

The Careful Gardener

By Annie VanderMeer

The summons to court, placed at the entrance of his quarters as if an afterthought, was as expected as it was unwelcome. Ikoma Ujiaki frowned at the seal on it, as if the image of the flower pressed into the wax could curl at the heat of his gaze. Kakita Yoshi dared to use the imperial seal on what he had written. The Lion ground his teeth. *Of course he does. He is the regent now, and thinks he has won.* Ujiaki clenched the rice paper in his fingers.

Doubtless Yoshi would order the Lion Clan to withdraw its forces from Crane and Unicorn lands, and Ujiaki would be chattered at in that same superior tone Yoshi used before Bayushi Shoju was removed as regent, when he arrayed the Phoenix Clan to do his bidding.

Ujiaki snorted in disdain and flung the paper away from him, where it fluttered to the floor like a wounded bird. *Useless chickens, the lot of them, flapping their wings and crowing “under Heaven!” as if that meant anything to Yoshi except the height of his own ambitions.*

He ran his thumb over the hilt of the katana at his belt, the action soothing his thoughts and focusing them from bitter rage into the shape of a plan.

Of course the new regent would act as though the Lion merely captured Kyūden Kakita, as though his personal castle was the same as the whole of Rokugan—conveniently forgetting what happened to it, and who was responsible.

The Lion ambassador narrowed his eyes.

I will not let him forget. We will see how far I can push him, and how willing he is to act.

When he finally deigned to appear before the Imperial Court, Ujiaki was not alone: with him were Akodo Kage, Matsu Hiroru, and the newly arrived Kitsu Motso. As part of the escort of Kakita Ichiro, nephew to the regent, Motso had been spared the fate of the unfortunate souls who had fought to take Kyūden Kakita. Although the appearance of many Lions when only one was summoned was cause for chatter, Ujiaki was certain it was Motso's presence that caused the greater stir of murmurs, like echoes to their footsteps on the floor. Ujiaki held in a growl of contempt when he saw how perfectly they were polished, the mirror shine gleaming in the soft glow of the lanterns.

Freshly polished so Yoshi can see the imprints of the noses of those who bow in supplication to him. He held in a scowl. *He'll not have that honor from me.*

The Kakita family *daimyō* sat on the Emerald Throne with a careful grace—one Ujiaki imagined he'd practiced a thousand times more than he'd ever sat horseback—and motioned





with one hand for the Lion delegation to advance, his other hand delicately holding his silver *tessen*. “You arrive at last, Lord Ikoma Ujiaki. And with other Lions, I see. Do you require a pride to appear before the court?”

“The pride that stands out in this court is not my own,” Ujiaki said gruffly, then inwardly berated himself for letting Yoshi get a rise out of him. *Not so early. Hold your temper. For the moment.*

Yoshi carefully positioned a considering hand beneath his lower lip, thoughtfully tapping his silver fan

against his leg. “So you say,” he said smoothly. “Yet there have been no reports of Lion leaving Unicorn lands. Still the aggression of your clan continues.”

Ujiaki kept his face still, though the mention of his greatest failure stung. *All that work—the wedding plans with Shinjo Altansarnai were so carefully crafted, meant to show the unreliable nature of the Unicorn. The depleted stores, to make the Lion forces desperate, enraged. But the damned Crane makes them dance like puppets, paper horses behind a screen.* “And what of the aggression of your own clan, Regent?” he replied, and the whispers crashed throughout the room like a wave.

Yoshi’s frown was small, almost theatrical, but there was a flame in his voice. “You speak against yourself, Ambassador. The Lion captured Kyūden Kakita without warning—”

“I do not speak of Kakita lands, though for certain they will be mentioned,” Ujiaki interrupted, pushing on. “But Toshi Ranbo has been known as Lion territory for generations. And yet, instead of being given back to the Lion, it was ceded to the Scorpion—an insult meant to inflame us. What were we to do, when to endure the insult would invite further aggression from Unicorn and Crane alike?”

Yoshi’s laugh was short and cold, the sharp trill of the kingfisher. “You claim it was in defense, then, that Matsu Tsuko declared herself Lion Clan Champion and led your forces to Kyūden Kakita, breaking its walls and imprisoning its people?”

I had such high hopes for you, Tsuko. But forces were arrayed against you that I could not have imagined. Ujiaki’s eyes narrowed. *I only hope it can count for something here.* “Whether or not what Matsu Tsuko did was the will of my clan, none can claim that she acted ignobly. Evidence stands well to the contrary. Did she not treat her prisoners well? Did she not offer a chance of parley? To address *you*, Regent, as the lord of the castle, and ask for you to meet?”

The chatter that filled the room made the blood pound in Ujiaki's ears. A glance to his left showed Matsu Hiroru, Tsuko's younger brother, whose face was characteristically expressionless, but whose eyes burned. Beside him was Akodo Kage, and the tightness in the old man's eyes spoke of wariness. The old teacher was wise in the ways of battle, and his knowledge had benefited many of the players in this dangerous game: Hiroru, kneeling beside him; Toturi and Arasou, brothers on whom so much of the Lion Clan's futures had rested; and even Doji Kuwanan, whom Tsuko had met as a prisoner and quietly set free. Kage often counseled care and caution, tactical strikes, techniques too subtle for the current situation.

Yoshi knows subtlety like a flick of that irritating fan of his. Brute force, in this case, is what is called for. He smothered a dark smile. Think like a Matsu. All ferocity, no retreat. His eyes slid to his right, landing on Kitsu Motso, and when their gaze met, he could see a fierce agreement in the man. *Did he have that look when Tsuko declared herself champion? Did he predict what even I could not?*

Yoshi's face remained calm and imperious, but just for a moment, Ujiaki swore he'd seen the knuckles on the man's hand grow white, tightening on his fan. "You speak with disrespect, Lion," he said coldly. "Remember whom you address."

"I know well to whom I speak," Ujiaki growled, his voice growing in intensity. "The Regent now, but before and after this moment, the daimyō of the Kakita. A man who allowed his castle to be destroyed, rather than to answer a parley. You speak of disrespect, but what is the fate of one who allowed the destruction of his own lands? His own home? You squawked of 'under Heaven' before, but what now?" His words seemed to shake the room. "What is honorable combat, when instead of parley, there is destruction? What is respect for the laws of Rokugan, when it is violated by the weapons of outsiders?" He held the silence for a moment, letting his next line land with a sudden precipitous drop in volume.

"What is this then, but a true act of *war*?"

Yoshi flushed, though Ujiaki would attribute that to the man's own stunted desire for conflict rather than embarrassment. "You dare to threaten war upon another clan, in the very throne room?"

"I dare to state that the Crane has already made that proclamation—with the destruction of Kyūden Kakita." Ujiaki felt his own face grow hot. "And yet you, Regent, demand that my clan stands down, while the Crane detonates our monuments, rather than speak to us as equals? To negotiate? What value do you hold on life, *Regent*? When a Lion general goes into battle, they know what they ask of their troops. What promise of heroism and glory is there in the chaos of an explosion? And yet you ask for me to look past the grave insult you have not only hurled upon my clan, but possibly on any other who might stand against the Crane. You think you know what it means to offer your life for your clan, you who have never held a blade?"

True anger flashed in Yoshi's eyes, though to his narrow credit, his voice did not rise in



volume. "I will not abide this disrespect, *Ambassador*." His fan snapped open, the silver slats glinting like blades. "Be well aware of the danger in your words."

"Cease your cries, Chancellor!" Ujiaki barked. "You wave that fan like a child with a wooden sword, imagining it more than it is, as you imagine yourself to be more than you are. You and I both know you will not condemn this dreadful act, because then your own clan would lose face."

"This was the action of a single—"

"*That is impossible!*" He was unstoppable now, and though Yoshi's complexion had hardly reddened, Ujiaki imagined it bright against the Crane Chancellor's white hair. "It could not have been a single *bushi* who carried out this fateful act. If you say Tsuko's actions represent all the Lion, then this must represent the will of the Crane in the same fashion. Will you say nothing to address this violation, to act as the regent that you say you are, against such tragedy and betrayal?" He ground his teeth into the last phrase. "Against the murder of your own wife?"

Yoshi was on his feet, and Ujiaki felt himself leap upwards as well, as if ready to duel—though that were impossible on so many frustrating levels. "*Enough*," the Crane snapped, then steadied his voice. "You have no place in this court, Ujiaki. I shall not go so far as to command your death or strip your rank, but you are no longer permitted as an ambassador here. My order to the Lion Clan stands: remove your troops from Crane and Unicorn territory, and put up your swords, or this aggression will not be tolerated. Bring them that message as your last act as ambassador, and do not act within the permissions of that office again."

"You are dismissed, Ujiaki. Take your little pride with you."

Ujiaki was barely conscious of his stalking out of the room, or the hurried footsteps of the other Lion following him. *I hope that outburst was worth it*, he berated himself. *Burned down everything, and for what? There is no victory against Yoshi in court, certainly not from me. There may be horror against what the Crane has wrought, and in tales of the explosion at Kyūden Kakita, but is not enough on its own to tear down that damnable man's reputation.* He snorted, nostrils stinging in the late fall cold. *Some might even feel sorry for him, the fools.*



He dimly heard Kage's attempts to catch his attention, but put up a hand and stalked to a far corner of the gardens, thick with maples. Though most of their leaves had fallen, the thicket was dense enough to hide from prying eyes and the crunch of the small leaves would be a



challenge for even the nimblest of *shinobi* to avoid. He stopped, and slowly his fellows joined him, in a rough circle.

There was a moment of heavy silence before Kitsu Motso—accurate to his usual sardonic self—gave a harsh chuckle and shook his head. “Not the worst speech I’ve ever heard in court, but certainly the loudest.”

“What were you thinking?” Akodo Kage hissed, shaking his head in disbelief. “The Lion have no representation in the court now. You could have gotten yourself killed—”

“Untrue,” Ujiaki said sharply. *Though I will never let them see that I am somewhat relieved.* “To call for my death would be to admit his vulnerability at the loss of his wife and castle. While he did not see fit to sacrifice his political position to parley with Lady Matsu Tsuko, I cannot imagine destroying his lands was a decision he would have made, even to defeat a dangerous foe.”

Hiroru was silent, his face blank, but Ujiaki knew the young man well enough to see the fury in his eyes. “I am not my sister,” he said quietly, “or I could bring that upstart Crane down from his perch by the neck.”

The former Lion ambassador nodded slowly, and tried to add some gentleness to his voice. “You are not, but you share with her many important traits, such as a glorious stubbornness.” *And unpredictability, though that went well enough.* Manipulating Tsuko had been a roll of the dice every time.

Certainly, she had proved to be hotheaded enough in certain situations, and able to perform far better in battle than he could had hoped. And it was easy to count on her thirst for revenge as enough to spur certain factions into more aggressive action, but her ability to temper that thirst had worked even better than he could have hoped. Her release of Doji Kuwanan had been particularly unexpected.

Certainly he had not counted on that outcome when he hired the *rōnin* to capture Kuwanan at Shirei Mura, but Tsuko had surprised him then, and to forego a half-measure of revenge in the hopes of destabilizing the Crane was a step he did not expect, and even admired. A mention to her of his pride at Akodo Toturi being made Emerald Champion worked to enflame her rage exactly as he’d hoped, but her further declaring herself as the new Lion Clan Champion and successfully uniting the Lion generals to take the Kakita Palace was a success he had not dared dream of. The resources captured there, after such a long shortage of food, would make Lion even stronger against their enemies, and he had envisioned Unicorn and Crane forces crumpling before their charge like rice stalks against a sickle. Lion banners would march across the lands, retaking what once had been lost, and winning new territories in one proud offensive after another. Tsuko’s brilliant and swift capture of Kyūden Kakita felt like the triumphant first step in this march to victory.

But too soon after, the gaijin pepper that the Crane had acquired—*Where? And how?—*



brought the castle itself low. That was a shift he never could have predicted. And with Bayushi Shoji removed as regent, the Lion Clan's power held on by a thread.

"None of us are Tsuko, but what is certain is that none of us will be chosen as the next Lion ambassador now." Kage sighed in frustration. "We have given up what little say we had in a display of foolish arrogance."

Hiroru threw a dark glance at his former master. "Or one of courage. Something the Crane know little about."

Kage shook his head, dismissive. "An empty display, regardless. And one with dire consequences."

Kitsu Motso gave another dry laugh. "Kage-sama, you could teach these maples around us how to quake," sneered Motso. "But one should expect that of someone scared from the room by a minor clan."



Kage's face grew cold and intense, and he opened his mouth a moment before Ujiaki threw up a hand. "Enough," he growled, his voice low. "You say none of you will be ambassador, and that is certain. What I believe is that the regent would never give the office to anyone who would speak against him. Perhaps anyone at all."

The old Akodo clenched his fists. "All the more reason to not endanger that station!"

"Did that meeting not make it apparent that station is a lie? That whatever power it might hold was a falsehood?" Kage's face reddened in frustration, but he said nothing. "It is better to know that the Lion are being silenced directly than suffer under the illusion that we are being heard."

"So what now?" asked Motso, crossing his arms. *Ever a man unafraid to look arrogant.* Ujiaki regarded him carefully.

"There are no allies we might find in the court," he said slowly. "But there may be one elsewhere. Guarded, but not truly imprisoned. Accused, but not convicted. And seemingly powerless, though assuredly not without power."

Motso caught his meaning first, and even the brash man looked a bit taken aback. Kage blinked in disbelief, and Hiroru's gaze was practiced, unreadable as a Scorpion behind their mask. The old teacher stammered a moment, trying to compose himself. "You... you can't mean..."

"I do."



"But Toshi Ranbo –"

"Was given to them. They did not take it from us."

Hiroru's look was even. "They are not to be trusted."

Motso responded to that, ever hungry for a target. "Are they ever? If they stood in the rain, I'm not sure if they'd get wet, or just find their way around the drops."

Kage took a deep breath, and looked at Ujiaki seriously. "You risk everything with this."

"To anyone who saw my court appearance, I was just one loud Lion. If anything goes wrong, I am one still." *Though I have no intention of going down alone if I fail. Beasts of the field claw at a Lion, but we rise. I will see us rise still.* "Then we are agreed?"

Slowly, each of the men nodded.

"Good." Ujiaki said firmly. "Now, I need some tea."

The Dragon guards started as he approached, and Ujiaki inclined his head politely—a gesture that was entirely unnecessary, given his status, but marked him as a supplicant to their judgement. He sensed them exchange a quick glance before they relaxed slightly. "Ikoma-sama," the one of the left said carefully, but not without respect. "It is... unusual that you are here. And so close to the dinner hour?"

"Is it?" Ujiaki quipped with a dry bit of humor, shaking his head. "I take dinner later myself, as I am not much loved in the court these days... Neither is your guest. I would take tea with an old friend, should that be allowed."

The guards narrowed their eyes, and carefully Ujiaki lifted the smooth sandalwood lid of the elaborate tea set he carried, showing the delicate porcelain cups, nestled safely in a compartment away from the small iron pot. "No hidden knives or keys, no implements of destruction"—his face quirked slightly, adding a smile to his dry wit—"though in all fairness, I suppose a Scorpion bent on my death would need but a goose's quill to make an end of me, if the stories are true." His smile turned almost indulgent, a smirk of confidence. "But even if they were, I am certain your charge would not survive an escape attempt. And I am doubly certain he knows it."

The one on the right looked to have a shrewder brain beneath his helmet, and gazed carefully at the set. "Open the tea canister," he demanded. "I'll see for myself if you carry anything dangerous."

Ujiaki gave a nearly theatrical sigh, and shook his head. "If one of you holds this, then—you wouldn't diminish its beauty by setting it upon the floor, would you?" Awkwardly the two shook their heads—*Dragons and their formality, of course*—and the Lion placed the case in the outstretched hands of the first guard. He withdrew the slender case and opened it before them, rolling the contents inside for their observation, and wafting the scents in their direction. The two sniffed and wrinkled their noses, and Ujiaki did his best to grind down his impatience,



visualizing a sword against a whetstone. *All patience, all smiles, all understanding. This must not be seen as artifice.*

Finally the guard on the right—if not the senior by rank then certainly by sense—nodded, and Ujiaki resealed the container and packed it away. “Four coils only,” the guard chided, gesturing to the incense clock that burned on a table nearby, sending a gentle scent of pine sap drifting into the air. “A cup between friends—don’t try to fool me that a Lion appreciates the art of tea.”

“You would be surprised, I’d wager”—*pull back the irritation, pull back*—“but I shall refrain from any formal ceremonies. Thank you for your forbearance.” Again Ujiaki tilted his head, and waited patiently for the guards to pull open the door to the room, hardly waiting for him to step inside before sliding it quickly closed, as though the occupant could become mist and slither out.

If Bayushi Shoji was surprised to see him, it did not register on the visible part of his face, and Ujiaki would not have laid money on a bet that it registered underneath the mask, either. The Scorpion simply sat cross-legged at the center of the floor near a small brazier, contemplating a Go board sitting on a low table before him, a game half-finished, but no opponent in sight. “A unique pleasure to see you, Ikoma-sama,” he said, that voice seeming like it came both from somewhere far away and next to your ear at the same time. “Did I hear talk of tea?”

“You did. May I present you with some?”

A slight twitch of the Scorpion’s mouth, which for others—even Ujiaki—would be a bitter smile, asking the dry question *Do I have a choice?* “That would be pleasant. Please—I am no host here, but nonetheless I consider you my guest. Allow me.”

Ujiaki set down the tea box near the brazier, and carefully Shoji removed the heavy pot from the box, examining it for a moment before pouring some water, kept in a nearby flask for his refreshment, into the kettle and placing it on the fire. Ujiaki settled himself on the tatami and opened the tea container, and masked his flash of enjoyment as he saw Shoji turn, interested. “Bergamot, a Lion favorite,” the Scorpion observed quietly. “And something else.”

“Rhubarb,” Ujiaki clarified, certain Shoji had known but was waiting to make sure he did as well. “A favorite of your clan, if I am not mistaken.”

“You are not.” Shoji’s dark eyes regarded him almost blankly behind his lacquered mask, and Ujiaki ground down his inner hatred for that clan’s particular affectation. *Whetstone, blade.* “An... unusual combination.”

“But an excellent one, I hope you’ll find, particularly in the current weather.”

Shoji’s gaze did not waver. “I fear I have not had much occasion to experience it.”

Telling. Ujiaki covered his reaction as best he could with a nod, and an idle scratch at his impressive beard. *He’s been out of the loop. Scorpion’s spies are silent as the mountain, and yet they have not reached him. Either they are not as good as they say, or they have remained separate for a reason.* “Well, it’s hardly pleasant. The bite in the air is tense enough that it cuts like knives,



and it looks to be a dark and frigid winter, especially for those not prepared for it.” He felt the Scorpion’s eyes weighing him as he continued, and he pushed to keep his tone conversational. “Even as a pragmatist who knows winter has its place in a cycle, I admit I long for spring to arrive. Nothing like the first sign of a true spring—the blooms of the palest *tsubaki*, pure as the snow they replace.”

Shoju sat back and folded his hands, the *hanakotoba* apparently not lost on him. In the language of flowers, the camellia had a far more dire meaning to those who wielded a blade—the “beheading” of the flowers at their fall. Pale white, however, was not the red of love and passion, but *waiting*. “An elegant thought,” he said slowly, his eyes downcast a moment. “Are you much of a gardener, then, Ikoma-sama?”

It was the art of decades of manipulation that crafted a laugh from Ujiaki’s throat that did not sound too triumphant at the sign of interest, nor too false. “Not nearly to the level that you are, Bayushi-sama,” he chuckled. “I lacked the patience for true careful cultivation, especially in my youth, and the understanding of when to let the garden develop on its own. But now...” He steepled his fingers. “I know that sometimes, it is helpful to push the snow off of a battered chrysanthemum.”

That was it. The barest twitch of Shoju’s mouth at the mention of the Imperial flower, the sign of the Empire itself. Ujiaki was certain the other man had meant for him to see it. Heartened, he pushed ahead. “Sometimes it is even necessary.”

“Necessary?”

“Lest it be crushed under the weight, especially when fools want such weight untouched because they believe it looks more lovely that way.”

Shoju’s nod was barely discernible. “There is risk to manipulating the gardens of others, of course. Even the shifting of snow might invoke disappointment, or harm to other flowers.”

Ujiaki leaned forward. *Any guard listening would be perplexed at best. I believed the language of flowers was only good for wooing—I never thought it would decide the fate of the Empire, but we are in strange times. Sharpen the blade.* “Gardeners such as we know the truth of things. It is the chrysanthemum that is the focus of all the garden, and it must be protected. All else falls away before it, or can be straightened after spring arrives.” A shrug, slight. “Or uprooted, if it no longer is fit to flourish.”

The Scorpion looked down, considering. The water had begun to boil now, the steam further masking Shoju’s face. “As you say,” he began slowly, then looked up towards his guest. “I believe I could be so bold a gardener, knowing to what purpose that disruption was for. One must know what is intended to bloom.”

In Ujiaki’s mind, a blade sung against a whetstone, trembling in the air. With sure hands, he slid his fingers into notches on the tea set and lifted up the hidden top of the box, setting it aside to reveal a stoppered porcelain bottle and two slender saucers. The water continued to



boil as he unstopped the bottle and poured a measure of sake into each cup, and with a nod, both men lifted their cup, dark eyes locked.

“To the garden that flourishes,” Ujiaki began, and let the words hang as Shoju raised his cup a little higher.

“May what is necessary be pruned, and the old swept away.” His gaze burned with a determination that was almost shocking to see on such an otherwise neutral face. “Unmourned.”

The note of the blade sings in the silence. The plan is joined.

“*Kanpai*,” the men declared in unison, and drank.

