



The First Murder Is Unimportant

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You would think that travelling weeks at sea to a new land would mean that some problems were left behind. Yumiko suppressed a tired sigh and ignored her desire to grab a bottle of shochu and pretend this never happened. Unfortunately, this did happen and now Ikoma Yumiko was looking at the blighted strip of land that just formed outside of a bar. A dead body still lay face down there from earlier in the day. People drink, get angry, fights break out, and sometimes people die. Here, outside of the creatively named *Honey Dip Bar*, it had happened again. Drinking hadn't stopped from last night, leading to this early morning. Some guards closed off the road while she investigated. Not that there is much to investigate.

It was a story that Yumiko has seen too many times to be more than mildly put out by someone waking her up from the first night of decent sleep in weeks. Reaching up to fiddle her hair and, for once, keep the bun neat. Her brown eyes swept over the perpetrator.

Matsu Yona was one of the Lion who never quite made the transition from cub to lioness. There were always some who, no matter how well they did at the tests, couldn't handle the real world; whether it was because of their pride or simply not being built to handle the regimented military life. So, trapped between their own feelings and a Clan which had no idea how to deal with them, they acted out and ruined their own lives.

She could relate, honestly, just not that early in the morning. Ignoring the fact that it was nearly noon.

"Alright, seeing as how we're all working for Akodo-dono here, I'm not inclined to let you off the hook, Matsu-san." Yumiko said.

Yona looked like she was not quite done beating people to death with that glare of hers. Her eyes were black, the colour of obsidian spark with fire. "It was an accident, a duel that got out of hand."

"Ichiro?" Yumiko held up a hand.

Without a word, her assistant handed a scroll to her and Yumiko made a show of opening it. "Matsu Yona: first offence disorderly conduct resulting in property damage, punishment was stockade duty. Second offence, disorderly conduct resulting in property damage, twenty lashes. Third offence, unlawful duelling, five weeks confinement. I could go on but we both know that it would take us all day to list out all of your crimes."

The almost pretty Matsu curled her lips in a low sneer as she folded her arms. "Get to the point. It wasn't my fault any of those times. I just got punished because I'm not the special one."

Yumiko rolled up the scroll and thought for a minute of hitting Yona with it, but that probably wouldn't work out for her. While she was good in a fight, her whole life wasn't getting drunk and fighting like Yona's was...the woman was a stone heavier too.

"Honestly, I could not care about your slights Matsu-san." Yumiko said. "What I care about is you killed a man and now the land looks as bad as the Kuni Wastes."

Yona looked at the disturbed ground. "I didn't mean to kill him. He ducked when I was aiming at his belly and took it to the face. It was an accident."

Resisting the urge to massage her temple, Yumiko shook her head. "Mean to or not, this isn't something you can just wave off. Now are you going to come quietly to the jail cell or not?"

In that moment, Yumiko could almost see the twin paths branching before the younger Matsu: in one she went quietly, received a punishment, possibly the ultimate one, but would die with honour and so had a chance to be reborn with a better life next time. But it was an end, an ignoble one for someone who clearly resented her lot in life. Then there was the other path, the one where Yona fought her, escaped and ran, likely becoming one of the first ronin in Sanctuary. It was a path where she had her life and her pride, but at the cost of her honour and her future.

On the balance, Yumiko found herself readying her jitte with one hand and sword in the other. To come quietly meant acknowledging that something had gone wrong and Yumiko didn't think that Matsu Yona was capable of that.

"I'll come quietly." Yona said dully. "We need to get this seen by others."

Yumiko blinked, that was surprising. "Very well, come with me to the courthouse, and we'll see justice done."

The Matsu just nodded, her anger still simmering under the surface. Why had she given in so easily? Yumiko didn't know, and while she wasn't inclined to look a gift horse in the mouth, she could do that later. For now, she led Yona away, letting Ichiro take care of the clean up. With one last look at the blackened dead soil, something clicked in Yumiko's head. Half remembered reports of projected harvests she had been looped in on because she was a potential collector of the tithes. There was something there, what was it?

With that question in the back of her mind, Yumiko walked under the near noon sun towards the courthouse.

The courthouse was hardly grand, even by the relatively austere standards of the Lion. A simple building of sturdy wood, painted over and covered to keep rot from setting in and then a series of windows and shutters to keep it from being too dark. Not that it helped now, at night. Lord Moon was pleasant at least, the pale light illuminating the records room well.

Yumiko looked over the report again. The fighting against the Scorpion had ended with the Lion victorious on the field, but the rice had been stolen anyway. Cheating bastards, but still why would bloodshed darken the earth? It didn't make any sense. If it was just blood then the fields around the Crane Lion border should be a benighted hellscape rather than some of the most productive lands in the Empire.

Still, as Kitsuki as it was, the evidence was fairly clear. Kill someone in violence, the land blackened and nothing could grow there. Further skirmishes with the Scorpion and Mantis had proven that. Leading to the establishment of castles, little more than forts, to make sure the fighting happened away.

Yet, Yona had shown it wasn't only foreign violence, but domestic as well. Reaching back to stretch tired bones, Yumiko remembered why the duel had broken out. The man had demanded Yona share her bottle of plum wine. Yona had refused and things went from there. Something bothered her though, not the killing, she was sort of used to that. No, it was something else. Yumiko stood up and looked over the reports of the rice loss again, where blood had poisoned the earth.

A magistrate was often also the tax collector, so reading over the documents wasn't hard but would have been easier with sake, though. Alas Yumiko had to be a mature adult. She hated that part of her personality.

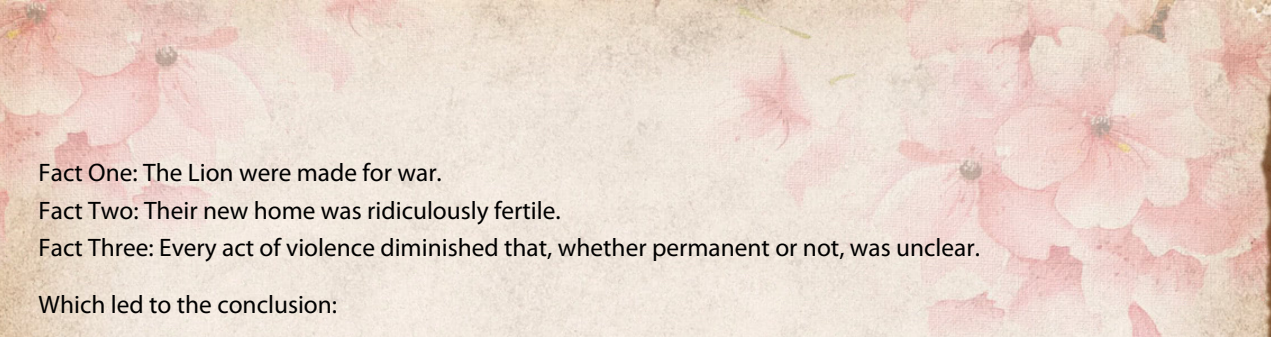
Fortune's Fields were ridiculously fertile. Producing more food than even the most determined agriculture in the Lion lands had ever had. Yet, there was something wrong here. Yumiko clicked her tongue against her teeth.

There...you'd never see it unless you were like her and suspicious of everything, but laid out like this with the reports of the blood fields were reports of the overall expected harvests and they went down too sharply just for some land lost, and marginal land at that. No, with each fight it hadn't just been the land that had been hurt, but the crops over all.

Yumiko wasn't quite sure when she sat down, but she did, and was just staring up at the moon. The logic was inescapable. The Lion fighting anyone, even themselves on the Fortune Fields hurt the land. The Lion were meant for war, but could not fight at home. And possibly not even outside of it. She had to look at the records after another skirmish broke out at one of the castles. For the life of her, Yumiko had no idea what to do about this.

It was an unpleasant, unfamiliar feeling. Being tired? Sure, familiar territory. Being cynical and paranoid, well that happened to any magistrate. Being unsure what to *do*? That was new. She had been made magistrate because she never left well enough alone. Not because she was as dear old Daiken-sensei liked to say. 'Choosy as a concussed sheep.'

Familiar motions draw out the bottle of sake at her side, the burn of liquor clarifying things. Yumiko lets out a satisfied sigh.



Fact One: The Lion were made for war.

Fact Two: Their new home was ridiculously fertile.

Fact Three: Every act of violence diminished that, whether permanent or not, was unclear.

Which led to the conclusion:

The Lion could *not* wage a defensive war.

No one could wage an offensive war without destroying Fortune's Fields meant little. Too many enemies would be happy with trading the destruction of the fields for the death of the Lion.

Which meant...which meant...

"We have to break the Imperial peace, establish a buffer," Yumiko said out loud.

Create a wall of defenses past the fields, like the Carpenter Wall. Only instead of keeping out monsters, it would keep out people.

It tasted like ash in her mouth. Collectively they were the last hope of the Clans, their legacy, their ideals.

To preserve themselves, the Lion would have to destroy at least one of them, maybe more.

"Damn," Yumiko said and took another sip of her sake.

Compared to that, what did the first murder matter?

