

Honor, Loyalty, Duty

By Mari Murdock

Yojiro applied his blade to the soft, pulpy surface of the wood. A curled shaving, and then another, like tongues of fire, rose and fell onto a *furoshiki* he had placed on the floor to catch them. Yojiro tapped his knife on the bench to let the wood slivers fall. The staccato mirrored the rain's rhythm.

Tap tap. Tap. Tap tap tap.

A gardener dressed in simple brown ducked out from behind a gate, a paper parasol draped over his shoulder.

An improbable figure: the gardener stared at him just a little too long before beginning to collect fallen leaves from the gravel pathway with a set of brass tongs. Yojiro continued to carve, his knife occasionally knocking the slivers from his work.

Tap tap tap.

Giggles issued from inside the embassy as a group of ladies approached a second story window. Lady Kachiko's languorous voice rose above the other women's. The shutter opened, and the courtiers sighed at the sight.

"Ah, the soft summer storm," Kachiko called out the window. "Shall we enjoy the view while we play our game?"

"Yes, *hanafuda* while we watch the flowers. How poignant," another woman replied. Yojiro recognized the voice as Shosuro Hatsuko, Kachiko's favorite geisha spy.

As their game commenced, the lacquered wooden cards fell upon a table with methodical clacks, also mirroring the rain's beat.



Click click. Click. Click click.

Yojiro tapped his knife again.

Tap tap.

The connection was established. Yojiro listened for the clicks of the hanafuda cards above, translating them into the words he had been ordered to wait for.

Click. Click click click.

The sounds issued from the window, nearly muffled by the shower, but Yojiro heard every word clearly.

Magistrate. Power. Tournament.



Yojiro transposed the coded words in his mind, connecting them to their intended meaning. Kachiko was referring to his position as an Emerald Magistrate, an honor that gave him control over planning the Emerald Championship tournament. Bayushi Shoji's brother Aramoro, the Scorpion contender, was to fight in the final match in a few days' time.

He answered, tapping his knife on the wood before him, knocking the shavings to the floor. Yes. My lady.

"You know, ladies," Kachiko said out loud, her words nothing more than a smoke screen for the true conversation. "I'm afraid that my recent visit to the Crane courtiers was disappointing."

The gardener approached. His work had brought him directly beneath Kachiko's window to scoop leaves from a koi pond with a long bamboo net. The gardener would hear nothing.

"Kakita Yuri completely lacks style," Kachiko continued. "Who knew a fine kimono could be ruined when its wearer's pride crumples into stubbornness?"

"Yes, something about the twist of a pig-headed expression throws off the balance of the patterns," Hatsuko answered. "Someone really ought to tell Yuri-san that the clothes do not make the man. The man makes the clothes."

The hanafuda cards continued to fall.

Click. Click click. Click click.

Tournament. Scorpion. Win.

Yojiro paused, his reply at the tips of his fingers. A twinge in his stomach stopped him short. Kachiko was asking him to sabotage the tournament, to use his crafting to ensure Aramoro became Emerald Champion. He frowned.

He could picture Kachiko's face above. Her full, crimson lips tilted into her knowing yet fathomless smile, savoring the delight of the plot.

Her message continued.

You. Clever. You. Win.

He could imagine her eyes, dark and mysterious, a tinge of flirtation.

So often he saw those eyes beside the Emperor. There, sitting in his regal majesty, the Hantei's gentle eyes extended toward heaven. The trusting, guileless wisdom with which he spoke. His strong hand resting upon the Chrysanthemum Throne.

Such a sabotage would be treason, Yojiro reminded himself. Worse even. A personal insult to the Emperor, blasphemy under the rule of Heaven.

Yet, Yojiro could not fully banish from his mind Kachiko's face, her ambitious gaze blazing with immutable loyalty to the Scorpion, the same fealty with which he had already devised a



way to sabotage the tournament the moment she had asked.

He sighed. Above all else, he was a servant to his clan. Above his honor. Above his soul.

He plied his knife.

I serve. Scorpion.

"It is a relief that the fighting between the Lion and the Crane must cease during the duration of the Emerald Champion tournament," Kachiko said, her sincerity seemingly unfeigned. "It should bring a few days of peace, more than we could have hoped for."

Craft well, Yojiro. Craft wise.

"A peace well earned," replied Hatsuko. "War is such an ugly thing."

I serve. My lady.

The gardener shot a suspicious glance at Yojiro, but he ignored it.

I wait. Good fortune.

Yojiro carefully wrapped his pile of wood shavings in his furoshiki and tucked it into his sleeve. He met the eyes of the gardener again before stepping out into the rain to hand him his carving.

A small wooden Crane for a Crane spy.

Mortified, the gardener stood paralyzed at being discovered, so Yojiro tucked it into the man's obi before walking away. He had another project to work on.

Bayushi Yojiro's high collar felt too tight around his throat. Its upward sweeping points pricked the sides of his face, caging him within his turmoil.

Honor. Dishonor. Am I a traitor? Whom would I be a traitor to?

"Yoji-kun. What's troubling you?"

Yojiro had forgotten he was walking with his sister. "It's nothing, Mii-chan."

Otomo Mikuru cast him a suspicious glance, over-exaggerated in a mocking style of her usually impeccable acting skills. "Your anxiety is plain on your face. That stiff collar hides nothing from me, brother."

Yojiro hesitated. His sister had always been more stalwart than him in her loyalty. Trained from a young age as an exceptional actress, she volunteered at only ten years of age to take part in a deceptive plot involving an Otomo representative visiting Kyūden Bayushi. She had done well. Now that she was married into the Otomo household, her ploys continued hourly, and she loved every minute.

"Even if I hide nothing from you, Mii-chan, it does not mean I can just say what comes to mind. We are no longer secret-sharing children."

"So you have a secret, then?" Her smile stretched far across her cheeks. She paused on the wooden planked path to stare at the tournament grounds. The path led to an array of brightly painted risers clothed in banners hued and marked for the seven clans. They enclosed a



spacious marble demonstration floor in an octagon, the Emperor's dais decorated with emerald silk and chrysanthemums making up the eighth side.

"Is your secret about the upcoming tournament?" Mikuru asked.

Yojiro nodded.

"Is it about the real reason why the tournament is being held at the capital city? Bayushi Goshu and I have been arguing about gossip regarding the Emperor's displeasure with the state of the Palace of the Emerald Champion. I heard Doji Satsume left the castle quite in disarray."

"There's no scandal," Yojiro sighed, weary of quelling the rumors. "Our blessed Emperor is merely getting too aged to travel. Honestly, Mii-chan. Have you ever heard of Champion Satsume and the word disarray in the same sentence before that rumor?"

Mikuru laughed out loud, unbecoming of a court lady. "I suppose you're right. But for having the reputation as 'the only honest Scorpion,' you are being very tight-lipped. What is your secret really, Yoji-kun?"

Yojiro gazed into her fresh face, barely seeing the tinge of concern in the crook of her ever-poised mouth.

Whom am I willing to betray?

He shook his head. "I'm sorry." He drew a long, silk parcel from his sleeve and offered it to her. "A present. I made this for you."

She unraveled the silk to reveal a *kanzashi* which sparkled blindingly in the sunlight. She touched the delicate, mirrored beads that fell in an arcing spray from the end. One of the beads lay fixed in place, a tiny corner tangled in the silk threading while the others dangled free, Yojiro's skill hidden in the seeming flaw.

"Am I to wear this at this tournament, Yojiro?"

He nodded, careful to hide an uncontrollable twitch in his frown from his sister behind his high collar.

"You and your husband's family have seats on the Emperor's dais. You are to help Aramoro win by blinding his opponent with this. You should be able to master the mirror in only a few minutes."

She touched her brother's sleeve. "And your worry? What ails your heart in this endeavor?"

"Should the mirror's reflection be contested, you must offer to commit seppuku for the dishonor of the accident."

Mikuru smiled, undisturbed by the command. "Are you worried it will come to that? That I will have to die?"



Yojiro shook his head, sweeping the prospect of death aside. "No, Mii-chan. What I worry about is more...subtle. And yet all the more tormenting. Betraying the Emperor's trust is not a light thing to consider."

"You are right. It is not." Mikuru started walking, stopping only when she stood right before the Emperor's dais. She gently slashed the kanzashi into the intricate loops of hair coiled upon her head and bowed as though preparing for an audience. As she lifted her head, the same fire burned in her eyes that Yojiro had often seen in Kachiko's. The loyalty beyond death. The ambition for power. Kachiko's presence had intimidated him into burning with that fire, her fervor consuming him. Yet seeing it reflected in his own sister's eyes twisted his stomach.

"What does the Emperor trust you to do?"

Yojiro thought a moment. "As Emerald Magistrate, I must fulfill my duties to the best of my ability and serve Rokugan with dignity and equanimity."

Mikuru turned to look at the Scorpion banner that hung above one of the stands. "The Emperor trusts Lord Shoju to do that too, Yojiro." She turned back to him. "And Lord Shoju trusts me to do the same, even at the cost of my own life."

Mikuru bowed to her brother, flashing the setting sun right into his eyes with the mirrored beads on her new hair ornament. She smiled, amused with her new skill, and departed.

Yojiro blinked the spots in his vision away, remembering his cunning, fathomless Champion. Shoju's masked face betrayed nothing, yet his eyes pierced through a man to his very soul, beyond his lusts and weaknesses into his core. Those eyes were always shrewd, savage perhaps, yet clear with no fire of ambition burning in them like those of Kachiko.

Suddenly, Yojiro could see Kachiko's ambition stained all over this Emerald Championship plot. She and Aramoro would risk dishonor for the possibility of power in the name of their clan. However, Shoju would not risk the Emperor's trust on such a blatant scheme as sabotaging the tournament, even for the power the Emerald Championship afforded.

Yojiro took a lingering look at the Emperor's dais. Shoju's loyalty to the Empire could be trusted, his motives ever for the sake of Rokugan. There was honor in that.

Your sentiments are right, Mii-chan, he thought. I must be the man that Lord Shoju can trust to protect Rokugan, even at the cost of my own clan. If I must tip the scales in Aramoro's favor, so too shall I tip the scales for his opponent, until they are balanced once more.

