



Chasing Butterflies

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Hues of peach and rose colored the pre-dawn sky over the sparkling seas near Jukami Mura, brightening the top of a heavy stone wall within the noble district of the city, but the alley to the side of the wall was still well-cast in night's shadow. The quiet of the alleyway was only slightly disturbed by the rustling of branches on the inside of the wall. A pair of hands, followed by a face, appeared over the top of it, followed by a long, lean body and a pair of legs. A young man dropped to the ground in the darkened alleyway and paused for a moment to brush the twigs and stray leaves off his kimono.

"Quite finished?" a voice from the shadows drawled.

"Taneharu-san!" The young man turned, a grin lighting up his face. "What brings you here?"

Kakita Taneharu stepped out of the shadow, though the scant light did little to illuminate more than the light blue trim of his black kimono and hakama, the glittering of his spear's blade. It definitely did not do much to brighten features darkened by a dour frown.

"Daidōji Akikore-san," He gave a curt bow. "Your mother sent me to find you. She would not be pleased to know I found you climbing over the wall of the Crab Clan Embassy."

Akikore flicked the long tail of his white hair over his shoulder, returned the bow, and looked the Kakita in the eye. "I was working! Improving Crab and Crane relations. The Crab are seeking allies, if you haven't heard." He raised a finger sternly at Taneharu, as if to scold him. "Between the invasion of Akuma-no-Oni, the Wall falling, and the news about Hida Kisada, they need our encouragement and support!"

"You mean the ambassador's daughter took a fancy to you at the Cherry Blossom feast and took you home to celebrate, don't you?" The words dripped with disdain.

The foolish smile returned to Akikore's lips, and his finger dropped. "Sometimes it is refreshing to receive explicit instructions..."

"Disgusting."

The two started walking back towards Akikore's family estate on the outskirts of town. The fisherman along the docks would be putting out their akebune, and ship traffic never stopped in the busy port city, but so far away from the docks the streets were quiet.

"You know what your tragedy is, Taneharu-san? Life is a garden, and what would a garden be without beautiful butterflies to grace it?"

Taneharu humphed, but did not answer.

"Or perhaps you prefer bees?"

The Kakita scowled. "Keep your butterflies and your bees. I have no use for either. This is enough." He tapped his omi-yari with the back of his hand. That hand was marred, missing a thumb and first finger, but a ring on the great spear's shaft made it a glittering promise of death in the duelist's grip.

As always, Akikore pretended not to notice. "Your garden won't be very fruitful that way."

"Your peach trees will bear enough fruit for the both of us, I am sure."

They reached the gates of the family estate, and two Daidōji bushi standing guard bowed slightly as they stepped aside to allow the pair to pass. Akikore and Taneharu paused their argument only long enough to return the bows and enter the gardens.

"You can't fool me, Taneharu-sensei..." Akikore put emphasis on the title. "I have seen the care with which you train your students. Your garden is not made of stone, no matter how much you would like to pretend it is."

Taneharu had the grace to look abashed, and privately Akikore added one more victory to his tally.

As they approached his mother's study, Taneharu's voice dropped as he quietly warned, "Be careful. Ota-sama is angry."

"My mother is—"

"Your mother is a general," a smooth voice cut in before the young man could finish the sentiment. "She does not let emotion dictate her actions." An older man, wearing beautiful robes decorated with a fine tracery of flowers, had opened the shoji screen. "That said, you do seem to manage to find new ways to try her patience, my son."

Akikore bowed deeply. "I apologize, Father. I came as soon as I could."

Taneharu bowed also. "I am sorry I could not fetch him earlier, lenori-sama."

The courtier waved his hand, "I know, I know. It is not like this is the first time. But come, Akikore-kun. This concerns us all."

lenori led the way into the Daidōji General's study.

General Daidōji Ota knelt before a low table, the bowls of her and her husband's morning repast pushed aside to make way for the letter she held. She was tall and well-muscled, an older woman, her iron hair twisted up in a tight bun. She wore the light gray and blue of the Daidōji family, plain and severe in its styling. Practical.

Taneharu did not enter the study, instead pulling the shoji screen shut behind Akikaru and his father and leaving the family its privacy.

Akikaru gave a deep bow before his mother as his father stood to one side.

"Mother," Akikore began when he straightened. "I apologize for troubling your morning meal in this fashion. I should have left a message when I left last night."

Ota's gray eyes darted up. "You're an adult. Do as you will and defend yourself if there are consequences," she snapped. "Sit. I have news that might put an end to your twilight dalliances. We have received a letter." She lifted the piece of paper in her hands to show him. "From the Empress."

Akikore hastened to sit as bid, bubbling with a curiosity he tried to hide, while his father lenori gracefully knelt beside them, a small, mysterious smile dancing on his lips as if he had all the answers and would never share them.

Ota let them settle beside her, no trace of emotion playing across her stern features. "Our ancestors have always served the Crane, and we owe Daidōji Uji-dono our full allegiance. But it is not only to the Crane that we have debts."

Akikore's father lenori drew a fan and opened it, looking amused as his wife recounted their family history as bluntly as one laying out a battleplan.

Ota ignored him. "Long ago, in the years just prior to the Battle of the White Stag, our family was one of those responsible for greeting the foreigners who came to our shores, to welcome them and to acquaint them with the Empire, to set up profitable trade with them, and teach them our ways. You remember this, at least."

Akikore nodded silently, well aware of his family's ancient shame.

The general continued. "When the foreigners turned on us, on the Empire, refusing the Empress's edict, Daidōji Tsunishi begged for permission to commit seppuku for her failure. Empress Yuzohime would not be appeased, rightfully demanding her execution and the end of her family line. But her royal consort, the former Emerald Champion Dōji Usan, pleaded with her, and, through his intervention, Tsunishi was allowed to commit seppuku, her family kept safe and permitted to retain its position. He protected our family even in the years that followed the death of Yuzohime at the hands of the foreigners, at great political cost. We owe the Imperial Consort a debt that can never be repaid."

lenori's dark eyes studied his wife, and then looked down at the paper in her hands. "The Empress has called in that debt, hasn't she?"

Ota met her husband's gaze. "Yes. Each new Empress or Consort has affirmed that debt through the centuries

since then. The charter has always been maintained the same: If the Empress orders, we must prepare our family and our followers and our goods and travel with her to a new land, no matter the cost. And now Empress Hochiahime claims that this time has come. That she acts for the sake of the Empire, but all debts must come due eventually. Honor demands we follow."

"But, you have duties here!" Protests he could not stifle erupted from Akikore's lips. "What of Lord Uji? What will he say when he loses one of his generals?" He tried to keep his own fears out of his voice.

"The war with the Lion is at an end, at least at truce. The Crab are no threat at present. And Uji-dono has his own obligations to the throne and to the Empress. He will not forbid us from following. More likely, he will order us to protect her."

"But when?! Do we really have to go?"

"Three months. The Empress is sending shipwrights. A fleet is coming. It has already begun."

Akikore fell silent, his heart becoming a stone in his chest. It would be unlikely that any new land would have the butterflies of Jukami Mura.

