

# Violence Behind Courtliness

By Katrina Ostrander

Heavily armored warriors and lightly armored messengers of the Crane Clan thronged the small court chamber. The retinue of the Tsume family shifted restlessly at the approach of the honor guard.

Doji Hotaru's resplendent *dō* armor heralded that she was visiting in her capacity as leader of the Crane Clan military forces. Daidoji Netsu in his general's regalia and Kakita Toshimoko in his understated robes followed close behind.

The lady of the castle kneeled upon a single-step dais, her long black-brown hair loose and unadorned save for a single silver hairpiece in the shape of a feather above her left ear. Her blue-silver robes were new, perhaps the finest garments she owned. She bowed to touch her head to the floor at her champion's approach, and Doji Hotaru returned the courtesy with a shallower bow of her own.

"You are welcome at Kyotei Castle, my lord and champion. The samurai of the Tsume family are honored to extend to you our meager hospitality and eager to serve however we are needed. We are also glad to hear that you were both victorious and spared from any major casualties in your march north."

"Thank you for your welcome, Tsume no Doji Itsuyo-dono," Hotaru returned. The young woman may have been new to the clan, having come from the Shiba family of the Phoenix, but her warrior's grace and highborn manners were unmistakable. "I am told that you have withstood your own share of Lion aggression, and that your swordsmanship is matched only by your diligence for stewardship of the valley."

Tsuyo unfurled her fan to hide her blush. "I am humbled by your praise, Doji-ue."

The woman was already acclimating well to the clan, it seemed. The Crane couldn't afford to risk losing her loyalty in these troubled times. "Doji Kuzunobu spoke well of you in his letters. It is a tragedy that you do not have the assistance of a capable spouse to support you in all of your good work. I will send word to Kakita Ryoku to begin making a suitable match. If you have someone in mind..."

"Thank you, Doji-ue," Itsuyo said as she bowed once more.

"Sadly, I am not here simply to arrange weddings, but to prepare for a war. While General Daidoji Uji retakes Kyūden Kakita, we will press on against the Lion and the Castle of the Swift Sword, where we can lay siege to them with our Unicorn allies. But first, we must reassert our claim over Toshi Ranbo."





The court was silent with the weight of her words. She was committing them to a path from which they could not walk back. If Toshi Ranbo mounted an earnest defense, they could be bogged down in a siege that would see them all slowly freeze outside the castle gates. If Chief Magistrate Bayushi Yojiro objected, she would have brought down the ire of the Empire upon them all. But the road home to Kyūden Doji was lined with regret—she knew this in her heart. The clan needed this victory, this well-stocked castle, this staging ground. And she needed to restore her reputation.

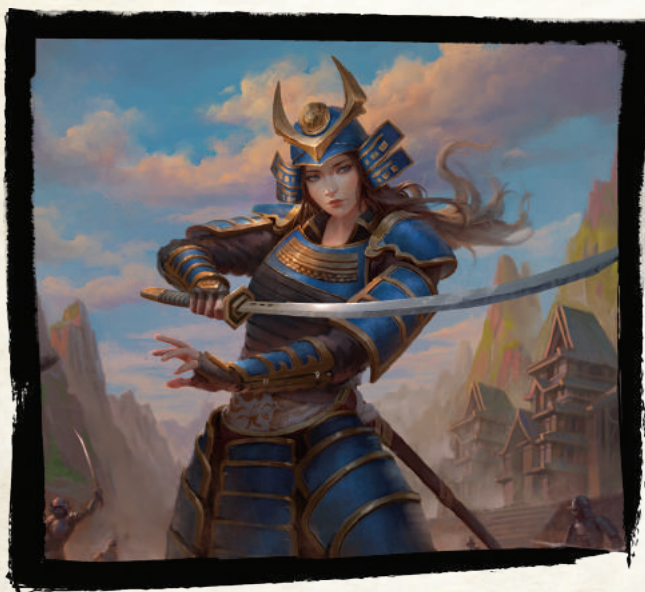
“We must be delicate in how we proceed, lest we risk earning the ire of the acting Emerald Champion, Agasha Sumiko, not to mention the Imperial Regent,” Hotaru acknowledged. If there was time, she could write to Kachiko at the capital to help soften any ill-considered reactions by Bayushi Shōju.

*But I must act swiftly or not at all. We will be lucky if word of our approach hasn't already provoked censure at the capital.* For now, she had heard nothing, and so the window of opportunity was still open.

“First, we will attempt diplomacy,” Hotaru continued, “but if we cannot retake the castle peaceably, then we must avoid as much bloodshed as possible. If we have allies by our side, we can prevail.”

“Tsume-dono.” Hotaru’s gaze fixed on the young lord. “There is one other way you can serve the clan: please, send a messenger to the esteemed governor of Nikesake. I would ask that he lend us the support of the Phoenix, if he can give it.” Itsuyo’s match had been struck with this very alliance in mind, but Hotaru wished she could have paid a visit prior to asking so much of her and her family.

“My champion’s will be done.” Itsuyo held up a hand, and her advisor began inking the request on paper. “Yet, I know that he will ask that he bring the *shugenja* of the Isawa to commune with the disquieted ghosts on the plains.”



A favor demanded a favor in return, but Hotaru was lucky the Phoenix’s request would be so easy to grant. To what end had Bayushi Yojiro and the Emerald Champion continued to block their request? What harm could come of putting ghosts to rest? Unless they were simply overwhelmed... Bureaucracy was not known for its efficiency, as Uncle Toshimoko had always been quick to point out, usually referring to his brother in the same breath.





"I will allow it. If we can try to surround the city—the Daidoji from the south and southwest, the Tsume from the east, and the Shiba from the north—we may be able to convince the Chief Magistrate to surrender command of the city to our joint forces. We will say that we are coming to reinforce the Imperial Legions, not to attack them."

The audience murmured to one another, but their tone was one of hope rather than skepticism. There was a chance they could pull this off.

"Who will deliver this message?" Toshimoko asked, now leaning lazily against one of the wooden pillars supporting the second-floor gallery. His tone suggested he was volunteering himself.

"It must come from the Crane Clan Champion herself," said Itsuyo's chief advisor, who had the greatest wisdom of years amongst them all. "He will not be able to publicly doubt her word without grave insult."

"It is too dangerous to send our champion in with the delegation," Daidoji Netsu warned. "What if the 'honest Scorpion' is not so honest after all? We cannot risk losing Doji-ue."

"Doji-ue, permit me to go," Tsume Itsuyo cautiously offered. "As the closest sitting Crane lord, I will be arriving as a neighbor, not an invader."

The murmurs of the audience grew louder as Hotaru considered all of their advice. As she moved to speak, the court went silent again.

"Tsume-dono, your chief advisor is right, but so is General Daidoji," Hotaru declared, and nodded to them both. She turned to face the entire court. "I think you are on to something. I have a plan..."

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Kakita Toshimoko set down the wine bottle on the table with a *thump* of indignation. "Your plan is a foolish one, Hotaru, and you know it." The fierce autumn winds lashed the shutters with rain, and the lamplights quivered in the frigid drafts. The shadows seemed to harden her uncle's frown. They were alone now, and so he could speak freely.

"I thought that meant you'd approve," Hotaru sniped back, downing the cheap wine in one gulp before pouring herself another. The banquet had gone on long into the night, and egged on by Kakita Toshimoko's tales of his youthful exploits and the accompanying toasts, the somber evening had transformed into a night for no regrets. If this was to be their last night in a relatively warm castle, should they not enjoy it to the fullest?

"Watch your tongue, Hotaru," Toshimoko growled. "You may be champion, but even an Emperor shows respect for his elders."

She seethed inside, but did not talk back. It had been a long time since Hotaru had imbibed this much, and her words were now flowing as easily as the wine, but she also remembered her uncle's tricks for staying sharp and avoiding the next day's effects of drinking. She collected herself, sitting up straighter.





“There is no other way that I can see. Serving by Imperial appointment, Bayushi Yojiro outranks the master of the Kakita Dueling Academy, even if you are Kenshinzen. His word will prevail, if he does not believe that you come in peace.”

Toshimoko closed his eyes and shook his head. “It is too dangerous for the clan champion to be separated from the protection of her armies. The clan is in too precarious a position as it is.”

Hotaru winced. “And that is precisely why I must do this, uncle. You sound like my father.”

Toshimoko scratched his chin. “Satsume certainly had his faults, but that doesn’t mean he was always wrong.”

“I know,” Hotaru conceded quietly. Whatever she felt about Satsume, Toshimoko was right about this. “You are just looking out for me. But I tried to do the sensible thing, the proper thing, and we were only losing ground! And now, Kyūden Kakita...”

She felt her warm cheeks blaze hotter. *What kind of champion loses the ancestral home of the Kakita? How can I possibly command my clan’s respect with such a dark stain on my soul?* She choked back a sob. “The clan needs to hold Toshi Ranbo once more—we must secure our northern flank and find a refuge for our northern armies. I need to prove that I can bring victory to our clan. ‘Where is the slayer of the Lion Clan Champion?’ you asked me not so long ago.

“She takes chances, leaves herself out in the open to take the shot, if she has to.”

*And if I prove unworthy—if my imperfections beget my defeat—then let me die so that another can right this ship.*

“Uncle, you taught me to live each day as if it were my last. I would rather try and fail than live with regret. If life is fleeting, then let me live each moment as nobly as I can. Let me fulfill my oaths to my clan. Let me be a worthy leader to them!”

The hair on the back of her neck rose, and her shoulders tensed to contain the ferocity of her spirit. Something in her uncle shifted, and she knew she must be on guard.

“You must do what you need to do, Hotaru. But right now, I can sense doubt in your resolve. You must commit yourself fully to this path. The entire body must be unified with the sword, with your will.”

Toshimoko raised his chin and said, “Prove to me that your spirit is pure!”

There was not a moment to hesitate.

Toshimoko kicked the table out from in front of him, and the wine bottle shattered against the wall.

Hotaru reached for the sword at her side and threw the scabbard off at the same time that she tumbled forward, away from where Toshimoko’s blade would land after his iai draw strike. She found her feet and swung her body and blade right.

He’d anticipated her defensive movement and whirled around, his blade at her throat. But the tip of her own sword hovered a mere breath away from the sweat beading on his neck.





Still mirrored, they rose to their feet, neither willing to lower their weapons. She hadn't won, but she hadn't lost—yet.

Toshimoko was a Kenshinzen, a title she lacked because she'd never bested her master in a formal duel. When the time came for her to claim the championship, Toshimoko had not competed in the tournament, because they both knew he would beat her.

Hotaru forced herself to slow her breath. She was thinking too much, thoughts racing when she needed the calm of no-mind. She gripped the sword's handle more tightly. Her hands were warm, the grip cold and rough. The weight of the metal pulled her in. No, she was the sword.



Toshimoko struck out with a yell, a lunge and stab that she dodged with a quick backpedal. She cast a quick glance around to take stock of their makeshift dueling ground, but it was too dark to fully perceive their surroundings. She brought the sword over her head as they circled each other, waiting for the perfect moment.

*Breathe in, out.* Toshimoko's dark blue eyes betrayed no hint of weakness, but something in his hands trembled as he readied his next strike.

It came like lightning, and this time, she wasn't fast enough to dodge his blow and the strewn-about furniture at the same time. She teetered backward and twisted to catch her fall, but his blade sliced through the fabric of her robe. She prepared to defend her midsection as soon as she replanted her feet, but they were too close now.

She brought her handle up between his two-handed grip, locking their swords together. The razor-edges bore down mere inches from their hands.

There was a weakness in his wrists that she'd never felt before as they struggled, and with a shout she unleashed her strength to push him back. Now he was on the back foot, but they were fighting with live steel. *I don't want to kill him—*

Toshimoko seized upon her doubt and swung once, twice, before bringing his elbow around to catch her in the side of the head.

Her ears rang and her vision swam, but she still held on to her sword, and she used her other arm to prop herself up from the titling ground.

"You won't give up?" he asked.

"No," she breathed, and struggled back to her feet, readying her blade once again.

She forgot the pain of her body, her heart. She felt the give of the tatami through her socks, making herself buoyant, light, preparing to spring.





He was waiting for her to come at him again, to dispel all trace of her fear. She had to be fast, now.

And he was ready. He ducked and dodged, deftly moving out of the way of her wild blows. She overextended herself and lunged past him, tripping on something she couldn't see. The butt of his sword came down hard against her ribs, sending pain shooting up her side and knocking the breath from her lungs. The force sent her to the floor once again, exposed flesh scraping against broken glass.

"You cannot best me, Hotaru. Concede!" he commanded.

She shuddered on her hands and knees, gasping for breath. She found enough for the one word she needed: "*Never!*"

In a last-ditch effort, Hotaru launched herself forward and swung, the tears streaming down her face.

Toshimoko was pinned against the wall, the first few inches of her sword pressed against his neck. A single drop of blood followed the muscle down to his collar bone. His eyes twinkled with a quiet smile.

"You are ready to face your destiny," he declared. Hotaru struggled to catch her breath, her chest rising and falling as her shoulders finally relaxed. Her heart trembled at hearing his conviction. She was ready. She would see this through.

She lowered her sword, and he bowed. Her guard retinue burst into the room, but she remained calm.

"All is well," she reassured them. "Thank you, uncle. For everything."

The door opened with a loud *snap*, and Bayushi Yojiro entered. He usually came to visit her after dinner, not before the midday meal. Then again, there usually weren't three armies camped out on their doorstep. Crane and Phoenix banners waved in the wind, along with the gold-and-blue sashimono of the lord of Golden Valley. It was the only reason she hadn't



immediately jumped to the assumption that Akodo Toturi's death—and her involvement—had finally been found out.

"Is this somehow *your* doing?" he demanded before he even entered the room. It seemed he had no time for the usual pleasantries and no reservations against overtly questioning the honor and intentions of the spouse of the Scorpion Clan Champion. She didn't blame him, really.

Kachiko resisted the urge to smirk and laid down the histories of Toshi Ranbo that





she'd convinced him to lend her from the castle's library. Even if she was being held in solitary confinement for "protection," she could make some productive use of her hours. "No, not this time," she answered, half in teasing and half in confession. She instantly regretted the flippant tone, but it was hard to break old habits.

He took a seat across from her, kneeling on the tatami in the proper *seiza* position. "What reason could the Crane have to threaten Toshi Ranbo like this?" he asked sharply, not disguising the implicit accusation.

"Have you asked Kakita Sukenobu?" The former Crane steward of Toshi Ranbo still lived within the city, although Yojiro had assumed nearly all of his powers and responsibilities since being named Chief Magistrate.

"Yes, and he claims ignorance." His stare was unrelenting.

Kachiko let out a long sigh and met his gaze. The eye contact was uncomfortably intimate. "I can swear to you, on my honor as a humble servant of the Scorpion Clan, that I have not sent word to any samurai of the Crane."

It was the truth, but she couldn't control whether he believed her. If he chose not to, and relayed allegations of her treachery to Shojū, it would mean the Grove for her. She was dancing on the edge of a knife. *This is your own doing*, she reminded herself.

It was said that it took a liar to know a liar, and Yojiro had never been very good at that particular Scorpion talent. Nevertheless, he said nothing more as to her loyalties.

It was her move. "What can I assist you with right now?"

Yojiro shook his head. "Nothing. It is better for you to stay uninvolved. I cannot fulfill my pledge to Shojū if you are discovered."

"Very well." Kachiko turned another page within the book, pretending to read its contents. "Then while I am confined to sit and wait, can you at least tell me if the castle is in a position to withstand a siege?"

Yojiro was no battle-hardened general. He had to rely on the tacticians of the Imperial Legionnaires, who could either be brilliant or barely competent. His silence was not reassuring.

If the Crane had marched to lay siege to the castle, they could be dead tomorrow, or in several months' time. Why had they come, if not to seek revenge for their loss of Kyūden Kakita? But then, why threaten the Scorpion, and not the Lion? Unless the Crane thought the other clans ready to retaliate for the brazen power-play that was Shojū's regency...

That seemed unlikely, with the acting Emerald Champion backing the edict. The left hand and the underhand of the Emperor had their disagreements, but Hotaru had never been their enemy. It wasn't the Scorpion's fault that the Crane Clan couldn't honor its usual level of commitments to the rest of the Empire when its rice stores ran low. Neither was it Hotaru's fault, no matter what Satsume would have said. *He deserves to be dead*. The timing, she admitted, was inopportune.





No, there was another reason why the Crane could be advancing north instead of south.  
“Yojiro-san, I believe the Crane forces may want to winter at Toshi Ranbo instead of at Kyūden Doji.”

“What? Why?” His confusion was plain.

She got up to stand close to the barred window. “Because the Champion of the Crane Clan sees those palaces as a prison.”

The banners of the gathered forces rose and fell like waves in the wind.

“How would you know that, Kachiko-sama?” Yojiro stood up to join her.

Quietly, she said, “Once upon a time, I got to know her very well while we were enjoying Mantis hospitality together.” She still remembered their first kiss atop the keep in the snowstorm.

They watched from her tower as a contingent bearing the banners of the Tsume family of Kyotei Castle approached the gates. The guards ushered them in.

*Strange that they have brought rōnin mercenaries among their number...*

*Unless...* She marked the height of one of the rōnin against the size of the gates, watched the way the figure reached to ensure their *daishō* was securely fastened, how the figure held back from the group to take a second glance at the castle’s defenses.

*It would be just like Hotaru to...*

“Yojiro-san, please, you must allow me attend your reception of the Kyotei delegation. I can be of help.”

“What? No, it is out of the question.” He looked at her a moment, his brows furrowing.  
“Why?”

Sometimes, the simple truth could be just as devastating and as persuasive as the most meticulously crafted lie. “Because it is possible the Champion of the Crane Clan is paying you a visit.”

Yojiro’s eyes went wide.

