

By the Stroke of a Brush

By Lisa Farrell

Hour of the Rooster—The Gardens outside the Crane Guesthouse

Kuwanan had argued with Hotaru before—they had argued since he was old enough to speak—but he still hated it when she was proven right. Since he had arrived in Ootosan Uchi, every unfruitful interview and investigative dead end had brought her words back to him.

The Fortunes may very well have decreed it was his time to return to the Karmic Wheel.

It could not be true. His father was a great man; the Emerald Champion's time could not simply *end*. It made no sense; there had to be a reason, a culprit.

His sandals echoed hollowly on the path beneath him, the *yoriki* beside him spoke empty words of flattery and sympathy, and no revelations were forthcoming.

"The evening grows cool," Kuwanan interjected, as the man paused for breath.

"It does, my lord." The man had introduced himself as Kitsuki Kāgi, but there was nothing of the Kitsuki about him. Kuwanan was sure Kāgi would only notice clues he was specifically ordered to find. "Shall we take this path?" Kāgi suggested. "I believe we can reach the guesthouse without interrupting the preparations for the recital."

"Thank you, Kāgi-san," Kuwanan said, all politeness. Then he fell silent. It was better to say nothing when there was nothing to be said. He had found that silence might invite answers to surface more readily than questions.

"It has been an honor to accompany you today," Kāgi said. Perhaps there really was nothing of note to be had from the magistrate. "I served your father humbly for many years and held him in great esteem. No matter that sometimes relations between our clans were somewhat—frayed. There was a mutual respect between us."

"Pardon the question," Kuwanan said, "but you do not speak of the Dragon."

"No. I was Matsu before I was Kitsuki."

So that was why Akodo Toturi sent Kāgi to aid him—he was doubly loyal to the new Emerald Champion. Every question Kuwanan asked would be relayed to the Lion. Perhaps Kāgi had even worked to foil his investigation.

"It was kind of the Emerald Champion to send his chief *yoriki* to allay my concerns," Kuwanan said, intending to dismiss Kāgi as quickly as possible. "But since he has not seen fit to reopen the investigation, there seems little left to discuss."

No response; the *yoriki* remained silent. Kuwanan glanced at the man, who walked with his hands hidden in his sleeves, eyes focused on the reddening sky.



“The Emerald Champion simply feels the matter was sufficiently dealt with by the Ruby Champion,” Kāgi said at last. “Agasha Sumiko commissioned a second investigation into your father’s death. His correspondence and records were again investigated. Nothing untoward was found.”

“I would like to see these records for myself.”

“Then I shall appeal to my lord champion on your behalf, since they have passed to his safekeeping in the Palace of the Emerald Champion.”

Kuwanan repressed a sigh. He would have to return there, of course. It would feel like taking a step back, but if there was nothing to learn here, then there was no reason to stay.

“Although, I suppose some of his more personal effects might still be held in the Crane Guesthouse,” Kāgi said.

Of course. Kuwanan had the restraint not to run, but he quickened his pace toward the guesthouse, not caring if he outpaced Kāgi, who hesitated briefly before deigning to match his steps.

To think that evidence may have lain so close to where he slept, while he travelled the capital every waking moment seeking answers from servants and courtiers, neglecting to look closer to home...

The circuitous path finally took them to the main entrance of the guesthouse. A statue of the original Hantei with his sister Doji stood outside, their gaze passing serenely over them. Kuwanan paused. This was something he wished to do alone.

“You have been most helpful,” he said. “I think we have learned all we can today.”

It was meant as a polite dismissal, but Kāgi hesitated.

“Perhaps, as his heir, your sister should be the one to sort through your father’s documents,” he suggested.

“She has had ample time.” Kuwanan offered a polite bow, which Kāgi bested at once with a lower one.

“It has been a pleasure to offer my humble assistance,” Kāgi said, and finally withdrew.

Kuwanan could have hurried inside, but instead he paused, raising his eyes to the statue. Up close, there was a sternness to the set of Hantei’s mouth, as though he disapproved of something. Leaders had to make hard decisions, take actions they would rather avoid. The Kami had fought his own kin, defeated his own father, because he knew it was the right thing to do, it was his duty. Did Hotaru truly believe she acted out of duty, that she did the right thing?

Yet, what was true for the Kami was not true for mortals, who lived to serve. Even clan champions must respect their elders, their superiors, their fathers. To do anything else threatened the Celestial Order—the Will of Heaven. It was not Hotaru’s place to decide where her duty lay: it was clearly written in their very births. Their duty was to their family, their clan, and the Empire. There was no other truth. But to be derelict in one’s duty...to betray one’s very birthright...



Servants attended him as he entered the guesthouse, showing him at once to the room where his father's things were kept. No one challenged his right to see them; in this sanctuary of Crane hospitality, no one would be so impolite as to question him. Kuwanan knelt inside the room, and let the servant slide the door closed behind him.

It was a pleasant room, clearly aired daily as it smelt of the sweet *kinmokusei* in the garden. His father's things had been arranged as though Satsume himself might yet use them; his cypress-wood desk placed where it



caught the remaining sunlight streaming through the window, papers stacked neatly in boxes within reach, a thick mat for his time-worn knees. There were Kakita-made vases of blue and white in the corners of the room that Kuwanan recognized from home. His father had brought carefully selected pieces with him, a reminder of the Esteemed Palaces of the Crane.

Kuwanan moved to the boxes and began sorting through his father's scrolls. The letters were trivial, the documents insignificant. Kāgi was right; anything concerning the Empire would be in Akodo Toturi's safekeeping now. He went through each box, as the sunlight faded and the red leached from the sky outside. Servants brought lamps, and still he searched for clues in the scrolls. There was nothing unexpected or suspicious, only evidence of his father's diligent work, and his devotion to duty. Such a man had earned a thorough investigation into his death.

Kuwanan turned to look at the desk again, imagining his father at work.

There was a writing box on the desk that he did not recognize at first. He moved closer. It was not his father's style, the airy images of cranes in flight inlaid in the wood too wistful, too delicate. Then he remembered long, slender fingers raising the lid of that box—his mother's fingers—that used the contents with such skill. He had once copied her calligraphy with his own inelegant hands, hands like his father's.

Satsume would not have used his wife's brushes, made for smaller hands. He had kept that box as a reminder of her. Whatever Hotaru might think, Satsume had cared deeply for their mother, and here was the proof.

Kuwanan knelt at his father's desk and put his fingers to the smooth wood of his mother's writing box. He lifted the lid and found her brushes, so carefully stored, as clean and perfect as though they had never been used. Then he twisted the box, and the compartment at the bottom slid open, revealing a handful of scrolls.



His father had hidden these for a reason. Would he want his son to read them, or were they better left unread? Now that he was gone, there was no way of knowing, but the answers to many other questions might lie in these scrolls. One by one, Kuwanan slid them from their hiding place.

One bore his sister's seal. What letter was so precious their father intended to keep it secreted away?

Hour of the Rat—Imperial Chancellor's Apartment in the Imperial Palace

Letter-writing was one of the most satisfying of arts—a welcome distraction after a day at court. A single well-chosen character could alter the meaning of the whole, as well as the sentiment behind the words. The impression the reader derived from the shape of the kanji, the hue of the ink, the scent of the paper. Each element had its part to play. A fine duelist might find the same beauty in a kata correctly performed, but the perfect letter could cut as keenly as any sword.

The lamps had long since been lit, but Kakita Yoshi took his time over his letter to Kakita Yuri, a man who would appreciate its subtlety. It was his pleasure to inform Yuri that his daughter had been liberated from the Lion, as promised. Kakita Asami was safely on her way to Kyūden Kitsune to continue an important diplomatic mission. Yuri would be grateful, and it was important to remain the focus of that gratitude. Yoshi had to phrase the news delicately, to ensure Yuri knew he owed him a favor. No matter that Yoshi had not needed to orchestrate Asami's change of fortune himself.

Sending news of good fortune for his clan was a pleasure he had been largely denied of late, and he savored each brushstroke.

“Forgive me, my lord.”

Yoshi froze, brush poised in the air. Eyes gazed unblinking from the shadowed corner of the room, glinting in the lamplight for a moment too long, before bowing to the floor. If Yoshi had not recognized her voice, he might have thought her a ghost come to frighten him, but he did not fear this lowborn woman.

“You should not be here,” he said.

“Forgive me,” she repeated, “but I have news you may wish to hear.”

She sat up, keeping her eyes lowered, but he was not fooled by her apparent meekness.

“What news could not wait?” he asked.

“The Son of Heaven has left this world behind,” she said, glancing up briefly to see his reaction.

Yoshi did not react, but merely set down his brush.

“You are sure?” he asked. “You saw with your own eyes?”

“I'm certain,” she said. “I did not see the body, but there is no doubt. The Emperor is dead.”

That changed everything. Now came that period of uncertainty when power shifted and loyalties were tested. With Hantei XXXVIII gone, Bayushi Shoju no longer had his best friend in the man who sat the throne. Bayushi Kachiko didn't have her claws in young Sotorii—yet. And there was still a chance he could solidify the betrothal of Doji Chiyoe to the Crown Prince.

“Why is it you bring me this news?” he asked, half to himself. “Why is this not proclaimed loudly from one end of the palace to the other? The whole Empire should be in mourning.”

“I learned through whispers,” she said, “as I always do. The guards remain mute, but the servants who polish his floors, who clean his sheets...”

“*His Imperial Majesty's floors!*” Yoshi interrupted, appalled in equal measure by her casual tone and the news that brought her to him. “Your Emperor is dead!”

His own words startled him, as though he had not believed it until he heard himself speak it. The Emperor was dead, and someone had delayed the spread of the news. As Imperial Chancellor, he should have been among the first to know, through official channels. He should not have to rely on messengers like this, whose presence disturbed his peace.

“Who ordered silence?” he asked.

“Those who seek to control the whispers. Who is powerful enough to dam the deluge this news brings? Some names I won't speak aloud, not for any reward. Otherwise, I risk becoming just another missing servant when dawn breaks.”

“You will be rewarded,” he promised. “Although your lack of grief offends me and the gods.”

She threw herself to the floor, gasped and wept, tore at her servant garb, but only for a moment. Then she was gone through his window, leaving the shutters open as she left. Yoshi sat in the chill breeze and stared after her, appalled at her sham of humility, and at himself for relying on such a creature.

There were those who would demonstrate true grief at the Emperor's death. What would Lady Ryoku do, when she heard the news? He might be the one to tell her, but not yet. He could not reveal his knowledge, not until he knew for sure who tried to keep it from him.

He had his suspicions, of course. There were few powerful enough to keep such a thing quiet. He felt the hand of the Scorpion in this, and it stung as bitterly as the chill that blew in through the open window. Bayushi Kachiko had the power to give such orders, and she was bold enough to do so. She knew that, as soon as he learned the truth,



Yoshi could consolidate his authority alongside the new emperor. She would be unable to stand the thought of him having more power than she did, but surely she only delayed the inevitable. Unless she needed time to put some nefarious scheme into action or had something she wished to hide.

Could she have been involved in the Emperor's death? She was not a woman to leave anything to chance, and the Emperor's age and failing health would make it easy for one such as her... No, even Kachiko would not risk offending the Heavens themselves.

Yet what if she had? If she or one of her agents had killed the Emperor, what would her next move be? Could assassins be on their way to ensure he never gained Sotorii's confidence?

Yoshi shivered. He rose to close the shutters against the night, as the door slid open behind him with a whisper. No servant spoke, no guest announced their presence. Yoshi turned slowly to face the silent intruder, wishing for the first time since he was a boy that he could draw steel and take courage from it. As it was, he took refuge in his pride, drawing himself taller, and displaying nothing but perfect poise as the figure stepped into the room.

Yoshi's breath left him as the apparition moved into the lamplight with the deadly grace of a born warrior, pale kimono hanging from broad shoulders. Long silver hair swept across the sharp-featured face in the night breeze, and bright eyes stared from sockets darkened by weariness. Yoshi nearly said the words: *Lord Satsume*, but the ghost spoke first.

"Kakita-dono!"

The voice that broke the silence did not belong to the late Emerald Champion, but to his son, Doji Kuwanan. Had he too heard the news?

"Chancellor, forgive my haste, but I must speak with you."

"Of course, Doji-sama." Instinct told him Kuwanan was here on some other matter, so Yoshi made no mention of the Emperor. He bowed to Kuwanan and offered to summon servants to bring tea.

"No, please. We must speak alone—" Kuwanan insisted, "—truly alone." He slid the door closed.

Yoshi pushed aside his desk and they knelt close together, the breeze plucking at their hair and clothes. Kuwanan had a scroll in his left hand. Kuwanan placed his katana to his right, his movements slow but his eyes alight and intense, brightened by some great purpose. Yoshi had seen that look before on Satsume's face, the night before he gained the title of Emerald Champion.

I must not lose, Yoshi-san, because I cannot let him win.

"I have been looking into my father's death," Kuwanan said, his voice hushed. "I have found what I feared, and more. Worse."

Yet his face remained a mask; Satsume had raised the boy well.

"Before he died, my father sent a letter here, for safekeeping. A letter bearing my sister's seal." Kuwanan paused, as though fortifying that mask. "It was not a letter sent to my father, but one he had intercepted. A letter from the Crane Clan Champion to the Imperial Advisor."



Kachiko. Why was their champion writing to Kachiko, without his knowledge?

“I need to know,” Kuwanan went on, “if it might be a forgery.”

“May I see the letter?” Yoshi asked. It took all his restraint to keep from snatching it from Kuwanan’s hand.

“I am hoping you will examine it for me,” Kuwanan said, “but what you read you must never reveal. This could bring shame to our family and our clan. I know my father would wish this secret kept.”

“You have my secrecy, as he always did,” Yoshi said, eyes on the scroll. The paper was a pleasant shade of creamy white, the quality fine enough to be Crane.

Kuwanan handed him the scroll with both hands, like a gift. Yoshi unrolled it, and peered at the words in the lamplight, admiring their form despite the content. The brushwork was elegant, the ink a shade paler than the blue her father had favored. It appeared to be her hand, and yet, how could she write such things?

Hotaru wrote of her hatred for her father, Lord of the Crane and Emerald Champion. A man she should have held in greatest respect. She wrote that she wished to leave the Crane lands behind and be with Kachiko, the woman who had been clawing away Crane power for years, who he had worked tirelessly to overcome.

“Your father should never have had to read this,” he said. “Your sister should never have written it.” Yoshi raised his eyes for a moment, but immediately dropped them when he saw Kuwanan’s face twist. He waited for the boy to compose himself. Kuwanan was not as astute as his sister when it came to reading people, but he was dutiful and honorable. In many ways, he would be better suited to the role of champion. He took sound advice, as his father had.

“Then, you believe it is genuine?” Kuwanan asked.

Yoshi could not be entirely sure, but if it was a forgery, it was beyond his substantial skill to determine. He detected passion in the shape of the characters, and a strong sense of grief in the kanji chosen. Hotaru had allowed her emotions to overcome her sense of duty, making her a Scorpion puppet. No wonder Hotaru had been unwilling to enter the Tournament of the Emerald Champion; it would have gone against Kachiko’s plans. Was it Kachiko’s idea to sell Kakita art as well? The pair were bent on dismantling the Crane’s very identity. Hotaru was Clan Champion, but the clan must come first.

“It is no forgery,” he said.

Kuwanan sat silently, his eyes unfocused as he thought. He had spoken out against her before, Yoshi only had to rekindle some of that anger.

“This is very troubling,” Yoshi said, “especially in light of recent events.”

Kuwanan looked up. “Which recent events?”

“The Son of Heaven has left us,” Yoshi said. He paused, allowing time for Kuwanan to absorb his words.

“The Emperor is dead?” Kuwanan asked.



“Yet we have been left to sleep, when the palace should hold vigil,” Yoshi said. “I believe the Scorpion mean to take control. They have been gaining power in the capital, ingratiating themselves with the Emperor, as well as the youngest prince.”

Kuwanan said nothing. Perhaps he already knew what was coming, but he needed to hear it, so Yoshi continued: “Now it seems Doji Hotaru is working with Kachiko, whose goal has long been to undermine Crane influence. I believe it is all part of some greater plan, a plan they intend to put into action now, before revealing the Emperor’s death.”

Kuwanan started to rise, but caught himself and settled back on his knees. He had to come to the decision on his own. Yoshi rerolled the scroll and held it out. The young Crane’s eyes widened but he did not take it. Betrayal within a family was no easy thing to accept.

“I will keep this secret for you,” Yoshi said, “but we cannot allow this Scorpion treachery.”

Kuwanan took the scroll from Yoshi’s hands. When he spoke, his voice was barely above a whisper.

“I had suspected the Scorpion, but my sister?”

“If your father confronted her about the contents of this letter, or even threatened to disinherit her...”

“She tried to prevent me from investigating, as she feared I’d find the letter,” Kuwanan said. “But even if she wrote these words—even if she hated our father—she would never act out of hatred.”

“She would not have had to act, herself. Kachiko was born Shosuro. She must have access to all manner of poisons. Your father’s death, even his failing health, might not have been as natural as we were all led to believe.”

The flash of horror in Kuwanan’s eyes told Yoshi his words had hit the mark.

“My sister could only have offended the Heavens more if she had killed our father with her own hands,” Kuwanan said. “She has betrayed her duty. She cannot be allowed to lead our clan.”

“Someone must act.”

Kuwanan nodded, his lips pressed tight as though afraid to speak his thoughts.

Yoshi waited for the words he knew would come. If Crane fought Crane, he would have to choose a side—publicly. The clan would be divided, and his support would lend weight to Kuwanan’s claim, but if Kuwanan lost...

Hotaru had led the clan as close to ruin as they had ever been, on the battlefield and in the courts. The Crane had lost Toshi Ranbo because of her, a loss Satsume would have felt keenly. Her father had doubted her ability to lead and been proved right. Kuwanan was the better choice; surely, he could not do worse.

“I must challenge my sister’s right to be Crane Champion,” Kuwanan said at last, making his choice. It was time for Yoshi to confirm his, as well. He bent to the floor before Satsume’s son.

“I pledge my loyalty to you, Doji Kuwanan,” he said. “As I swore to your father, I swear to follow you.”



“Thank you, Kakita-dono, for your support.”

“I suggest you send word of our suspicions to Daidoji Uji, to ensure his support as well. And you should inform Shiba Tsukune, to honor our alliances with the Phoenix.”

“I will do as you suggest,” Kuwanan agreed.

“And allow me to speak to the Emerald Champion on your behalf, to determine where his loyalties lie. If the Imperial Advisor seeks to take control, Akodo Toturi may be the only one in a position to prevent her.”

“I suspect we will receive little help from Toturi,” Kuwanan said, a touch of bitterness in his voice. “Seek what support you can here. Until our clan is united, there is little I can do in the capital. I must go. I must challenge the right of Doji Hotaru to be clan champion.”

“A new era begins for us all,” Yoshi said, watching Kuwanan tuck the scroll away. “With you as Champion, the Crane can steer the Empire’s new course, as is our duty.”

Kuwanan lifted his sword from its place beside him and drew the blade from its sheath, raising it to shine as silver as the moonlight now visible through the window. The moment held infinite possibilities, and while Yoshi could not guess what Kuwanan thought, he imagined where that sword might end up. Crane blood on a Crane blade. What would Satsume think of such choices, if he were here?

Kuwanan lifted his free hand and took hold of his long hair, gripping it firmly in his fist. He held his blade a breath from the back of his neck, then drew his sword across in one quick, silent stroke, cutting a perfectly straight line. A few white strands escaped his grip and drifted gently down, until caught by a gust of wind and swept away into some dark corner. Yoshi remained seated as Kuwanan rose to stand with the length of hair still in his fist. He had made some terrible promise to himself, to his sword, and Yoshi was his witness. His path was set now. He would take that sword to duel his sister, and kin would fight kin.

Kuwanan left silently, his shoulders set, his blade still in his hand. He turned briefly and Yoshi caught a glance of his pale face, mouth a grim line, an icy resolution in his eyes. Yoshi had always thought the boy looked like his father, the image of Satsume in his youth, but no one would mistake him for his father now.

