

We Strike First

By Lisa Farrell

A time to wait, a time to strike, a time to run.

– Hare Clan saying

The monk from the Eternal Patience Monastery sat so still, wrinkled hands resting upturned on her knees, that she might have been dead. Usagi Tsukiko, *daimyō* and champion of the Hare, knelt at the opposite side of the room, waiting. Tsukiko watched all the young samurai between them for signs of weakness—a shaking of limbs or shortness of breath. The *bushi* knelt silent and still in their places, and Tsukiko was pleased. They were only waiting for the last of their number to arrive; then, they could feast to celebrate their *gempuku*—their coming of age.

It was Asao, Tsukiko's own son, who was late to the feast. She feared that his determination to succeed would keep him in the woods until the sun sank and he had to stumble home in the dark. Of course she would be proud if he returned like Usagi Shun had, with a hare hanging from each fist, still kicking. Yet she accepted that he would not.

At last, a figure shuffled quietly into the room and took his place, the closest to his mother. Tsukiko glanced to the door, where a servant waited empty-handed. No kill for Asao, then.

The monk clapped four times and began her whispered prayer. Her words were hushed, her voice like the hiss of a breeze through long grasses. She raised her hands as servants placed a covered dish before each waiting samurai. Then she stopped, smiled, and picked up her red-tipped chopsticks.

Servants lifted the lids, and the young samurai were served their first meal of flesh.

"Eat," Tsukiko told them. "And be proud to take these hare spirits into your own. You are samurai now, and through you, these small souls may achieve a greater destiny. Let them become part of you, blessed and purified as they are."

The new samurai began their meal in silence, but Tsukiko made a point of talking to her son as she ate, to let the others know that such was allowed.

"You have not failed," she told him. "That you are at the feast shows you have passed your *gempuku*, and you should celebrate."

"I caught nothing," he said.

"So you have learned the lesson, that by being fast and wary, hares are hard to catch."

"But if I'd had my bow..."

"Any samurai can shoot a hare with a bow, any peasant can trap one, any child can chase one down with dogs. To catch one with your bare hands—that is something only Hare hunters can do."

"Except I can't."

"And that is why Usagi Shun is my heir, and you are merely my son."

There was no room in her clan for excuses, when there was always another samurai ready to succeed where one failed. When Shun had brought two hares home on her gempuku, Tsukiko had named Shun her *yōjimbō* at once, and her heir soon after.

"Usagi-ue," her son asked her, after swallowing some of the meat. "How did Shun-sama catch those hares with her bare hands?"

"Why, she knew when to wait, when to strike, and when to run," Tsukiko said. "As all of us must learn." She raised her voice, so the whole room could hear. "And when do we strike?"

"We strike first!" the young samurai chorused.

Tsukiko would have made a speech, but a servant appeared at her shoulder and whispered in her ear. Shun had returned from Maemikake at last. Tsukiko excused herself immediately, feeling the monk's eyes on her as she departed.

Usagi Tsukiko returned to her room to find Usagi Shun waiting for her, still in her muddled traveling clothes. The young bushi bowed deeply.

"What news?" Tsukiko asked.

Shun glanced up, a glint of humor in her eyes, and Tsukiko realized she had let her impatience show. There was no shame in that. She had waited long enough; Shun had been gone almost a month.

"The Crab have been forced to call upon local lords to reinforce their troops on the Wall," Shun said. "This leaves many minor lords unable to spare bushi to protect the villages in their domains."

"So their territory is vulnerable," Tsukiko said. "That could be a terrible temptation for other clans."

"A great temptation," Shun agreed, "though the Great Clans have larger concerns at the capital."

"Everything remains unsettled?"

"The regent struggles against political opposition that claims his position is illegitimate. Skirmishes among the Osari Plains have escalated with so many magistrates attempting to maintain order in the capital, but the Great Clans fight among themselves. Any troubles this far from Otosan Uchi are beneath their notice for the moment."

Tsukiko allowed herself a smile. She had waited for so long.

"And what of the rumors I asked you to look into?" she asked.

"I only heard one rumor regarding Bramble Thorn Village," Shun said. "A *mahō-tsukai* escaped Maemikake and fled in that direction, but that was several years ago. Kuni Witch Hunters eventually found a twisted corpse they believed to be their quarry, who had succumbed to the perils of his own dark arts."

Anywhere as large and busy as Maemikake was full of empty rumors, obsolete news, and groundless fears. This wasn't quite the rumor Tsukiko had been hoping for, but it would do.

"The Witch Hunters lack our patience," she said. "They think the matter resolved, as it suits them to think so. Who's to say if that body was mahō-tsukai or victim? You have done well to bring this rumor to my attention. We must look into it."

"Are you concerned there might yet be a mahō-tsukai in the village?" Shun asked. "The rumor is old..."

"I am concerned," Tsukiko said, "that with the Crab always so focused on their Wall, they neglect threats within the Empire. We have a duty to help them drive out evil, by investigating rumors just like this one. We must find out if there is any truth in it."

"Of course, my lord. I will prepare to leave at once."

"It is late, and the gempuku feast is underway. We will leave tomorrow, together, after a night's comfort. I wish to see this village for myself."



They set off early the next day with a single *guntai* squad on horseback, the fresh samurai joking they could go faster on foot. The horses were for show; the beasts raised the samurai above villagers in more ways than one.

Shun rode on one side of her, in patient silence. Asao, whose red eyes betrayed the sake he had drunk the night before, rode on the other. He asked many questions: Why did she give credence to this rumor? Why seek trouble outside of their borders? Wouldn't the Kuni deal with any threats out there? Would the Hiruma accept their assistance?

Tsukiko tried to answer him, but what could she say? That there was a time to wait, but this was not it: she could not afford to wait. That there were more mouths to feed every year. That she was still the swiftest, but her hair was greying and she didn't know how long it would be before Shun outpaced her, before people said the champion was fast *for her age*. That this might be her last chance to lead her clan to victory, to increase its territory, to earn the glory her potential had promised when she caught her own hares at her gempuku. That she was tired of waiting, and the time had come to strike.

She could not tell her son these things, and so she spoke of duty. That was something he could understand.

Bramble Thorn Village lived up to its name. The road approaching soon became a narrow, overgrown trail. Tsukiko feared the sharp undergrowth might tear the hides of the horses as they passed. She sent Asao and Shun ahead on foot to cut them back, and to scout the way.

They returned with confirmation that the village was unprotected. *So like the Crab, to send all their warriors to their Wall and forget that there might be enemies at home—that evil could strike anywhere.*

They rode single file along the winding path, which opened onto a sunny valley. Villagers stood knee-deep in the murky water of the rice paddies, pausing in their work as they heard the horses. The peasants bowed as the samurai rode by.

The village itself was large, with two *kura* for storage that Tsukiko intended to inspect as soon as she could. The houses seemed in good repair, well thatched. She heard the cluck of chickens somewhere near.

As they rode past the first houses, a young man came hurrying to receive them.

“Greetings, samurai!” he called, bowing low before them. “I am Jun, the leader here. How may we serve you?”

Tsukiko put up a hand and the riders stopped as one.

“It is we who are here to serve you,” she said. “I am daimyō of the Usagi. We have heard there may be evil hiding in your midst—a practitioner of blood magic. We have come to find and remove that evil.”

Trembling, the village leader prostrated himself on the ground.

“Whatever we can do to help you, we will do! But please, spare the village and its people.”

It was bold of him to beg, but why did he think his village was in danger? He may have heard that whole villages were burned to purge them, but that was not the way of the Hare.

Tsukiko dismounted and bade the leader rise. Jun was very young for one in such a position. He had a delicate face, clear healthy skin, and broad muscular shoulders from working in the fields. Another sign the village was prosperous.

“We will stay and wait,” Tsukiko said. “Evil cannot hide its face for long.”

“Thank you, honored daimyō,” Jun said, a look of wonder and gratitude on his face as though she had just spared his life. “We have rice for you and your samurai, and we can tend to your horses.”

Villagers hurried to take the horses as the samurai dismounted. Tsukiko had her party search the village before accepting a meal, however, looking everywhere for signs of *mahō*. It was the sacred duty of her clan to remain vigilant, and even the new samurai knew well what to look for, what questions to ask. They would have the villagers raise their arms and would check their limbs for cuts. They would carefully examine any scrolls or books they found. Then, after dark, they would watch the village and its surroundings in shifts, in case any foul, undead thing rose to disturb the night.

While her samurai sought mahō, Tsukiko surveyed the village for other purposes. She walked around the perimeter and inspected the fields. She counted the chickens and peered into the storehouses. She also found a suitable place for her samurai to make camp, though Jun gave her the use of his own house. It was there that Shun found her, alone.

"No signs of mahō, that I can find," Shun said. "Perhaps there was nothing to the rumor after all. My apologies. I fear I have wasted your time with this journey."

"Not at all," Tsukiko said. "Better to be sure, and we are ever vigilant."

Shun smiled. "And they have stores here to feed a village three times this size."

It was true: the village was thriving. The storehouses were full, the fields and orchard fruitful, yet their rice tax had not been increased for years. Jun had admitted that villagers often took surplus to the markets in Maemikake, but there had been no strangers in the village for some time. There was no evidence of mahō here, but that did not mean the visit was a waste.

They were in the village three days before a Hiruma patrol came to challenge them. Perhaps a villager had been sent as messenger and the Hare were not as welcome as they thought, or maybe the Hiruma were more suspicious than she gave them credit for.

"I am Hiruma Kenzou," announced the *gunsō*, sitting fully armored upon his horse. "This village is Hiruma territory. Who seeks to occupy it?"

"We are friends, Hiruma-san," Tsukiko said, coming forward on foot to meet him. He did not dismount, but removed his mask and peered down at her. She kept her eyes on him as she bowed. "I am Usagi Tsukiko, daimyō and champion of the Hare, and I am here to root out the evil of mahō."

"Explain yourself, Usagi-ue," he barked, still looking down at her. "Why do you seek mahō here?"

"I heard rumor that a practitioner escaped a Witch Hunter in Maemikake and was never found. That a mahō-tsukai came this way and may have even settled here."

"What rumor is this? I heard no such rumor," the Hiruma said. "And since when does a rumor warrant an occupation?"

"I must maintain control of this village only until I can be sure it is purged of any evil, of any danger to the Empire. You know we Hare take our roles as watchers very seriously. What the Kuni hunters miss, we take the time to find."

"And if there is nothing to find?"

In a sudden, unforeseen moment, a chicken burst out from between two houses and darted across the path between her samurai and the Hiruma. One raw Crab recruit reached for his weapon.

Shun leapt between him and Tsukiko, and in a flick drew her sword and pierced one of the Crab's exposed eyes, spraying blood.



For a moment, no one moved but the dead man, who collapsed with a clatter to the ground. Then, the Hiruma gunsō replaced his mask. It was too late to find another way.

“Strike first!” Tsukiko shouted, drawing her sword and leaping at the gunsō. She landed behind him on the horse and drove her blade up under his armpit before pushing him to the ground. Her samurai fought around her, and she heard Shun’s familiar grunts and cries as one mounted samurai after another fell. With Shun at her side, Tsukiko felt

protected, invincible. She kicked backward, arcing her leg to jab her foot up into the face of the Crab behind her. She heard the crunch of his skull even through his helmet, and he crumpled, sliding from his horse.

The horse beneath her lost its nerve and bolted, throwing her unprepared into the fray. She lost her balance for a moment, narrowly dodging a hammer blow that nearly crushed her. Then Shun was there, preventing the enemy from surrounding them, and more Hiruma fell. The Hare would win; she could taste the victory already. As Tsukiko leapt toward the last Crab rider, who turned in an attempt to flee, a sudden force and sharp pain in the back of her thigh sent her sprawling in the dirt.

Shun carried her into the shade of the village leader’s house. Jun was there, cowering in the darkness beyond the doorway. Tsukiko saw his eyes bright in the dark, heard Shun demand he find something to bind the wound.

“We have to stop the bleeding,” Shun said, as something tightened around Tsukiko’s thigh and ignited the pain. Tsukiko gasped a breath, but made no other sound. The pain would not beat her; she was strong.

Shun looked into her eyes. “You will live, Tsukiko-ue,” she whispered. “You will live.”

“But will I run?” Tsukiko asked, already knowing the answer. She might walk again, if she was lucky, but she had been robbed of her speed.

Shun only hesitated a moment. “You will run,” she said. “We will find a shugenja to heal you, or a skilled artisan to replace the limb if we must.”

“And how long will that take? I cannot stop now; we have the village...”

She wanted more, not just for herself but for the Hare. This small victory was not enough:

They needed to consolidate their position before the Hiruma patrol was missed, summon more bushi, and press on.

Her sword, the sword of the Hare champion, was still in her hand. A Kaiu blade, gifted to the clan's founder and passed from one champion to the next. She lifted it toward Shun, loosening her grip.

"Take this," she said. "And take command. Whatever happens to me, the Hare must have a worthy champion. Congratulate our warriors and prepare them. This will be the first of many victories. It is time now to strike."

Shun nodded, taking the sword reverently in her hands.

"Watch her," Shun called to Jun, and she left to do her daimyō's bidding.

Tsukiko lay in the darkness with pain like a fog in her mind, preventing her from thinking, leaving only raw feeling and a deep, dark regret.

The soft features of Jun's face appeared before her in the flickering gloom of the peasant house. He stared down at her, as though he were examining the thoughts inside her skull. She lay rigid, gritting her teeth against the pain.

"I can help you," he said. "If you'll let me."

"No one can help me now," she said. "Not in time. Shun must lead."

His face loomed closer. Never had Tsukiko felt so helpless, so humiliated.

"I can help you," he said, a strange sort of smile passing over his lips. "This is a serious wound, a terrible setback. If you'll let me, I can take the pain away, and make you stronger even than you were before."

She did not ask how; she did not care. She only knew she had lost her last chance to lead her clan to greatness, and she could not live the rest of her life mourning what she might have achieved.

"Do it," she spat.

He wore a definite smile now, wide and thin across his face like a slit. He muttered words she did not know, and she thought of the monk whispering prayers and how this felt entirely, horribly, different. His voice seemed to thicken the air, his words like a cloud of insects, a buzzing in numbed ears, irritating and oppressive.

The pain sharpened, intensified, flared in the darkness. She gasped out a loud cry, but then the pain was gone. One moment, pain had consumed her body; the next, she felt calm, strong, and whole.

Tsukiko rose to her feet, and the village leader grinned at her from the ground, where he lay bleeding from his own thigh. She stepped away from his pooling blood. Jun hissed at her through his teeth.

"Now," he said, "know this: the *kansen* don't forget. If I whisper my desire, or I die, they return your wound to you, and more. Do what you like to keep the Crab away, but do not allow your samurai to interfere in my affairs. Or you will regret it."

Before she could answer, Shun returned, wearing the sword as though it belonged to her.

“Usagi-ue, are you...”

“It is not as bad as it first seemed,” Tsukiko said, cutting her off.

Shun said nothing, only looked from her daimyō to the wounded peasant on the floor, who cackled softly to himself.

“Return my sword,” Tsukiko said. Shun stared at her as though etiquette no longer applied, as though she were nothing but a monster to be assessed and dealt with.

Tsukiko stood firm, confident she hid her fear well. Shun’s loyalty was absolute, but mahō was the very thing she had been raised to purge. Shun reached for the sword slowly, her hand coming to rest along its shadowed hilt. Tsukiko waited to see which end would be offered.

Shun hesitated, then spun on her heels and ran from the hut. She had always been the perfect student, had always known when to run.

Asao was not perfect, but he was obedient. Perhaps he would make a suitable heir after all.

