

Cold Autumn Harvests

By Mari Murdock

The letter felt heavier than simple rice paper should have... The weight of a harsh order.

Ikoma Tsanuri dropped the missive onto her map table, where it knocked over a banner tile.

"You see?" Ikoma Ayano said at her elbow. The emissary was bundled in a thick, fur-lined traveling cloak and smelled of perfume. An odd visitor to a military camp. "My lord Anakazu-ue's command is clear. Take the Unicorn village for supplies."

Or starve.

Tsanuri rubbed a brooding hand across her lips and chin, as if to erase the disloyalty that threatened to spring from her mouth.

Have we already come to this?

She stood, righting the fallen banner in a smooth motion, and met Ayano's mistrustful eyes. "Lord Anakazu's message has been received with respect and honor, Ayano-san. I thank you for your long journey and extend the hospitality of our camp before your return to Otosan Uchi."

Ayano's mouth twitched before she tucked her hands into the sleeves of her traveling kimono. "I will leave after I see Ikoma-ue's command fulfilled."

"You doubt the loyalty of my army?" Tsanuri asked.

A smug smile lit up Ayano's face.

"No, but Lord Ujiaki told me that you might stall." The emissary snickered, betraying the machinations behind the letter.

"Lord Ujiaki?" Tsanuri frowned.

That presumptuous ambassador dares stick his fingers into affairs of the military?

Ayano lifted her chin with an air of authority. "Both Lord Anakazu and Lord Ujiaki devised this strategy after analyzing information from all the supply lines. Your duty lies in obedience, not in questioning, Tsanuri-san."

"Ikoma-ue's orders shall be fulfilled, Ayano-san," Tsanuri reasserted, careful not to betray her rising frustration. Such interference of bureaucracy was new to her, but she meant to keep her wits and her honor intact, especially during this time of internal upheaval within the Lion Clan leadership. "I must confer with my advisors before any action is taken. 'Thought proceeds action, strategy before the strike.'"

Tsanuri's quote from Akodo's *Leadership* rang dull in the air; her delay might be interpreted as hesitation...

Like Toturi-ue might have done.

Ayano sniffed.





Tsanuri marched from the war tent, the crisp autumn air stinging her cheeks. A guard fell in line behind her as she exited. Anakazu's representative followed them, and Tsanuri could feel Ayano's leering gaze absorbing her every move, to be reported back to the Ikoma daimyō.

From atop the hill, Tsanuri could see down into the valley where Onon Village lay. Most of the huts and storehouses had plum-dyed banners hanging from the eaves, signaling their vassalage to the Unicorn. The hamlet's rice paddies had been drained weeks ago, the last of the

autumn harvest already suspended from bamboo drying poles. The peasant families bundled in blanket coats crept between large stone troughs, filling them with the full rice sheaves, threshing the stalks with wooden staves, and winnowing the rice grains from their hulls. Nearby stood a rice-straw wickerwork ki-rin, a ward against harm.

A few farmers directed wary glances up the hill toward the Lion camp. One small child pointed a tiny harvesting sickle at Tsanuri. She could not make out his face, but the boy's mother slapped his hand down and pointed to the rice stalks, ducking her head and smashing her staff back into the rhythm of threshing, pretending the Lion weren't there.

The heaviness of Lord Anakazu's letter eddied in Tsanuri's gut, and her military training forced her to analyze the situation to settle the uneasiness. The Lion and Unicorn were not officially at war, but Altansarnai's aggression was being utterly ignored by the new Scorpion regent. Perhaps the rumors of dissension in the capital were accurate, and the regent simply could not enact a censure of the escalating violence along the Lion-Unicorn border. But if such violence advantaged the Scorpion...

Tsanuri rubbed at her bottom lip again.

It is my duty to follow orders, even if it leads to war. Only through perfect obedience will the Lion armies remain united and strong enough to face such challenges.

The village below was legally off limits to any direct assault, and this immunity meant that there was no Unicorn army nearby to defend the farming lands. But with Lion villages under attack by the Unicorn, it seemed that such laws had apparently lost their weight. There would only be a meager peasant militia to defend Onon.

Chickens against hungry Lions. Can I really order such a thing?

Tsanuri turned her back and strode toward the supply tents, her emissary shadow in pursuit. Akodo Toshio, her quartermaster, appeared from between paltry stacks of straw



barrels, a writing brush and parchment in his strong hands.

"Tsanuri-sama," he greeted her, smiling with hollow cheeks. His nearly bare ledger retold the story of the dwindling rice casks. He bowed to Tsanuri and then separately to the emissary. "Ayano-san, I hear you finally bring word from the Ikoma daimyō."

"Yes," Ayano replied, graciously returning his bow. "Lord Anakazu has cleverly resolved your supply shortage."

"The blessing of the Fortunes on Anakazu-ue," Toshiro said. "We were about to eat our horses."

His crude joke dropped Ayano's bottom lip, so Tsanuri stepped forward. "How much do we have left, Toshiro-san?"

Toshiro caught the weight in her voice, his smile vanishing. His gaze lingered on her for a moment before he scanned the ledger and did a minor mental calculation while tapping his brush against the side of his writing board. When he returned his gaze to Tsanuri, his jaw was tight.

"We have enough to last us two more days, Tsanuri-sama, but we can make it stretch to four if we cut down portions again. However, I worry that our soldiers' strength dwindles. They have endured weeks of strict rationing, and the autumn cold is already here. We cannot last much longer without resupply."

The sharpness of his cheekbones signaled that Toshiro had personally adopted the brunt of their last ration cuts, reserving what he could for the rest of the company and, most importantly, for Tsanuri as general. He had a slight shiver in his bones and was almost too weak to keep himself warm. Tsanuri turned to her guard, a Matsu woman with a curved yari and a grim jaw. The thinness of her face and her needling eyes signaled a ferocity sharpened by her own hunger.

"Beiona-san, what do you think of Toshiro-san's report? Will you and the other soldiers last four more days?"

Beiona's tight lips deepened into a resolved frown. She stabbed a sidelong glance at Ayano, her grip tightening on her spear.

"We shall do anything you command, Tsanuri-sama," Beiona growled. "Even if it means waiting a week more for the supplies to arrive."

Tsanuri winced.

Beiona knows about the village. She, and her comrades, would sacrifice much to avoid such a one-sided raid against peasants. There is no honor in attacking farmers.

"No need to wait a week," Ayano grumbled, impatience spurring her to an unseemly outburst. She pointed down the hill. "The rice is there!"

"Are you serious?" Toshiro gasped. Beiona glared at Ayano, but the emissary did not notice.

"Lord Anakazu commands—"

"—has asked that we supplement our supplies with those from Onon Village," Tsanuri said, lifting a hand to silence Ayano and keep the peace. The emissary cringed but ceased speaking.



"At least until the supply lines can be reestablished to our location. Right now, provisions are stretched too thin among all the other contingents along the borders, not just here near the Unicorn lands but also near those of the Crane."

"That is absurd," Toshiro mumbled, tapping his brush again in nervous calculation. "Our own harvests should have been gathered already. That should be more than enough."

The heaviness inside Tsanuri's gut lurched. Toshiro was right. Somewhere, something was amiss.

Tsanuri's eyes darted back down to the quiet village. The peasants were carting away countless bushels of rice. Beside her, Beiona's agitated gaze, boney wrists, and thin lips were mirrored across all the Lion in her army. An army with no war to wage, they had been passively patrolling the border, monitoring travelers and intimidating any Unicorn contingents that wandered too close. The monotony of their eventless march had gone on for months with scant resupply. Impatient soldiers with empty bellies had made her army wild. Tsanuri had heard rumors of her ashigaru catching autumn field finches and even crickets to fill their time and empty bellies. Asking them to continue to slowly starve for weeks was dishonorable. Her own reluctance to carry out Lord Anakazu's order would not come before her duty to her soldiers. The Lion's power was its armies, and she would not betray her clan to doubtful conjecture.

"It is our duty to obey, not to question, Toshiro-san," Tsanuri snapped at him but also at herself, echoing Ayano's words. "We must uphold the honor of the Lion, and right now, that means feeding our clan's armies. Our stores must be supplemented until supplies can arrive from harvests in our own lands."

"But stealing—"

"—Akodo Toshiro-san," Beiona growled, attempting to awaken his sense of duty. On instinct, Toshiro had already half-drawn his katana at her cry, his brush and ledger cast absentmindedly to the ground, before stopping himself. Crimson shame mottled his cheeks before he resheathed his sword and bowed in apology to Tsanuri and Beiona. He ignored Ayano.

"Forgive me, Tsanuri-sama. Beiona-san. The hunger...it makes me...foolish."

"Ikoma-ue is wise in his strategy to alleviate the suffering of your troops," Ayano said to Tsanuri, her proud eyes watching Toshiro bend to retrieve his writing implements. "Who knows what would have happened if I had come only a few days later."

"We shall only take what we need," Tsanuri told Beiona and Toshiro, ignoring the fact that she had no assurances from Ayano about how much longer they would need to wait before fresh provisions arrived. "Toshiro-san, calculate how much we will require for a month. Beiona-san, ready the troops to take the village and send a messenger to the peasants. We move in an hour. That should give the villagers enough time for their militia to organize, should they dare stand against us."

"And if they do?" Beiona asked, holding her yari with both hands now.



Tsanuri once again rubbed her lips and stared down the hill. The peasant boy followed his mother back toward the village, a large sack of rice on her back. He cast a final glance up toward Tsanuri. She turned away.

“Then they stand against the Lion.”

The raid lasted barely more than an hour. Hunger had spurred Tsanuri’s soldiers to merciless efficiency. Many of her troops had crashed into the storehouses first, dragging out sacks of rice and millet, casks of wine and preserved vegetables, strings of dried fish, and baskets of fruit. A dozen gaunt samurai had wrestled large cooking pots out of some huts, and the nearest soldiers pummeled each other to scoop handfuls of the porridge into their ravenous mouths. A few of the ashigaru had even begun butchering livestock before Toshiro put an end to it. In between mouthfuls, the frenzied soldiers had slashed down any who opposed them, and the peasant militia crumpled within moments, falling like their own rice sheaves before the kama.

But too many had attempted to guard their harvest. Beiona oversaw the peasants gathering the bodies into a pile, her armor spattered with blood. Her ferocity still had not settled, and she paced back and forth before the mound of fallen heimin.

“Cowards!” she growled, swinging her spear wildly with wrathful strikes in the air. The peasants gathered in the square fled before her as the Matsu rampaged. She kicked the mound repeatedly and screamed into the sky. “Why didn’t you put up more of a fight, you mice! You vermin! You cowards!”

“Beiona!” Tsanuri shouted. “Clean yourself up and go ensure the soldiers are only taking what supplies we need from the storehouses.”

The Matsu growled again, kicking a final time before stalking away, her dissatisfied fury seething from her in waves.

“Two hundred fifty-six,” Toshiro whispered.

“Bodies?” Tsanuri asked, whirling toward him, bewildered.

The Akodo shook his head, his brush gliding across a slowly populating ledger.

“I was counting the koku of rice that the peasants harvested today,” Toshiro replied, his voice tight, as if sealed in a jar. He finished adding up that day’s harvest and followed Beiona to count what was left in the storehouses, his shoulders slumped.



A few Lion ashigaru slinked after Toshiro, uneasy under the bleak gazes of the bereft Unicorn farmers. One even wiped the porridge from around his mouth with a guilty hand before joining his comrades. They had stolen from their own kind, peasants raiding and killing other peasants, and they attempted to hide their shame by ducking behind the Lion samurai and focusing their eyes on their work.

With a strong sweep of her arm, Tsanuri directed the Unicorn farmers to finish collecting the dead.

She had seen death countless times. The deaths in Onon did little to shake her. But Beiona's anger...Toshiro's discouragement...The shameful faces of her troops. This was worse than hunger.

A victory with no glory.

Ayano lingered near the edge of the square, her sleeve over her mouth as she stared at the bodies with bulging eyes.

"Why so many?" she mumbled as Tsanuri approached. "Why did they not simply surrender?"

"They have their own duty to the Unicorn. They guard their crops with their lives just as samurai defend the honor of their lords and clans. Just as you do the bidding of Anakazu-ue."

The emissary choked, the realization of her hand in the slaughter breaking upon her mind. She almost gagged.

"Return to camp, Ayano-san," Tsanuri directed. "Rest tonight. You can report back to Otosan Uchi in the morning."

The Ikoma messenger nodded and walked back up the hill with leaden feet. Tsanuri returned to the center of the square to oversee the rest of the accounting, of bodies and provisions alike.

Night fell on the Lion camp. The indignity of the raid faded into the dark, and bellies long empty had finally been filled. Tsanuri, opting to eat last after ensuring all her bushi had been fed, finally sat in her war tent over a bowl of rice, stewed lotus root and potatoes, pickled radish and mustard greens, and an early autumn apple. The meal had grown cold in the chill of the autumn darkness, but she sank back into the comfort of the food, savoring each taste she had missed after weeks of only millet gruel.

The curtained door parted, letting in a wind that rattled the fire in her lanterns and wood brazier.

"Akodo Toshiro-san and Ikoma Ayano-san to see you," the guard beyond called in.

"Admit them," Tsanuri replied, setting her chopsticks down for the moment.

Toshiro entered, his ledger still in hand, and Ayano shuffled in after him, a resolved haughtiness plastered back onto her face. She pulled her fur-lined cloak tighter around her shoulders.



"Forgive our intrusion during your meal, Tsanuri-sama," Toshiro said. "I have the final accounts for the day."

"How much do we have?"

"The supplies from Onon total three thousand, seven hundred and sixty koku of rice, along with about half that in vegetables and other staples. However, one of the villagers told me that Onon is a tax farm. Most of the harvest was grown to be sent for Unicorn Imperial taxes, with only a little left over for the village's farmers."

Tsanuri's brows furrowed. "Is this true? Does Lord Anakazu know about this?"

The emissary had already steeled herself against confrontation. "Lord Anakazu has instructed that I oversee the resupply of your stores. He mentioned nothing to me about taxes."

Tsanuri took up Lord Anakazu's letter once more. The noncommittal politeness of Anakazu's wording implied an indefinite wait before resupply and made no mention of knowing Onon's function as a tax holding.

"We will leave the portion meant for taxes. We shall not take what is the Emperor's," Tsanuri said. Doubt crept back into her stomach.

Where are the Lion land harvests?

"And Onon's winter stores?" Toshiro contested.

"You undermine Ikoma-ue's intentions if your army still starves regardless of the actions you've taken this day," Ayano said, her face hot with defensive anger, though an anxious twinge rimmed her mouth. "You must keep the supplies."

"How can you be so heartless?"

The noise of Toshiro and Ayano's argument faded as Tsanuri looked down at her meal. It seemed spoiled with the bitterness of this new revelation. Eating it meant Onon would starve.

The heaviness inside her yawned wide into an acerbic whirlpool of doubt, threatening to engulf her.

Had Ikoma-ue knowingly ordered such a thing?

She could not doubt the honor of her lord. Ikoma Anakazu had always led their family with wisdom and diligence. But had this order been a mistake? Perhaps the disorder in Lion leadership was worse than she had previously thought. Her standing army had no real purpose. The Lion harvests were missing. Today's orders had been less strategic and more reckless. And how many more companies like hers had been ordered to attack defenseless villages like Onon out of necessity? What game was Lord Anakazu playing?

A snarl almost escaped Tsanuri's lips.

No. Not Anakazu. Ujiaki.

She glanced down at Ikoma-ue's letter again. The signature chop mark stood out from the black ink like a crimson eye peering from the thick of a winter forest. Ikoma Anakazu. Her commander. Her daimyō. He was blameless in this. If there was more chaos beneath the surface, then he was facing it on their behalf. She would support her commander. Regardless of



the schemes of Ujiaki, Bayushi Shojū, or even Matsu Tsuko...Tsanuri would serve as the general Lord Anakazu could rely on perfectly, no matter the cost.

Tsanuri slammed her fist down onto the table. The ceramic dishes clinked precariously against the wood, but Toshiro and Ayano silenced them immediately.

“Lord Anakazu must not know that the Unicorn reserved Onon as a tax holding,” Tsanuri said, holding his letter up. “That is my fault for not discovering this ahead of time and relaying such important information to my superiors. Their strategy follows the knowledge they had, so this is my own failure, and the dishonor of it be on my head. To maintain the honor of our army, we will follow Ikoma-ue’s orders, and in the future, I shall do better to include such important details in my letters from the war front to our leaders. I shall follow Ayano-san’s example and be a better servant to our lord.”

Toshiro winced and bowed his head. Ayano’s eyes widened. She opened her mouth, but she paused. A strange awe had softened her face. She placed her hand on the Lion mon emblazoned on her chest.

“You have done what Lord Anakazu has commanded, and I shall report on the honor of your success,” she said. Then she bowed, deeper than she ever had since coming to their camp. “I shall leave for Ootosan Uchi at once.”

Without another word, she slipped out of the tent, disappearing as the autumn wind wailed behind her.

Tsanuri sank back into her chair and set the letter down next to her dinner. Her sick stomach had ruined her appetite, but she picked up the chopsticks anyway. People had died for this food. People might still die for it.

Toshiro bit his lip. “Tsanuri-sama. You sacrifice so much for us.”

Tsanuri laughed, startling the sentimental Akodo, and he almost dropped his ledger.

“We all do,” she said, scooping up a mouthful of the rice. Each golden grain glimmered in the firelight. “Every single one of us. That is what makes the Lion armies strong. Hundreds of lives. Thousands of sacrifices. All of them honorable.”

Toshiro nodded, finally pocketing his ledger.

“Now, go eat something before your foolishness gets you in trouble, again,” Tsanuri said. The Akodo quartermaster bowed and made to leave the tent.



“Oh. And Toshiro-san,” she called after him. “Don’t you dare write one of those silly Crane poems you scribble in your tent at night about me.”

Toshiro smiled. “A sacrifice I shall make for you, Tsanuri-sama. Good night.”

Alone with her meal again, Tsanuri lifted her chopsticks to her lips. War was coming. From the Unicorn. And the Crane. And the Scorpion. Soon, she would be asked to do much worse things than eat. They all would.

I shall do what is asked of me by my commander. Always.

She put the rice in her mouth and savored every grain.

