

Behind the Empty Throne

By Mari Murdock

Bayushi Shoji found himself once more before the Great Dais. The tiniest specks of dust lay on the Chrysanthemum Throne, its maintenance forgotten in the haste of funeral preparations—an ashen tribute to the absence of Jodan, Son of Heaven, thirty-eighth Hantei Emperor, now ascended to Tengoku's celestial realm.

He touched the armrest of the throne, half hoping to feel the calm, wise spirit of his old friend resting there. It was lifeless.

Farewell, Jodan, Son of Heaven, friend of the Scorpion. You have given everything to serve Rokugan, and I shall continue to sacrifice for it.

But Shoji's next sacrifice would be his wife.

Kachiko's treason burned in his mind like a canker. He had always allowed her to do as she pleased. He had trusted in her skill, her insight, her command over others—even in her careful dalliance with Hotaru.

Theirs had not been a marriage of love, convenience, or station. Theirs had been a marriage of power. He, a ferocious strategic mastermind, and she, a brilliant political architect. As the two most formidable Scorpion born in the last generation, they had been joined by their clan in the hope that their combined strength would raise the Scorpion like a hidden wave to its apex in the Empire. She had become the Emperor's advisor. He had become the Emperor's choice for Imperial regent. Together, they were supposed to champion the Scorpion Clan's role as the Underhand to the Emperor, to act in the shadows to preserve the honor of Heaven, to rid the Empire of unseen enemies, to protect the Hantei dynasty from behind the Chrysanthemum Throne...

But now the throne sat empty. Jodan had prepared for that eventuality *with* Shoji, but Kachiko had acted rashly, forsaking all that they, *together*, had accomplished.

I underestimated her ambition.

He traced the tapestry of her impressive career in his mind. Her alliances, her triumphs at court, her relationship with the Emperor himself. She had even surrounded herself with those who recklessly followed her, blind to her mistakes, lost in their love of her, like Aramoro. All of it fed her thirst for independent dominion, eventually exceeding her sense of duty.

Could I have foreseen the unwise paths she would take?

His reverie dredged up a memory of many years ago, when he and Kachiko had been first married, before either of them had a fixed place at court. Aramoro had presented a newly widowed Yogo Asami to the Scorpion Clan Champion, a woman near perfect in likeness to Kachiko's beauty and trained in the Shosuro school of impersonation. Aramoro argued that



Asami's similarities to Lady Kachiko would be an invaluable tool for their clan. Despite his suspicions of his brother's motives, Shoji had accepted Aramoro's scheme on behalf of the Scorpion, knowing a body double would provide Kachiko added influence and capability in the weave of court intrigue. His wife had politely thanked her brother-in-law for the strategic boon, but her eyes had flashed with aspiring fire upon seeing the girl. With a small smile stretching from deep inside a selfish part of her soul, she had said, "With this gift, Aramoro-san, you give me the freedom to do what I will."



Her words now haunted Shoji, and he could feel his frown pucker up against the lacquered wood of his mempo. She should have said "to do Heaven's will." In the moment, so long ago, he had mistakenly interpreted her words to imply her intentions toward the Scorpion, Rokugan, and her duty. He had not suspected she longed only for autonomy.

Now, for her treason, their clan had forgotten its purpose.

And for that, Shoji must punish her.

"Good morning, Bayushi-sama," a strong voice called from behind him. Shoji exhaled the bitter regrets and turned to face Agasha Sumiko, the one who would make him regent.

The acting Emerald Champion still wore her Ruby Champion's ceremonial armor, though some Otomo had tied a green stone chrysanthemum amulet of rank about her neck to signify her hasty promotion. A nervous twinge rested in her bottom lip, yet her eyes were sharp with the clarity of her duty despite its literal weight around her neck. She bowed deeply, and he returned her greeting.

Sumiko held out a scroll toward him with a firm hand. The edict. "The Imperial scribes have confirmed that this was written in Toturi's calligraphy," she reported, "and it had indeed been officially sealed by the Emperor himself. Thus, I can legally deliver it at court as the late Emperor's last wishes."

She hesitated ever so slightly, waiting for him to take the scroll, but he remained still, dark eyes locked on hers. He knew Sumiko well, having studied her personality and potential long before she had risen to her own position of power, but this accidental turn of events shifted everything. If his own wife had erred, anyone was likely to change their ways. He waited, letting her make another move, watching her body language for clues into her mind. He would not act until he knew where they stood.



His silence unnerved her, and her eyes narrowed a fraction. She shifted her weight back, settling into a defensive stance, and she tucked the edict into her sleeve.

“Unfortunately,” she continued, powering through the awkwardness though it increased the worried creases around her mouth, “the Seppun have acknowledged Akodo Toturi-sama’s disappearance and likewise insist that Prince Daisetsu is nowhere to be found.” She paused, but when he said nothing, she lifted her chin petulantly. “I had hoped that you, as future regent and husband to the Emperor’s advisor, would have an explanation for what is happening.”

“Is that an accusation of me or my wife?” he countered, his disciplined voice void of emotion.

Sumiko steeled her face, propriety masking her blatant suspicion, though her eyes grew cold. “No,” she said. “However, as acting Emerald Champion on Toturi-sama’s behalf, I must know all that you know.”

Shoju tucked his arms into his sleeves. She had keen senses, but he could not let her mistrust thrive. He needed the Ruby Champion on his side if he was to perform the role Jodan required of him now. With a hidden sneer, he adopted his wife’s diplomatic craft.

Truth forms no alliances. All bridges are artifice.

“Lady Kachiko has been preoccupied with overseeing the purification of the late Emperor’s body and his funeral preparations, so she knows almost nothing of the disappearances. She did see the lady Kaede leave the Harvest Moon gathering early, as if ill, but Seppun Ishikawa reported he found the Emerald Champion suites vacant, both of guard and occupant. He can only guess that Toturi-sama and his wife left the city. Untimely, perhaps, but not illegal.”

Anger rumbled in his heart at the thought of Toturi’s disappearance. It had the slight shadow of Kachiko’s involvement. His disappearance—perhaps even demise—only lengthened the list of her indiscretions. Toturi was a loyal and sensible servant of the Emperor, focused on the honor of the approach just as much as the honor of the outcome. Those simple Lion principles made him easy to predict and therefore trust for Shoju’s planning. He would need to approach Sumiko with a different strategy.

But Sumiko’s face remained smooth, her opinion almost unreadable, though her voice dipped slightly, as if annoyed. “It is, of course, his right as Emerald Champion to go where and when he pleases. But given the circumstances, I find it surprising that Toturi-sama would choose to be anywhere but here. He should be the one to present the Emperor’s final edict and declare the new heir.”

Shoju dared to extend a hand of sympathy. “It is fortunate, then, that Toturi-sama has such an accomplished second who can assume his duties in these difficult times.”

The Ruby Champion lifted her chin again in defiance. She did not yet accept him as Imperial regent. Perhaps she even suspected him of being involved in the disappearances, despite the contents of the edict.



"On the subject of the prince," Shoji continued, "several guards reported last seeing Prince Daisetsu in the company of Iuchi Shahai. In their search, they found a smashed meishōdō trinket in a tea room frequently used by the princes."

The Ruby Champion shook her head. "A fallen emperor, a missing prince and Emerald Champion, rumors of meishōdō... The declaration of the Imperial edict will only add to the chaos."

Shoji nodded. "Shrewd observation. What do you propose we do?"

Sumiko's balance shifted, her stance tilting into an offensive pose. An odd attitude, unless she already had a clear course of action. Shoji did not sink into defense. Instead, he withdrew his hands from his sleeves, fingers balled into fists.

"You have already taken measures, then," he said.

"Yes," the Ruby Champion said, the green chrysanthemum at her throat gleaming. "I have ordered the Army of the Rising Wave to enter the city to keep the peace and protect the palace."

Shoji almost growled. He knew that the approaching Dragon army had snuck closer to the Imperial capital, a tiger stalking between herds of cattle, but he had no idea Sumiko would be so bold as to invite them directly into the Forbidden City. A daring move for a leader whose promotion was only a few hours old.

This Dragon is flexing her new Emerald claws. Does she truly suspect my involvement? Is her army a show of force against an alleged Scorpion insurgence?

But Shoji drew back his temper, studying the Ruby Champion's bold jaw and clear eyes. Sumiko was no Lion, deploying legions with wild fury to defend against a perceived dishonor. She accused no one, yet she did not discard distrust of the Scorpion. She was merely testing the waters, baring her teeth while doing so. In that move, he could see the fine lines of her principles emerge.

She is cautious but not hesitant. She favors fairness, stability, and order. Those are easy states to conjure, but her wariness of the Scorpion requires soothing.

"Do you disapprove of the Dragon taking command of the city?" Sumiko's sharp gaze attempted to study him behind his mempō, the news of her martial confrontation prodding him to garner a response. Shoji took a step toward the throne, feigning a symbolic retreat in the face of her military advance. She took her own step forward.

A Dragon's compulsive need for balance. Her actions meted out to match my own. Dependence, then, in the place of trust. If we appear to need her, then she shall act to meet our needs. And if she in turn needs us...

"Your actions were insightful, Champion," Shoji said, tucking his arms behind his back in a sign of casual approval of her actions. "The Army of the Rising Wave will surely keep the peace should matters become difficult. However, tell your forces that in their new posts, they should expect nothing less than war."

Surprise quivered across Sumiko's face, and her bold composure collapsed.

Instability breeds reliance.



"War?" she gasped. "Why would you think that?"

He smiled at her naïveté but refrained from striking at her weakness.

And thus, we build our bridge, Sumiko.

"War is the inevitable end that always looms before us, Champion," he answered. "As an Empire built upon the strength of its samurai, friction between Rokugan's Great Clans has been building for some time. That is why the Emperor, in his wisdom, set things in motion that would further prevent it after his death—at least for another generation." He nodded at the edict in her sleeve, and she subconsciously gripped it with an anxious hand. "Our role as his servants is to live by the guidance of Heaven's wisdom. Together, we must mete out Celestial intent."

She turned from him to stare at the Emerald Throne. Doubt still creased her mouth, but her duty called her to act in the name of her Emperor, the Emperor who asked that the Emerald Champion sustain Shoji.

"Yes," she mumbled almost to herself. "The late Emperor was wise in his Heavenly calling. Above the reproach of mortals."

Sumiko regained her composure, squaring her shoulders to stand taller than Shoji.

"Then, as acting Emerald Champion in Akodo Toturi's absence," she said, turning her clear eyes back to Shoji, "I shall support your regency in honor of the Emperor's final wishes and obedience to the legitimacy of his decree. The Army of the Rising Wave is at your disposal." She bowed again, confirming her words with the obeisance of her body.

Her action for my need. Balance and order.

"I thank you for your support, Champion. I trust you to help me protect the throne until Prince Daisetsu can take his rightful place upon it. Tomorrow, after the edict's delivery at court, we will need to garner the support of the other Great Clans. I intend to start with the Crab.



My first command as regent will be to give them control of the jade mines in Toshi Ranbo to support their fight against the Shadowlands. This should show the emissaries in the Imperial Court that we intend to maintain Rokugan as the Emperor would have done."

"I shall see to its legal transfer tonight as I organize the edict's delivery at court tomorrow," Sumiko replied. "Should Prince Sotorii publicly abdicate his claim upon the throne tomorrow as well?"



"I see no need in the middle of mourning the loss of his father. The edict should be sufficient. Before his untimely death, the late Emperor intended to accompany Prince Sotorii to the Monastery Among the Winds, and his death shall not change those plans. The prince will continue his mourning period there, departing within the week in the care of the Seppun Honor Guard."

Sumiko shifted her weight again, offensively.

Another weakness she must strengthen.

"You have a reservation?"

The Ruby Champion respectfully averted her gaze down from his to deliver her disagreement. "The Seppun Honor Guard is not enough of an escort. I intend no dishonor to Seppun Ishikawa, but the disappearances of the Emerald Champion and the heir to the throne speak to the complete failure of Imperial guards. We must protect Prince Sotorii with all diligence."

Shoju nodded at her foresight. "Then I depend on you, as acting Emerald Champion, to see that the prince is protected sufficiently. Do as you see fit."

Sumiko bowed in understanding. "And Prince Daisetsu?"

Shoju smiled at her thoroughness. "The Seppun have yet to question the Unicorn ambassadors about Shahai's possible involvement in his disappearance, but the meishōdō trinket has already been sent to Seppun Masayo for examination. I have commanded Bayushi Yunako of my Elite Guard to search for the prince. She leaves within the hour."

Concern returned to the Ruby Champion's face. Shoju nodded to her, having anticipated it.

"Might I suggest another addition to the search party?" Sumiko offered. "Such an endeavor is not one that could be achieved alone, and she may find a different family name can open doors that would otherwise be closed to her."

She intended to have a hand in every affair, a Dragon for every Scorpion influence. He admired her extreme caution and her loyalty to her clan.

A good replacement for Toturi as an ally.

"You believe I should send someone else to accompany her? A Dragon, perhaps?"

Sumiko's brow furrowed, ever slightly. "I believe she may need the assistance of someone whose honor and reputation cannot be questioned. Magistrate Kitsuki Yuikimi has recently arrived at the capital to assist the Dragon ambassador, but has not yet begun her new duties."

Shoju smiled. "Magistrate Kitsuki Yuikimi's assistance would be most valuable in finding Prince Daisetsu's whereabouts. Please, ask her to accompany Yunako."

Sumiko once again bowed in gratitude and acknowledgment of her new task. "I am glad that we have agreed upon a course of action in this difficult time, Shoju-san."

"Yes, your cooperation is commendable, Champion," he replied, bowing to her in sincere respect. "Your prudence and devotion to your station place the throne in secure hands. I look forward to our collaboration in the affairs of the Empire. Until tomorrow then."

"Until the court assembly tomorrow." Sumiko bowed and exited the room, hand on her katana.



Shoju turned back to the throne.

You make a wise and trustworthy ally, Sumiko. Dedicated to your duty. If only Kachiko had been so.

The rosewood throne glowed almost crimson in the light of a setting sun. Tomorrow's declaration would make it his rightful place as Imperial regent—a Scorpion openly leading the Empire. They should have remained behind it, in the shadows as their duty demanded. Yet to leave the Empire absent leadership would be far worse. He touched the armrest once more. This time, the wood felt warm. Shoju turned away from the omen and left the room, carefully shutting the door behind him.

The chilly morning deterred no one as the throne room pulsed in turbulent anticipation. Every courtier, magistrate, official, scribe, steward, attendant, and yōjimbō who could fit within the gold-papered walls of the throne room thronged inside to hear the edict concerning the late Emperor's wishes for succession. Not a voice dared stir the reverence of the occasion, and every face donned the tranquility of dutiful respect, though the tremors of frenzied energy still leaked through the seams of courtly composure. Flitting eyes and shivering lips simmered through the sea of people before Shoju as he entered the room. His spies had already reported to him every shred of gossip concerning the Emperor's death, Toturi's absence, Scorpion involvement, and the princes. No one had guessed the exact truth. Yet.

Yogo Asami had already assumed Kachiko's role, sitting in her chair at the Emperor's left. She wore Kachiko's scarlet and white mourning kimono, a somber yet dignified air perfecting the illusion of her impersonation. Asami nodded a polite acknowledgement of his presence, as his wife would have done if she had been permitted to attend. Shoju greeted her with a blunt nod. She would serve sufficiently in Kachiko's absence.

Did the Emperor not tell Kachiko of the edict because he believed so wholly in our unity as a couple? How ironic that I did not tell her because I did not worry about her involvement in the plan. I shall not make that mistake again.

She had left Otsan Uchi the day before, bound for Toshi Ranbo in the company of the Bayushi Elite Guard. He had instructed Chief Magistrate Bayushi Yojiro on the conditions of her stay: conditions that would prevent her from undermining Shoju's duty any further.

A greying Otomo herald called for the opening of the court assembly, and Agasha Sumiko, acting Emerald Champion, took her place upon the Great Dais, standing directly before the Imperial throne. She still wore her Ruby Champion's armor, though the emerald chrysanthemum about her neck appeared lighter than it had before. She scanned the assembly with confident eyes, the edict tightly in her fist. With all attention on her, she nodded to the herald. The Otomo winced almost imperceptibly before turning his gaze in Shoju's direction. He bowed deeply before speaking.



“On behalf of the Emperor, the acting Emerald Champion invites the Scorpion Clan Champion, Bayushi Shoji, to take his place upon the Great Dais at her side.”

A wave of half-stifled gasps and snorts echoed through the throne room as Shoji stepped up onto the dais. He bowed to Sumiko before standing to her right to face the assembly. Kakita Yoshi’s silver fan slid open before him as he watched Shoji ascend the dais, and Miya Satoshi’s eyes narrowed with the faintest hint of a sneer. Ikoma Ujiaki even dared a hissing whisper to his companion Eiji, whose eyes filled with a confused rage. However, as Sumiko lifted the edict scroll, the disturbance flickered out, leaving only the smoke of disapproval staining the faces of all in attendance. Shoji glared at the masses as a sheepish guilt spread throughout the throng.



They know they should not publicly defy the wishes of the Emperor. May Heaven and the Fortunes help me quell all their secret rebellions.

Sumiko opened the scroll. The celestial intent was made bare.

“An edict...” she read with a strong, steady voice. Shoji closed his eyes.

I do this for you, Jodan. And for Rokugan.

“...from His August Imperial Majesty, Hantei XXXVIII...”

