

A Discerning Eye and an Unyielding Resolve

By Tyler Parrott

"I understand you have something you wish to show us." The door slid shut behind Kitsuki Chiari.

The investigator bowed to the Ruby Champion and sat. Tea steamed between them, yet Agasha Sumiko seemed to take no notice of it, and Chiari paid it no mind. Only Kitsuki Yaruma, sitting to Sumiko's right, acknowledged its existence by pouring some for himself as he watched the younger woman settle onto her knees before the Regent's chief enforcer.

At first, only the quiet padding of feet on the lacquered floor answered Sumiko's statement. Chiari waited as the warrior who had closed the door behind her—renowned hatamoto Mirumoto Hitomi—returned to the Ruby Champion's side. Unlike Ambassador Yaruma, who comfortably awaited Chiari's report, Hitomi wore her swords openly and remained standing. Chiari had not requested Hitomi's presence for this meeting, but the clear threat of a trained duelist indicated that Sumiko was taking Chiari's testimony quite seriously.

Since Chiari had first informed Yaruma of the importance of her testimony, the emptiness in her stomach had only grown. Either the testimony would dismantle the very legitimacy of the Emerald Empire, or she would be quietly removed from her post, never to be seen again. Lord Justicar Gorō had always taught her that nothing mattered except the truth. Yet Agasha Sumiko served Regent Bayushi Shōju, a Bayushi who had a tenuous relationship with the truth at best.

Kitsuki Chiari swallowed and reached into her obi, withdrawing a small scroll tied with a crimson ribbon.

"Three things, Agasha-sama," Chiari said. "Two are but testimony, while the third can be read in this message from Lord Yogo to Bayushi Shōju."

Hitomi and Yaruma both looked to the scroll with interest while Sumiko watched Chiari's expression. The intensity in the Ruby Champion's eyes bore down upon her, daring her to hesitate or retreat. Chiari did not move, yet her heart beat swiftly. Her discovery could be presented to no one else. Only Agasha Sumiko could act upon what Chiari had learned. Steeling herself, she met Sumiko's gaze unflinchingly.

Yaruma reached forward to take the scroll. While he read, Sumiko spoke. "And what is it you have uncovered?"



"The truth about His Excellency, the late Hantei," Chiari replied. "I'm afraid our esteemed Regent has not been entirely truthful."

Sumiko's brow furrowed in response. "I suggest you choose your words carefully, Kitsuki-san."

Chiari breathed. She always chose her words carefully. "Please allow me to present my evidence. The first, which you likely already know, is that the ancestral sword of the Hantei is no longer in the palace. Sometime within the past few weeks, it was sent to the lands of the Yogo, where dangerous artifacts are kept safe."

Sumiko shifted slightly on her heels. A subtle but unexpected gesture. *Perhaps she does not know after all.*

Yet despite her discomfort, Sumiko's expression betrayed no recognition—or lack of it. "What makes you think so?"

All of the threads led back to Bayushi Sōtatsu, though Chiari could not easily see why. The assistant director of palace upkeep had identified Sōtatsu as the administrator responsible for selecting the newest servants for the Imperial Palace, those who had started suddenly after the Emperor's death. It had seemed particularly timely, given the rise of the Scorpion Clan Champion to the regency, but Chiari's subsequent interviews with the servants had only complicated the matter. Few of them had known Sōtatsu before being reassigned to the palace, and many had previously worked in distant Lion or Phoenix households. Even the most conspicuous ones, who had served Scorpion samurai in the past, she had been unable to catch in subterfuge when she had monitored them. If Sōtatsu had installed Scorpion spies in the Imperial Palace, he had done so with remarkable effectiveness.

And if he had not... why did he have business with Chiari?

She found him awaiting her on a cold evening at her refuge, the House of the Golden Willow. She should have suspected that the Scorpion would try to find out what she, a Kitsuki, had learned of their affairs. Taizō had agreed to share evidence should either of them catch wind of such an inquiry, yet she had no way to predict when, or how, such a visit might take place. When she arrived and was informed by the house's *okāsan* that a man in a half mask had booked a room for the two of them to share, she knew that the hare would now need to outwit the fox.

She had been in this room many times before. A low table held a precise flower arrangement that complemented the mountainscapes along the walls—a familiar touch of Chiari's home—and a mat at one end of the room presented with the color of faded gold. A man sat at the head of the table, comfortably resting on the tatami, smiling with half of his face hidden behind a white and red horned lacquer mask. A cup of sake rested in front of him, but it was still full, untouched as he entertained light conversation with the two geisha who sat



with him: Chiari's friend Taizō and his *maiko* apprentice Kichihana.

Tucked between the Scorpion's crimson kimono and jagged black obi was a small pouch laced with emerald-green lettering and the *mon* of the Seppun. An *omamori* trinket of protection.

Was he afraid of being cursed?

"Kitsuki-sama, I was so glad to hear you would be joining us." Taizō welcomed her with a small bow from his seat. "Bayushi Sōtatsu-sama was just entertaining us with a story of life at the palace."



Sōtatsu turned to greet her, his smile a bit stiff. "Kitsuki Chiari-san. I always find it a joy to discover a friendly face among those whose duty brings them before the Emperor. I had not been informed of your recent arrival at the palace, or I would have introduced myself sooner."

Chiari took a seat at the table beside Kichihana and allowed her to pour a cup of sake. The four drank together.

"My arrival is perhaps less recent than all that," Chiari replied, "although I will admit that the palace is quite expansive. With so many people coming and going, it is a wonder you can keep track of the staff and their duties."

"You overestimate the difficulty," Sōtatsu said. "As the Asako wrote in the early days, 'the open mind knows what is needed.' But you are not unfamiliar with the palace's staff yourself."

She hadn't expected to find him a scholar. Chiari had also read Asako Eichi's book of ancient poetry, but as it had been written in an old Rokugani script, she knew of few others who knew of it...let alone could quote it from memory. She let the comment lie unremarked.

"I find value in the perspectives of all those I meet, regardless of their station," she said.

"Yet you spend so much time watering the reeds while the delicate willow thirsts."

While Chiari had recently been mingling with representatives from the Asako and Yasuki to build a coalition of support for her clan on behalf of Yaruma, her investigations among the servants were not part of her regular duties, and she had hoped they would continue overlooked until she learned more. *I wonder who tipped him off.*

"Even the willow cannot sustain itself alone. It grows so much more magnificent when surrounded by a bed of comfort," Chiari said. "After all, I keep coming back to the House of the Golden Willow for its pleasantries, and here we are drinking sake together. To what do I owe the pleasantness of your company?"

"Serendipity," the Scorpion replied. "I have been seeking additional talent with which to entertain the court, and this house's reputation for excellent music attracted me."



"We are honored that you would consider us." Taizō's smile was gentle and broad. "After hearing such amusing stories as yours, who would not leap at the opportunity to be welcomed somewhere as wondrous as the palace?"

"It certainly carries the beauty of the Heavens," Chiari agreed.

Kichihana poured more sake for them all—she had cut her hair in Taizō's style since Chiari had last seen her and now looked more the part of the male entertainer than ever—as the topic of discussion moved to less remarkable subjects: an early snow for the season, the poetry readings that Otomo Mikuru had been holding to entertain the court, and the debacle of an Ikoma courtier who had mistaken one of the Regent's servants for his own.

"Given the amount of turnover within the palace lately, I can understand his mistake," Chiari observed.

"Were you mentioning to us earlier that you were also in search of new servants for the palace?" Taizō asked. "I could make some recommendations, should you wish."

New servants are needed again? I wonder what other casual remarks of his Taizō could share with me after this.

"A minor concern." Sōtatsu's tone was unshaken, yet Chiari detected a slight agitated flutter. He would pass it off as an effect of the sake, but Chiari had to know more.

"Has some trouble befallen the staff?"

"Nothing so dire," Sōtatsu replied. "Only that two of them must be sent away for a time, and while they are gone, I will need their roles filled."

"Such changes in the staff must be quite ordinary, I'm sure," Chiari offered to ease his concern. This was clearly no routine assignment.

"There is beauty in change," the Scorpion stated, and he said little more. They ate and drank until their meal was finished, at which point Taizō and Kichihana took to the mat at the front of the room to perform for their guests.

"I understand you have been inquiring among the servants in the kitchens." His voice was low but clear underneath Taizō and Kichihana's melodies. "There is nothing they can tell you that I cannot."

"In the kitchens?" Chiari replied. "I was merely exchanging suggestions with the cooks to help make my companions' reception more comfortable, as I said."

"You were exchanging nothing, Kitsuki-san," Sōtatsu said. "From the reports I have read, you seem awfully curious about who maintains the Emperor's quarters. You will find that continuing to lie to me would be unwise."

If he knew the exact topics she had been inquiring about—perhaps even the exact questions she had asked—then whoever was informing him was close to the kitchen staff. Perhaps even among them.

"I see," Chiari replied. She could not tell him the truth, of course—if he was willing to spend the evening quietly intimidating her to discourage her inquiries, then she could not run the



risk that he would be equally willing to use force to end her investigation. "Very well. You are correct that I have been interested in the Emperor's study, but I did not wish to raise attention to it unduly. You see, several days ago I was passing by in the evening and thought I heard the sound of a quiet argument within. I waited in the hallway to see if anyone would emerge, but no one ever did. I only wished to confirm whether I could have truly heard people within, when I understand that room has not been used since the Regent took up his sacred duty."

"Surely this could have been answered much more simply had you taken it up with me, or even your lord, Yaruma."

"As surely someone of your administrative position understands, my lord has many duties that call upon him, especially in these trying times. To burden him with conjecture would be imprudent, not to mention a poor reflection of my own courage and sincerity."

"You may uphold your virtues, Kitsuki-san," Sôtatsu hissed. "But you would do well to remember your duty to the Hantei comes before all else. Let the servants do their job, and focus on doing your own. Do not concern yourself with imagined whispers."

"I promise I have no intention of interrupting their tasks," Chiari countered. "I only wish to ensure that the Emperor's peace is not undone by conspiracy."

"Then you should take greater care," Sôtatsu said. "Your own curiosity can easily be mistaken as conspiracy."

"Should I be concerned about being 'sent away,' as with the two most recent missing servants?"

"Those servants have been given a prestigious assignment." So they were not murdered, then, as the servants who had attended the Emperor's study directly had been. "I would be more concerned with the gossip of the court if I were you. Ambassadors unused to the rigors of the palace can find their fortunes change overnight."

"Is that not why we must be so vigilant in the defense of the Throne? I would hate for a deception to unravel the late Hantei's wishes." If Sôtatsu had any direct connection to Shoju, she assumed he could be assuaged by an appeal to Shoju's legitimacy.

"It is unfortunate that so many seem to wish to do so. It is why the treasures of the Throne must be kept safe until Crown Prince Daisetsu is safely returned."

Ah. Had the servants' prestigious assignment been to safeguard the Emperor's sword? She could think of no other reason why he might be mentioning the treasures of the Throne now, in this context.

"I can only hope that the prince returns quickly to claim his birthright so that all of this suspicion can be put to rest. As you said, it would have been wiser for me to bring my concerns to you directly than to ask among the servants. Should I observe anything unusual in the future, I will be sure to do so."

"That would be wise." Perhaps Sôtatsu believed he had concealed the pride in his voice, but



Chiari could hear its subtle inflection. Let him believe that he had caught her in the act. She would play along and end her questioning, for now.

The performance ended, and with great praise for the performers, Chiari acted the part of humble deference and apologized for her early departure. "Thank you both for your wonderful performances, and thank you, Bayushi-sama, for your words of wisdom." Before she left, she made a point to catch Taizō's eye and received a discreet nod in response. With a gentle but swift retreat, she paid the mother of the house and returned to the evening streets of Otosan Uchi.

She did not go far, however. Slipping around the side of the building, she busied herself with making scattered observations and hypotheses in a book she kept with her for this purpose until Sōtatsu appeared only half an hour later. As he scanned his surroundings for prying eyes, she retreated into the shadows beneath the wooden walls and waited. His suspicions were warranted, so she could afford him no chance of discovering her. When she poked her head around the corner several minutes later, he was gone.

She slipped back into the geisha house and returned to the room they had been entertained in. Only Taizō awaited her.

"Did he share anything after I left?" Chiari asked.

"Only this," Taizō replied, producing an unfolded paper. "It is his name and an address where messages can be left for him at a teahouse at the southern edge of the city."

Chiari examined it. "A written invitation to leave written correspondence," she mused. "And he knew I had been inquiring after the newest member of the kitchen staff."

"What meaning lies with his need to replace two servants?" Taizō asked. "He mentioned it offhandedly when introducing himself to us but did not seem keen on the topic with you. Is this the same situation as the servants you are investigating?"

"I have my suspicions, but he could have been lying. I must be certain before I craft my report to my lord. Unfortunately, it seems my investigation has been less secretive than I had hoped, so I fear I cannot continue on my own."

Taizō raised an eyebrow when she looked up to him expectantly. "That depends entirely on what you're looking for, Chiari-san."

"Based on how he asked you to get in touch with him, it seems that he is used to writing to and receiving messages from the people he meets with. And if he gets his servants' reports in writing as well, as he alluded to, I suspect he receives many reports from people left at many different locations. None of the servants I questioned had reason to be Scorpion spies, but of course that's because his spies were already in the palace. If he knew through the kitchen staff, then it is likely that his spies are among *those* servants, and their reports are left somewhere within the kitchens."

If she could corroborate what he had implied—that Kunshu, the ancestral sword of the Hantei, had been sent away from the Imperial Palace for safekeeping—then the Regent had



reason to believe what she had suspected when she had drawn the sword not two weeks before, and he was hiding it from the rest of the Empire.

“I need you to pose as a servant—as one of his spies—for a few days and find me something significant among their reports.”

“Fortunately for us both, my friend is as good an actor as he is a musician, and the Scorpion spies did not question an addition to their ranks,” Chiari explained to the Ruby Champion. “He monitored the palace kitchens for three days before finding something quite unexpected—a letter sent from Yogo Junzo to Lord Bayushi, which you now hold.”

Kitsuki Yaruma handed the scroll to Agasha Sumiko. She read it over briefly, then pondered it for some time. “Junzo writes of dark portents and spiritual disturbance, which is the purview of the Yogo. It is not dissimilar to the urgings of the Isawa, who see imbalance in every omen. Yet I assume that is not the message you wish to show me, for you have circled several kanji throughout the letter.”

“He would not write of it openly,” Chiari explained, “although his portents are part of his message. When Bayushi Sōtatsu spoke to me of keeping safe ‘the treasures of the Throne’ and of sending the palace’s servants away with an honorable—but secretive—assignment, he was telling the truth. This task was the safekeeping of Kunshu, a task that was secretly entrusted to Yogo Junzo by Lord Bayushi himself.

“But even that task remains unspecified, for Yogo Junzo writes only vaguely of it in his letter. It was not until I considered Bayushi Sōtatsu’s mention of a quote from Asako Eichi, a poet and philosopher from the second century, that I recognized certain characters used in the letter as being ones shared with an archaic script. This would not be quite so out of place were they the only characters that had such a historical connection. Having studied much ancient poetry myself, I was able to put them together using their old meanings. When read in that context, they say, ‘A curse of treason upon the blade of the Hantei.’”

Agasha Sumiko set the letter down before her. As she met Chiari’s level gaze, the investigator noticed creases of concern that had intruded upon her expression. “That is quite the conclusion.”

“I have one further piece of evidence that should, unfortunately, dispel any doubt. I left it with Kitsuki Yaruma-sama some weeks ago, as a precaution, when I first felt something was wrong. But these words,



hidden within Yogo Junzo's message, confirm what I witnessed myself."

Chiari turned to Yaruma. "Do you still have the poem I wrote for you?"

"I had a suspicion this would matter today, of all days," Yaruma replied. He withdrew a small scrap of paper, the detritus of some cast-aside missive sent by a member of an Imperial family, upon whose empty space several lines had been written in small, neat text. She had instructed him to not share it or act on it unless something were to happen to her, for her investigation was not yet complete and her instinct alone could not be trusted. She was glad he had brought it along and allowed Agasha Sumiko to read it silently before continuing.

*A sacred star falls
Beneath the hand of honor
Unseen amidst the cherry blossoms and
The blooming chrysanthemums.
Its portentous meaning
Awaits a discerning eye
And an unyielding resolve.*

"This poem is my testimony from three weeks ago, when I disgraced myself by breaching the sanctity of the Emperor's study and observed its pristine cleanliness. It was as if the entire study had been made new, without the weathering of the Emperor's many meditations. I looked upon the twin swords Kunshu and Shori and saw, hidden within the folds of Shori's handle, a dried stain of blood that should not have been there. If you inspect it now, you too will find it. It compelled me to draw the Emperor's blade and experience a horrible darkness—a 'miasma of despair'—which I now believe Yogo Junzo has also witnessed."

She could still feel the weight of nothingness within that moment. Even the memory of it was an anathema to joy.

Why am I even sharing this with these lordly samurai? They will never believe me. She was an investigator in pursuit of truth, and it had been little more than a momentary terror in her mind. But there was no other explanation. She had to say it.

"Only one thing could cause a curse to befall such a sacred sword: the murder of the Emperor."

Agasha Sumiko did not gasp, but her next breath was sharp. Her eyes narrowed. "Are you accusing Lord Bayushi of regicide?"

The emptiness in Chiari's stomach grew, and for a moment she feared that her tension would render her speechless. She took a deep breath.

"Yes. Based on the curse that has befallen Kunshu, the blood that has stained Shori's hilt, and the regency's intent to keep this secret hidden, there is no explanation except that Bayushi Shoju has murdered the Emperor and taken his throne."



Silence filled the room. The remnants of Yaruma's tea had gone cold. Mirumoto Hitomi's left hand instinctively clenched the handle of her katana. But they all served the Ruby Champion. What would Agasha Sumiko do?

