence of the scene. "If we take the city by force..."

"So you admit that should we pursue, we would take it?" Arasou said, his handsome brow furrowing. "The odds are now on our side! Thanks to that pincer attack, we have seriously depleted their forces. All we need to do is push! The gates are open! Today we regain what is rightfully ours!"

Toturi's mouth twisted in seriousness, and he stretched to his full height as if trying to play the older brother. "Taking it by force could spark all-out war with the Crane and turn the Emperor's favor against us. Through siege, we can hope the Crane will surrender to save face and avoid a slaughter."



Tsuko pounced forward. "Hope for surrender? What kind of Lion are you?" she snarled. "Trust your instincts, Arasou-sama. Remember, 'Those who attack first shall win.' That is our path to victory. A siege has no glory, and hope cannot win us the city."

Arasou locked eyes with Tsuko, pride blazing in his gaze. He smiled. Her heart burned.

"Lady Tsuko agrees with me, Toturi-san. With her advice, I shall lead our final charge toward the city. Toshi Ranbo will be ours!"

With a powerful arm, he signaled his banners. The Lion forces, united under their champion, fell into disciplined ranks, ready for the charge. Tsuko and Toturi joined the lines on either side of Arasou.

"To victory!" he shouted, taking a last look at Toturi, then at Tsuko, before charging after the retreating Crane.

Tsuko raced toward Toshi Ranbo, her heart swelling as her brothers and sisters of the Lion rushed to overtake the foe. Arasou and his elite swordsmen bounded toward the Crane in fierce strides, overtaking the first of their prey in moments. With a mighty leap, he crashed down upon the back of a large Crane spearman, knocking him to the ground. He tumbled forward to knock the legs out from under another retreating Crane before springing into the air to again smash down upon another.

Tsuko veered to the right to cut her own path toward Toshi Ranbo's gates. She stabbed at one Crane, who tripped another with his falling body. Tsuko hurled herself at them, finishing them quickly. Her katana lodged deep in the lacquered folds of a breastplate, so she kicked at it to wrench her sword free. She regained her pace.



Just three hundred more paces to the gate! Victory is upon us!

A flash of blue and white emerged from Toshi Ranbo. Doji Hotaru, the Crane Clan Champion, appeared with a small body of archers to provide cover fire for the fleeing Crane. They let fly a volley, raining death down upon the gaining Lion. Two zipped past Tsuko's face, so she darted toward the gate to find shelter from the hail of arrows. She leaped over several mangled Crane bodies that marked Arasou's ferocious path ahead of her. She managed a glimpse of the top of his shining helmet.

Tsuko sped forward to catch up to him. She could hear his battle cries, which swelled with the passion of battle. He raged through the Crane ranks, slashing through blue bodies on either side of him, leaves before a tempest. He was a mere two hundred paces from the gate. Tsuko could see Hotaru's face contorted in fear as the raging force approached. The Crane Champion's eyes glistened with tears.

"Victory!" Tsuko cried. "Arasou, lead us to victory!"

As Tsuko drew closer, however, the look on Hotaru's face became clear. It was not fear: it was sorrow.

The Crane Clan Champion drew back her bowstring in a long, graceful pull and let an arrow fly. Her bolt sped like lightning straight into Arasou's chest. The Lion Clan Champion didn't break pace. Tsuko shoved through the throng, trying to clear a path to Arasou, but a few dozen Crane ashigaru still crowded the way, ramming her in all directions. She dropped her katana and pushed back against the bodies.

Another arrow flew from Hotaru's bow. The arrowhead slammed through the back of Arasou's helmet with a sickening snap. His momentum slowed, and he tumbled forward onto the earth.

Tsuko screamed, but she could not hear the sound. Silence shuddered through her body, her stomach, her throat, her heart. Numbness spread down her limbs. Her legs shook, barely holding her up as she stumbled. Eventually, after an eternal moment, she stood over what was once the greatest samurai in the Lion Clan.

She fell to her knees, choking as her lungs stiffened, every part of her trembling in disbelief. *No!*

She clutched at his shoulder, her hands trembling too fiercely to lift him.

This is a dream! A nightmare!

Toturi rushed to her side and heaved Arasou over. Hotaru's arrow stuck out of his eye, reddish water welling up its shaft, spilling into the other clear, open eye that saw nothing.

Shivering, Tsuko turned from Arasou's dead gaze to Toturi, but he did not notice her. With his jaw clenched, the only sign of his pain, he stared at Hotaru. The white-haired samurai wiped away her tears before fleeing with the remaining Crane back into Toshi Ranbo, the gates closing behind them.

The silence broke. The chaos of the battlefield flooded back over Tsuko—moans of the



wounded and dying, crimson spattering blue and brown alike.

Motso approached, Arasou's fallen katana in hand. Crane blood still dripped from its blade, staining Arasou's golden armor.

"Lord Toturi," Motso whispered, his gentle voice cracking. He turned the ancestral hilt toward the bereaved brother. "As oldest living heir of Akodo One-Eye, you are now clan champion."

Tsuko shut her eyes and blindly reached out to grasp Arasou's gloved hand. It was still hot.

"War!" Tsuko roared, slamming her fist onto the table, scattering maps and troop markers onto the ground.

Toturi clenched his teeth, reading the faces of the other Lion Clan samurai assembled in the war pavilion like a tragic story. Their faces flickered in the firelight, sorrow deepening the lines of their frowns. Kitsu Motso fidgeted, unable to make eye contact with Tsuko or Toturi. Matsu Agetoki's wrinkled mouth lengthened into a grimace. Toturi turned back to Tsuko. Hers was the only face that wore rage—pure, seething rage.

"War against the Crane!" Tsuko repeated, the harshness of her voice slamming into the others as though to batter them into submission. "Today's losses should not go unpunished! It is an insult to our clan. It's—"

"The price of battle!" Agetoki growled. The old Lion glared at her. "Our clan above all should know this price *and* the further cost we would pay for all-out war with the Crane!"

"The Emperor will not look kindly on an illegal declaration," Motso mumbled. "Arasou chose to attack the Crane. The Crane can claim they were defending themselves, so we cannot seek immediate vengeance for our champion's death. We must go through the proper channels."

"More waiting?" Tsuko spat. "Toturi, stop behaving as a simpering child and act! Seek retribution! Reclaim Toshi Ranbo, the Osari Plains, and more from those thieving murderers. Make them cower for their insults! Think of our clan's honor! You are clan champion now. What will you do?"

Their stares demanded an answer. He was now champion, he whom his clan had once passed over for his younger, stronger, more powerful brother, Arasou.

What will I do?

A thousand pathways opened up before him. Choices. So many choices.

Arasou. Death. The Emperor. The Empire. Hotaru.

Each road through his mind branched a dozen ways like a river, like a bursting star. He followed each strand in an instant, discovering the plots, gauging the people and their actions, inserting uncertain figures, each dangerous, each a risk.

Revenge. War.

He began counting the bodies, the true costs it would demand.



"Damn you, Toturi!" Tsuko yelled, scattering his thoughts. "You coward! You are not worthy of leading as champion! You were passed over for your lack of martial skill. You are a mockery of our ways!"

"Silence, Tsuko-sama!" Agetoki thundered, his hand snapping to his katana. "Your insubordination is a grievous error in discipline! Akodo-ue is now in command, and—"

"Stop!" Toturi shouted, towering over the Lion samurai before him. His brow wrinkled in seriousness, but he set a calm hand upon the table. "Agetoki-san, I thank you for upholding our ways—discipline, honor, and decorum—but Lion *voices* shall never be silenced. Tsuko-san has a right to speak, especially in this time of grief and heartbreak."

Tsuko's eyes narrowed in steely wrath. "How dare you!" she whispered, her voice sharp like a knife. She marched out of the pavilion.



Agetoki shook his head in shame, lowering his hand from his sword. "Fool. Lady Tsuko's ways are unbecoming of the Matsu family *daimyō*."

"Agetoki-san," Toturi replied. "You know well that the Matsu are born and bred to fight for any cause they find just. Do not hold this against her. As an Akodo, I must take the responsibility to lead even the wildest."

He turned from the council to stare into the fire, hoping it would illumine the correct path through the labyrinth of his

thoughts. But the signposts were illegible in the darkness.

Finally, he spoke. "I shall not make decisions until I have spoken to the clan generals and the other family *daimyō*. I will also seek counsel from the Emperor. Send messengers to the palace in Otosan Uchi, informing him of my brother's death. Motso-sama, you will ride to Yōjin no Shiro and prepare the funeral rites for Arasou-sama. I will have Tsuko-sama follow to deliver the body."

"She will not want to go," Motso said.

"Duty rides before us," Toturi said, lowering his head in reverence. "He was her betrothed, and this is her last obligation to him."

Motso bowed and left the tent.

Agetoki remained a moment, standing by the door, a full head and shoulders shorter than his new champion but still straight and proud in his carriage. "Akodo-ue," he said, resting a strong, calloused hand on his shoulder. "Your time has come. You know the Akodo ways, but a lion is more than his roar, more than his mane, more than his teeth, more than his heart. A lion



is all of these. Tsuko-sama was right to ask what you will do, because now all of the Lion Clan families look to you to act as one."

Toturi nodded. "I'm afraid, with my brother's loss, a schism is inevitable. Tsuko-san's rage will poison many against me."

"And as clan champion, you must not let that divide us."

"Never."

Agetoki bowed and vanished into the night.

Toturi wandered back to the fallen maps and troop markers. He picked them up in several armfuls and set them back on the table in a heap. A wooden lion figurine had a leg broken off.

This is a mess, isn't it? He picked up the figure and touched the amputated stump. *My mess.*

Toturi spied the map of Toshi Ranbo on top of the pile, the paper crumpled into crooked plains and false mountains. Once again, the threads of pathways started to appear. He could see Tsuko's rage swerving off into the distance toward an avenger's fire. He saw the Emperor's polite, bloodless answer to the news of Arasou's death.

Hotaru-san killed my brother today.

Those words burst unexpectedly from a thick dam in his mind. With a gasp, Toturi crushed the lion figure to splinters and squeezed until his fingers were numb. Slowly, he opened his palm, and there lay the lifeless, wooden lion. Drops of blood welled around the bone-like slivers where they had pierced his skin.

My brother...Arasou...

A rustling at the door roused him. Toturi turned to see Motso standing there.

"A message, Akodo-ue" he said, a little winded, as if he had just run across the camp. "From Champion Doji Hotaru."

He held out a delicate white scroll with a silvery seal upon it. Toturi took it and nodded before Motso bowed and ran out. The paper was scented with plum blossom, symbolizing all at once perseverance, hope, and the transitoriness of life. Elegant calligraphy curled over its surface: "To the Lion Clan Champion, Akodo Toturi."

He broke the seal.

"Akodo Toturi, brother-in-arms, friend of my heart, and now Lion Clan Champion, I write in the heat of this sorrowful night as the sun sets upon an era for your clan. Akodo Arasou-dono was the best of your clan, a noble warrior whose life called down the pride of your ancestors from the Heavens. He was an admirable foe, and..."

The flowery Crane diplomacy and social obligation melted in a pause of the brushstrokes.

"...I know you are too strong of soul to admit your pain. However, if my own soul can hardly fathom the horror of what occurred today, I know that somewhere in you, this same sentiment lurks, this anguish, this blackness.

"I can offer no consolation that will bridge this abyss. I can make no reparations for what I have taken. Yet, you are now clan champion, and what you do will not only speak for the



Akodo in your brother's memory but also speak for your clan.

"I know you to be level-headed, wise, and honorable, so I trust that you will take the best course of action; yet, though we have been friends many years, I can hardly guess what that will be. I write to ask. Toturi-san, what will you do?"

"Loyally, faithfully, your comrade of old and fellow servant to the Emperor, Doji Hotaru."

Toturi shut his eyes.

Hotaru killed my brother.

He sank to the floor, dropping the bloodied Lion figure and Hotaru's letter, lowering his head into his hands as the scene played over and over before him.

Two arrows. The broken body. Hotaru's tears. Tsuko's heart. Arasou, why did you not listen? Why did you leave me with this mess?

What will you do? They had all asked—Tsuko, Agetoki, and even Hotaru.

What will I do?

A writhing chaos rose before him, again bursting in a snaking multiplicity of pathways, each needing to be followed. Twisted knots of actions to take, the inevitable cry for revenge, the threat of war, Arasou's goals and victories cut short in a thousand bleeding dead ends all twisted around choices Toturi dared not make. The trails bled together into a deep ocean and crashed around him. He pressed his heart with his bleeding hand.

Arasou's voice, echoing deep from a memory, cut through the confusion. "Brother, you think too much." The image his brother's strong face loomed before him, his eye now missing like that of Akodo One-Eye, smiling. "You think too much."

"I know!" Toturi responded aloud. He ground his fists into the earth. "That is why you were chosen! Not me. You were the man of action. You were the one who could do everything!"

Silence answered him, the silence of the dead. Arasou would never answer him again, and in that silence, Toturi felt a pause in which the universe waited for him to act.

What will I do?

Toturi opened his eyes. On the far side of the tent, rising above the broken lion figurine on the floor, the Lion Clan *mon* flapped in a gentle breeze, golden and glowing in the firelight in fierce splendor.





Akodo Toturi - Brilliant Champion of the Lion Clan

