

# The Fires of Justice

By Annie VanderMeer Mitsoda

It took one of the embers snapping beneath the pressure of the iron rake—a little *crack* and a feather of flame—to break Matsu Tsuko out of her reverie. She did not start or flinch, but she could tell from the slight shift of the man across from her that the change in her demeanor did not go unnoticed.

Her eyes flicked again to the edge of the room, near the tent flap, and fell on the hastily strewn sand scattered across a pool of blood half-soaked into the earth. That blood had been—until very recently—inside the body of a detestable rōnin named Kujira, who had committed dishonorable acts to capture both the village of Shirei Mura and the prisoner across from her. *A band of rōnin hired by Lion to butcher a Lion village*, she thought, and her teeth were set on edge. *That cannot be.*

She dared a look at the man, who was making a quiet show of finishing his tea from a cup that had been empty for several minutes now: though trained by so many clans, Doji Kuwanan was still a Crane, and she suspected his heart would fail him before his politeness did.

A sudden gust of wind stirred the tent flap, and Tsuko felt her eyes fixing on the image painted upon it—a lion stalking through the tall grass. They were lions here, on the Osari Plains, stalking and running down their prey, reclaiming what was theirs.

“I do not know who hired those rōnin,” Tsuko admitted aloud, her eyes locking with Kuwanan’s. “And I do not even know if I was expected to care. I have a suspicion I was meant to kill you, that someone thought my rage would demand it.” She breathed deeply, and squeezed the wound on her right hand to remind her of that cost, the pain a steadying force. “Someone has treated us as pawns.”

Doji Kuwanan’s face darkened suddenly, but resolved into confusion as he fought away any hint of insult. “You are certain?”

Tsuko pursed her lips. “It is the uncertainty of the situation that gives me pause,” she said carefully. “I did not know you would be at Shirei Mura—I don’t know if any of the Lion did, or



at least they did not see fit to tell me. And I knew nothing of these rōnin, either. It was expected that I...that I would be going to Yōjin no Shiro, to bury my betrothed. But..." Anger flared in her at the memory of the meeting in the war pavilion after the disaster at Toshi Ranbo. The denunciation of Matsu Agetoki, of Akodo Toturi's condescension—to her pain and not to her point—and even Kitsuo Motso's own reluctance to engage.

"I imagine that few believed I would simply obey and travel straight there," Tsuko continued. "Someone might have assumed well enough that the Osari Plains would be foremost in my attentions."

"And revenge," added Kuwanan quietly. Tsuko nodded slowly, and he looked down a moment, digesting this, and shook his head in disgust. "To use your grief—and at the death of so great a man—is reprehensible." There was a long silence, stretched like a fading wisp of smoke. "So what would you have us do?" he finally asked.

"My duty is to my people, to my clan, and to my champion," she admitted. "I am bound to this. To rid the rōnin from Shirei Mura, to travel to Yōjin no Shiro and lay Akodo Arasou to rest, and finally—to return and reclaim the Osari Plains as Lion lands."

"But right now, your life is at my mercy." Kuwanan bristled slightly, but she raised a hand for understanding, and he relaxed. "We both honor Bushidō. And we respect each other. And as you hate the idea of me being used as a pawn, so do I loathe that you may be as well."

"I ask you to address the demand of your heart, and to answer for yourself the question you could not answer for me." She felt the heat rise on her face as her fist clenched and pain shot up her arm. "Ask Doji Hotaru, Champion of the Crane Clan, killer of my beloved—ask your sister why she does not do as duty demands and investigate the death of your father."

Tsuko took a deep breath. "A storm of strange fates has brought us together. But if someone believes you have a question to ask that carries a danger to it even being voiced..." Her eyes bored into Kuwanan's. "Then perhaps someone saw worth in trying to have you silenced."

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The stars had begun to show their faces when Matsu Tsuko and Doji Kuwanan exited the tent, the latter clad as a simple merchant, straw hat drawn low, his telltale white hair bound up and away from view. The horse he mounted was perhaps too fine a specimen for an ordinary merchant, and the rider's bearing too proud, but Tsuko hoped he would reach his destination before anyone grew overly suspicious.

"This arrangement is still very odd," Kuwanan admitted as he slid into the saddle with a wince, "but I understand its wisdom. Friend or foe, perhaps it is best I remain unseen."

"It is strange for me as well," Tsuko admitted, passing over the reins of the animal. "But our cause is righteous. You will disappear from Shirei Mura—"

"And appear in Kyūden Kakita with a tale of escaping my foolish rōnin captors," Kuwanan finished. "I am no playwright, but I should have a serviceable story assembled by the time I

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reach the city. And I know someone with an even greater talent for words who will be waiting for me at the castle.” Tsuko nodded, barely perceptible in the low light, and another pause followed: a familiar tempo.

“Farewell, Tsuko-sama,” Kuwanan said at last.

“Sayonara, Kuwanan-sama.”

She watched his retreating figure until it was lost from sight and the soft echo of hoofbeats had vanished into the night air. In his retreat, an image rose unbidden to Tsuko’s mind: a swallow with its tail on fire, returning in panic to its home—only to set the whole of it ablaze.

A dark part of her wondered how the conflagration would begin, even as she dimly hoped Kuwanan would be smart enough to survive it. And if those flames would be enough to burn away the artifice of their enemies.

