

Caged Birds

By Katrina Ostrander

The eastern gate of Toshi Ranbo Castle was so used to being barred shut against invaders that it groaned with protest at being opened, even for something as meek as a lowly merchant's ox-drawn cart.

The inner yard's samurai officer shouted for them and to enter; dressed in a simple cotton kimono, coat, and apron, Bayushi Kachiko would have been a fool to disobey.

As she and her disguised retinue passed under the gate, the roof granted them a blessed break from the unceasing pelting of rain, but the reprieve was over all too quickly.

Every time she'd forget that night for a moment, the feeling of Shoji's dagger across her neck, it all came flooding back in a sickening rush.

A contingent of ashigaru guards flanked the officer on both sides, their spears upright in attention. The approaching samurai's sharp, red-and-black armor was meant to threaten.

Once, it would have been a welcome sight—a Scorpion Clan crest signified a loyal ally who would have been prepared to die for the Mother of Scorpions in a heartbeat. Now, Kachiko was nothing. Nobody.

She'd dropped the strings. Now, there were none to pull.

"Hold!"

She shivered again as the traveling party came to a halt and bowed to the castle's guardians. Staying in motion meant staying slightly warmer, and she couldn't remember the last time she had seen or felt the light of Lady Sun. The goddess hadn't seen fit to bless their journey, and the days were only growing shorter. Soon, the rain would turn to slush, then snow. It was only a matter of weeks before drifts closed the Emperor's Road, and the Winter Court would begin. Without her.

"Present your goods for inspection," the samurai ordered. It was her cue to retrieve the small chest from the cart. The handles almost slipped through her numb fingers, but she held it steady, waiting, for as long as was needed.



Taro rattled off the contents of the cart as his fingers took an accounting of each and every barrel, the officer nodding as he went. The rest of her traveling companions held on to the silence since departing on the Emperor's Road. Emiko, Denji, and Iri each moved aside or helped Taro present the goods as needed, but she could still feel their gaze, watching her for any hint of treachery.

They did not trust her. This wariness was partially why they had lasted so long in the Bayushi Elite Guard. She couldn't blame a sentry for exercising basic caution.

When the officer finally came to her, a flicker of shame swept over her bare cheeks, but there was no way the samurai could recognize her like this, and the wide straw hat shielded much of her face from view. It was inconceivable that the Imperial Advisor would have fallen so far, or stooped so low. She kept her eyes downcast as she unlatched the box to reveal as much of the contents as she could without ruining them with rain.

A *heimin* was subject to the whims of Fortunes and samurai. If, on a given day, the samurai felt her lord's allowances too meager, she could demand the chest be opened and pocket a few items for herself, as the official accounting wouldn't be taken until they reached the storage barns. If the samurai had received ill news or been personally slighted, she could tear the box from the merchant's arms and turn its contents out into the muddy yard, depriving the merchants of its worth entirely.

Kachiko had engineered her own fortunes, and those of others, since before she'd stepped foot in the Hall of Lies to learn the arts of manipulation. She'd amassed power by denying it to others, tempting and deceiving and killing until she was a force to be reckoned with in her own right, independent of her husband or father or brother or son. It was all worth it—her power helped the clan.

Now, she was at another's mercy, waiting for the blow to come or pass.

This chest contained so much more than simple trinkets within its hidden compartments. These mementos were all that she still possessed of her old life in the capital, when she pulled the strings.

The blow did not come to pass, and the samurai paid the chest no more than a moment's glance.

Almost their entire ledger's worth of supplies had been reviewed when she spied Taro's slight bow as he proffered a small string of pennies to the samurai. It was business as usual, even for one as high of stature as an Imperial Legionnaire. Kachiko lifted her gaze as much as she dared without catching the samurai's attention.

Soshi Yayoi's branch of the family was certainly wealthy enough to purchase her a commission in the ranks if she'd had no affinity with the kami. And samurai accustomed to high standards of living had expensive tastes. Surely there was yet some drinkable sake somewhere in the castle town—for the right price.

She pocketed the information for a different rainy day.



"Hurry up, now!" the samurai shouted over the din of the rain. Kachiko was all too eager to comply.

"Thank you, samurai-sama," Taro offered, completing a deeper bow to the legionnaire and then returning to sit beside the driver. He looked to the rest of them and grinned. "At last, a chance to get out from under Osano-wo's piss." He laughed, and the samurai ignored his crass remark.

Despite the command to hurry, each step was a struggle as she plucked one foot from the mud, then another. When was the last time she had been this dirty, this cold, or this alone? She couldn't remember.

No, that wasn't true. It had been during the Battle of Ice and Snow, when she'd been held captive atop the highest floor to await whatever punishment Inazuma no Gendo was ready to mete out. She hadn't known then whether Hotaru, her sworn yōjimbō, was coming to save her—or if Hotaru would instead rejoin the Crane warriors who had begun the assault on the keep.

Hotaru had come for her then—had risked her life and her father's approval for Kachiko. But Hotaru couldn't come to her, now, even if Kachiko dared sending her a message and inviting Shoji's wrath upon her head. Honor, Duty, and Loyalty demanded that the Crane Clan Champion stay by her armies' side. And Duty required that Kachiko accept her fate, for now.

She had never been very good at simply accepting anything. But that was before she had discovered that the spoiled Crown Prince had murdered his own father in cold blood, nearly destroying the Hantei name and plunging the Empire into utter chaos. That was before she had tried to eliminate Toturi to prevent him from staging his own power play. Before she walked the very fine line separating her from a tree in Traitor's Grove.

The great doors of the gatehouse shuddered closed behind them, and the inner yard suddenly felt very small.

Kachiko spied another Scorpion samurai among the Imperial Legionnaires—Shosuro Hayate. He was too honorable for the Scorpion, and so a more suitable duty was found. But even in the ranks of the Emerald Champion's troops, a Scorpion would not forget their duty. Yojiro had been wise in how he'd reinforced the garrison.

She'd thought she'd been wise in weaving her web. Wise, and clever. Now, her eyes and ears were all hundreds of miles away. She knew how to groom new informants, but how many did Yojiro already have under his sway? And how much was she willing to risk?

Taro led their cart to one of the many storehouses built to supply the castle during a siege. She was under a roof at last, even if it stank of wet hay. Was she expected to help unload the cart as well? Her arms and legs already ached with the day's travel, and when she finally stopped moving, she shook from the marrow of her very bones.

She got her answer when someone she didn't recognize approached her, bidding her to follow. She forced herself up the steps and into the building.



Although she was leaving them behind, this was hardly the last she would see of “Taro” and the rest of the squad assigned to protect her. They would simply assume new roles within the castle and continue their watch.

Once they were in a side room and the sliding door closed behind them, her attendant helped her remove the rice-straw *mino* as she untied her hat. Kachiko peeled off the socks and shin guards that dripped with mud, her fingers trembling. After wiping her feet with a warm hand towel, she eagerly slipped her swollen feet into the coarse slippers provided, but by the time she looked up again, her raingear and attendant had vanished. A plain cotton kimono lay folded on a side table for her to change into.

The simple garment meant she would need no help to dress. In the palace, she would have spent those minutes donning her robes being briefed by Ayaka on all that the spy had learned since the last time they spoke. Surely, her handmaiden would be serving a new mistress by now.

She waited. As the shivering slowly subsided, soft thunder rolled over the castle grounds, and the minutes passed by. The attendant was not returning.

No one was coming for her.

The side room of the storehouse was austere, and where an alcove would have been in a proper samurai's house, there hung only a single scroll from the wooden pillar: “The mighty must fall; the full becomes empty.” The Shinseist saying was a message intended for her, no doubt delivered on Shoji's behalf.

Here in Toshi Ranbo, she was stripped of her silks, her jewelry, her masks, her whisperers, her admirers. She could not even watch her son from afar.



He thinks that alone, I am powerless.

She reached out for the warm towel, but it had turned cold.

Without Ayaka, Kachiko would have to screen her own visitors and send her own messages.

Without Takeru, she would need to ferret out her own secrets.

Without Aramoro, she would have to watch her own back.

Without Asami, she would be forced to honor all of her appearances.

Without Shoji, she would have to serve as her own devil's advocate.

Without Hotaru, she would be forced to keep her own confidences.

She stared at the scroll for a long time until her cheeks felt warm and wet. When her tears finally dried, she could feel nothing at all.



The Osari Plains had already become a marsh under the relentless rains of fall, and Shizue's letter had made it clear just how much of a quagmire they had found themselves in.

In the darkness of a cloudy morning, the surrounding battlefields shrouded in mist, Doji Hotaru put herself through her kata. It was practice, not punishment, she told herself.

They'd lost Kyūden Kakita—its priceless treasures and its stalwart defenders—to the Lion. It was impossible, only it had happened. And on her watch as champion.

You are not good enough for the championship. How many times had her father told her that?

I would never be good enough, in his eyes. She had come to peace with that. Thankfully, Daidoji Uji and her brother had already begun the counterattack. Her own role was less certain.

Her generals warned that Matsu Tsuko meant to draw them out from their position on the Osari Plains. If they left, it would only be a matter of time until rōnin retook these villages, sacking them in the process and ruining whatever harvest might still be salvageable once the rain abated. And once winter set in, there would be no getting them back—not until the thaws of the new year.

But could they weather the rest of the season here and risk being pinned in the open like this, if a sudden frost came? Shouldn't she command Daidoji Netsu to bring the army south to winter at Kyūden Doji?

It would be admitting defeat. She refused to be confined to the palaces, not when she was champion.

How cruel it is that I must be consigned to war when I have only ever wanted to create art. Is everything beautiful in this world destined to be destroyed or fall apart?

Hotaru whirled the practice stick in her hands, shifting her grip as she blocked mock blow after blow, drawing on her training for how to fight with her *naginata* when she was outnumbered and alone.

She was alone. Her enemies were closing in on the clan from all sides, and her allies were scattered to the winds. High Priestess Takako prayed to the spirits to keep the storms at bay on their coasts. Lady Ryoku shielded students and refugees at Shizuka Toshi. Kuzunobu had to make the long journey from his parents' estates. And Shizue was leaving for the far west, counting on the Unicorn Clan's hospitality—and protection.

Kachiko, though...

There was no reason to believe Kachiko had been involved in Satsume's death after both investigations, but it was impossible for the Mother of Scorpions not to be at the center of the current turmoil at the heart of Otosan Uchi. As Imperial Advisor and wife to the Regent, she held far more influence than the Shosuro daimyō ever could, and with the heirs missing...

Is it enough? Are you happy now, having amassed so much power?

She thrust the polearm straight ahead, swung it hard to the left, pivoted to turn around.

Is that why you've been too busy to write?





Hotaru caught the pole just short before it struck the neck of the grey-haired man who'd approached her from behind.

"*Sumimasen!*" she offered automatically, freezing in place. "Are you all right, Toshimoko-sensei?" she asked, immediately realizing how silly of a question it was. Her uncle casually placed his hand on the staff's edge to lower it, his smile slight and perfectly arrogant.

They were far from their old practice grounds in Tsuma. In his muddied, rough-spun clothes, he could have passed for a lone

rōnin traveler, save for Kandaïsa, the priceless Kakita blade at his hip.

Hotaru slowly brought the practice weapon back to her side. "I thought you needed to stay with your students at the academy. Why have you come, uncle? Kyūden Kakita is under siege, and Daidoji Uji would be glad to have a champion like you fighting alongside his armies."

Toshimoki chuckled, crossing his arms over his chest. "If my students need me, then I am a poorer teacher than I knew. You know I haven't the patience for sieges. No, I wanted to see what sort of adventures my favorite niece was getting up to without me."

She almost laughed. Had the other teachers at the academy even tried to stop him? In all his many years, no one had been very successful at telling the Grey Crane what he could and could not do. Not even Satsume could command him.

Hotaru had never had that freedom. She carried the weight of the clan on her shoulders.

"I would hardly call watching our war camp slowly sink into the earth an adventure," she said solemnly. "These are dire times."

"Perhaps not the kinds of adventures we used to get up to, but you are being tested nevertheless. The situation is dire, yes. But you were born for this. You are restless because your destiny is at hand."

She stuck the ground with the butt of her stick. "I must do what is best for the Crane, which means upholding our honor and solidifying our position on the Osari Plains! I can't simply hand these people to the Lion."

"Where is the fearless duelist from the Battle of Ice and Snow? Where is the darling of the Winter Court? Where is the slayer of the Lion Clan Champion?" The glimmer in his eye was the one she had always treasured most as his pupil: the look of a teacher's pride.

She couldn't forget how her heart had tightened, taut as a bowstring before she loosed the arrow. How easily Arasou had fallen, as it were a dream. How fleeting had been her pride, when the realization set in that she had killed Toturi's own brother at the gates of Toshi Ranbo.



Hotaru turned to face the north. "Toshi Ranbo..." She paused. "The Lion armies have pushed to the south. They're no longer blocking the way."

"Mmm... so it would seem. You are our lord and champion, Doji-ue. What will you do?"

She said it so quietly, she couldn't be sure she even said it aloud. "We will go."

Kachiko awoke as if from a nightmare. The layout of the room was all wrong. The air was chill, her sleeping garments coarse. There was no sound of the bustling city beyond—only the endless din of rain.

The days caught up to her. Weeks ago, she'd left Otosan Uchi, her home for as long as she'd been Imperial Advisor. Now she was in Toshi Ranbo, under the protection of Chief Magistrate Bayushi Yojiro. She had managed to convince the late Emperor that the city should become an Imperial stronghold in name. In practice, it was a holding of the Scorpion. Here, she could be kept at arm's length from Imperial politics. And kept under close Scorpion guard.

She was alone in the room, but the silhouette of her guards stood out against the rice-paper door in the morning light. A kimono appropriate for her status as wife to the Bayushi daimyō hung on a stand in one corner.

The desk was empty of any paper, and there was no calligraphy set. Did Shoju think her foolish enough to reach out to anyone in light of what had happened? She shivered.

"...the only reason you are not now being dragged to Traitor's Grove."

She knew better than to defy her champion and husband after such a direct threat. She would have to be cautious. Lady Shosuro herself must have cloaked Kachiko's deeds in shadow. Shoju didn't know about Aramoro and Toturi—not yet. If he did, she wouldn't be here right now. Of that, she was certain.

It was like waiting for a slow-acting poison to take effect. You didn't know when—or if—you would succumb.

She made herself dress, but when it came time to do up her hair and makeup, she hesitated. She allowed herself a mask, here in the tower she shared with no one but her guards. After a simple breakfast, she began to unpack the belongings that had been smuggled in with the peasant's cart.

Carefully, she opened up the chest's hidden compartments. She hadn't been sure if its contents would survive the journey.

Hotaru's fan had survived, but not without time taking its toll. The colors were duller than she remembered, the wood starting to show wear. Yet that did not change whose fan it was, or what the gift had meant at the time. She could still hold on to the fan, to the memory.

"Lady Kachiko," came the familiar voice. It was sadder than she'd last heard it.

"Come in, Chief Magistrate Bayushi," she said, her voice faltering from disuse.

The sliding door opened and his tabi muffled his footsteps across the polished wood floor.





He knelt before her, but she avoided his gaze. "I am so sorry that the circumstances surrounding your visit aren't more favorable," he apologized, bowing deeply.

The anger of their last meeting returned like a fire in her belly, but she took a deep breath. Nothing more needed to be said.

His brows were knit together in concern as he spoke. "I do not know why you have been bidden to journey to Toshi Ranbo, only that you must be protected and kept here in secret."

Was he speaking the truth? If so, his ignorance was her opportunity. With a blank canvas, she could paint her own picture of the events. He longed for her, to be in her confidence, and how much sweeter would it be if he could be her savior? It would not be so hard to draw him in...to show him her love...

To begin tempting him, she needed only to unfurl her fan in one slow, languorous motion—to turn her head to reveal a hint of her delicate neck.

But then what? What would she do with him? Use him to defy Shojū? No, Yojiro would be too conflicted.

It was too dangerous to tell Yojiro the truth. And if Shojū hadn't seen fit to fill him in, she wouldn't dare give him anything more.

"My sources tell me that things are difficult at the capital right now. The edict has been declared. Shojū is regent. But the court is unsettled. It is too convenient that the Emperor should die the night before his abdication. And the princes..." Yojiro's face sank.

"What of their highnesses?" Kachiko asked, flipping the closed fan over in her hands.

"Both are missing, along with Akodo Toturi."

Kachiko searched his posture for any sign of wariness. Was that an accusation laced in his words? Did Yojiro trust her, or did he suspect?

"That is grave news," Kachiko said sincerely, letting the fan rest. "If the princes cannot be found..."

Or if Akodo Toturi is found...

The fate of the entire clan lay in the balance. She felt her stomach turn.

If Shojū had told me about the edict, could I have kept the princes safer in the aftermath?

If Shojū had trusted me...would I still be in Otosan Uchi?

If Shojū had trusted me...

She looked directly into Yojiro's eyes; his entire face lay bare save for the high collar of his robes.



If I had been trustworthy. If I hadn't sought power for its own sake, without considering the damage it could cause to the clan or to others.

"Then Shoji's regency looks increasingly like a coup," Yojiro said, not averting her gaze. "We are all in danger, but as his wife, you are especially so. It is possible that is why he has sent you here, so that you might be protected from whatever comes next."

Protected. That could be one way to read her arriving incognito, traveling with an elite guard retinue. It was a charitable reading, perhaps even naïve.

Yojiro knew better. He knew who she was, what she had tried to do with the Emerald Championship. But he would not insult her by saying the truth out loud: that she was too dangerous to be allowed to continue to play at politics. Not when the stakes were this high.

"We will make every effort to keep you safe, but your safety depends on your presence here remaining a secret. Please—I ask you do not make that harder for any of us. *Onegaishimasu.*" He bowed again.

Kachiko turned to look out the barred window, toward the southeastern horizon. To agree would be to throw away her only key to this cage.

She had no choice.

