

The Art of Matchmaking

By Nancy M Sauer

Doji Shizue took a deep breath of the fresh air and levered herself to her feet with her cane. The stir of activity around her meant that the caravan's rest break would soon end, and she would not be chivvied into the travel palanquin like an unruly child, no matter how satisfying it would feel. Crane and Unicorn samurai put away whatever they had been amusing themselves with—dice, mostly—and started getting ready for the next stretch of travel. They would march or ride, enjoying the pleasant breeze and the sunshine on the rolling land around them. Shizue would ride in a palanquin. Not her palanquin—the one she used in Otosan Uchi or Crane lands—that was spacious, well-padded, and airy. This was a travel palanquin, built for speed. It was small and cramped, with only a single tatami for padding and tightly woven reed walls that were supposed to keep insects and travel dust away from their passenger, but which also kept out cooling breezes and light. She slid open the door with slightly more force than was needed and got in.

The usual noises of preparation filtered through as Shizue tried to find a less uncomfortable way to sit. If she could ride a horse, she thought, she wouldn't need the palanquin. She allowed herself a few moments to imagine what it would be like, and then banished the daydream with a smile. However useful they might be in travel or war, a horse was of little use to a courtier who spent most of her time in the Imperial City.

A loud, shrill yell interrupted her thoughts, and the noises around her abruptly changed character. Shizue slid open the door, and the chaos of battle swept across her vision. Shouting warriors were rushing the caravan, pushing their way through the outer guards. The startled Crane and Unicorn guards were fighting desperately. Words rang in her ears: "Form a line! Drive these Lion dogs back!" As Shizue watched, a Unicorn samurai swung herself onto her horse and then immediately kicked it. The beast reared with a furious cry, and its hooves fell upon a samurai rushing toward them, smashing the hapless attacker flat. Shizue saw the life fade from the eyes of a samurai not much older than her, blood seeping up through cracks in his yellow lacquered armor and from his lifeless lips alike. A few feet away, another Lion *bushi* drove a spear into the side of a Crane guard struggling to his feet, then, without pause, drew her *wakizashi* and leapt upon a Unicorn samurai in a cold, killing rage. Blood from the kill sprayed wildly, splashing across Shizue's face.

Time was frantic, and yet each second seemed endless to Shizue. Kakita Yoshi had entrusted her with negotiating an alliance with the Unicorn Clan. If she died here, or was taken captive, she would have failed him. She would fail her clan, which needed the aid the Unicorn Clan



could offer. Worst of all, she would fail her sister Hotaru, who had been her guide and ideal since she could walk. That was an unbearable thought, and the fear of failure pushed back her horror at the unfolding scene just enough. Shizue felt chills through her limbs as she began to move.

Father, guide me, she prayed, and she crawled out. In the yells and screams of combat, no one paid any attention to a small, unarmored woman huddled near a palanquin. Shizue resisted the urge to cower from the noise and the smell of blood and looked about. A trio of Crane samurai surrounded by Lions caught her eye; they were equal in numbers, but the Cranes were on the defensive. If she hurried across and threw herself on one of the Lions she could—no, that was foolish, she thought. But it did give her an idea. Shizue grabbed her cane from the palanquin and shifted her position until she held it overhead, gripped in both hands, pointing toward her target. It was a move she had perfected when Fumio was a kitten, but then she had been lobbing the cane with only enough force to startle an overly curious cat with some noise. Now she tried to focus all of her will and strength into her throw as she launched it at the back of one of the Lions.

The cane bounced off of her target's armor harmlessly, but a small jerk of his head showed that he had felt it. Then the Lion crumpled as the Daidoji he was fighting pierced his stomach with a *naginata*, forcing him to the ground. Emboldened, Shizue cast about, seeking something else to throw. A flutter of motion caught her eye, and she looked toward the west to see a troop of mounted warriors.

Long spears and curved blades glinting in the sunlight, purple and white ribbons streaming in the wind, the Unicorns swept up and over the camp, catching the Lion samurai like the tide catching driftwood.

No one wrote poems about the immediate aftermath of a battle, Shizue mused. She wasn't sure it was possible; her jumble of fear and relief was too sharp to be contained by flowing strokes of calligraphy. And it had ended as suddenly as it had begun, the rout of the Lion contingent complete in mere moments. The soldiers around her occupied themselves with making arrangements for the dead and deciding what to do about the fact that the hired palanquin-bearers had all fled when the Lion attacked. She sat and tried to unravel the tangled threads of her emotions.



One of the Crane soldiers—a Daidoji judging from the crest on his armor—came up carrying her cane. He was smiling. “They say Doji Satsume gave his clan two fine warriors to defend it. Now, there is a third.”

Shizue accepted the cane he handed her, blushing furiously. The idea that her actions made her the equal of her siblings seemed foolish. “Please, do not speak of my actions,” she said. Seeing the look on the Daidoji’s face she added, “The stories would be a distraction.” And would make her feel incredibly vain.

“In my family, we say that the first Daidoji was born a Doji.” He went down on a knee, gave her the warrior’s salute, and then left, leaving Shizue blinking in confusion. Before she could recover, a tall Unicorn woman bearing the Utaku family crest strode up.

“What madness is this, to creep along in a palanquin? Do the Crane not know there is wisdom in speed?”

Poor manners were something she was prepared to deal with. Shizue levered herself up and stared coolly at the Unicorn. “I am Doji Shizue, sister of the Crane Champion Doji Hotaru and emissary to the Unicorn Champion Shinjo Altansarnai. Who are you?”

“You are the storyteller?” The woman sounded impressed. “The Crane Clan has honored us greatly, then. I am Utaku Kamoko.”

“It is an honor to meet you,” Shizue said, bowing respectfully. “And your arrival was very welcome. I have seen many beautiful sights, but none more welcome than seeing your warriors sweep into battle.”

Kamoko returned the bow. It was not, Shizue noted, the correct depth, but she supposed it was close enough for battlefield etiquette. “We are both fortunate. My troop is moving to discourage the Lion from stealing more of our villages, and our scouts found the trail these had left behind them.” She nodded briefly to where the corpses of the Lion soldiers had been piled.

“You have been losing villages to the Lion?” Shizue asked. This was terrible news; if the Unicorn were themselves beset, how could she convince them to send military aid to the Crane?

“They have taken Onon Village—temporarily,” Kamoko said curtly. She tapped the scabbard of her sword. “We tried dealing honorably with them. That failed. If they wish to try their swords against us, we will show them—again—what the Children of the Wind know of war.”

“I do not doubt your clan’s ability to defend its borders,” Shizue said. Kamoko still looked aggrieved, so she added, “I am only surprised at this show of arrogance on your enemy’s part.”

“I have stopped being surprised by Lion arrogance,” Kamoko said. “They breathe it like the air. But now we must get you safely to Far Traveler Castle. I wish that I could ride alongside you and listen to your stories, but I must maintain the border. My battle sister, Ichika, shall ride ahead to speed your way.”





Shinjo Altansarnai's private study had the usual size and proportions, but it had been furnished with strange woods imported from beyond the Empire's borders. The flowers in the wall niche were arranged in one of the standard forms, but Shizue had never seen their like before. The clash of the familiar with the strange disturbed and fascinated her. The tea she was served was delicious, though, and she recognized the tea set as coming from one of the more famous Crane potters. Comforted by this show of courtesy, she sipped her tea and waited for her host to speak.

"I remember hearing your stories when I last visited the Imperial Palace," Shinjo Altansarnai said. "I look forward to hearing you again here, in my home."

"I would be most pleased to share them with you and your court." Shizue had spent the tedious hours of travel reviewing every story she knew that involved members of the Crane and Unicorn clans acting in harmony, starting with Doji-no-Kami's great love for her sister Shinjo-no-Kami, and continuing on to the near-present with the poet-warrior Kakita Kosho's journey to learn Unicorn travel poetry from Ide Rinako.

"First, however," Altansarnai said, "we must discuss this treaty proposal of which Ide Tadaki has sent word."

"And time is pressing, so we cannot waste it with the roundabout chatter that the other Great Clans are so fond of. We have armies; what do the Crane have to offer us?" The speaker was Shinjo Haruko, daughter of Altansarnai and the third person in the room. Her presence and the bluntness of her question was a clear sign to Shizue that there were people in the champion's household who did not favor an alliance with the Crane. It was Haruko, then, she had to convince first.

"In *iaijutsu*, as in life, there are times that call for slow deliberation and times that call for swift action," Shizue said. "I agree that this is a time for swiftness. You say that we have no armies to offer, and that is true, but the Crane have always cultivated different forms of power."



It was not an army that changed Imperial law to allow the Unicorn Clan to import and sell food in the Empire; it was the political force wielded by the Crane Champion Doji Chuai, grandfather of Doji Hotaru. Would you say that this was a small thing?"

"Small or large," Haruko said, "that was in the past."

"But its effects continue in the present," Altansarnai said, "and they are very significant."

Shizue nodded gracefully at the older woman. "An alliance of our clans would bring the benefits of sword and brush to both, making both stronger. In these times of trouble, we must seek strength to preserve the honor of the Empire and the well-being of our clans."

"It is the Scorpion Clan, and not the Crane, who control the brush of the Empire today," Haruko said pointedly.

"It is so, and our power is not what it was before the Great Wave came," Shizue said. In her mind, Kyūden Kakita burned. "But things that appear weak today may yet grow into new strength. I know little of horses, but I do not think you saddle new-born foals and ride them into battle. We are beset by the Lion, but the Lion have been growling at us for centuries, and we are still here."

"You would ask us to sacrifice our people in your battles?" Haruko said. "The People of the Wind did not earn our freedom by serving the other clans."

"But we do not keep that freedom by rejecting unity, either," Altansarnai said. "What would you propose, Doji-san?"

Shizue turned to Altansarnai as Haruko sipped her tea silently. "There is much for us to discuss in settling terms. What resources the Crane will offer, what forces the Unicorn will field, arranging a marriage to one of your children to seal the treaty—"

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, Shizue realized that she had made a terrible mistake. Haruko made a noise that sounded suspiciously like a snarl and slammed her teacup down. Altansarnai's grey eyes went cold like chips of granite, and her lips compressed into a hard, thin line. Shizue thought fast and threw herself into a full obeisance. "I am so sorry, Shinjo-sama," she said. "In my haste I have not made myself clear. When I said that there would be a marriage arranged, I meant that there would be a real marriage, arranged by real Crane matchmakers."

"Get up," Altansarnai said, "and explain."

Shizue would rather have stayed prostrate; it made it easier for her to hide her trembling. She set her face in a storyteller's calm mask and sat up. "No one wants to invite strife and discord into their house, so who would wish it on their children? When Crane parents hire a matchmaker, one of the things expected is that the matchmaker will find their child a spouse with whom they can live in harmony. Shinjo-sama, you have three children. Does it seem that unreasonable that a Crane matchmaker could not find a good spouse for at least one of them?"

"Who the *Crane* would consider a good spouse," Haruko said acidly.



"I do not think our standards are so different from yours," Shizue said. "Consider Doji Kuwanan. He is bold in war, amiable to his friends and family, devoted to his clan, and, may I note, very handsome. Would you reject such a suitor out of hand?"

"You would offer us the Crane Champion's brother?" Altansarnai said. Her tone was a combination of surprise and suspicion.

"As an example," Shizue said. "It may be that, among the Crane nobility, there is a more suitable husband for Haruko-san. Or consider your appointed successor, Shono. A wife with a courtier's training would be a splendid political advisor, would she not?"

"And a lever the Crane could use to manipulate my clan, to make it more like yours," Altansarnai said.

Shizue recognized the danger in the Champion's statement and realized that she needed to confront it head-on. "Shinjo-sama, I have been warned to avoid roundabout chatter, so I will speak bluntly: You cannot be a part of the Empire, and know its ways, and yet be forever untouched by it. Would that benefit you? I have heard from—" she almost stumbled, mentioning Shagai's name, "from Unicorn courtiers that your clan's strength comes from your ancestors' decision to adopt new customs when they made sense. What would your ancestors think of this? Would they shy away from any talk of change?"

"So, the Unicorn will change, and the Crane remain the same," Haruko said.

"There will be those among the Crane who will think that," Shizue said, "but they are ignorant of poetry. Everyone has noted the difference in Kakita Kosho's haiku after his year of study with Ide Rinako. His students established the Red Bridge School, which has long been a foundation for the compositions of countless poets of many different clans."

"Changing poetry is one thing," Haruko said, "but it will not halt a Lion's sword or an *ashigaru* spear."

Shizue's upheld hand indicated she was not finished. "As with Rinako and Kosho, I believe there are practices unique to your clan that would benefit us in this era of change and growth. My lord Hotaru would be willing to consider sharing your ways with our clan, and thus—"

"Enough," Altansarnai said.

In the silence that followed, Altansarnai poured herself some tea and slowly drank it. Shizue took a quick glance at Haruko, who regarded her mother with a certain wariness. It was an expression the storyteller didn't know how to interpret. Had she been too blunt? Did the Unicorn Champion hate Ide Rinako's poetry? Was her dissatisfaction with the treaty-marriage the Lion had brokered with her so strong that she would never accept another? Could she convince Hotaru to accept a treaty of such importance that didn't involve a marriage?

"This is a dangerous time," Altansarnai said, "and it will not benefit my clan to stand alone in the Empire. Many clans have shown interest in gaining the power of our horses, but only the Crane have shown willingness to embrace our unique ways. I will accept your offer of alliance, and a marriage to seal it, but with a condition of our own: that my child would be able to meet



the matchmaker's choice and could reject them if needed."

It was an odd stipulation, Shizue thought with relief, but not one worth losing an army over. "Of course," she said. "Your child will see for themselves the excellent work that our matchmakers do."

"You will be sending an army to the other end of the Empire to fight for the Crane, mother," Haruko warned.

"No, I will not be sending an army," Altansarnai said. She smiled widely at Shizue's gasp. "I will lead the might of the Blue Horde into battle myself against the Lion. Their arrogance is tiresome, and I think it is time someone taught them some courtesy."

For a moment Shizue, was speechless as she tried to imagine all the implications of the Unicorn Champion herself coming to the aid of the Crane. Could the darkness over her clan be lifting at last? Then she bowed deeply to Altansarnai. "They will not forget your lessons, Shinjo-sama, and I look forward to telling those stories to your grandchildren."

"I look forward to hearing them."

