

Roar of the Lioness

By Annie VanderMeer Mitsoda

The last of the lanterns—makeshift things, hardly more than scraps of paper curled around the stubs of candles—had wandered down the small stream and out of sight before Matsu Tsuko knelt by the water with her own offering. There wasn't much in the way of supplies for Obon out here in the long grasslands of the Osari Plains, but for the memory of her beloved, she had claimed a lantern of birch bark and oil paper, sturdy as she could allow herself to use. She willed her hands not to tremble before the watchful eyes of her troops as she lit the lantern with a long reed and placed it gently on the cold water. After a moment to make sure it would not sink, she released her grip on the delicate handle and sent it along its way down the stream, a gentle light bobbing away into the dark.

Tsuko remained kneeling, imagining walking beside it down the length of the stream to where it inevitably joined with the River of the Sun and eventually drifted through the Bay of the Golden Sun and out into the ocean. *And where are you now, Arasou? She dipped her hand in the stream, feeling the chill of the water. Have you ascended to the Realm of Ancestors? Do you watch over me now, on this auspicious hour? Or do you linger in the Realm of Waiting—even as I delayed so long bringing you to your rest?* Her fist clenched, accepting the ache the cold water wove into her fingers. *There is so much you had yet to do that part of me fears you are tethered to this world, but I must remind myself you are too strong for that.* She lifted her hand out of the water, watching droplets fall like tears. *I hope you are watching.*

As the prayers of the priest finally faded into the night air, she stood at last, silent, as her troops began to file away back to their tasks. Without looking, she made a slight beckoning gesture, and almost at once, Kitsu Motso was at her side. He was never far from her these days. Later, she would consider his true purposes; for now, it was a helpful convenience, and those were few enough.

"How can I be of service, Lady Matsu?" The handsome man smiled widely—a little too widely for such a solemn occasion—but Motso had never been one to vex himself overmuch with concepts of propriety.

"Please inform my generals that they should refresh themselves and take time with



their thoughts for now," she said quietly, brushing errant blades of grass from her kimono with brisk efficiency before facing her lieutenant directly. "I will expect them to join me in my tent by the Hour of the Dog."

Even in the dim autumn light, Tsuko could see Motso pale slightly. "The...the Dog, mistress?" He swallowed and gave an awkward smile. "Would it not be better to meet early tomorrow morning, at Dragon or even Hare? That hour—"

"I will expect them then." She turned and walked to her tent, leaving Kitsu Motso alone with his task in the growing dark.

The emptiness that greeted Tsuko within her tent gave her a sudden pause, and she was on her guard before she remembered that she'd asked her servants to give her space—in the guise of allowing them their own time to participate in the small celebration and ceremony that passed for the Feast of Lanterns while away from home. As requested, a scroll was hung opposite the entrance, covered with a white linen cloth, with a dish of sand and three small sticks of incense set before it. She released the handle of her dagger—instinct had made her seize it, though it was not a proper sword—and shrugged her broad shoulders within the thick kimono. She itched to be out of this formal garb and into her armor, but she needed to prepare her mind before dressing herself for the challenge ahead.

The flames in the brazier licked low as she teased out an ember with a small iron rake. She had sat in front of same brass brazier, teasing the flames as she considered the fate of her prisoner. She had freed Doji Kuwanan to seek justice: an honorable action, and one she did not regret, but part of her deeply wished it had brought her more closure, more of a sense of satisfaction. Instead, the Crane Clan still held out on the battlefields, enduring loss upon loss but never relenting, even as the Lion Clan wavered, barely holding their ground.

Birds wander blithely through our territory, and the killer of my betrothed still flies free. She let out a low breath. Doji Hotaru has not the honor to face me on the field within the range of my blades. Not as things stand now, at least.

Tsuko took another deep breath, banking her anger from an inferno back to a low flame, and used the rake to pull out an ember from the pile and place it into a thick stone bowl. She picked up the vessel, feeling the warmth radiate into her hands like a fond memory as she carried it across the tent, placing it before the shrouded picture beside the dish of sand. With a single swift tug, she pulled the cloth from the scroll, revealing no grand painting beneath, but a simple sketch done in rough brushwork—her own—that only someone familiar with the man would recognize as Akodo Arasou.

He had been perhaps the only one who could tease her without flaring her temper into true rage; though to outsiders, their occasional sparring matches might have appeared frightening. She had once overheard a clan elder chiding Arasou for these displays, that he should not

engage in such contests. “Are we not of the Lion?” he had said proudly. “Should we not fight with everything we have, with teeth, claws, and roars? What could make our people prouder than to see a champion and his betrothed display the depths of their fearsome determination?”

She smiled at the memory, then refocused herself, picking up a small reed and lighting it upon the ember in the bowl, then carrying its flame to the first of the sticks of incense. Cinnamon filled the air, and with its woody burn came the memories of her vigil at Arasou’s corpse and the long journey to the Castle of Vigilance for his final rest. She ran her ring finger along the scar on her right thumb—sliced open on his helmet during such a vigil—and lit the second stick. Bitter and sweet at once was the scent of bergamot, just as the retaking of Toshi Ranbo had been, with first news of the victory and thereafter the truth that it had been given not to Lion, but to the Scorpion Clan. The last stick, the scent of sandalwood, and the memory of news from Ikoma Ujiaki declaring that Akodo Toturi had become the Emerald Champion.

To him, it was a victory, she reflected, letting out another long, frustrated breath. But I knew how that glittering armor would further hide his eyes from the plight of our people.

Tsuko felt her anger flare again and restrained it, controlling her breathing as a metalsmith might the bellows of a forge. Wisps of incense smoke curled around her, wreathing her in the scents of home, and her eyes rose again to the rough portrait. Calligraphy and painting were two expectations of a court lady that she had never mastered, and in her life she had broken more than her share of brushes in fury. Arasou had joked with her about this on more than one occasion, and finally, she demanded that he pose for her. It had taken a full afternoon, and many terrible drafts, but finally she had made something that—while by no means a creation of someone with any great talent for the arts—showed the intensity of her care. Arasou had smiled and asked to keep the painting as a reminder of the fearsome depths of her determination.

“I remember what you stood for,” she said quietly, staring intensely at the painting as if she could will it to better resemble the man she had loved—but more importantly, had been proud to follow as clan champion. “The pride of being Lion, the joy of serving, the importance of bravery, and showing that you would do more than anyone to bring honor to us all. At the forefront of every battle, the loudest at any celebration. You were the beacon of our clan.

“And I swear I will do anything to keep that light from going out.”

It was near the Hour of the Dog when the incense had burned itself down to stubs, and Tsuko swiftly made preparations as the meeting time approached. The map was neatly rolled out on the war table, and small figurines of lions, unicorns, and cranes were arranged across its surface. Fresh logs were placed within the braziers, and Tsuko allowed herself a small smile as she lit each one; the flames licked hungrily at the wood, and the interior of the tent grew ever brighter.

In the night, a gong sounded the change of hours, and a moment later, a bell rung near the door flap of her tent. “Enter,” she replied, and watched impassively as her generals filed into the



room. Several showed overt surprise at the sight of the map, and Tsuko in armor. They slowly arranged themselves around the table, though more than a few faces seemed pinched with concern.

“Thank you for your attendance at this late hour,” Tsuko said evenly, indulging the fiction that their presence was not compulsory. “I hope the calm of the festival has brought you all clarity.”

“It has, Matsu-sama,” Akodo Zentarō said, “but I do not think it has done the same for you. Do you not fear the darkness of this hour, and the tragedy that the Battle of the Hour of the Wolf wrought upon our clan?”

She fixed him with a long stare, as intense as a burning coal held against his hand, and the general quickly lowered his eyes in deference. “I know well of the tragedy of that day. It is written in the blood of all my family. But do I fear it?” She raised her chin defiantly. “No. I will not surrender my nerve to superstition. I will stand upon this day, on this hour, and I—we—will build a new history.

“Toward that end,” she continued, unwilling to risk her momentum flagging, “I know now is the time to act. Autumn’s ripeness is fading, and we cannot afford to wait through to the spring. Delays have cost us dearly before...” The faces of a few darkened at this. Her reference to Akodo Toturi’s hesitation—and the failure at Toshi Ranbo—did not go unnoticed. “And I would not have our people experience this further. Victory—*true* victory, not simple reclamation of what is ours—is a taste we have been denied for too long.” Murmurs of assent drifted through the assembled, mostly from her own family and their vassals, but more than a few among the Akodo nodded as well.

Your thumb is on the handle. Push the blade free, and they will draw alongside you as it leaves the sheath.

“Thus.” She picked up the slender bamboo cue in front of her, and gestured toward the map on the table, careful strokes of paint marking the wide green of the Osari Plains on which many of their forces currently stood. “I propose we advance the Matsu Legions—First, Fourth, and Fifth—to the south. First will follow the road directly southward, while Fourth and Fifth move across the plains to the southwest and circle around Osari Mori, using the edges of the forest as cover.” The cue slid two agate lion statues near a wide patch of dark green on the thick canvas map, stopping halfway across it, and Tsuko placed another small marker on the board beneath them. “Both legions will select their best scouts and send them *through* the woods, and they will wait and observe here”—the cue dragged the new marker through the green to its edge, near a castle marked with pale blue—“until the other legions are able to meet them here. First will hold the eastern road, Fourth the southern one, and Fifth the plains around.” She grasped the cue with both hands, nodding in satisfaction. “We march to avenge the loss of the Goseki family, who held Toshi Ranbo until the Crane stole it away. To burn away our dishonor.” *And the cowardly murder of Arasou.*





Tsuko paused a moment, studying the faces of the generals before her. She had thought this plan through as carefully as she could, struggling with the desire to march all her troops in one formidable force, and instead did her best to think as an Ikoma might, and exercise what seemed the most practical strategy. As she watched the surprise at her chosen target turn into grim nods—and even a few small smiles at the thought—she reached out with the cue once more, executing her most audacious move.

“That leaves the Ikoma Auxiliaries, the Akodo Companies, and the Kitsu Regiment.” The room seemed to empty of air as she spoke, and the sound of the cue pulling the other lion statues on the board seemed to scratch at the fabric of the world. Onyx, citrine, and carnelian lions paraded across the map, moved carefully into position, and Tsuko’s patient narration of her plans sounded like shouting in a room gone so quiet, and the blood thundering in her ears threatened to drown out even that. At last, when the marches of proxy armies had ceased, she lay the bamboo cue back down on the table and crossed her arms over her chest. “Are there any questions?”

The silence seemed to stretch and grow, until finally Kitsu Motso gently cleared his throat and gestured to the lions on the map, rampant in their new positions. “With all respect, my lady,” he said carefully, “those generals will only follow the rightful Lion Clan Champion.” His raised eyebrow invited further comment, and there was something like excitement flickering in his dark orange eyes.

The blade is drawn. Now we see if it is meant for my enemies...or for me.

“My generals, I ask you to but look at the portrait on the easel behind me. Forgive my rough skill with the arts, but I know each of you recognize the face of our former champion, Akodo Arasou.” She studied them carefully, feeling the heat rise in her chest. “I know you knew what he stood for. The pride of the Lion, the exemplar of our clan, who held high our banner and dared to see us rise. I fought alongside him in his victories, as Matsu once fought beside Akodo-no-Kami.

“But who has replaced him?” She ground her teeth, and flames leapt inside her as surely as they had in the braziers. “A man without bravery, without vision, without honor. A man who hesitated at the gates of Toshi Ranbo, and who later abandoned it to the Scorpion. You ask me if I remember the dishonor and devastation that this hour brought upon our clan. I ask you instead—does *Akodo Toturi remember*? That he should grant the city that is ours by right to our greatest enemies? That the Doji should simply be replaced by their counterparts, the Bayushi?”



She saw several among her generals stiffen, but she pushed on.

“What honor is there in following someone who thinks so little of his own? Say what you will—that an Emerald Champion must bow to the Empire, not simply his own clan—but what justice is there in risking the welfare of your people, that we might lose the Osari Plains? That our own people might suffer not only that disgrace, but starve while our enemies grow strong?!” Her teeth ground together as she struggled to contain her fury.

I must use this flame, or be burned alive by it. This is the proclamation that will determine a future: either that of the Lion, or of my own end.

“I am a Matsu and not an Akodo, this is true,” Tsuko said carefully, untying the katana from her belt and placing it on the table. “But I am, most of all, a samurai of the Lion Clan, and I can no longer bear to see it kept low. My duty is to my clan and the memory of my beloved, its greatest champion. I cannot follow with false face a man I do not believe in, whom I see leading our people into ruin. I stand to pick up the burden that Arasou-sama dropped and to carry his banner. In me, his fire will burn again, and it will be a flame that reduces our enemies to ash.”

In one smooth motion, she drew the katana of her family and lay its naked steel upon the table. “I hereby claim the title of Champion of the Lion Clan, that my betrothed once held, that his brother dishonors. I claim it not as dowry, but as a debt I mean to pay, and a promise I mean to keep.

“If you find this blasphemous, if you disagree, then I make this demand.” She gestured to the blade that lay in front of her, and stared at each of her generals in turn, her face hot. “I will accept your challenge in combat, and lay my life on the line for it. Because I know well there is no turning back for me, not even to the Deathseekers. If not this...” she raised her head defiantly and let out a long breath that felt like flames, “there is only death.”

The silence that stretched after that moment seemed to dwarf all those that had come before, and time became a drop of water trembling on the edge of a leaf, a slowness that was painful to endure. Her throat suddenly constricted at the sound of a blade sliding free from its scabbard, and heat again seized her limbs, the instinct of panic—but instead of danger, she saw Kitsu Motso kneeling before her, head bowed, his sword lying flat upon his upraised palms, offered to her.

“My life for the Lion,” he said proudly, and raised his head slightly to meet her eyes. “And for Matsu Tsuko, its champion.”



The music of other swords leaving their scabbards was almost deafening in the tent, but each of them were held out in palms facing her, all knees but her own pressed into the ground in submission, and Motso's same promise repeated from all the throats of those assembled. In her mind, those words turned into roars, echoing in the night air of the Osari Plains.

The cheers that reached Tsuko that evening were sweeter than she could have imagined, somehow even more so than the thunder of her own heartbeat in her ears, and the fire of bloodlust that seared her chest as she threw herself into battle just hours before.

"Hail to the Lion Champion!"

"My life for the Lion!"

"For the Matsu!"

Those cheers and other wordless cries of triumph buoyed her spirits as she marched toward the city. It had been hard to resign herself to fighting outside its walls with the Fourth and Fifth Legions while the First took point in breaching their defenses, but it had been worth it. She had carved her way through what narrow forces had faced them, cutting a whirling path of red through the pale blue of the foes unlucky enough to face her, and now the prize was hers. She paused for a moment, allowing her retinue to arrange itself, and admired the sight of Kyūden Kakita, fallen before her.

Flanked by torchbearers and a banner-wielding honor guard, she strode through the shattered gates that gaped like a mouth full of broken teeth. To one side of the castle gate lay the rams that had crashed through them, crafted hurriedly from the once-sheltering trees of the Osari Wood. Along the interior walls, she could see baskets full of arrows, waiting to be brought up to archers: deliveries that would never be made, for the speed and ferocity of the Lion assault had been far too great for the defenders to withstand. Further within, she could see her followers already hauling the dead into rows in the courtyard, the ranks of blue uniforms far outnumbering those in yellow and brown. *May you run rampant in the afterlife, my brothers and sisters.* Tsuko's smile was small, grim, and determined. *And be certain that your blood shed this day will be added to the very great tally of what the Crane owe us.*

The retinue of the Lion Clan Champion walked through elaborate streets lined with iris gardens and delicate murals, its people crouched in doorways, faces twisted in shock and disbelief at the sight of the invaders. Camp servants were already throwing rice stalks on the occasional bloodstain, as the Lion patrols methodically brought order to the city. The bright glow of the fading autumn sun stroked its fingers across the castle as the group approached the inner courtyard of Kyūden Kakita, its rays staining the pale white and blue banners with shades of gold.

The scene within the inner courtyard was less hectic than the exterior. Rough cloths had been draped over the bodies of fallen guards and their captain, and servants and nobles alike



knelt in clusters, guarded by a detachment of the swiftest warriors of the Matsu. These troops were the ones she had ordered to make their way through the wilds of the forest...and when the gates of the city were breached, were trusted to rush directly to the castle and capture it before any of the Kakita family could escape. Taking in the scene before her—and the trio of well-dressed figures more carefully guarded than any other group—she felt a small thrill of satisfaction that her trust had not been misplaced.

She approached the group, studying them carefully: a frightened woman in robes embroidered with countless delicate roses, an older man with a number-board tied to his *obi*, and a sullen-faced youth who stared daggers at her with no fear or submission. *This young stork imagines itself a falcon, I see. I think I can use that.* “I am Matsu Tsuko, Champion of the Lion Clan,” she announced, and felt a thrill flare in her at the disbelief in their eyes. “I would know your names, so that I may deal with you properly.”

The older man gave a nervous bow of his head. “I am Kakita Wataru, seneschal of the castle,” he said carefully, “and this is my deputy seneschal, Kakita Ichirō, nephew to the lady.” The woman seemed to flinch at being referenced, and Tsuko regarded her calmly.

“And you must be Lady Kakita Barahime,” she said carefully, nodding her head slightly in respect. “I would know where your son is, Barahime-sama, so that I may ensure his safety.”

“Shinta isn’t here,” the woman said carefully, her voice wavering and her delicate face struggling to maintain its careful composure. “He is away studying diplomacy at Shizuka Toshi.” Her façade cracked a little, and Tsuko saw her look at the other nobles and servants, many of whom wept openly and cowered in fear. “If...if I may, I would know what you intend to do with us. Would you...do you mean to take revenge for your fallen betrothed?”

Tsuko removed her helmet, tucking it underneath an arm, and shook her head sincerely. “There will be no harm done to you or your people, Lady Barahime. Of this, you have my word.” She let her gaze grow hot, and the other woman shrank a bit from its intensity. “Unlike Akodo Toturi, I know what it means to have honor.”

“A lie, Lion scum,” Ichirō hissed. “You’ll pay for this insult! My uncle will hear of this, and the Emperor...” The youth trailed off swiftly as a dozen blades focused in his direction, but lowered as Tsuko waved her hand.

“Captain!” she barked, and the woman snapped to attention. “Gather swift horses, your best scouts, and a flag of truce. A *temporary* truce.” She gestured toward the young man, who looked both frightened and furious. “You will have them escort Kakita Ichirō to the nearest Crane garrison, where he will inform his uncle, the Kakita *daimyō*, that I now control his castle and lands, and am the acting protector of his wife. Should he wish to negotiate...” her gaze was a glowing ember, a quiet but dangerous heat, “I will meet him on the field.”

She turned her attention back to the lady, who looked more alarmed than before. “In the meantime, you and your seneschal shall remain our honored guests, Lady Barahime. In fact, night is falling, and I would not see you get a chill. You will return to your quarters with my



own troops as your protectors.” The woman and man nodded, and were escorted into the castle by Matsu guards, even as the young man was guided away, a reluctant messenger.

Tsuko turned to her generals. “You know our next steps. Get the gates replaced and fortified as quickly as possible. Deploy scout patrols to keep us aware of the surrounding areas.” She nodded with a dark satisfaction. “And sharpen your blades.”

The courtyard rang with Lion Clan cheers for the second time that day, and Tsuko bared her teeth in a wide, triumphant smile. She could almost hear Arasou’s voice among them.

