

A Game of Promises

By Annie VanderMeer Mitsoda

Yasuki Oguri unrolled the piece of mulberry paper, checking its brief contents against the building across the road. Though the storm that had bedeviled their trip across Earthquake Fish Bay was depleted to a drizzle, it had done its best to give nearly everything he owned a uniform state of damp. Though the words in the note had begun to run, they were still clear enough for him to make out the name of the place Hida Kisada had asked him to visit. “The Thrashing Koi” stood out in big block script on a board near the building’s entrance, with a garishly painted fish, a sake cup curled in its fin, cavorting next to the lettering.

He let his mind wander, thinking over the deal that Kisada had asked him to make, but blinked in surprise as one of his escorts cleared her throat awkwardly and leaned close, concerned. “Is everything all right, Yasuki-sama?”

Oguri waved her away gently. “It’s all in order—I’m where I’m supposed to be. If you feel like waiting out here, you’re welcome to, but I know the inn at the docks is far more comfortable than standing around in the street. Go on—I’ll be all right.”

The trio of samurai looked conflicted, but another wave from their master sent them away, down the street and into the night. As they left, Oguri shifted the weight of the bag on his shoulder, tapping it reflexively to make sure the item was still there and secure.

A calm day, breezes from the sea stirring the leaves of the maples outside. The spring chill caused him to draw into his kimono further, even as his father seemed completely at ease, laying out the board for the game of shōgi with practiced skill. “Pay attention, son. This is a lesson you will want to take to heart.”

The drizzle began to slow, resolving to a mist that made the lanterns near the teahouse door glow with an almost supernaturally inviting light. Giving the strap of his bag one last nervous tug, Yasuki Oguri walked across the street and through the heavy cedar sliding doors of the Thrashing Koi.

After the quiet of the street and the hush of the rain, the sensation of walking into the teahouse was like being bowled over by a wave of noise. Sailors shouted and argued, servers with clattering plates weaved between groups as they walked to and from the kitchen, and dice cups clattered as working folk spent their hard-earned coin on games of chance. Oguri gave himself a moment to become acclimated, making a show of blinking his eyes as if coming into the low light from the outdoors disoriented him, and surreptitiously scanned the room. Almost



immediately he saw that his careful survey wasn't terribly necessary: at a far corner, surrounded by rowdy sailors, was a proud woman in teal robes, blowing elaborate smoke rings from a long-stemmed pipe. *Kudaka*.

Taking a cue from one of the many servants moving through the crowded teahouse, Oguri did his best to weave his way through the crowds, picking up an unattended stool and plonking it down at Kudaka's table. Almost instantly, conversation at the table stopped, and he felt the stares like pinpricks all along his face. Forcing a jovial smile, Oguri waved over a server, and reached inside his belt pouch. "I'm terribly thirsty—could you fetch me some of your finest *shōchū*?" The handful of silver *bu* that clinked noisily on the server's tray caused an almost palpable welling of interest in those around him. "And why don't you get some for my new friends here? I'm sure they're parched as well." The server bowed quickly and hurried off, and Kudaka leaned slowly forward, her dark eyes curious.

"Interesting," she purred, her accent pronounced. "Don't see that kinda gesture often 'round here. Mostly 'cause only a fool is free with his money in a place like this..." Her smirk deepened. "Or you happen to be someone who knows no locals will mess with him."

The smooth tiles of the shōgi board lay arrayed before him, and Yasuki Taka smiled widely, rolling up the long sleeves of his kimono like a laborer at work. "Look at this, my son. Do not think of it as just a game. This is a performance, and you must catch the attention of your opponent right away. Like...so!" A fuhyō swept across the board with a flourish, the pawn marching into an aggressive position. "A bold move requires a bolder one, wouldn't you say?"

Oguri smiled, then shrugged almost bashfully, throwing his shoulders back a little to reveal the family crest picked out near the collar of his undertunic. "I think you've caught me," he

laughed. "I am indeed a bit of a local fish."

"How nice of a local fish t' buy some visitors a little refreshment." Kudaka smiled coyly and blew another elaborate smoke ring into the air. "You this nice to every bit a' driftwood that washes ashore?"

"Hardly, though I'm happy to buy drinks for whatever 'bit of driftwood' you think is worth the beverage." Oguri lowered his voice slightly. "Although I think I might have something far more interesting to a priestess of tempests and tides."



A pair of slender twins to the right of Kudaka froze, their gaze locking onto Oguri's with muted alarm. Kudaka paused, chewing on the stem of the pipe before tapping it thoughtfully against her teeth. A moment later, she lifted her left leg and expertly shoved the sailor sitting next to her out of his seat. He gave a slurred yelp. "Look at that!" she said. "Seems a spot just opened up. Come rest your bones here, stranger."

Smiling widely, Oguri abandoned his previous seat for the new one, feeling the pale eyes of the twins boring into him as he moved.

"So you know a *tenkinja* when you see one, then, local fish—or you know me by name." Kudaka gave him a long, measuring look before smirking, amused. "For the moment, you've got my attention. What brings you my way?"

Oguri paused as a server set a jug of *shōchū* and a handful of cups on the table. He waited until they scurried away to pick up the jug and pour an ample serving of liquor into each of the cups, pushing one to Kudaka first before sipping from his own.

"Three weeks ago, the Watchtower of Sun's Shadow in Ishigaki Province stopped sending reports to Hida Castle. It might have been nothing, but..." He cleared his throat, and coughed as the sweet-potato wine burned a line into his sinuses. "A team of scouts was sent to check the area, and none of them returned. Something might have gotten through the Wall. I need to bring in a force that's swift and dangerous enough to find out—and to either take care of it or send a message back letting Hida Kisada know why."

Kudaka sniffed, nodded, and took a long drink of the *shōchū* herself. "And you could use some Mantis at your back."

"We could. I have heard excellent stories of the valor of the Mantis."

Kudaka downed the rest of the *shōchū* and took a few more puffs on her long pipe. The amusement had dropped from her features, replaced with a calculating stare. "Our islands are a long way from your Wall."

Taka waited as Oguri tapped his finger on one of his own pawns, and slid it deftly across the shōgi ban, marching deep into enemy territory. "And there it is: the bolder move, commanded as the gyokushō sits comfortably in the distance, observing!" his father crowed. "An excellent move by the player of the jeweled general." Taka's grin grew thin and wide, like a crack in a clay cup, and Oguri wished he hadn't lifted his finger off of the fuhyō piece. "Now the foe has reached its forces out, but you must not be swift to strike. Draw them out safely, as a hare from its warren..."

"To be fair," Oguri said, taking a leisurely sip of his *shōchū*, "any Crab problem is bound to be a Mantis problem too, before long. The demons of Jigoku don't much seem to care what clan anyone belongs to."

Kudaka's smirk was dark. "Ain't seen any demons crawlin' across the waters yet."



“Fair.” Oguri nodded. “But I also must point out that what I propose isn’t exactly a landbound journey: I plan to travel up the River of the Last Stand. Your expertise in such an endeavor would be unmatched.”

“In the Shadowlands, then?” Without breaking her gaze, Kudaka snatched another cup of shōchū from a nearby sailor, who looked upset for a moment but left to go find himself another drink. Her expression had not changed. “Even riskier.”

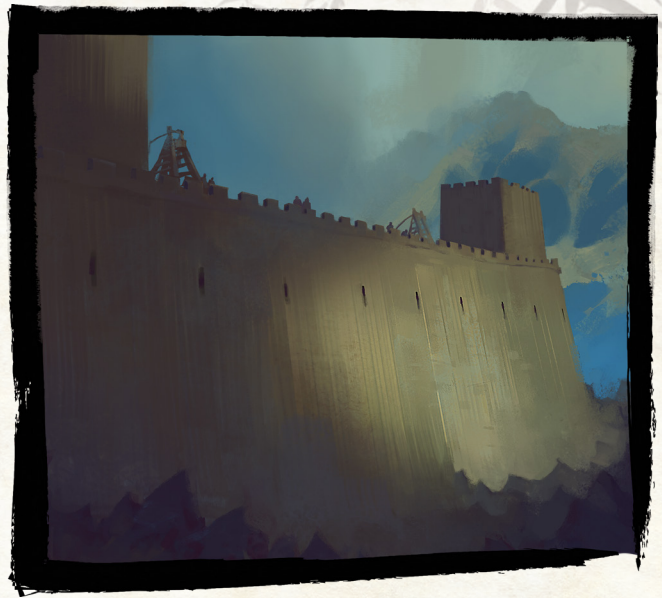
“My lady Kudaka,” Oguri said seriously, leaning in, “I am not your daimyō. I don’t come here with demands. I come with the intent to make a *deal*.”

The woman chewed on the end of her pipe, and Oguri could feel himself being weighed in her gaze, measured as loot...or ballast. “All right, then.” She nodded. “What’s your offer?”

Oguri steepled his hands together and affected a businesslike mien. “I know you are well aware of the... *historical difficulties* that the Crab and Crane Clans have encountered with each other. Thanks to the snooping of one particularly determined member of the Asahina family”—he saw Kudaka’s face twitch a moment, almost imperceptibly, and knew his source had been accurate—“the Crane are now aware that the Mantis have been attacking them *directly*. While I’m sure they are somewhat preoccupied with their feud with the Lion Clan, I am certain they can put together that Crab and Mantis are friendly with one another if they see your troops traveling with their colors out.

“Now, I know the plan for Yor—for your *leader’s* travel—was to cross the bay at night, in simple garb, to make the trip to Hida Castle in secret. But...” Oguri affected his most charming smile. “With a promise of aid for the watchtower in Ishigaki, all Mantis need not fear flying their colors, but should do so proudly.”

Kudaka snorted. “You can drench that grin right now, local fish. No ship roams the Sea of the Sun Goddess that would fail to recognize scores of armed sailors and multiple *tenkinja*, no matter how we were dressed.” Her smile and gaze grew sharper. “Besides—Amaterasu herself could glide down and very politely ask me to hide these colors, and I’d tell the First Sun, ‘Sorry, divine, but not I.’” She snapped the sleeves of her teal robes with a confident flourish, and leaned back on her seat. “You best do better’n that bilgewater you call a ‘deal,’ or we’ll be takin’ your shōchū while you call it a night.”



Was his father mocking him? Oguri frowned as he watched Taka select his next piece. These moves were beginner's mistakes, hardly what he expected from an experienced shōgi player. Did his father think his skill so poor? I'll show him, he thought, and pushed advantage after advantage, moving aggressively both in tactic and in force, tiles clacking against the shōgi ban.

“Of course!” Oguri stammered, laughing awkwardly. “That wasn’t even really an offer, more like an...*idea*. What I wanted to show you was *this!*” He pawed in his bag, drew out a small cedar model of a ballista, and displayed it with a flourish. The twins looked at it with a mix of confusion and excitement. His source had said that there were sailors in Kudaka’s crew with an interest in Kaiu craftsmanship, but she merely raised an unimpressed eyebrow.

“This is the model of a ballista created by the Kaiu family. On the Carpenter Wall we use much larger versions, which we load like so...” He fished out a sharpened stick and carefully loaded it into the model, cranking back the tiny winch until the waxed thread of the little weapon was taut. Carefully, he presented it to Kudaka, holding it up so that it could also be seen by the sailors at nearby tables. “They launch giant wooden bolts, often with oil and fire in notches at the top of the spike. It’s enough to kill an oni—or break a ship’s mast. The Kaiu family are the most skilled engineers in Rokugan and could easily make weapons like this from bamboo for your ships.”

Kudaka took the tiny ballista from him and studied it for a moment, taking in the details of its construction. “A very nice toy,” she said with a dry chuckle. She tapped the release lever, sending the little bolt straight at a sailor who had leaned closer to Kudaka to study the model—more confirmation of his source’s information on Kudaka and her crew. The woman yelped and grabbed her wounded hand in surprise. “Gettin’ a little *too* close to a conversation that don’t concern you, Miki,” Kudaka said smoothly, her voice low. “It’s a dangerous habit.”

As the young sailor scuttled away clutching her bleeding hand, Kudaka turned her attention back to Oguri, placing the model on the table and drawing a long breath on her pipe. “Nice enough, local fish,” she exhaled, smoke wreathing from her mouth with every word, “but you think like someone landbound. Bamboo spears’d shatter on any hull. Iron might pierce nice, but it might snag us, too. Besides, we don’t exactly want to sink our targets, most of the time, and giving space over to extra missiles means less space for cargo.”

“I have no doubt the Kaiu family would be open to collaborating on a—”

“Promises of a feast just make folks hungrier,” said Kudaka, cutting him off. She tapped her pipe against her knee, letting the ashes trickle to the floor. “I aim to keep my people fed.” She ground the last of the embers under her heel, then gave him a long, irritated look. “I’m not puttin’ the lives of my crew on the line for some promise or trinket. Thank you for the drink, Yasuki.”

Oguri sighed, shaking his head, and reached into his pack a final time. “I suppose, then... you would not be interested in this?”



In disbelief, Oguri looked down at the board, seeing his gyokushō checkmated.

“A jeweled general trapped in his own aggressions,” Taka said, folding his arms across his lap. “Feints—poor moves—to heat the blood, to draw you in. And then the final move, where things are turned around...”

The eyes of the twins widened in alarm as Oguri placed the *wakizashi* on the table, unwrapping it carefully from a protective silken sheet. From what he had been told, this was an item Kudaka would truly value, though he had initially had his reservations. Kudaka’s scorn dropped immediately when she saw the symbol etched on the pommel, gold against deep-teal jade. Her dark eyes widened, and sought Oguri’s.

“I know you must be wondering if this is truly what you think it is,” he said softly. “Permit me to show you proof.” Gently, he eased the blade from its sheath, revealing a delicately serrated inner edge. “Much like a shark’s grin.” He chuckled, returning the short sword to rest.

“This is indeed Shōbai, one of the ancient blades of the Mantis Clan, gambled away centuries ago by a champion who could not place his desires below his honor. I shall not speak his name for his crime, nor of the journey the blades made before they came into the hands of my great-grandfather many years ago, but I shall speak of this...

“Shōbai is not without a partner. It is part of a *daishō*, and its kin is not lost: the *katana* rests in the care of my family. It was no small feat for my great-grandfather to acquire those blades... just as it would be no small thing to sail along the river bordering the Shadowlands, to discover the fate of the Watchtower of Sun’s Shadow. Such a promise of loyalty and bravery would be worthy of the gift of the blades.

“Except,” he said with a small smile, wrapping the *wakizashi* back in its silk covering, “for this. It is our symbol of goodwill.” Oguri held the sword, balanced on his palms, out to Kudaka. “And it is meant for you.”

It took several moments of staring at the board, before his disbelief turned to admiration. Oguri started a moment as he felt a hand on his shoulder. He looked up into the eyes of his father, who held out to him a shōgi piece—not one from the set in front of him, but an ōshō, a king general, the black ink on its ivory surface faded and yellowed with time.

“I was your age when my father showed me that same tactic. I was livid at first—I thought myself one hell of a shōgi player, but I fell into his trap like any fool. After I understood his meaning, I went to him and apologized.” Yasuki Taka smiled, his eyes far away for a moment. “He just laughed and gave me this piece, and told me to use it to remember the lesson, even as he added another one. ‘A gift brings trust, and a potent reminder of a bond,’ he told me, and now I’m telling you.” He tossed the piece, and Oguri quickly caught it, running his hands over the tile.



“You played gote this time, as the challenger, but remember—in a deal, you are sente. You are the first player, have the first move, and control the board.” Taka wagged his finger at the piece in Oguri’s hand and winked. “Don’t let yourself forget that.”

It was a moment before Kudaka reached for the sword, and she laughed with delight as she ran her hand over the dark silk package. “Seems I was wrong. This is one *trinket* we’d proudly fight for.” She looked up at him, dark eyes bright with excitement. “I think I’m up for an adventure after all.

“Fuu! Umi!” The twins blinked suddenly, as if startled out of a dream. “You’ll be coming with me and my crew on this little trip. *Don’t* argue.” Their mouths closed forlornly on any objections. “You’ve never been outta sight of the sea, and it might do you some good, bein’ on the mainland a bit.”

Kudaka turned back to Oguri, and he scrambled a moment to catch up as she stood. “I called you a local fish, but you’re a bigger cormorant than your father. Though no less clever—or slippery.” She extended her arm to him, in the custom of the Islands of Spice and Silk, and when he did the same, she grasped him by the forearm and squeezed it briefly, her teeth flashing in a wide smile. “See you on board the *Poison Tide*, Yasuki.”

It was late that night when Yasuki Oguri returned to his room at the inn near the docks, and later still when enough of the sting of the shōchū had left him that he felt ready to write a letter. He scattered fine sand across the wet brushmarks with a scribe’s precision and, after a moment, carefully blew across the mulberry paper to send the sand scattering. It was a short missive, meant for Hida Kisada himself, written in a bold but simple script:

The king general is triumphant. The jeweled general sends their forces.



Oguri regarded the missive one final moment, checking for errors, then reached into his pocket, taking out a worn shōgi piece, black ink fading on the yellowed ivory. He smiled a moment, then returned the piece to its home, and folded and sealed the letter.

