



I've Got a Theory

Glen Goerwell

The cliffs overlooking the sea were beautiful in the sunset, cresting waves crashing against stone, ocean spray dancing in the light to create small rainbows wherever she looked. Soshi Yuka liked it up here, away from the hustle and bustle of the main camp, away from a hundred problems that needed solving yesterday. Even now the Scorpion struggled to find enough support to maintain themselves.

If only the Crane were the ones who held the bountiful farmlands. They knew well the power of a full belly to turn away a knife in the dark, Yuka thought. It was something the Lion had never learned; they had never had to. Their entire production had gone into maintaining their oversized army. *Of course you need to fight off everyone when you go out of your way to fight everyone. Nonsense.*

The quiet steps behind her were covered by the crashing waves, but the whispers of the kami made her attentive. Yuka turned, her covered face still hidden as she looked over the new arrivals. Yogo Norio. He was her friend... *No. Not friend.* Not when his husband was the largest threat to her power she had. *Fellow priest. That is better.* Flanking him was Bayushi Kazuki, a man she did not want to trust, but must. He held the power of the Scorpion in his hands. His brown eyes darted behind the demon mask he wore, scanning for threats. The third to approach was her 'diplomat to the Clans.'

Soshi Mika, a beautiful woman. Her distant kinsman had no talent for speaking with the spirits, but with other people she was better than Yuka had ever been. Honeyed brown eyes peaked out from the shawl that could only be called a mask on the barest of pretenses.

"So," Yuka murmured dryly. "What made you call this little meeting of the Left, Norio-san?"

Norio frowned with his eyes, his face hidden under the mask. "You've had them too, have you not? The dreams?"

"I have many dreams," Yuka replied. "But the ones calling us to the Shrines... yes, Horiyuki-kun already found the one to the Fortune of Wealth. The shrine names him Ankoku-no-kami... strange that the name has drifted so far in the Empire. Or is it here that has drifted?"

Mika spoke up. "The Lion say they have found the Shrine to the Lady of Romantic Love..."

"Waseiten-no-kami," Norio inserted without heat. "The gods have always changed their names in accordance with the people beneath them and with time. The Emperor declares new names and honors, or custom changes and kanji drift. The old names are forgotten. The Unicorn found other names in other lands. The name may change but who they are does not."

The shinobi Kazuki stepped forward. "It is not with the gentle touch of romance that the Lion will stop us from liberating some of the fruits of this land. However, our eyes in the other clans are not obscured. Yogo-sama asked me to confirm this, but we know the other shrines, and their names."

Yuka raised one eyebrow, not that they could see it. "Oh? Yogo-san, you've been busy. I thought you were trying to learn what exactly those Stone Guardians were?"

"Even you know the gods take precedence, oh Shrine Maiden." Norio pushed back with a gentle tease.

"Hmm," Yuka shrugged in acknowledgment of the point. "It's unlikely the other clans besides the Lion will deny us access to their shrines. Only they truly hate us."

"That will change," Kazuki answered. "It always does."

"There is something interesting, though," Mika spoke again. "The others deduced it, but I was able to confirm it during my goodwill tour. The Phoenix were quite eager to seek these shrines out. We could not provide the assistance they desired due to...complicating factors...regarding our own home."

"What is your theory?" Yuka asked, wishing they would get to the point.

"It almost seems that Lady Dōji arranged it so that each clan holds shrines for the things that an outsider might think we lack," Mika answered.

Yuka said nothing, waiting for them to elaborate.

Kazuki filled the silence "The Dragon have graciously shown Soshi-san that they have a shrine to Tennyō-no-kami, goddess of fertility and happiness."

"Well, the Dragon's problem with numbers is well known. Even during the time of the Founders it was well known, easy enough to predict that," Yuka says dismissively. "Though I do not know how the Kami could have known the Dragon would choose to settle there."

"It is a mystery, my Lord." Kazuki agreed, "While claiming that shrine for the Dragon seems logical even from the founding, the shrines found in other lands seem to hold similar thought."

"The Unicorn have found Contentment. Lord Bayushi petitioned for such a shrine extensively during Lady Dōji's lifetime. Yet, the Unicorn now tend to his shrine here, under the name Kaishi-no-kami." Norio locked one green eye with Yuka.

Yuka adjusted her mask slightly in thought. "Humm. I can see Lady Dōji wanting her sister's children to be able to settle down instead of forever wandering. Still, twice is not enough to say that she is some great planner equal to Lord Togashi or Lord Bayushi."

"The Crane have a Shrine to Bisha..forgive me, Sawakiten-no-kami." Kazuki added. "The Fortune of Strength and War. Lady Dōji would not have given her children that shrine on a whim."

In spite of herself, Yuka found the logic sound. The only Shrine less likely to be given to the Crane by their own hand was one to Osano-wo. Yet Lady Dōji, instead of allowing her husband's family to be swallowed up into her own, had helped Lord Kakita and her son found two families dedicated to the art of war as much as the art of peace. Silk hiding steel. Had she guessed that her children would disdain war? It wasn't that hard to predict, Yuka supposed, but still, three out of the seven clans...

"What were the other shrines?" Yuka asks.

"The Phoenix have shown me the Shrine to Fukurokushi-no-kami," Mika answered. "Wisdom and Mercy have been in their remit for some time, it is a weakness of the theory." Yuka nodded.

It was a weakness, but one only needed to spend extended time in Kyūden Isawa to know that mercy was in short supply for many. _And wisdom, well, that is always a matter of perspective. _Perhaps not that much of a weakness. The Scorpion leader gestured for Mika to continue.

"However, the Crab grudgingly are tending to Kotukubi-no-kami's shrine, the Fortune of Longevity," the younger Soshi offered. "The idea of dying in their bed is a foreign one to them, even if it is a good thing for their clan. Still, Yasuki-san was perturbed that we are tending to Ankoku-no-kami instead of them."

"They even renamed the Fortune's Balm," Norio noted dryly. "And the Lion...tend to Waseiten-no-kami...the Fortune of Love for the Lion? If Lady Dōji did not intend that her brother and Lady Matsu would just admit their feelings for each other, that shrine is a very strange choice to make, no?" They all chuckled at the thought.

"The only problem with it," Yuka said, "Is that the Fortune of Honest Work, Webisu-no-kami, also has a shrine, although only the Fortune of Secrets seems to know where it is now. While his importance has waxed and waned over the centuries, Lady Dōji was one of those who argued for his elevation to keep the peasants happy."

Kazuki nodded, "We had discussed that among ourselves, my lord. The only thing we could come up with is that she thought we would all need to work hard in this new land, and thus to say one had to work harder was an insult, thus she placed his shrine elsewhere."

The elder Soshi considered that. *No, the logic is sound enough — a Fortune for what the Clan lacked.* While never poor per se, the Scorpion were not rich and had relied on opium monopolies and skilled luxury production to stay afloat. How much worse had it been in Lady Dōji's day when Ryoko Owari had been a twinkling gleam in the eyes of her ancestors? Still...Waseiten-no-kami belonging to the Lion? The Lion had never been shy of boasting of how much they gave to the Warrior's temples in their lands. Never been unwilling to allow visitors either, for they knew that the Fortunes of War loved them best — how could they not? But Waseiten was different.

"We dare not let the Lion monopolize the Fortune of Love," Yuka said. "Traditionally pilgrims to the Sacred Shrines have been allowed free passage. But traditionally the Shrines have gone to the clans who do not think that the Fortune will turn their faces away to others."

"You can't think that they would dare to anger Waseiten-no-kami like that, surely?" Norio asked.

Mika shook her head, her long black hair swaying behind her. "The Lion are *furious* with us. Perhaps the whole situation. If only Kotaro hadn't..." A sigh. "They are a clan with more grudges than anyone else. Maybe they'll see Lady Dōji's message, but I wouldn't be surprised if they didn't."

"Then we can not trust them with the Shrine." Kazuki folded his arms. "And despite our best being ready, I cannot steal a shrine. My lord, we have tried in the past. It doesn't work."

Yuka frowned. "Yogo-san, go to the shrine and try to see if the Lion are willing to accept the formation of a neutral Brotherhood overseeing the Shrine. Offer the same for our shrine. Soshi-san, go to the other clans. Leave Kotaro behind."

Barely able to hide her relief at being ordered to leave her unreliable yojimbo Bayushi Kotaro behind, Mika bowed low. "Hai."

Norio pointed towards the north. "I will do as you ask, but if the Lion say no, what then?"

"You've been married to Tadashi-san for years, Yogo-san. Surely some of his skills have rubbed off on you. Find a way," Yuka ordered.

"And me?" Kazuki asked.

Yuka turned to the shinobi. "Make sure that Soshi-san survives. You say your best are ready, use them. Dismissed, all of you."

The three other Scorpion bowed and left to perform their orders. Yuka turned back to look at the sea. Lady Dōji may have planned much...but why, oh why, did she give the burden of leadership to the Soshi? Or was it all truly capricious chance? Chance or destiny, what she truly wanted to know was why had it been her lot to undertake it?

The ocean, predictably, gave no answer.