

What the Eye Cannot See

By Marie Brennan

It began with a request for paper.

A simple request, one that Chiari delivered without giving it much thought. But the heimin servant stammered and shot a pleading look at her companion, and although the other woman said she would see to it right away, Chiari could hear the bravado of a lie.

They were servants in the Imperial Palace. And yet they didn't know where to find paper.

It might have been a calculated insult. The Scorpion ascendancy over the Imperial Court was complete, and they held no love for Kitsuki-trained courtiers, who—depending on temperament—saw ferreting out Scorpion secrets as something ranging from a sacred calling to the most entertaining challenge around. Someone, perhaps even Bayushi Kachiko herself, might have given orders to assign the least competent servants to assist Chiari in her diplomatic duties.

Except that the next morning Chiari saw another peasant stop halfway down the veranda and look around in confusion, then turn and retrace his steps. Her own path took her more or less in the same direction, and as she passed the room the man had entered, she heard him ask someone where the lantern oil was kept.

After that, Chiari began to pay attention.

Messages and tea trays that took too long to arrive, or went to the wrong place. Samurai who had been resident in the Imperial Palace for many years complaining that someone had forgotten that they preferred cold tea with their breakfast, or hated the scent of camellia. Mistake after mistake, none of them large, but all of them pointing to the same conclusion:

A surprising number of the servants in the palace were new to their jobs.

The first layer of truth. But as the Kitsuki taught their investigators, each answer begat more questions.

Why new servants?

And where had the old ones gone?

Doji Azumamaro was a predictable man. When he had time off from his duties, he invariably made his way out into Otosan Uchi, to the House of Morning's Fragrance.

This was not the finest teahouse in the capital by any stretch, and at first Chiari wondered if there were some deeper significance to his choice. Espionage, perhaps. Azumamaro certainly appeared to be one of the most boring men ever to grace the Imperial bureaucracy, carrying out his work in the Bureau of Palace Upkeep with neither distinction nor demerit. He'd been there for years, rising very slowly to the position of third assistant director, and was the kind



of person everyone forgot even existed. Which was, for a spy, ideal.

But as in everything else, Chiari found that Azumamaro's choice of teahouse was entirely boring. He was conducting an unremarkable affair with the owner's nephew, a young man with a sweet disposition and passable beauty. Looking into the nephew, Chiari learned that he had briefly been a servant in the palace three years previously, which was where Azumamaro had met him. Nothing pointed at any hidden game.



Which suited her just fine. Chiari arranged for an errand to a nearby incense shop, and stopped at the House of Morning's Fragrance on her way back.

It was hardly her usual milieu, but at least the tea was drinkable. No self-respecting Doji would put up with less, not for the charms of a peasant of only passable beauty. Chiari sipped it and nibbled at some fried tofu, waiting for her quarry to show up.

Relatively few samurai frequented this place, so Azumamaro noticed her the moment he walked in, and came over to greet her.

"You, I believe, are one of the new Dragon diplomats," he said.

Chiari introduced herself and invited him to sit with her. Azumamaro accepted, and pleasant but tedious small talk ensued. The tedium didn't bother Chiari: like many bureaucrats of long standing, Azumamaro had a habit of constantly mentioning things that had recently changed, where "recent" might mean anything within the last five years.

Which gave her the opening she needed.

"It seems like a great many things have changed, quite recently," she said.

There was a certain tone of voice that signaled a pointed and leading comment. Azumamaro was competent enough to recognize it. "Changed for the better or worse, Kitsuki-san?"

She laughed lightly. "If this is for the better, I shudder to think about what the palace was like beforehand. A shocking number of the servants seem barely to know what they are doing."

"Ah, yes." Azumamaro sipped his tea. "I'm afraid many of them are new to their positions. They have all worked elsewhere before, of course—we would not assign people entirely without experience—but the Imperial Palace itself is unfamiliar to them."

Chiari sighed and put down her last piece of tofu as if she'd lost her appetite. "They may have experience, but I wonder if it taught them anything." She suddenly covered her mouth in embarrassment. "Forgive me, Doji-san. I meant no insult to you."



He took no offense. "I oversee the servants, yes, but it was Bayushi Sôtatsu who selected them."

"Really?" Chiari wished briefly for a fan, but to hide her face now would be too obvious. "I'm sure he had his...reasons for choosing them."

Azumamaro's position might put him in the stagnant outer waters of the Imperial bureaucracy, well away from the swift-flowing currents of court, but the Crane's loss of influence to the Scorpion stung them all. He was all too ready to go along with her suggestion that the minister of the Imperial Household might have filled the palace with spies. "He was following the orders of the Imperial Advisor herself."

If she'd been holding a fan, she might have dropped it. "Bayushi Kachiko involved herself with such a lowly task?"

"After the Emperor's death," Azumamaro said, nodding. "She said they were all defiled by the impurity it caused. She dismissed them the very next morning. It is to the minister's credit that he was able to replace them so quickly; otherwise it would have been chaos in the palace."

Chiari couldn't quite tell whether he meant that comment to be an acidic hint that the Scorpion had their spies lined up and waiting, or genuine praise for how well Sôtatsu had navigated a difficult moment. Conceivably both, she thought.

A man like Azumamaro survived in the bureaucracy by doing his work just well enough that it wasn't worth replacing him, and by adapting himself to the whims of whoever headed his ministry. He might wonder about spies, but it would go no further.

Chiari, on the other hand, was an investigator.

The divided curtains that separated the tearoom from the kitchen parted to let a young man through—Azumamaro's lover. The bureaucrat made his apologies and departed for a room upstairs; the young man cleared away the dishes, then followed after not quite enough time had passed to be discreet.

But Chiari remained where she was, thinking. *Simply a grab at power as soon as the opportunity arose?* She wondered. From what she knew of the woman's reputation, it was the kind of thing Kachiko might do. But no one who rose to the rank of Imperial Advisor could be wholly stupid, and while positioning spies in the palace was one thing, this wholesale replacement was clumsy. Kachiko wouldn't have done it without better reason than mere ambition.

During her training, several of Chiari's sensei had chided her for making speculative leaps not supported by the evidence. She'd worked hard to suppress the impulse so that it wouldn't bias her thinking, but she couldn't obliterate it entirely.

There in the House of Morning's Fragrance, she found herself thinking, *Maybe the servants knew something they shouldn't.*

Kitsuki Yaruma stood with his hands linked behind his back, gazing out the window of his office, as Chiari reported on her usual duties. When she finished, he said, “Thank you. I’ll write to Asako-san myself. Please request an appointment with—”

He turned as he spoke and caught sight of her expression. “Is there a problem?”

“A private matter, I’m afraid,” Chiari said, feigning reluctance and deep embarrassment. She curled the fingers of her left hand inward: the signal to take steps against eavesdroppers. The Dragon Guesthouse ought to be secure—especially with one of her own school in charge—but given what she’d learned since speaking with Azumamaro, it was better to be cautious. She was fairly confident she’d avoided Scorpion watchers while making her inquiries around the city, but “fairly confident” was not the same thing as “certain.”

Yaruma sighed as if irritated and closed the shutters. In the sudden dimness, he opened a hidden drawer in his desk and took out a strip of calligraphed paper: an *ofuda* from a special temple in Shiro Kitsuki. He affixed it to the join of the shutters, warding them against eavesdroppers.

“What is it?” he asked, in the weary tone of a man prepared to receive bad news.

“I have learned some things of an alarming nature,” Chiari said, “but to confirm what I suspect, I will have to do something dishonorable, which will bring great trouble on the clan if I am caught. If you wish me to, I will tell you what I know—but in the event of difficulty, it may serve the clan better for you not to know, so that you will not lie when you say you are ignorant. I will follow your will, my lord.”

Yaruma was too experienced to ask any pointless questions. He only stood, lips pressed together in thought, for several long moments. Then he said, “Are you certain the issue is grave enough to merit the risk?”

“Yes.”

He nodded as if he expected nothing more. “Then write out your suspicions, in cipher, seal it, and leave it with one of our agents in the city.” With a swift jerk, he pulled down the *ofuda*. “I am disappointed in you, Kitsuki-san. Your previous superiors spoke more highly of you than this. But if this is the standard of service I am to expect, then I have no use for you here. As of this moment, you are dismissed from service here in Ootosan Uchi. You leave for our lands tomorrow.”

“Yes, Kitsuki-sama,” Chiari said, kneeling and touching her head to the floor as if she were in disgrace.



It wasn't a perfect solution. The Scorpion would suspect intrigue regardless. But Yaruma would be able to say, with perfect honesty, that by remaining in the capital she had disobeyed his orders, and that would help mitigate any suspicion from the other clans. He would have someone else read her coded report, and tell him its contents once it was safe.

But all of that, Chiari hoped, was a mere precaution. She had no intention of being caught.

The problem with bringing in so many new servants at once was that it became trivially easy to slip one more into their ranks.

Dressed as a lowly heimin maid, Chiari made her way through the palace. She was no trained Scorpion infiltrator, but she didn't have to be; carrying a wrapped burden and looking harried was enough to protect her. The one time she got stopped, it was by another servant, a man desperate to know where Ikoma Mitsuyo's chambers were. Fortunately Chiari knew, and sent him quickly on his way.

She had no illusions as to what would happen if she were caught, though. A few of the servants had been dismissed and were now working at new jobs elsewhere in the city...but many had simply vanished. And although Chiari based her next deduction on her knowledge of Bayushi Kachiko rather than direct evidence, she had every reason to think the missing ones were dead.

Every one of them had been working in the vicinity of the Emperor's study that night.

Kitsuki training sometimes included a few skills not ordinarily used by honorable samurai. Chiari quickly worked open the gilt brass lock, then closed it again so that, from a distance, the room would look still sealed. Then she slipped inside.

The dimly lit room felt sterile. Incense still hung in the air from the purification, but no one had used the study since the Emperor's death. Chiari walked a circuit, observing everything, not touching anything yet. The tatami was all new—part of the purification, no doubt. But was that the only reason?

Nothing seemed out of place. She worked from the edges inward, on the grounds that anyone interfering was more likely to have missed something at the fringes, but the furniture was all undisturbed, and the elegant panels of the walls were clean of even dust. She spent a great deal of time at the late Emperor's desk, silently begging forgiveness from his spirit; unfortunately, all his papers had been cleared away, leaving her no hints as to what he'd been working on before his death.

In truth, she couldn't even be certain of the desk itself, or any of the room's other furnishings. They, like the tatami, might be new. Those most likely to notice a replacement were either missing, like Toturi, or benefiting far too much from the Emperor's passing to raise a fuss.

Only two things were exempt from that possibility. They stood in side-by-side stands: the



elegance of Kunshu, and the blunt simplicity of Shori. The ancestral sword of the Hantei, and that of the Lion.

She'd already examined them during her first pass, but respect had kept her at a slight distance. Now Chiari bent close enough to smell the choji oil that protected the blades from rust, scrutinizing them both in the scant light filtering through the shutters. The hilt of Kunshu and the carved feathers of its sheath were as clean as everything else in the room. But on the hilt of Shori—

She couldn't be sure. Holding her breath and offering another apology, this time to a thousand years of outraged Lion ancestors, she lifted the blade from its stand and carried it to a brighter spot by the round window.

On its hilt there was a single, minuscule speck of dried blood.

Chiari's pulse jumped. Heedless of the traditions surrounding the blade, but careful to avoid erasing any evidence, she drew it from its sheath, angling it this way and that until she was absolutely sure. Apart from that single speck, Shori was clean.

Voices outside made her crouch lower beneath the window. When they passed, she hurried to replace the blade on its rack, all too aware that she had already pressed her luck further than most would dare. But she couldn't leave without completing her investigation—and so she knelt before Kunshu and bowed her head to the floor. Silently she prayed, *May any punishment for this blasphemy fall on me and me alone, for what I do, I do in the service of not just my clan, but the Empire.*

Then she rose and drew Kunshu.

An instant later she slammed it back into its sheath and dropped it to the floor. The clatter was appallingly loud, but Chiari could barely hear it over the shrieking horror in her mind. *No no no blessed Fortunes have mercy...*

It was irrational. It had no basis in evidence. It was more than a mere speculative leap; it was wild supposition, a visceral reaction she could not justify in the least. But over and over again in her mind, one horrific realization echoed:

It's cursed. The ancestral sword of the Hantei is cursed.

Chiari wasn't a shugenja, and she knew no more of theology than she had to. But she felt it in her bones: this sacred relic had been stained beyond recall. As if someone had used it to commit an unforgivable, blasphemous crime.

Like killing the Emperor.



The possibility was almost too huge to contemplate. That the Emperor had not died of ill health, but had been assassinated—

A spot of blood on Shori's hilt. A room more clean than mere purification would require. Servants dismissed. Servants missing—the ones who had been closest when he died. Taken all together, it barely counted as proof of anything, much less murder.

But the screaming certainty within her would not be quiet. She would not be able to sleep nor eat, much less concentrate on her other duties, unless she told someone. Yet Chiari could barely imagine herself facing Yaruma and telling him, *I think that Kunshu is cursed*. He'd undergone the same training she had. He would want evidence.

She would find it.

