

The Villain's Mask

By Mari Murdock

Mere days ago, Bayushi Shoju had been the rightful regent to the entire Empire—bestowed that honor and responsibility by his own Emperor who trusted him with the safekeeping of their beloved Rokugan.

How quickly that Imperial edict had turned to ash in the fires of conspiracy.

A weak sun rose over the eastern walls of Otosan Uchi, its rays smothered behind an overcast autumn sky. Standing on the balcony of the priests' dormitory, Shoju wished he could feel Lady Sun's heat on his skin. His face was unmasked so as to avoid being recognized by a passerby, both as a Scorpion and most especially as himself. No one who might see his expressionless features could possibly recognize or even remember him, much less suspect that it was the once proud Scorpion Clan Champion now cowering in a shrine at the Lion guesthouse. After decades of wearing a mask during the day, only removing it to sleep, he doubted if he would even recognize himself.

He had not slept since he had opened the Black Scroll and written Ikoma Ujiaki's name in it, and the dull iron tick of exhaustion at the back of his head loosened his grip over his emotions. Fear. He had not felt fear in so long... The anxiety over his mistakes boiled in his belly. He had lacked discernment. He had failed to calculate for betrayal in his own house. He had once been the master of secrets, but his wife's own secrets and schemes had mastered him, in the end. And the Black Scroll...

Was that another fatal sin?

Shoju covered his naked face with his hands. It itched in the morning chill, and he longed to don the mask hidden in his sleeve—to become himself again.

But he was no longer himself. No longer the master of lies, mastermind of the Imperial court.

Below him in the courtyard, a Kitsune shrine acolyte had risen with the dawn to sweep fallen leaves. The gentle *shush shush* of his broom across the stone drew Shoju from his griefs. He seized them within their iron cage once again. He still had work to do. He still had to play the game.

Hida Kisada's last letter to him, delivered from the Watchtower of Sun's Shadow before his ousting, still festered in his mind, the one that reported the latest string of failed battles along the Kaiu Wall. Hundreds dead. Parts of the Wall itself ravaged to the point of collapse. Alongside the usual forceful appeal for an increase in resources and troops, Kisada had even questioned whether it was Heaven's will that the Shadowlands rise and scourge the clans from this earth.



Was this the spiritual price for the prince's deicide? Since Hantei Jodan's death, chaos had spread like wildfire. The Crab's unendurable losses at the Kaiu Wall. The Unicorn and Phoenix's feuding after Crown Prince Daisetsu's disappearance with the so-called sorceress Shahai. The Lion and Unicorn battles with their thousands of civilian casualties and food shortages. The destruction of Kyūden Kakita and the Crane's call for revenge against the Lion. His wife's ill-fated schemes leading to the crumbling of Scorpion power. The loss of wise, just leadership at court in both Agasha Sumiko's and Akodo Toturi's resignations of their samurai rank, resulting in Kakita Yoshi's hastily asserted regency, a position he had already begun to abuse. The Dragon Clan's subsequent unprecedented raid of the Forbidden City.

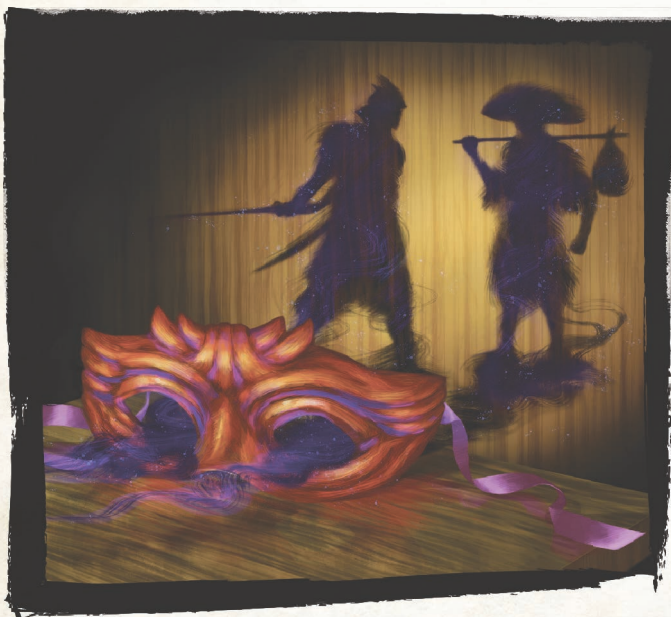
He had attempted to keep the peace through civility during an age where ambition, warmongering, and curses ripened Rokugan for destruction. And for what? For those vices to consume him and his clan? They had stripped him of his power, his allies, his home, his family, his identity...

The young acolyte finished sweeping and moved on to perform morning ablutions at a tiny fountain—an empty ritual if Heaven had indeed forsaken the whole land for want of purity.

"Forgive me, Jodan," Shoji whispered into the freezing morning air, watching his words fly into nebulous fog. "I am no longer the man you once put confidence in."

Shoji left the balcony and shut the door, engulfing himself in the darkness of his bare, windowless room. He returned his mask to his face to ward off the dark that caressed his bare skin. He could be what was left of Shoji here, in the secret dark of his hiding place...But what was left?

The blasphemer who had supposedly murdered the Son of Heaven, his dearest friend? The blackguard who had allied with Ikoma Ujiaki in bad faith? The betrayer who had delved into dark magics that his own clan was sworn to guard against?



He lit a lamp, but the cheap oil sputtered. His half-turned gaze caught a twisted shadow in the corner.

In an instant, the knife concealed in his sleeve was in his hand, and he had advanced three swift steps into his Ten Strikes of the Sting *kata*. But the shadow, though crooked and uneven in the shuddering flame, was his own. He flicked the blade away, staring at his dark facsimile. One moment, the shadow had horns. The next, wings. Spines. Claws. A scorpion's tail.



"Was this your fate, Bayushi-no-Kami?" Shoju asked the shadow. Alongside the Mistress of Shadows, Shosuro, Bayushi became what no other Kami dared become: the villain that only the Emperor could trust. An opponent for the whole of Rokugan.

Shoju sat *seiza*, his knees pressed decorously upon the austere wood floor. The shadow mirrored him. Yet, the outline, ever wild, could never be called the shadow of Shoju the man. The crudeness of the flame gave it a life beyond himself, a creative essence that no one could trust because it followed no form. It was the shadow of a monster.

"Is this what you intended all along, my old friend?" Shoju whispered. "You knew the ancient histories better than I did. You knew that I could not rule as you had, with light and righteousness, since I was Bayushi-no-Kami's descendant. I could not serve Rokugan as your replacement, and I have now failed when I tried to rule as you had."

The lamp and its cheap oil sputtered, its impurities finally burnt away, producing a weak yet tranquil flame.

"Yet you chose me, Jodan," Shoju said, looking back at his shadow. It was his own shape. Shoju the man. "I can only do you and your Empire justice by acting as your shadow. As it had in its earliest days, Rokugan will have its clear villain once more. The Great Clans must loathe me for more than just being a foiled criminal."

He nearly clutched at his own heart as the revelation of his villainy rang true within him.

"I must become the face of evil."

Shoju drew a small calligraphy set from his meager belongings, shielding the paper with his shadow as he kept his back to the flame, writing his letter with swift, slashing strokes. A secret code. After tucking the finished missive into the breast of his kimono, he breathed easy. The last of his old self, his failed self, could now die.

"I am sorry for what I must do, Jodan."

He drew his mask off and studied its crimson lacquered face. The indiscernible expression had served him well for many years since his *gempuku*, when he had come of age. But now, he needed to act with less subtlety.

"I need to announce my rebirth to the world," he insisted, almost apologetic as he smeared black ink across his old crimson face, erasing its artfulness and nuance with bold, destructive strokes.

He set the *mempō* down on the cold floor so the ink could dry. The changed visage grinned with horrible delight. His new face.

The wrinkles on Ikoma Ujiaki's brow split his aging face, his greying hair wreathed around him like a primed lion's mane tied to a withered wine gourd. Yet the zealous courtier's step drummed with confidence. A performance.

Shoju bowed as the Lion entered, letting him speak first.

"My honored guest," Ujiaki greeted him, his words establishing the hierarchy of roles, with



Shoju as a visitor, subordinate to the host. “It seems that your mask now wears an even more dour expression than it had when we first met. I hope your accommodations have not been the cause of such disfigurement.”

Shoju bowed again, tilting his ink-stained mempō toward the floor. “Your generosity, and the cunning manner with which you have secreted me here at your family’s shrine, have been admirable, Ikoma-sama, and I can only offer my gratitude at this time. I assure you, this alteration to my visage is a mere outward representation of the change we hope to bring to pass.”

“I see,” Ujiaki said. “I am glad to see you so manifestly dedicated to right the wrongs done to our clans.”

“And to us,” Shoju added, carefully placing the first few steps in his dance of diplomacy against Ujiaki. The Black Scroll’s revelations had suggested the need for a personal approach. “Please be seated. We have much to discuss.”

Shoju knelt upon the hardwood floor as Ujiaki sat upon a brown silk cushion his silent attendant had brought with them into the bare dormitory room. They faced one another with the flickering lamp between them.

“So far, the court is in an uproar,” Ujiaki reported. “Yoshi is torn between the Lion’s military maneuvers in his home lands and your sudden disappearance, nearly driven to the same madness that caused Kyūden Kakita’s destruction. The representatives of the Dragon, Crane, and Lion demand an immediate manhunt throughout the city to search for you, none more vehemently than Mirumoto Hitomi. She might have been disgraced by her ineptitude as a jailer if I had not first blamed Yoshi publicly for such incompetent leadership.”

The satisfaction on Ujiaki’s face flowered into enjoyment, but Shoju caught the lie. Through the Black Scroll, Shoju knew that Ujiaki had been dismissed from court, but the Lion had not yet felt the need to share the political disgrace he had sustained with his new ally. It was likely that the dismissed

Lion courtier had merely spread his public accusation of Yoshi in a tea house where the other courtiers often congregated, a truly Scorpion tactic that the Lion claimed as a proud and honest court victory. Perhaps Ujiaki’s corruption did not require as delicate a touch as he thought.

“And what of my clan? What has become of the Scorpion in Otosan Uchi?”



"Some have retreated to the Scorpion guest estates, which have been thoroughly searched many times over for you, where they remain under house arrest for the time being. The Scorpion samurai in the Imperial Guard have been imprisoned in the gatehouses. In both cases, I have ensured that Lion forces were the ones to confiscate their weapons and keep watch over them. When the time is right, they can be rearmed and liberated."

That had been Shoji's idea, but he did not care that Ujiaki had claimed it.

"It seems you have thought of everything, Ikoma-sama."

"I owe much of my foresight and prowess to my lord Anakazu, of course," the Lion confessed, with the feigned humility expected of a courtier, ignoring the fact that he was pulling strings behind his superiors' backs.

"Naturally," Shoji acquiesced. "But your individual calculated efforts have been a credit to your clan. You cast off the passions and compulsions that dictate Yoshi's and Hitomi's actions in this time of turmoil, striking a grave blow to the enemies of the throne. An honorable and worthy achievement."

A hint of Ujiaki's shame wavered in his eyes—that doubt that gnawed upon the old Lion's every self-righteous thought and clawed-for goal. Shoji might have seen it only because the Black Scroll told him of its existence, festering invisibly behind the proud façade. The Black Scroll's forbidden knowledge had tutored Shoji in every intricacy of Ikoma Ujiaki's soul—his desire, his fear, his self-doubt, his pride, his frailty. The secret shame that drove his ambition.

As a young *bushi*, Ujiaki had been severely injured in battle, and after many months of agonizing convalescence, had never regained the full use of his sword arm. To hide it, he had boasted about his recovered strength, only to be defeated in a training exercise by a young Akodo Arasou, then barely more than a child preparing for his gempuku, a defeat which humiliated Ujiaki in front of the Lion Clan Champion. He had then been silently dismissed from the military and sent to Otsan Uchi to serve as a courtier instead. However, there he would find even more shame as his private reputation as a broken soldier transmuted into a public reputation as a tactless fool, his brash, inexperienced approach to court politics earning him the swift judgment of the clan representatives since he seemed to embarrass himself every time he opened his mouth. Eventually, when his misstep in court had lost the Lion a major landholding and trade negotiation, his own clan would have dismissed him from court as well had not Akodo Kage interceded on his behalf, magnanimously asking Ikoma Anakazu to mentor him for a time.

Many years had passed since then, and Ujiaki had grown adept and cunning in his role as a courtier, but the wounds of his original shame still lingered deep inside his heart, whispering to Ujiaki that he was a failure to his clan both as a *bushi* and as an ambassador. However confidently the aged Lion might prance as if in his prime, doubts still flowed in his mind, especially now that he had been truly banished from the Imperial court by Yoshi. He was now



living through the complete disgrace that he almost felt he deserved years ago, all his years of shrewd schemes meaning nothing in the face of the truth that rankled inside his head. He was a failure and time had finally proven it to be true.

Shoju studied the pitiful smear of shame hiding behind Ujiaki's performative self-assurance.

A wounded animal is the easiest prey.

"Leaders with the righteous hand of Heaven on their side have no need of shame," Shoju said. "And we act with the faith that our cause is just and that Heaven will laud our efforts while the forces of Earth will bend to our will."

"Perhaps," Ujiaki said, his well-practiced suspicion of the Scorpion creeping into his voice. "But we must still proceed with caution. We must not underestimate our enemies."

"Indeed," Shoju replied. "As they should not have underestimated you."

Ujiaki frowned, wary of poisonous flattery.

"My clan is in your debt," Shoju continued, careful to keep his eye contact truthfully straight and his shoulders bent in slight submission. "You alone have given me the hand of an ally when no one else dared stand against the falsehoods spewed against me. You have acted in wisdom and strength against those who have defied the Emperor and your clan. Your challenge of Yoshi's power, your maneuvering of your clan leaders into opportunities for victory, and your generous mercy in granting me and my clan a chance to seek revenge against our enemies. These are actions I place my confidence in, and I trust you to help me obey the desires of the late Emperor and bring his will into being."

The distrust in Ujiaki's eyes hardened, but the shame still stared longingly out, lapping up Shoju's words. "Trust is a rare virtue in such times," he insisted, waiting for Shoju's motives to play out.

"You have arranged a foundation upon which we can build. All we need now is a public victory against Yoshi, Hitomi, and the other dissenters that will show the strength of our side, drawing the ambivalent clans to our cause. Only such a feat would ensure our hold over the throne."

"A public victory, you say?" Ujiaki mused. That need for public acknowledgement of his abilities, a reassurance of his true worth as a Lion, consumed him. The bitterness of having to forgo evermore the Lion Clan's celebrated glory on the battlefield had never left the broken soldier. Now, the chance to have it again would heal him. The Lion's teeth bared in hunger. "Well, a show of force from the Lion demands a military strategy. What if we retake the palace and oust Yoshi the pretender from his castle?"

Shoju would have smiled behind his mask if he hadn't trained himself out of the habit years ago.

"Are you suggesting another military coup?" He paused, pretending to think on the subject. "It seems impossible with the Army of the Rising Wave and the Imperial Legion protecting the Forbidden City."

Ujiaki shook his head, his greyed mane swaying. "The void left behind by Toturi and



Sumiko has given us a unique opportunity with the Imperial Legions,” he explained. “When there was a need in the past, the Lion Clan Champion has taken control of them for the Emerald Champion.”

“But your clan champion has been slain.”

“Matsu Tsuko was murdered by Crane treachery,” Ujiaki hurriedly countered, the flames of his designs consuming his tact. “Since her replacement has yet to be chosen by the Lion families’ daimyō, leaving the Imperial Legion with no direct leader, it would be simple for someone to claim the troops in Tsuko’s name.”

“A masterful stroke of politicking,” Shoji said, careful not to sound overeager nor overindulgent toward Ujiaki’s desire for esteem. “And who could we call on to enact such a bold move on behalf of the Lion martyr?”

“Perhaps Lord Anakazu could be persuaded.”

“No,” Shoji said, shaking his head. “We do not have time to secretly meet with Lord Anakazu to persuade him to adopt our cause. If Yoshi resorts to a manhunt to search for me to save face, then Hitomi will throw her army into that effort, spreading her troops thin across the capital, making it easy for the Imperial Legions to cut through her forces and retake the palace. We must act now.”

“Before a new Lion Clan Champion can be chosen,” Ujiaki agreed, his brow angled in deep thought. The balance between caution and vanity inside of Ujiaki wavered, as on a weighted scale. One more piece of gilded lead, and the whole scale would tip.

Shoji sat up straight, folding his arms across his chest. “We don’t just need someone with military experience, Ikoma-sama. We need someone who can lead the Imperial Legion to fight against the injustices dealt to your clan, someone who understands the losses you have sustained. A true Lion warrior who can rally for justice.”

Ujiaki’s frown deepened, a darkness descending across his entire face. His fingers curling white knuckled around the hem of his sleeve. He no longer wrestled with the details of Shoji’s plan. He wrestled with himself.

Do you dare take up your chance for glory, Ujiaki?

“I...” Ujiaki began, his unsure words gaining strength as he uttered them. His chin lifted as his confidence curled his mouth into a cunning smile once more, the plan igniting golden thoughts of glory and praise. “I can do it. I can lead the Imperial Legions to retake Otosan Uchi from Yoshi and Hitomi. I can lead our victory.”

Shoji allowed himself a small smile. The old Lion was tamed. All he had to do was pull on the leash.

Smoke rose above Otosan Uchi. A northern wind had caught the dark column, twisting it into an arc that curved ominously in the iron grey winter sky.



Like a scorpion's tail, Shoji thought, staring at it to catch the wind's direction. As planned, the wind would drive the blaze over the wall of the Forbidden City and into the palace itself, sparks raining from above. The wind whipped up the blaze, scattering it wildly.

Upon regaining their arms and fighting their way out of their house arrest, a contingent of Scorpion samurai still loyal to him had swarmed at the northern end of the Forbidden City, setting fire to the wooden eaves of the roof. These bushi had already organized a battering ram and were slaying dozens of fire brigade members and unsuspecting Unicorn samurai stationed in the nearby Hito District. Blood ran into the streets, flowing down toward the shores of the River of the Sun.

Drawn to Shoji's beacon of fire and blood, Kakita Yoshi had ordered a hasty evacuation of the palace, sending Seppun Ishikawa and his guards to the northern end of the Forbidden City to both quench the fire and stop the breach. And as Ujiaki had predicted, Hitomi's thinly scattered troops withdrew from their manhunt across the city, rushing in disorganized packs toward the palace to face the Scorpion who were obviously attempting to retake it in the name of the true regent, Bayushi Shoji.

"It seems the ruse worked," Ujiaki said, nearly congratulating himself from atop his horse.

Shoji stood at the courtier's heel, disguised in the clothes of a plain Scorpion *ashigaru*, his mempō hidden away in his sleeve to allow his face to conceal his identity.

"Yes, now it is your turn," Shoji replied absently, selecting Ujiaki's armed escort from amongst the Lion and Scorpion soldiers huddled around him.

This main force of samurai had hidden inside the walled courtyard of the Lion embassy as the feigned attack at the northern end of the palace raged. A Lion scout crept in through the gate and made her way to the mounted Ujiaki.

"The bulk of Hitomi's troops have already entered Kanjo District," she said, bowing respectfully as she reported the news.

"Excellent," Ujiaki acknowledged. "Now we can cut through the rear of her army and catch her unawares. They will not suspect the Lion's teeth mingled with the Scorpion's sting stabbing into their backs."

Shoji gestured for the gate to open.

"Onward to our goal!" Ujiaki shouted, pointing a new war fan toward the southern gates of



the city, his eyes shining with the empty gleam of a reclaimed pride.

"You will follow Ujiaki and set the pace," Shoji commanded, signaling the escort to keep Ujiaki safe and in line. "Carve out our entrance to the palace through the city to the palace's southern gates. Regroup within the palace walls, outside the palace doors."

"Kill all who cross our path!" Ujiaki yelled. "Victory only!"

Shoji nodded his dismissal, melting into the crowd of samurai as they flooded out of the embassy and into the streets. Like a torrential rain, their footfalls thundered across the cobblestones as the Lion and Scorpion samurai combined. The sounds of shouting and steel rent the air ahead as they smashed through a straggling detachment of Hitomi's forces. Ujiaki's samurai swept through them like a tidal surge, the Lion in his company making swift work of the unwitting Dragon. Behind Ujiaki's forward push, the Scorpion troops scanned the edges of their progress, cautious of an ambush or routing force.

Drawing back from the slaughter, Shoji noticed a Dragon force snaking its way out of another side street to flank their main forces. He barreled ahead to catch them at the bottleneck. One Dragon warrior had already cut down a dozen samurai, his sword flashing as he led his company's charge into the rushing river of Scorpion and Lion. It was Mirumoto Raitsugu, Hitomi's lieutenant who had first arrested Shoji in the palace.

"Surround them!" Shoji commanded, dragging back his small company to draw Raitsugu's soldiers into the street. Raitsugu saw the ploy and tried to order his troops back into the alley, but they had already been cut off by the sea of legionnaires that washed into the gap. One by

one, the Dragon fell, yet Raitsugu kept urging a retreat, hoping to save even a handful of his bushi.

Lunging into a gap in the battle, Shoji snatched the back of Raitsugu's collar and slammed him to the street. He stamped on the young man's sword hand, pinning it to the ground, but Raitsugu drew a short knife with his other to plunge it into Shoji's calf. The Scorpion slashed at that wrist, sending the knife flying, and the Dragon cried out in pain. Raitsugu struggled, trying desperately to rise, but Shoji slid the point of his blade



into a gap in the Dragon's armor, precise enough to draw blood without being lethal.

"Foolish little Dragon," Shoji warned. "Do not make me kill you. I intend to let you live. I have a message I want you to deliver to Hitomi and the other clan representatives burned out of



their snake den.”

“Who are you?” Raitsugu wheezed, still attempting to free his sword arm.

Shoju forced himself to smile.

“The Regent of Rokugan.”

Confusion spread across the man’s face until Shoju’s meaning became clear.

“Traitor,” Raitsugu spat. “Murderer! You slew the Emperor!”

The words raked across Shoju’s heart. He had not slain the Emperor, but how many would die this night so that he might prove his villainy to the Empire? He had not been a traitor, until now.

“You will carry my message,” Shoju repeated, pressing down harder on Raitsugu’s chest.

“Tell the usurpers that I have reclaimed the palace that they defiled with their treason. There, with the authority of my masters, I will convene the court, and I expect the daimyō and champions of the Great Clans to attend under my rightful rule. Anyone who defies this order will drown in the nightmares I will unleash from beyond the Carpenter Wall.”

Raitsugu’s eyes widened in horror at those words, the realization draining the blood from his face. A tremor of shock wavered amongst the nearby Scorpion and Lion who could hear Shoju’s voice.

Shoju stepped back from Raitsugu, and the Dragon struggled to his feet, trying to regain his footing so he could lunge forward with his sword. Shoju kicked the sword away before snatching the front of the lieutenant’s armor. With meticulous accuracy, he sliced into Raitsugu’s side, biting between the tiny lacquered plates of his armor and slicing into the young man’s flesh. Raitsugu screamed, clutching at Shoju’s hand, trying to force the blade away.

“Tell them,” Shoju whispered to his prey, cutting deeper into Raitsugu, careful to miss any organs that would make the wound lethal. “Tell them what you have heard.”

He dropped the Dragon samurai. Raitsugu clutched his side.

“Curse you, Shoju,” he cried as his blood loss slowly dragged his consciousness from him.

“May you burn in a thousand hells, you demon...”

Shoju paused. His lie had taken root. From that moment, in whatever histories Rokugan would have, Bayushi Shoju would be recorded as its most nefarious demon, murderer of the Son of Heaven and servant of the Shadowlands.

If your hate spreads across the thousand hearts of Rokugan and unites them against me, I will gladly be consumed by its fire.

His fate sealed, Shoju signaled his contingent to rejoin the march toward the palace.

Led by Ujiaki, the Lion and Scorpion forces smashed through the southern gates, scattering the fragmented units of the Army of the Rising Wave and swallowing Ishikawa’s trapped guards, bushi of all sides falling in ferocious combat for the Forbidden City. Unlike Hitomi’s takeover, which had only cost a handful of Scorpion due to Yoshi’s careful interference, Shoju’s seizure of the palace saw the blood of nearly all the clans and the Imperial families spilled



within the halls of the Forbidden City. Guards, samurai, a few straggling courtiers, and servants lay strewn within its walls.

Shoju stepped over them all on his way to the throne room.

He did not bother lighting a lamp. He simply shut the door behind him, padding the memorized steps up to the throne in the blackness. He stood before the Emerald Throne, the symbol of power for the Empire he now sacrificed his soul for.

"Forgive me, my friend," Shoju whispered for a final time to his dear Emperor's spirit. "I have retaken, with blood, what they stole...that which you had dared to give me. I hope you will not regret your choice in the afterlife."

Because I will not.

Shoju lowered himself onto the throne. He leaned into its cold lacquer, his eyes adjusting to the dark. The room lay empty before him, as if it were his tomb.

He had given up his true legacy, his family, his friendships, and his soul, all he had to offer, to save the Empire. And none in it would mourn his loss.

A small price to pay if Rokugan lives on.

He checked his pocket for the encrypted letter he had written—his confession—a final star of hope that he would take into the abyss with him. This letter alone would tell the truth while the rest of Rokugan swallowed the lies he had crafted this day. Even Kachiko.

The thought of his wife choked Shoju, and his hand rose unbidden to his chest to suppress the pain. She was born to become the Shosuro daimyō, one of his most trusted vassals, one of his master of spies, yet the astrologers of the Yogo had warned that she must become the champion's wife to avert a calamity befalling the clan. She had been his equal in all aspects, and he had loved her. She was the only person who could understand the burden of the sacrifice he was making now. And she would never know about it. She would hate him along with the rest, and she would teach that hatred to their son Dairu, to preserve the Scorpion after Shoju's death.

"I trust you to rebuild what I have destroyed, Kachiko," Shoju whispered. "I hope you have learned something from all this, for now I abandon you to the fires of Rokugan's judgment of our clan for my sins. But I know that you will protect it as you have always done, with a bravery and cunning only you can wield."

With that final sentiment, a parting prayer to the ghost of his old life, he locked his heart against all he had once held dear.

He drew his ink-ruined mask from his sleeve, fitting it perfectly to his face. He almost sighed in relief. He felt like himself once more. He was finally what he was destined to become.

He was his shadow.

He was the darkness.





Bayushi Shoji - Villain of the Empire

