

# Tactical Maneuvers

By Nancy M. Sauer

Kakita Asami poured tea into her visitor's cup and then into her own. Bayushi Iwane lifted his cup and inhaled, then gave Asami an inquiring look. "Pearl Dew of the Fourth Bridge? Where ever did you find this?"

"I brought some tea with me when I was sent here, having been...apprised of Lord Seishin's tastes in such things." Asami raised her own cup and smiled slightly at Iwane. "This is the last of my supply, and I wished to drink it with someone who would appreciate it."

"That would leave our noble host out of consideration." It was a characteristically blunt statement by the Scorpion courtier, and Asami was not surprised. Everyone in the castle knew that Lord Seishin treated his habit of drinking cheap tea as evidence of a virtuous character. Asami didn't understand it at all—Matsu Seishin was in no way a stupid man—but it had made her private stock of fine leaf a useful resource. She had spent the summer inviting courtiers from the other clans to her rooms to drink tea and chat about the latest pillow books to be published, the best ways to make ink for painting, and speculations on how this year's Imperial Winter Court would affect obi styles. By now, any Lion samurai who was, accidentally of course, listening in on her conversations would have definite opinions on how important they were.

"His tastes do run to the minimal in matters of art," she said.

"This is an area in which I differ," Iwane said. He casually waved a hand toward the flower arrangement in the wall niche. "It is still possible to have beauty without ostentation."

"I am gratified you think well of my work," Asami said. "I have heard that your son has shown great talent in ikebana."

Iwane's mask was a simple drape of thin red silk across his lower face, and it did little to hide the courtier's grimace. "Too much talent, I fear. My wife has been all over the Scorpion lands trying to find a sensei for him, to make him push his skills, but they all look at his untutored work and sing his praises. He will never find greatness until he is challenged."

"Perhaps you should send him to the Kakita Academy for training."

"He would benefit from it," Iwane said. "But to be granted admission is difficult even for a Crane student. For someone from another clan it is rare indeed."

"That is true," Asami said, "but a courtier of your standing should have no trouble making the contacts necessary to advance such a student."

Iwane shrugged slightly. "But a courtier of my standing must also consider the needs of the clan. If I had such a contact, should I use it to advance my son, or to benefit my lord?"



“Speaking as a Crane,” Asami said, “I think that adding a talented ikebana artist to his court would benefit a lord. Though there are sometimes contingencies to consider.”

Iwane chuckled. “You are a true child of Doji-no-Kami,” he said. “Speaking of flowers, I have been rereading Kakita Ryoku’s *Winter*. What do you think of her opinions on gardens?”

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“One perfect strike is all that is needed,” Kakita Kaezin murmured.

Asami took comfort in her bodyguard’s words of encouragement. Her plan was sound, everything was in place, and now all she needed to do was make the final move. The doors to the great hall were opened by the Lion guards attending it, and Asami strode through with a confident gait and a relaxed expression on her face.

Conversations buzzed up and then died into silence as she made her way to Lord Seishin’s dais, and Asami didn’t have to guess why. She was attired in full formal dress, with four underkimono, two kimono, and an obi tied in a severely old-fashioned style. Everyone in the room would understand that something was about to happen, and as she knelt to give her greetings to the Lion lord, she knew she had the undivided attention of the room.

“Lord Seishin,” she said when the formalities were over, “great is my gratitude for the hospitality you have shown me, but time flows on and I must set a date for my departure from this house.”

Seishin blinked at this and quickly glanced over to his right. Asami suppressed her impulse to smile. Ikoma Eiji had been dispatched the previous week to settle a small dispute with Seishin’s Ikoma neighbor to the west, leaving the lord bereft of his most experienced courtier. Seishin frowned at the empty spot Eiji normally occupied and then turned his attention back to Asami. “I am confused by your words,” he said. “Do you no longer serve the interests of your clan?”

“My lord’s reputation for humor remains intact,” Asami said, turning aside the insult. “It was my hope to negotiate an understanding between our clans regarding the Osari Plains and



Toshi Ranbo before the matter became noisy enough to disturb the Son of Heaven. But now that the Emperor has placed Toshi Ranbo under Imperial authority, and Lion and rōnin forces are sweeping through the plains, I am no longer needed here.”

A courtier wearing the drab blue of the Crab Clan snapped his fan shut. “It is perfectly reasonable for Kakita-san to wish to leave—no one likes to be reminded of their failures.”

“The honorable do not go where they like, but to where their lord bids them,” Seishin said. “I do not think, Asami-san, that your work here is finished.”

“Forgive me, my lord, but now I am confused.” Bayushi Iwane stepped forward and bowed slightly. “Kakita-sama is intelligent and well-spoken, but she lacks the standing to speak for an Emerald Magistrate such as Bayushi Yojiro. What more work can she do here?”

For a moment, Seishin studied the Scorpion courtier, and then he looked around the room. Asami kept her breathing even and a bland, pleasant expression fixed on her face. Now, she was sure, Seishin was noticing that every non-Lion courtier living under his roof was in this room, looking at him. From the beginning, the Lion Clan had claimed that she was here as a diplomat, not a hostage. Now Seishin had the choice between admitting that she was being held as a hostage—illegally, for the Crane and Lion were not officially at war—or letting her go.

“The honorable go where their lord bids them,” Matsu Seishin said. “You may depart whenever you feel it is best.”

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Doji Kuzunobu inhaled deeply, absorbing both the scent of the lush forest around him and the thin, bitter knowledge that this was no longer his home. A real Crane lord would, he was sure, be able to dash off a quick poem to capture the conflict he was now feeling—but, a real Crane lord wouldn't need to.

“Such a beautiful garden,” Kakita Asami said. “I have never seen anything like it.”

Kuzunobu glanced down at the courtier walking beside him. Asami's success in freeing herself and her bodyguard from the Lion had raised her reputation in the courts a great deal, and Hotaru had sent the young courtier with him on this mission. “A Crane will take a piece of cultivated ground and put great effort into making it resemble a patch of wilderness. A Fox will find a patch of wilderness and tidy it up enough that they can find a place to sit.” Asami laughed, gracefully raising her fan to cover her mouth as she did so.

They walked on a little farther before Kuzunobu stopped and indicated a small clearing off of the path. “And here we can sit.” There was a handful of tree stumps scattered around, each hewed off at a convenient height for sitting. Kuzunobu settled down on one, and Asami chose another a polite distance away. Kakita Kaezin, who had been silently following them, took up his position a few paces behind Kuzunobu. The leaves of the trees above them rustled gently amidst the afternoon breeze. “We will need to start back to the palace before full dark falls, but we can talk in privacy here for a bit. What have you discovered today?” Kuzunobu asked.

“More questions than answers,” Asami said. While Kuzunobu had spent the day engaged in public, highly scripted activities appropriate for the spouse of a major clan champion visiting a minor clan champion, she had been gossiping with the courtiers of her station. “They are worried about all the appropriate things, of course, but there seems to be a specific worry about a Lion samurai who is visiting the palace here. And yet no one will tell me what the worry is.”

“They are worried about one Lion?” Kuzunobu asked. He had grown up in the Fox, for whom the Lion Clan was a long-standing threat, and he had been married into the Crane, for whom the Lion Clan was a long-standing rival. In either case, it was understood that Lion samurai were generally only threats when they were in a group.

“It is very odd,” Asami said. “He is an older samurai named Akodo Kage. I heard there is an honored sensei by that name in the Lion lands; I am not sure if he is the same one. I met him today in passing, and he has a rōnin as a bodyguard.”

“He is not a rōnin,” Kakita Kaezin commented.

Kuzunobu twisted around in his seat to look at Kaezin. “You know this man?”

“I know of him; he is a Mirumoto duelist on a warrior pilgrimage. He is currently known as Akihiro.”

“Is he skilled?”

“Among those who practice the two-sword technique, he is considered to be very good.” Kaezin shrugged, rendering a Kenshinzen’s silent judgement on the technique in question. “That he seeks to improve himself speaks well of him. And attaching himself to a sensei is very clever in these unsettled times—he will be able to travel throughout the Lion provinces without being killed out of hand as a spy or forced to serve in their armies.”

Asami raised her fan to tap it gently on her nose. “That explains that,” she said thoughtfully, “but it—” She shrieked and flung the fan away as a small bat dived down and attached itself to it. For a brief moment, the small flat face stared up at her from the ground, its beady eyes locked with hers as its mouth slowly opened and tiny white fangs glittered within. Then, the fluttering of dark leathery wings filled the clearing as a cloud of similar creatures descended upon the trio.

“*Nodeppō!*” Kuzunobu yelled, springing to his feet and shielding his face from the blood-sucking bats of the *yōkai*. “Begone, spirit! You have no business here.” From the corner of his vision, he could see Asami had sensibly rolled herself into a ball at the foot of the stump and was using the wide sleeves of her kimono to shield her head. He turned his attention to the trees around him and found what he sought on a nearby branch: a creature resembling an overly large flying squirrel that was blowing bats out of its mouth. Before he could say anything else, the creature launched itself from its perch and swooped down toward his face.

And then Kaezin was standing before him, his katana sweeping out in a sharp-edged curve. The two halves of the creature hit the ground with meaty thuds as the bats melted away into wisps of smoke. Kuzunobu looked at the remains in horror as Kaezin turned toward him, sword still in hand. “Are you all right, my lord?”

“You killed it,” Kuzunobu said.

His bodyguard tilted his head slightly, as if hearing something unexpected in Kuzunobu’s tone. “It was threatening you,” he said.



“The nodeppō is a forest spirit,” Kuzunobu said. “Killing it is...” His voice trailed off. He couldn’t think of a word that would explain to the Crane samurai what he had just done. Kaezin had shed blood in the sacred forest without first asking leave of the spirits.

Kaezin shook the blood from his blade, sheathed it, and prostrated himself in front of Kuzunobu in one smooth motion. “Bushidō demands I follow Lady Doji’s command to protect you,” he said. “It also demands I accept any consequences of my actions. I will do as you command.”

Kuzunobu looked down at him, aware of the sound of alarmed voices coming down the garden path and of the aghast expression on Asami’s face. “I will leave consequences to your Lady to decide,” he said, putting the problem off. “I will deal with the Fox Clan.”

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“My bodyguard acted appropriately,” Kuzunobu said. “He was protecting me.”

“So now you have turned into a Great Clan samurai,” Kitsune Gohei observed.

“That was your order to me, was it not, Gohei-sama?”

The two men were sitting in Gohei’s private study. The last time he was here, Kuzunobu remembered, was when his cousin told him of his betrothal to Doji Hotaru. Apparently Gohei also remembered, because he shifted slightly and dropped his gaze to his desk. “Be that as it may,” Gohei said more quietly, “he has created trouble for us with the forest-dwellers. Now I have troubles on my borders, trouble in the forest, and trouble in my own home.”

When one had the Lion Clan for a neighbor, troubled borders were unremarkable. Kuzunobu ignored that and focused on more interesting matters. “The Crane Clan will certainly compensate your shugenja for whatever rituals they need to perform to mollify the forest-dwellers,” he said. “And as for the rest—you arranged for my marriage in hopes of my swaying the Crane to the Fox Clan’s advantage. I cannot help if I don’t know what is needed.”

Gohei picked up the ink stone from an adjacent writing table and played with it. When he set it down, he looked back up at Kuzunobu. “You have heard of my Lion visitor?”

“The old sensei? Akodo Kage?”

“Him. He says he is visiting because he had heard of the beauty of the forest in this season. It’s merely an unfortunate accident that he keeps bringing up the idea that the Fox Clan should be dissolved, and our people reunited with the Unicorn Clan.”

“Swift-riding Shinjo!” Kuzunobu said. “He can’t possibly think he can revive that argument. The members of the Emperor’s court have much more interesting things to argue about these days.”

“He doesn’t really need to believe it,” Gohei said. “He just needs to sound as if he believes it long enough to entice someone in my court do something stupid. And then the Lion will have something they can claim as a pretext for attacking us.”



“Are you sure that is his game? The Lion are quite busy not having a war with the Crane. They have no need to start a second... ah.” The Crane Clan had very few fortifications on their border with the Fox, and this summer, Hotaru had transferred most of the samurai who guarded them to the north.

“One can’t fault the Akodo for being frugal,” Gohei said. “If he fails, they have lost nothing but a few weeks of a sensei’s time. He didn’t even bring a Lion samurai as a bodyguard!”

“No, he brought a skilled duelist.”

“I have many skilled duelists here.”

“This one is good enough that the Kakita knows who he is.”

“Is that so?” Gohei asked. “That would explain why no one had tried to challenge him yet.”

“Indeed.” Kuzunobu smiled widely. “Yet.”

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A guest as prestigious as the spouse of the Crane Clan Champion was highly unusual in the Fox lands, and thus called for a grand banquet in honor of the occasion. Kuzunobu drank his sake and pretended to listen to his great-aunt’s lengthy account of her most recent efforts at matchmaking. She could be relied upon to talk for as long as needed, but she was a soft-voiced woman who in no way hampered his ability to listen in on the conversations around him. Kakita Kaezin, as always, was standing silently behind him.

A short distance away, Akodo Kage had been placed close to Kuzunobu’s seat as a sign of respect, but not too close given their clans’ current strife. Akihiro was standing behind him; another gesture of prestige offered to a visiting sensei of the Lion Clan. Seated on the far side of Kage was Itsuki, one of Kuzunobu’s younger cousins. Under normal circumstances, someone like Itsuki wouldn’t be allowed in the same room with someone like Kage, which made him perfect for tonight.



“How can you sit in Lord Gohei’s house and say such a thing!” Itsuki had held his temper much longer than Kuzunobu expected, but now he was red-faced and on the verge of jumping to his feet.

“I have said nothing to bring dishonor to this house,” Kage said. “I am only pointing out that, as a family of the Unicorn Clan, you would have a higher status than as members of a minor clan.”



Kuzunobu cut in before Itsaki could reply, raising his voice so everyone in the room could hear him. "You surprise me, Akodo-san. One does not usually hear a Lion samurai criticizing the Emperor."

Everyone, including his great-aunt, stopped talking and stared at Kuzunobu.

"I am sorry, Doji-sama, but you must have misheard. There is no disrespect for the Emperor in my words," Kage said. Although his hair had gone to silver and the skin on his face and hands showed the wrinkles of age, there was no mistaking the intensity of the look he turned on Kuzunobu.

"You said that the Kitsune should be returned to the Unicorn Clan, which the Emperor has not done. It is a clear criticism of his lack of action."

"My comment was speculation, based on common etiquette," Kage said. "The Emperor can, in his wisdom, do whatever he sees fit with the Kitsune."

"I," Kuzunobu said quietly, "say you were criticizing the Emperor." He smiled at Kage, and then pointedly turned his attention to pouring himself some more sake. One didn't need to win a stare-down when one had a Kenshinzen to stare for you. From the corner of his eye, he saw Akihiro, looking like he was facing into a strong wind. If it came to steel, he would duel Kaezin, but he didn't look eager about it.

His cup full, Kuzunobu lifted it up and sipped from it. Kage was still staring in his direction, but Kuzunobu was sure that the old sensei was considering Kaezin's stance.

"I see the error of my words," Kage said. He bowed slightly in Kuzunobu's direction. "I thank you, Doji-sama, for pointing out my mistake."

"We will speak no more of it," Kuzunobu said. "Is your cup full? Should we call for more sake?"

"You are gracious," Kage said, "but no. I feel I should return to my quarters and meditate on what I have learned this evening." He rose and excused himself from the gathering.

A lesser man would have stalked out of the room, but Kuzunobu hadn't expected a Lion sensei to behave like a lesser man. He signaled for more sake and began a discussion with his great-aunt about Crane families who were looking for good spouses for their children. His new clan needed all the allies it could get, and he would not let any opportunities go by.

