

The Fate of Flames

By Annie VanderMeer Mitsoda

Curling wisps of smoke escaped the jaws of the stone lion, heavy with the scents of cinnamon and sandalwood. Matsu Tsuko inhaled deeply, fighting off a cough that threatened to interrupt the deep, solemn chanting. This was her world now: the darkened tent; the funeral chants; the haze of the incense; and the helmet in her hands, its metal warmed by her constant touch. As a child, she had dreamed of holding something so precious as part of the ancestral armor of the Lion Clan. A wish wreathed her heart, insubstantial as the smoke, that she could give it back, for Arasou to still be wearing it proudly.

Akodo Arasou, Champion of the Lion Clan and the man she would have married, lay on a pallet before her, clad in spotless white funerary robes, right side folded crisply over the left, hands folded over his still chest. The armor he should have been wearing stood like a hollow, headless corpse in the corner, following the body of its former owner like a ghost until his burial. Tsuko's fingers tightened on the only piece of it that would not be passed along, her right thumb resting on the curled metal where the arrow had exited, even as her gaze rested on the cloth covering her beloved's eyes.

*The snap of Doji Hotaru's bow.
Arasou's body in my arms, turned to
face the sky—one eye sightless, the other
a ruin—and the false tears in Hotaru's
own eyes as she turned and fled back into*

*Toshi Ranbo, the city the faithless Crane had stolen. Toturi staring at Hotaru's exit, slow and numb
as he ever was, watching uselessly as his brother's murderer ran and closed the gates behind her—*

"Tsuko-sama!" A voice broke into her thoughts, tinged with concern. "Your hand..."

Tsuko looked down suddenly, pain breaking through the hot haze of her fury, and she pulled her hand away from the helmet. A deep cut, torn from the ragged edge of the helmet's ruin, ran along the meat of her right thumb and wept a red tear along her arm. She gave a small sigh of annoyance and took the cloth her companion handed to her, nodding in thanks.

Kitsu Motso tilted his head sympathetically. "All good Lion mourn the death of Akodo Arasou. While I do not wish to speed his journey to Yōjin no Shiro further than protocol



demands, I do worry that you torment yourself with this delay.”

Tsuko finished wrapping the small injury and stood, shaking her head. “That pain is the fire that forges my rage into something useful, Motso-san.”

Motso’s smile was barely a suggestion. “You are crafting some weapon, perhaps? A sword of agony, and great blade of the Lion?”

Tsuko let out a bitter chuckle as she placed the helmet back on its stand. “One is desperately needed. Even in death, Arasou has more direction than his brother.” Her fingers lingered against the metal a moment, and she shut her eyes against any tears that might arrive. *There will be justice. It will consume those who took you from me.* She opened her eyes again, fixing an intense gaze on Motso, and even he seemed discomfited by its heat. “Until the Osari Plains are reclaimed from the Crane’s clutches, I cannot rest—and neither can his spirit.”

As servants busied themselves clearing the vestiges of the service, Tsuko exited the tent, Motso at her heels, to the welcome sound of an army preparing for war. Organized lines of Lion troops conducted near-constant drills with swords, spears, bows, and even hand-to-hand. *All our lives, we of the Lion practice war. How many of us have truly faced it? How many would run bravely forth, as the greatest of us once did, and how many would hesitate as others died?* Her face grew even grimmer. *They must drill until thought and action are one—empty of indecision and fear, full of determination. They shall not fail as Toturi did.* Her gaze was fire. *As I shall not.*

The pair had almost reached the officers’ tents when a young Matsu bushi approached them, a strange look in her eyes somewhere between joy and worry. “Forgive this interruption, my lady, but there are a group of rōnin waiting to speak with you. They say they captured Shirei Mura!”

Kitsu Motso gave a small sound of curiosity. Beside him, Tsuko stiffened and frowned. “Rōnin? Who hired them?”

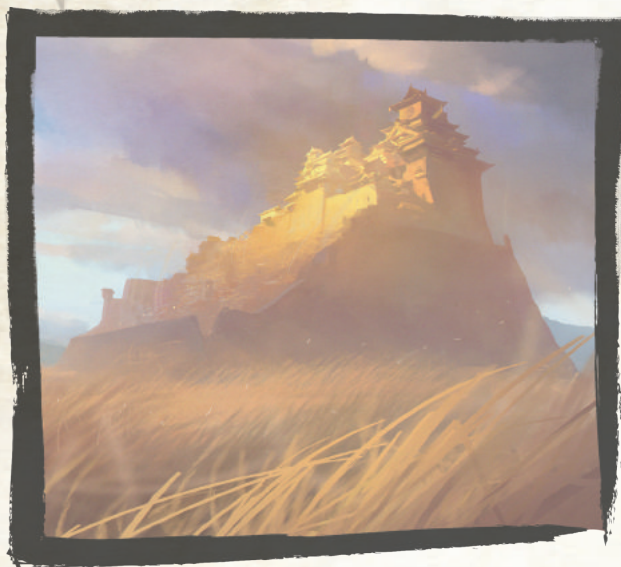
The bushi glanced around uneasily, and lowered her voice until it was hardly audible. “They said the Lion Clan did, my lady.”

Tsuko’s mouth drew into a thin line. “Motso-san—go to these rōnin and tell them to wait outside my tent. I will receive them when I am ready.” Her gaze held a quiet heat. “And continue the preparations for battle tomorrow.”

Tsuko didn’t wait around to see Motso deal with the rōnin, or even to dismiss the awkward young bushi, instead stalking directly into her tent. Servants looked up, startled at the look on the woman’s face, but obeyed with quick, respectful nods at her demands to start a fire and bring out preparations for tea. As her attendants hurried about their tasks, another servant helped Tsuko don her armor. The lioness’s eyes were fixed not on the bindings, but on the flint and steel clicking sparks into the hungry kindling.

Rōnin. A wince fluttered over her features as her new wound twitched while she laced a greave. *I was not told of this. And if Motso had heard of such a command, he gave no sign. He is already acting against Toturi’s orders by riding with me now, enabling my delay to lay Arasou to rest. This is not him.* A spark caught, and a small flame leaped, sending the scent of burning rice

stalks into the air, dried refuse from the fields around them. *Neither is this Toturi's doing. Even he is not so without honor as to hire rōnin—or more likely, he is not so decisive.*



A sudden hiss escaped her lips, and she looked down to see blood spotting the cloth over her wound. Taking a deep breath to steady herself, Tsuko unbound and washed the cut, binding it again with deliberate care. She moved to pick up her helmet, but paused, her hand against its white mane, then left it sitting on the rack. *I shall see these rōnin plainly, and hear their say.*

“Show them in,” she ordered, and went to stand near the fire as the servants bowed and exited the tent. A short time

later, the tent flap opened, and four people—one in the lead, and the other two dragging a bound and hooded prisoner—stepped inside. The leader immediately regarded Tsuko with a grin, and flourished a bow that was both too low and too ungraceful. *A man unused to dealing with authority.*

“Lady Tsuko, fearsome daimyō of the Matsu, I greet you,” the rōnin declared, his tone as oily as his thin dark hair and white-touched mustache. “I am Kujira, master of the Warriors of the Boar, and I have two gifts for you today. First among them is Shirei Village, captured by myself and my troops. And the second—” He jerked his head at his attendants, who unceremoniously dragged forth the prisoner to stand beside Kujira. “—is this fine specimen.”

With a flourish he yanked off the hood of the fourth figure, causing a mess of long white hair to spill everywhere. Tsuko’s heart stopped for a moment, and she hardly realized she had her hand on the hilt of her sword before she recognized the individual. *Not Doji Hotaru, but Kuwanan, her brother. Why in Heaven’s name is he here?*

Kujira’s rough bleating laughter jarred her out of the moment. “Never fear, Matsu-sama, this one had the fight knocked pretty well out of him, and I tied those bonds myself,” he snorted, tucking his thumbs under the rough leather belt that held his ill-fitting armor onto his wide frame. “Even a large bird breaks easily when you batter it around a bit, eh?”

Tsuko stepped forward, her dark eyes locking onto Kuwanan’s pale ones. Though strong and heavysset, the heir to the Crane Clan had seen better days. The hitched breathing told of at least one broken rib, and bruises spotted vivid purple on his skin. He wore a simple set of pale garments and armor padding, both stained with grime and splattered with blood.

“A skillful capture, to take him alive,” Tsuko found herself saying, not removing her eyes from Kuwanan’s. “And you say you took the village as well?”

"Aye, hardly lost a man in the fight, too." Kujira snorted, obviously proud of himself. "Sent a group of my best thunderin' in on their horses, got the peasants and a mess of Crane troops scared inside the walls. This one and a few of his archers hung out to cover their retreat...and they didn't do so bad, either, killed more'n their fair share! But archers don't outrun horses so well, especially when we had our own in those fields, disguised as farmers. He and his troops didn't even see my men coming before we had them netted like honking geese. After that it was just a simple matter of finding who was worth your time, and killing the rest."

Tsuko's eye twitched, but her gaze didn't waver. "And the village?"

Kujira's voice grated like cicadas in summer. "That was the best part. Got half my men into the dead Crane gear, tied up the rest like prisoners. Called up to the villagers like we was successful—another bit of cunning, getting the Crane pass-phrases for safe travel—and once we had them all together, we killed every Crane we could find and any peasant stupid enough to try and hide 'em. Maybe one or two got away, but that just lets the Crane learn how badly they were beaten by the Lion...and the Warriors of the Boar."

One of the rōnin holding Kuwanan snickered, and his half-toothed smile grew wider as Tsuko's sword left its sheath with a slow song of oiled metal. The Crane samurai did not flinch, even as Kujira gave a dark chuckle. "Figured you might wanna ransom him, or we would'a done the job for you—but then again, I heard what his sister did to your man. Not a bad idea, trading a death for a death."

Tsuko's eyes searched Kuwanan's. No fear, rage, or false tears lived in them. Just an intensity, watching her as she did him, waiting. Tsuko glanced at Kujira, whose nose seemed to be twitching in anticipation of bloodshed. "The Warriors of the Boar," she said slowly. "Not named for the lost Boar Clan, I would imagine."

Kujira looked confused a moment, then guffawed. "What? There was a Boar Clan?" The large rōnin shook his head, armor clanking. "We're just 'boar' for wealth—of which we certainly got our share in this shakeup, believe it. Not a lot of Crane to go around, but those pretty little weapons of theirs kill just as well. And while them peasants don't have much, those sneaky bastards got prizes hidden where you least expect it." The half-toothed rōnin started to chuckle darkly as Tsuko placed the blade of her sword against Kuwanan's shoulder.

"You were correct about one thing, leader of the Warriors of the Boar," she said pointedly. "There *is* a death that will set things on a better path."

The big man grinned—which lasted, eerily, even after Tsuko's strike, which opened up his neck almost to the spine.

The other rōnin cried out in horror as Kujira's body slumped to the ground, blood pooling in dark clouds against the dirt. In an instant, Tsuko's blade was leveled at them, and they held up their hands in surrender.

"Spare us!" howled the half-tooth. "I don't wanna die!"

"Neither did the people of Shirei Mura, but I'm sure you slew them all the same."

"Please," pleaded the young rōnin to the left, who hardly looked past boyhood. "I swear, we're not all like Kujira was. Not all of us plundered!"

Tsuko fixed him with a long look. "Then you are responsible for finding Kitsu Motso, making certain all of your troops surrender to him, and returning all that you have stolen. Those who have committed violence against the people of Lion lands—and Shirei Mura is of the Lion—must suffer the appropriate penalties." The young rōnin nodded, and he and his whimpering companion swiftly exited the tent, dragging the remains of the boastful Kujira behind them.

The tent flap had barely closed before the blade sang through the air a second time, separating rope fibers with a precise and dangerous grace. Kuwanan glanced downward as the bonds fell from his arms and slowly rubbed at his bruised wrists. Tsuko pointed her blade to a space at the side of the tent, separated by a paper screen. "Water there, and clean clothes. Do as you will."

When Kuwanan finally stepped from behind the screen, sand had been scattered across the bloody ground until such time as they could repitch her tent. Tsuko sat next to the brazier, sipping at a cup of tea. She gestured to a camp stool across from her, and wordlessly watched Kuwanan sit, mindful of his wounds, and gratefully take the tea in his hands. It was a long moment—punctuated only briefly by small sips of the beverage and the crackle of the flames—before anyone spoke.

"Why did you spare me?" said Doji Kuwanan carefully.

Tsuko took her eyes from the teacup to meet his. "Your capture was an act of trickery, a vile deception against you. I would not answer that with more dishonor." She took a long sip of tea, and pride strengthened her voice like steel. "The Lion do not deceive, or steal. We take what we want by strength of honor, or not at all."

She regarded him carefully before taking another drink. "And I am not a beast that I should kill any Crane I encounter off the battlefield. I should sooner hate a sword for the actions of its wielder, or blame an arrow"—she cursed herself inwardly for her sudden cough, her throat smarting from too large a sip of the tea—"...an arrow for where its archer sent it."

Another long moment of quiet stretched across the tent, which Kuwanan again broke. "I am deeply sorry for Ara—for the death of Akodo-sama." The man's voice was halting, strange coming from someone so well-built. "I trained with him, admired his skill and courage." The man's gaze slid towards the flames of the brazier, his tone bitter. "You are not the only one who is angry at a wrongful death, Tsuko-sama." Her nod was slow, understanding.

"It is still unknown how he died, then? Your father—forgive me—Champion Doji Satsume?"

"There is belief by some that my sister's assertions of natural causes are enough." Kuwanan's tone was stretched as the skin on a drum. "But honor demands more, simply as a matter of course. If we do not hold to Bushidō..."

"We are little better than the rōnin I slew," finished Tsuko, finishing her cup of tea. "I know too well why Toturi did not act in the battle of Toshi Ranbo—he is weak, and foolish. But if Hotaru can accept the horrible duty of the Crane Clan Champion and kill Akodo Arasou... what is preventing her from performing her more important duty: investigating your father's untimely death?"

Kuwanan's gaze dropped from Tsuko's, into the depths of his teacup. The silence hung around them like a haze of smoke, and Tsuko's eyes returned to the flames in the brazier before her. Deliberately, she prodded the glowing coals with a metal rake, small sparks hissing in different directions.

Damn this feeling of unease, she snarled inwardly. Were it that I had met this Crane on the battlefield—to see our forces surge around and consume them, and been done with it. To have taken Shirei Mura back myself, and made the Crane pay for their presumption in blood!

Her hand twitched, and Tsuko's gaze fell on the gore-spattered floor near the tent flap. *Vile rōnin. Striking at our enemy in Lion's name—and supposedly paid from our coffers? Her rage itched at her, insistent as a hungry flame. Why would we sink so low to hire such scoundrels? And why would they know who Kuwanan was when they captured him—and why not simply ransom him themselves? What else were they trying to gain—she swallowed a snarl—or what is someone trying to take from me?*

Beneath the tines of the rake, the flames in the brazier were slowly dying. The sounds of a far greater fire—the readying of her army for war—echoed beyond the cloth of her tent.

She could not kill Doji Kuwanan, not now.

But she could meet him again on the fields of battle and settle this score in honorable combat, avenging Arasou, reclaiming the Osari Plains, and proving herself Toturi's better.

Or she could send Kuwanan to Hotaru, where he could confront his sister for her failure of Bushidō and potentially help Tsuko uncover the identity of those who were playing them all as pawns.

Duty and Loyalty demanded she avenge Arasou's death. Righteousness demanded she bring the deceivers to justice.

The very honor of the Lion was at stake, and it fell to her to uphold it, even if Akodo Toturi would not.

