



Two Steps Forward, Three Steps Back

Glen Goerwell

Words flow in streams outwards towards the Imperial Court, leaving no trace of those letters ever to ever be found. Soshi Mika considered herself a patient person, not by nature but by nurture. A Scorpion had to be patient, preparing the ground before she sprang the trap. Anything less than perfect preparation would see your opponent weasel their way out. When words were as deadly as blades, you could not do an enemy a small injury. You must either caress them or destroy them. That was the lesson that her teachers had hammered into her.

But this was an enemy that Mika could neither caress nor annihilate. Otomo Utsonohime, the caretaker of the young Empress, refused to allow any messages to pass her careful watch. Mika adjusted the long black ponytail that hung down her back. Without Imperial approval or even guidance, she must choose a different way.

Her clan had gambled that it would be easy to take the Fortresses, easy to build up and gain enough food even with the limits of the sea. After all, anything worth defending had to be valuable, and any living within the fortresses would have what was needed to survive. The Ancient Stone Guardians had proven their gamble a failure. They did not need to eat as humans did, so there were no hinterlands surrounding the castles that could be exploited.

The sea provided its bounty, but with the Mantis around the Scorpion could never **trust** the sea. If, indeed, there was ever enough to provide for all the clans in this land in the first place. The other Clans were also fishing and competing with the Otter and the Mantis for the precious gifts of Mizutori-no-kami. The Lion, alone, had more than they needed.

And so, Mika supposed, she was here now, waiting in the hastily constructed facsimile of a proper tea house. She did not call attention to the lack of proper decoration, or the awkward layout. It would be gauche. But, for one used to the finest teahouses in the Empire, this was a pale imitation made to satisfy the need.

Courtiers needed a place outside of court to do their work. Even if the tea was more pine needles than tea leaves, there must be a place to be seen, to make snide remarks, and pretend to like each other. To that end, a squat ugly building centered around a rock garden had been built. The insides were plain but serviceable with a few private rooms, one of which the Scorpion had claimed for the day.

The door opened, and Mika turned to bow to the newest arrival: Ikoma Natsuko, the chief diplomat of the Lion. The woman was taller than her, like most Lion. The only similarities the two courtiers shared was that Natsuko too allowed herself the luxury of long hair hanging freely down her shoulders. Neither claimed a maiden's foxtail. They had both seen too much.

A fond memory of Hiroyuki and Kazuki flickered through Mika's memory. She quickly dismissed it.

Natsuko returned her bow, with a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. "Soshi-san, thank you for choosing such a pleasant location to talk."

"Oh no, Ikoma-san, the gratitude is all mine for choosing to meet with me. Come. Sit." Mika gestured at the table in front of her, where a small metal tea kettle awaited.

The Lioness nodded. "Then let us both be grateful for the chance to meet each other. Our clans are close as they were before, but that is no reason to be at odds."

Natsuko sat across from the Soshi and waited. Mika found it galling to pour tea for a woman who, at least according to the Scorpion researchers, had no greater ambition, or even personality, than service to her clan. Such people irritated her. She poured for the other woman anyways. The scent of the tea filled the room.

Delicately setting the kettle aside, Mika allowed a slight smile herself. *Give your opponent what they want to see: a smile or a knife. Then they will not see the hidden dagger.* "I had heard, Ikoma-san, that you were spending time with your kinswoman Ikoma Yumiko-sama again, I hope she is doing well?"

Natsuko did not acknowledge the barb, nor the attempt to fish for scandal. She answered blandly, "Ikoma-sama is doing the best she can in these trying times, as we all must. I trust that you are enjoying catching up with your old friends?"

Ah. She'd found out about Kazuki's relation to Mika's former sensei. *Well played.* "Somewhat Ikoma-san. But I think it is more important to make new friends, no?"

A slight nod. "It is a new world, but one where we still follow tradition," Natsuko allowed. "In truth, I had not looked for your invitation, given your fondness for the Crab these days."

Mika gave the slightest shrug as she sipped her tea. "There were certain matters that the Scorpion had to address with the Crab. It meant no insult to the honored right hand of the Empress."

"The Fortresses, yes?" Natsuko asked. "While we would never infringe on your clan territory, the Miya Cartographers have some impressive sketches of them."

The Soshi woman set down her cup. "Just so. I had not known you were looking into them, Ikoma-san."

The Lioness sipped her own tea. "This is a wild new land. I would be a poor samurai not to learn all I can about it."

"The idea of Ikoma-san being a poor samurai seems a rather merry jest," Mika replied mildly. "Forgive me. I have not inquired after your husband. I hope he is well?"

Natsuko's eyes narrowed ever so slightly, "He is well. I would ask after your own..."

Mika offered a more genuine smile. "Unfortunately, the man I was to be with was not one of the ones called to this expedition. Given that we were engaged and nothing more, I judged it better that we part ways."

Besides, Tsumuro had been a bore anyway.

"Unfortunate. I can only imagine that many are now competing for the rose of the Scorpion," Natsuko's smile turned sharp. "Do you intend to let any pluck you?"

Another sip of tea. "My Lady has granted me the privilege of being the one to pluck rather than plucked. I will have to be careful of any thorns though." Mika quipped.

Natsuko raised an eyebrow. The Scorpion as a rule detested love matches or the like: marriage was a contract where you hoped that two people would be compatible. Love? Love made things too complicated. Yet, implicitly, if a person was allowed to choose, they would choose someone they liked rather than necessarily who was best.

The Lioness took her own sip of tea. "I see, I wish you luck on that front then. I can only trust in the wisdom of Soshi-dono."

There was a subtle insult there if Mika wished to press on it. If she were back in the Empire proper, she would have. Belling Lion was a grand pastime, but she was here for a reason. "Thank you, Ikoma-san. Soshi-ue is a fine woman and I am glad to serve her."

"Certainly, there are not many who could have recovered as well as she has." Natsuko agreed. "My own lord Akodo Yoshitsune-ue is an example of overcoming adversity as well. Hopefully, that means they will get along."

Mika's smile faded; she had heard that the leader of the Lion was a man who had lost near everything in a single battle, but she hadn't expected Natsuko to bring it up. A signal that the Lioness wished to get down to business. *Well, I can oblige.*

"One can only hope. I have long admired the Lion's for their tireless work. When I was serving in Ryoko Owari, in fact, there was a Matsu..."

So dance began. One must not directly ask for what one needs. It is gauche, and, worse, a sign of desperation. Instead you insinuate, you massage, you let the absence of words speak for you.

As first meetings went, Mika decided it wasn't too bad.

Bayushi Kotaro was bored. As a rule, this wasn't unusual for him. A student of legendary sensei, he was used to being sent on the most challenging of tasks, the most dangerous of missions. Yet, here he was, plying his sword

as a mere guard would, defending the honor of Soshi Mika. Though...the baser part of him did have to admit he didn't mind watching the gorgeous courtier. Unfortunately, that part was well outweighed by just how dull this Crab-built court was. This was not the mainland where one could count on there being some cocky Crane present, a Lion, really, any samurai who needed to be put in their place. Instead, everyone in the new Imperial Court was infuriatingly level-headed.

Which, he supposed, was why he was here in the baths, eavesdropping like some junior shinobi rather than the seasoned veteran he was. All who came to the court sought out the baths eventually: whatever else you could say about the Crab's choice of landing site, it did mean the hot springs were excellent. *And convenient*, Kotaro thought as he sank into the near boiling mineral water, the sound masked by the constant dripping of spring water. For across the divider, he could overhear women speaking.

One voice he recognized. Otomo Usonohime, an imperious woman even by the standards of the Imperial families, she had stonewalled his charge from speaking to the Empress.

Usonohime spoke. "I'm given to understand that the Lion are keeping their stockpiles hidden from the clans, a wise precaution in light of how close they are to the Scorpion and Phoenix. Why, they might just slip in and steal everything!"

Another voice answered, Kotaro tentatively recalled it belonging to a Miya herald. *Kogane or something like that? No wait Kogara. That is it.*

"...The Lion might reveal their stores though, I understand Soshi-san and Ikoma-san meet near daily now."

"I doubt that my dear..." Usonohime said. "For the Lion never intend to share this with anyone. After all, you do not covet what you do not know."

Kotaro went very still. *Have the Lion been playing Mika-sama from the start?_No, surely not.* If the Lion meant to keep the best of their yields for themselves, then the Scorpion would certainly understand. But if they intended to make certain that there was less than the Scorpion needed, to weaken them in that way, then that was something he could not allow. That woman, Akodo Cho, probably had records proving their intent. If he could find them... *Well, there is more than one way to skin a cat.* It would be information that Mika could use to drive a harder bargain.

He rose slowly, careful not to make too much noise. There was work to be done.

Otomo Usonohime smiled softly at Miya Kogara. "It seems our Scorpion friend has taken the bait."

Kogara settled back in the bath and closed her eyes. "It doesn't seem fair. But this is for the well-being of Otomo Tsuji-sama."

"It is," Usonohime agreed. "Now you were telling me of the latest between the Unicorn and Crab?"

Soshi Mika wanted to scream. She wanted to throw her teacup through Kotaro's stupid lion mask. *Impulsive fool!* She could not allow herself the luxury of saying the words aloud. Such an outburst would mean acknowledging his actions. It would make the Scorpion look foolish.

"I am sorry to hear that, Ikoma-san," she said mildly. "Truly the entire thing?"

Ikoma Natsuko's eyes narrowed. "Hai. All of our documentation on the harvests was taken. An odd thing for any party to steal, don't you think?"

Mika forced herself to meet Natsuko's eyes, her own brown eyes the picture of innocence. "While I do not doubt that is important, I can't say I have any idea who might have taken them. Though they may be reading material for some, that sort of thing always puts me to sleep."

The Ikoma's mouth thinned. She did not believe her, but there was no way to prove any accusations. For all of his other faults, the Bayushi's brash actions were entirely unScorpion-like. To let an adversary know their office had been robbed was foolish, unless the point was to strike terror. It had not been. As long as Mika did not admit to knowing what was in those documents, the Lion would have suspicions, but nothing to act on.

And that is the only reason I won't have his head, the Soshi thought as she took a sip of the pine needle tea to calm herself.

Entire weeks of hard work and effort, wasted. Mika now had to rebuild that trust from the beginning, and hope that none of her other clanmates took Kotaro's information and decided to steal from those hidden caches.

Finally, Ikoma Natsuko spoke again. "My Lord is asking me to return to Lion lands to confer with him. That is why I came today. I wished to let you know that I will have to be out of touch for a few weeks. If you need to discuss anything pertinent, I will let my subordinates know to treat you with the utmost courtesy, Soshi-san."

Mika bowed her head. "I thank you for your consideration. Can you tell me anything I should do in particular to make their lives easier?"

By the Cursed Grove, I take two steps forward, only to have Kotaro take back three!

When the door slid shut, the porcelain cup shattered against the teahouse wall.