

A Worthy Opponent

By D.G. Laderoute

When Ikoma Ujiaki had gone, Bayushi Shoji turned to a Go board set up on a nearby table, looking at it, but not actually *seeing* it. His thoughts revolved, instead, around the offer Ujiaki had couched in *hanakotoba*, the language of flowers. The thought of escaping his confinement, and seeking to restore his regency, had ignited a surprisingly keen sense of anticipation, of opportunities suddenly and unexpectedly in reach. Shoji had resigned himself to death, but it hadn't been the prospect of dying that had bothered him. All samurai lived their lives a katana's length from Emma-Ō's judgment, a truism with which he had long ago made peace.

Shoji deliberately pulled his thoughts away from Ujiaki, to gain some distance from them, and pushed them, instead, toward the Go board. It was the set that Hantei Jodan, the late Emperor and his friend, had gifted to Shoji only hours before his death at the hands of his son, Prince Sotorii. Shoji had been denied anything not expressly allowed by his jailers, except for the Go set. Apparently a gift from the Emperor was immune to even the most egregious accusations of treason.

He narrowed his eyes at the arrangement of black stones on the board, and then those of white. In theory, if both players made only optimum placements of their stones, black would win in six moves. He had determined four of them, but the fifth stubbornly eluded him.

Not that it mattered. He was merely puzzling out the solutions to Go problems posed in a treatise by a famous Shiba player of some two centuries past, grudgingly provided to him by his jailers. It was entirely unsatisfying, though. There was no urgency, no tension to the game, because he had no opponent. Without an opponent, Go became a hollow endeavor.

Shoji turned away from the board, and the implications of his agreement with Ujiaki came flooding back in.

What had scraped away at him like an ink-stick on a grinding stone wasn't impending death; it was that he had failed Jodan. Just as the late Emperor had entrusted him with the Go set, an Imperial heirloom, he had likewise entrusted him with the Empire itself, until Prince Daisetsu could ascend. But Shoji had not succeeded in consolidating his Regency, or finding the missing princes, before Toturi and Sumiko ended it with a broken katana, a discarded *wakizashi*, and a few fatal words uttered before the Emerald Throne.

He clenched his fists at the memory, but not because of what Toturi and Sumiko had done. Had he been in their place, and learned that the half-brother of the new regent attempted to assassinate the Emerald Champion—and did so on the same night as the Emperor's untimely



death—he likely would have come to the same conclusions they had.

No, he clenched his fists because of Kachiko, who had foolishly tried to engineer what amounted to exactly what the former Champions had accused him of—a Scorpion Clan coup. Now, though, thanks to Ikoma Ujiaki, perhaps at least some of the damage could be undone.

A soft rattle at the door. Shoji turned as it slid open. A Dragon Clan *bushi* assigned as one of his guards stepped into the room, followed by a servant bearing his dinner. He waited as the woman crept into the room, her head bowed, eyes carefully averted—

Shoji tensed. Something was wrong. It took him a few heartbeats to find a cause for his alarm; it was the Dragon. The man just gaped blankly, as though staring at something far away.

There were four items within easy reach that could serve as serviceable, albeit inefficient, improvised weapons. The Go board, made of stout sandalwood, was the handiest, but the idea of using Jodan's gift as a bludgeon was distasteful—



“Please, Bayushi-ue,” the servant said, “do not be alarmed.”

The woman looked up. It took Shoji only an instant to see past the make-up, the affected deferential expression, the hunched and servile posture.

“Soshi...Angai, if memory serves,” he said, then glanced significantly at the guard. “Your doing, I assume?”

The woman looked a little surprised. “Yes, my lord.” She gave a rueful smile. “My deception is clearly not as foolproof as I hoped. And, yes, the kami of air gleefully obfuscate the senses of the guards, painting the reality they expect to see over that which actually is. I can only ask the spirits to maintain this ruse for a short time, though, before they grow bored with their trickery.”

Shoji moved to the door, still standing open. A second guard stood in the corridor, gaping as blankly as his fellow. He slid the door closed.

“Angai-san,” he said, “why have you come here?” He expected her to say, *Why, to help you escape, my lord*, which would, awkwardly, necessitate him refusing. He needed Ujiaki, if he were going to accomplish the things he’d begun to anticipate; he therefore needed Ujiaki to be the one who engineered his escape. When Angai spoke, though, she said nothing of the sort.

“It is calamity that has brought me to you, Bayushi-ue,” Angai replied, then went on to recount the catastrophic events that had led to the death of Yogo Junzo by the dark sorceries of



a demon-witch from the Shinomen Forest, and the subsequent evacuation of certain artifacts from the fallen Yogo Castle.

“And now, those artifacts are here, in Otosan Uchi,” Angai finished. “They are safe, in the Black Watch compound in the Hojize District, at least for the moment. But...” She shook her head. “I have no idea how to proceed, my lord, so I have come to you for your guidance.”

Shoju looked again at the Go board, as he digested Angai’s horrifying tale. The Black Watch were a secretive faction within the Scorpion, dedicated to opposing any dark forces that might try to insinuate themselves into the Empire—even if it meant breaking Imperial laws to do so. Few even among the Scorpion knew of their existence, and almost no one outside the clan. When it came to matters such as those Angai had just described, he trusted them implicitly.

Which meant her calling them a *calamity* was more than apt—Junzo dead, the vile presence of a Tainted monstrosity polluting Yogo Castle, the artifacts...

Shoju’s diffuse feeling of anticipation suddenly crystallized into a clearer vision, as though a stubborn mist had begun to lift.

Perhaps I have not yet failed you, Jodan, my old friend. But it all turns upon the lasting cooperation of Ikoma Ujiaki—something I may be able to ensure, depending on exactly what Angai saved.

He picked up two of the Go stones, one black, one white, and turned back to Angai. “Leave here and find Ikoma Ujiaki,” he said, handing her the stones. “Tell him that you speak on my behalf. Show him these stones as a guarantee of your sincerity. And then, tomorrow, at this same time...”

He went on to outline what he wanted her to do. When he was done, despite the many questions she clearly wished to ask, she simply bowed. “Your will, my lord.”

She withdrew, the guard following her out of the room. When they were gone, Shoju glanced at the Go board, and then out the window, at the city, and Rokugan beyond.

A clearer vision, yes, but not yet truly *clear*. Still, this much was certain—just as Go needed an opponent, so, too, did the Empire.

The next day, the door opened once again to admit a blank-eyed guard, followed by Soshi Angai, a wicker basket slung over her shoulder. She slid the door closed, then bowed to Shoju.

“My lord, the invocation I have used to deceive the guards is a simple one, that plays upon the naturally capricious nature of the Air spirits. I have the means of producing a more powerful and expansive effect that will allow us to escape,” she said, gesturing at the basket, “but it requires me to focus much more attention on the kami, to keep them engaged. I cannot do both invocations at once.”

Shoju nodded and stepped close to the Dragon guard. “Release this man, Angai-san. I will not do this while he is enraptured by the kami.”



Angai gave Shoju a doubtful look, but nodded, then relaxed slightly. The Dragon's eyes suddenly cleared, and he blinked at Shoju.

"I am sorry for this," Shoju said. The man tensed, but Shoju grabbed his head and twisted just so, snapping his neck like a dry reed. He lowered the body to the floor, then bowed deeply to it.

"May Emma-Ō judge you as the loyal servant to the Empire you were," he said, then turned to Angai. "You may proceed, Angai-san."

For a moment, Angai simply stared at the fallen guard. Then she nodded, and extracted a paper lantern from the basket. She spoke as she prepared to light it.

"Ikoma Ujiaki has arranged for a diversion, an altercation between two groups of rōnin in the street adjacent to this building. He also has a detachment of Lion troops located nearby, in case we need assistance in covering our escape." She moved to strike steel against flint, but paused. "Bayushi-ue, what of your son? He is also under guard in this house. Will we effect his escape as well?"

Shoju frowned. He didn't believe Dairu was in any danger from the Dragon; if anything, he was likely safer in their custody than he would be nearly anywhere else. More importantly,



though, Dairu must not be associated with the things Shoju may soon have to do. Indeed, he would likely come to hate Shoju for those things, but that hatred would be as armor, protecting the future of the Scorpion.

So Shoju shook his head. "No, Angai-san. Dairu remains where he is."

Angai again stared for a moment, then turned quickly back to her task.

But there was something else Shoju needed to know. "Angai-san?"

She paused and looked up from the lantern. "My lord?"

"I have been labeled a traitor to the Empire, responsible for the death of the Emperor. Given that—why are you doing this?"

"Why—because you are my lord, Bayushi-ue."

Shoju gave a thin smile. "Your loyalty is commendable, but the accusations against me are grievous."

"That is true. However, we of the Watch determined that while it was, indeed, *Kunshu* that struck down the Emperor, the blade was not wielded by a Scorpion hand. Rather, it was that of..." She paused, as though reluctant to go on.



"Speak, Angai-san."

The lantern caught, and began to glow. "We discerned that it was wielded by a Hantei, my lord. Which cannot, of course, be true."

"It is not, Angai-san."

Angai met Shojū's eyes, then nodded. "Of course, my lord. We are obviously in error." She stared into the lantern's flame, incanting softly. Finally, she blew upon the flame, causing it to gutter, then brighten; a moment later, the air around them began to swirl, as though a gusty wind suddenly blew through the room. The breeze disturbed nothing, though, not even fluttering papers.

Her face now taut with concentration, Angai stood. "The air kami will enshroud us in a veil of deception, so that others see nothing amiss as we leave," she said, her voice now a strained monotone, "but only for as long as...as I can maintain my focus."

Shojū nodded and followed close behind Angai as she moved to the door. He glanced back once, at the Go set. He regretted leaving it behind, but it was impractical to try to bring it with him. Instead, he had left it set up according to one of the problems posed in the Shiba's treatise, one move away from a win by a famed Scorpion master.

Their escape was an anti-climax. Angai's ritual allowed them to simply walk out of the guesthouse without incident, past Dragon guards who didn't acknowledge their presence at all. However, it taxed her to the brink of exhaustion. Her invocations faltered, and finally failed, a short distance from the Black Watch compound, a nondescript house in a nondescript neighborhood of the dilapidated Hojize District. She managed to open the wards that protected the place, before falling into a faint. Shojū caught and carried her inside.

He was met by a young, intense man named Yogo Itoju. He was, apparently, one of Angai's colleagues in the Black Watch, a skilled wardmaster who had provided the means to circumvent several hastily conceived wards around Shojū's prison. He bowed deeply to Shojū, then assisted him in getting Angai onto a futon.

"Bayushi-ue," Itoju said, "if you wish to rest as well—"

"I do not," Shojū said. "I wish to examine the artifacts that were evacuated from the Castle of Learning."

"Of course, my lord." He lit a lantern and led Shojū to a stout wooden door. Waving a hand before it, while intoning a prayer, caused a complex symbol to momentarily flicker within the wood, like far-off lightning. It faded, and Itoju opened the door. Beyond was a short flight of stairs that they descended into a gloomy basement.

"These are the items retrieved from Yogo Castle, my lord," Itoju said. "Many could not be saved, however."

"What of the Sword of the Hantei?"



"Lost, my lord."

Shoju could only return a grim nod. Calamity indeed. But he pushed aside thoughts of the sword, and instead cast his gaze across the sundry objects that had been saved, mostly scrolls. He studied their bamboo cases, seeking one in particular, marked by a distinctive series of chips and cracks. He didn't see it, and his stomach tightened. If the one he sought was also missing, then it would be beyond mere calamity—

No, there it was. Relieved, he turned to Itoju.

"I appreciate all that you have done, Itoju-san. Go, see to Angai-san. I wish to examine these artifacts, to determine what has been saved—and what has not."

Itoju placed the lantern down and bowed. "As you wish, my lord."

When he was gone, Shoju moved all of the artifacts except for the distinctive scroll to a side table. Had *this* item fallen into the clutches of the Shadowlands, or even just someone with nefarious intent, it may have spelled disaster for the Empire.

Shoju knelt and rested his hands on the table. Depending what he did here, it might spell disaster yet.



It is indeed a Black Scroll, Yogo Junzo had said.

Shoju, visiting Yogo Castle as the newly ascended Champion of the Scorpion Clan, had given Junzo a sharp look. He'd stood with the Yogo *daimyō* in a strongly barred and warded room deep beneath the castle, to reveal to him the wonderful and terrible things that were kept here, in the clan's custody—including this, kept in its own, ponderous vault.

It seems such an innocuous thing, Shoju had said.

Junzo had merely given a thin smile. *And yet.*

There are twelve. Where are the others?

We've ascertained that four have been previously opened, Junzo had replied, at various times in the Empire's history. The remaining eight were dispersed across the Empire, so that no one party would be able to open them all—or, at least, do so easily.

And if one is opened, what would be the effect?

Based on such accounts as are available, there seems to be little discernible effect whatsoever, Junzo had replied. It is only if the knowledge within is acted upon by a mortal that their terrible



power is realized.

Shoju had studied the scroll case, an unremarkable tube of plain bamboo, marked with a distinctive series of chips and cracks that only Junzo—and now, Shoju himself—would recognize as significant.

And what terrible power does this one offer? Shoju had asked.

It is called The Skin of Fu Leng, and is said to reveal the most intimate and damning secrets of one mortal to another. The latter, using their own blood, must inscribe the name of the former upon it, in a clearly deliberate act.

And the cost? Shoju asked.

Of using this particular scroll? We do not know. What we do know, however, is that it brings the Empire one step closer to the return of the most dire evil in existence.

Shoju stared intently at the scroll case, as though doing so might offer more insight into the vile artifact. He was still staring at it when the lantern Itoju had brought began to flicker. Shoju lit a candle from it, then continued his contemplative regard of the profoundly dangerous relic.

He considered the events that had brought him here, to this moment. One, in particular, stood out. It had been one of the very last things Hantei Jodan had said to him, only hours before his death, in the Imperial gardens.

This game is now yours, Shoju-san. I am sure you will find no lack of opponents, old and new.

He had meant the Go set he had gifted to Shoju, but Jodan had also gifted him the burden of the Throne, as Daisetsu's regent. He had trusted him to put right the many things that, even now, continued to go so wrong, leaving the Empire more fractious than ever.

But the situation was far worse than just a fractured Empire. As regent, he had received disturbing reports regarding cracks in the integrity of the Carpenter Wall, despite the best efforts of the Crab. That, the attack on Yogo Castle, and the death of Junzo had convinced Shoju that this disunity not only worsened, it did so in the shadow of a mounting Shadowlands threat to Rokugan.

The game is now yours, Shoju-san.

But the game needed an opponent. And, to that end, Shoju needed Ujiaki. The loyalty of Angai and those like her notwithstanding, if Shoju was going to do what he needed to do—to become what he must be—he needed the Lion firmly at his side.

I may have not yet failed you, Jodan, but to do what you have bidden me to do, I must undertake a terrible thing. I can only hope you will not hate me for it.

Shoju picked up the scroll case. A final moment of hesitation, as he reflected on the potential consequences he would eventually face. The ancestral sword of the Scorpion, *Itsuwari*, specifically existed to slay the Clan Champion should he ever betray the Empire. But even dying to the sword paled in comparison to the most grievous fate the Scorpion reserved for egregious treachery—the sinister, shadowed copse known as Traitors Grove.





Perhaps, if he had more time, he could find another way—

But the darkness was gathering. There was no more time.

Shoju opened the case, and extracted the Black Scroll from it.

He turned it over in his hand. Such an *innocuous thing* indeed. Just a plain, unadorned page, albeit with a pliant, slightly moist texture, unpleasantly like actual skin. It was rolled and sealed with crimson wax.

More words suddenly came to

Shoju—those of his divine ancestor, the Kami Bayushi, founder of the Scorpion Clan. He had spoken them to the First Emperor, the Kami Hantei, accepting the sacred duty the Scorpion had been given.

I will be your villain, Hantei.

Shoju took a breath, then broke the seal and opened the Black Scroll.

As Junzo had said, nothing happened. Shoju saw that a fine, spidery script filled perhaps the topmost quarter of the page, recounting essentially what Junzo had told him. The rest of the scroll was blank.

Someone—Angai or Itoju—had been cataloguing the artifacts evacuated from Yogo Castle, using a brush-and-ink set still sitting nearby. Shoju ground and mixed ink, then nicked his finger on a sharp corner of the grinding stone. He caused a drop of his own blood to fall into the ink, dipped the brush into it, then paused in the face of the appalling thing he was about to do. He could still simply put the brush down, return the Black Scroll to its case, and—

And what?

Ujiaki was, like Kachiko, an opportunist. His allegiance was true today, but it would eventually shift. What would Shoju do then, besides continuing to have failed Jodan, and Rokugan?

No. Again, it was clear that he needed Ujiaki and, by extension, the Lion, to remain by his side. But he also needed to know Ujiaki's loyalty would be as absolute and enduring as Angai's—at least, until Shoju had done all of the things he needed to do. After that, it wouldn't matter.

Lowering the brush to the page, Shoju wrote a name.

Ikoma Ujiaki.

A moment passed, then crimson splotches appeared on the page, as though unseen blood



dripped upon it. The ruddy dollops spread, wicking across the page, joining, becoming characters, then words. In a moment, it was complete.

Shoju read what had been written—a complete revelation of the most personal, most hidden secrets of the man that was Ujiaki. He was, indeed, an opportunist—but also much, much more.

The bloody script faded, Ujiaki's name with it. It didn't matter, though; Shoju would not forget what had been written. Rolling up the Black Scroll, he returned it to its case—

“Bayushi-ue?”

Footsteps came down the stairs. Soshi Angai appeared, her expression taut. She bowed.

“Angai-san,” Shoju said, “I am glad to see that you have recovered.”

“I have, my lord, although—” She shook her head. “Your pardon. I was awakened by a dark and disturbing dream, which has left me unsettled.” She opened her mouth, as though to say more, but just closed it again. “In any case, Itoju-san tells me you have been down here throughout the night, my lord,” she said. “If I may ask, is everything alright? Do you need any assistance?”

Shoju nodded. “I do, Angai-san. I need you to once more arrange a meeting for me with Ikoma Ujiaki, to discuss a matter of great urgency. You need not tell him this, but a new threat to the Empire has arisen.”

Angai's eyes widened slightly. “Again, if I may, my lord—what is this threat?”

Shoju looked at the scroll case, then back at the Soshi.

“Me.”

