



For There Will Always Be Secrets

Glen Goerwell

I was never meant for this. That was what Yuka found herself thinking as she made last minute adjustments to her clothes. Past the drawn-up plain shoji screens, a balcony overlooked the central courtyard of the castle—the first castle conquered by the Scorpion, but not the last. Indeed, with the ability to study the mechanisms behind the stone soldiers, infiltrating and disabling them had become much easier. The other fortresses had fallen and been claimed, even as of yet there weren't enough Scorpion to fully man all of them.

Today, though, under the setting sun she was inaugurating a new festival, a celebration of all they had accomplished to get this far. It was needed to give the people some semblance of respite. All that was left was to go out onto the balcony and speak.

Yuka had ever expected to do something like this. She was a third daughter, victim of a terrible accident. One that was meant to live out her days tending to a shrine that no one outside of her family ever visited. There had been contentment there, of a lonely sort. She had had purpose, guidance; and the kami were, if not sparkling conversationalists, always there to listen.

The mask on her face felt off, wrong even. The choice to wear a kumosou mask had been born out of a desire to hide the hideous scarring on her face. But the full basket hood covering her body had become familiar, comfortable. Yet, Tadashi was right. For this, appearing so humbly would do nothing but invite distrust.

The Scorpion were extravagant by nature. Most outside the clan would be surprised by that, but it was true. Pageantry, grand gestures and expansive feasts were what the Scorpion expected. For all their pragmatism, the average samurai and peasant of the clan wanted a show. To see that, despite their supposed 'villainy', they were flourishing. That their methods, no matter how underhanded, led to success.

Yuka could appreciate those ways, but they still made her uncomfortable. She donned a brilliantly-painted kabuki mask—gold and greens drawing together into the shape of blooming flowers. The crowd would appreciate it. The green was a new beginning and the gold was, of course, for how rich they were going to be.

"Soshi-dono," a voice called.

Yuka turned to look at her staunchest ally, Shosuro Shiori. The woman was dressed nicely tonight. Her usual bland cloth mask had been exchanged for a brilliantly-dyed animal mask that called to mind the forests that they no longer held.

Giving a polite nod, Yuka replied, "Shosuro-san, I thought you were still getting ready."

Shiori gave a wave of her hand in a so-so gesture. "Only so much you can do with a weathered woman like me." She smiled with self-deprecation. "Honestly, I thought picking a mask would take longer."

"It suits you. Is Yogo Tadashi-san here yet?" Yuka asked.

Shiori's brown eyes narrowed. "He managed to tear himself away from his flowers for the ceremony, yes."

Yuka, politely, did not roll her eyes. Anyone with eyes could see Shiori and Tadashi disliked each other. The latter thought the former simple, and the former thought the latter conceited. It was undeniably for the best that her left and right hands were not too close. But petty snipes like this were unbecoming.

Running her fingers over a fan, a gift from some ambitious brat that she had no intention of remembering, Yuka instead indulged in a private smile. It was hidden by the mask, but not her eyes. Another reason to dislike the kabuki one she had to wear for this ceremony.

"Now, now. His flowers may well mean we no longer have to rely on certain...factors...to provide food for us." Yuka chided. "But, yes, he is a little obsessed with getting that garden up and running."

Shiori inspected her manicured fingers for a moment. "Better if he were obsessed with helping Mika-san out. She's still trapped on the road because of him."

Yuka did not think that was true. Even if Tadashi were entirely her creature, he would still be someone to be used sparingly. He was of Bayushi Kachiko's school; ever grasping, ever reaching to bring more and more power to the

Scorpion. It was not a bad thing; the Scorpion needed that power. For now, though, better to be thought of as weak, to let the other clans get trapped in their own visions, while they built up these islands. Yuka was skilled at what she did, and, more importantly, young, giving the impression that the Scorpion were still unable to reach out.

"Mika-san is doing her best, as we all are." Yuka answered gently. "Now I must convince our people that the work is not yet done."

The older woman shook her head. "We all know what the reward for good work is, Soshi-dono. More work."

Yuka allowed herself to snort in mirth. "Ah, but I want them to be happy about it."

"I did wonder why you were opening the sake stocks up." Shiori replied, her eyes smiling.

Yuka returned a smile of her own. "Well, Bayushi-kun was so industrious in convincing the other clans to give some up for us...it seemed a shame not to use it."

"Hai," Shiori agreed. "I'll wait for you at the front then. I look forward to your speech."

Yuka nodded. "I'll be there shortly."

The other woman left, and Yuka took a breath as she began the final preparations to convince the kami to help her. No, she was never meant for this, but duty does not care what you are meant for. It cares that you fulfill it.

So, once more, Yuka entreated her treasured allies, this time to let her voice fill the courtyard as she speaks. Once more, she tried to find the courage to make herself heard.

Bayushi Kazuki glanced quickly around before he carefully slid into the vault room set aside by Yogo Norio. Nestled deep in the castle, the room was larger than expected, the walls given over to small talismans, medicinal chests and large protective wards. The floor divided in on itself again and again in a tiled maze, as tables and bookcases were scattered in some arrangement that had no logic that Kazuki could see.

The smell of incense and ink hung in the air. It was still fundamentally built like a treasure room, meant to be extremely hard to get into and out of, though careful work had been done to make it comfortable to live and work in. The overhead hanging lantern that illuminated the room was proof enough of that.

"Yogo-san!" Kazuki called.

From behind one bookcase, the older Yogo emerged, butterfly mask covering his face. The mask did little to hide the weariness in Norio's black eyes, as if he hadn't been sleeping enough. The brown kimono he wore was in disarray, from too-long use and catching naps in odd places. The man bowed.

"Bayushi-san, you made it. Come with me. We have much to discuss." Norio's words were clipped, with a hurry that belied his paunch.

Kazuki easily kept up with the man as they strode to the back of the vault. "What's this about, Yogo-san? I thought our last meeting went well."

Norio huffed slightly as they moved past a table littered with parts of a half-made incense burner. "It did, but something came up. And we're both in the habit of keeping some secrets—from even our masters."

In spite of himself, Kazuki found his hand drifting to the hidden knife he kept strapped to his leg. The ironclad rule of Tejina magic was that only those who were involved in its creation or its use could know about it. Others had to be eliminated, one way or another.

"Calm yourself," Norio snapped bluntly. "The secrets of the Tejina are safe. I'm aware of your possession, but no more than that. As is my job. Sometimes I think we Scorpion are too fond of our conspiracies within conspiracies."

Kazuki's brown eyes narrowed as his hand stopped. "Speak plainly then. I have no wish to dispatch you, but that

doesn't mean I won't."

Norio's shoulders sagged wearily. "Bayushi-san, you are in my sanctum. If you **can** dispatch me here, I would deserve it. But, like you, I have a separate purpose. We cannot let the Clan simply be...unwatched. That has led to unfortunate incidents, such as during the days of the Traitor."

There was only one Scorpion given that appellation, though there were many who could be said to have betrayed the clan. Only one had sought to make the Clan betray itself. Bayushi Atsuki he had been named. That meant...

"I thought you were a myth." Kazuki said, struggling to keep his tone bland, his manner unconcerned. "The Black Watch was a story told to keep us shinobi and priests from delving too deep into things we were not meant to."

Norio just chuckled. "And yet, we exist. I thought the same of the Kagedo. Although I gather that is a false name."

The Way of Shadow if one was feeling extremely generous, utter nonsense if one was not. Kazuki let himself give an amused exhalation. "Something like that. But why reveal yourself to me then? Are you not supposed to be the hidden knife against my throat?"

"Because, when I said we were too fond of conspiracies within conspiracies, I meant it." Norio stopped at the far wall where a heavy curtain hung. It seemed to be placed to try and keep the place warm.

Without a word, he shifted the fabric aside, pulling it away to reveal a wall of weapons unlike any that Kazuki has seen. While he was no bushi to be obsessed with armaments, the profession of shinobi demanded familiarity with the weapons of the warrior, all the better to imitate them.

Ten glittering weapons hung on the wall, all beautiful in their own way. All of them bearing names. Not names of their crafter or what the weapons themselves might be called. It was an ancient script, one he would never recognize save for the frequency he'd seen at least one particular name depicted in the most ancient shrines of his homeland. The name of one long gone.

"What...are these?" Kazuki found himself asking.

Norio reverently gazed up at the wall. "Near as I can tell, these are the last gifts that Lady Doji left her siblings, and herself, should she ever come here."

Kazuki almost wanted to pick up the short kodachi sword that bore Lord Bayushi's name but he did not. His instincts told him that this weapon was not for him. Perhaps it was not for anyone. Still his eyes swept through the collection to settle on two he could not, by their appearance, associate with any of the children of the Sun and Moon. One was an ornate but surprisingly gentle looking spear. None of the Founding kami had been known for their spear work. The other was a weapon that most would have disdained, a kusari-fundo. Brilliantly made with shining crystal and steel, it was not the weapon of a great warrior, a peacemaker, or an explorer. It was the weapon of someone who wished to subdue, but not conquer. The long chain weapon carried no edge to cut, but a heavy weight to prevent easy escape.

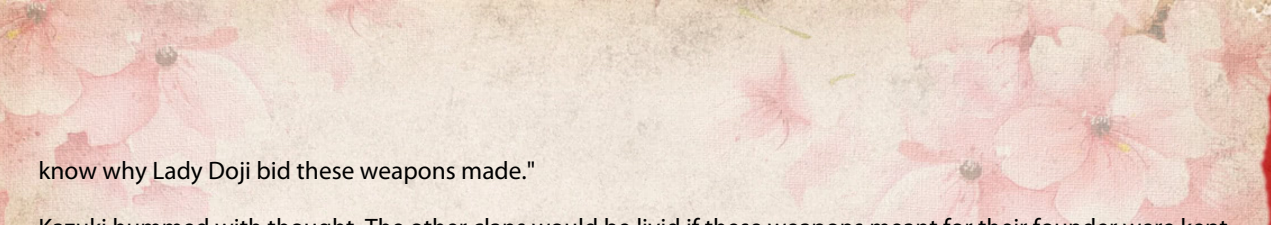
"...I see the Seven, and of course the great chokoto of O-Hantei-no-kami. But these last two, who are they for?" Kazuki found himself asking.

Norio looked at the wall. "I do not know. Only perhaps Lady Shinjo, should she ever return from her travels, could tell us, though some have associated this ornament with..." He shook his head. "I do not know," he said again. There is no sign in the books and records I have. But, I do not believe that Lady Doji would have a slow decline like us mere mortals. So those weapons must be for someone, perhaps a memorial of sorts. Yet that is not what concerns me."

Kazuki turned to look at the Yogo, his eyes narrowing in thought. The question was obvious.

"Why prepare weapons for a place meant to be a sanctuary?" Kazuki asked anyway.

"Indeed, we dare not give these to the Clans yet, though they may well deserve them." Norio says. "Not until we



know why Lady Doji bid these weapons made."

Kazuki hummed with thought. The other clans would be livid if these weapons meant for their founder were kept from them... and yet Kazuki couldn't disagree with the decision. The Sanctuary had revealed too many hidden secrets, hidden threats to trust blindly. From the Phoenix nearly at war with itself, to the Unicorn seemingly disappearing into an endless maze... No. Study was needed. And there was advantage to be gained.

"Hai. Where did you find these anyways?" Kazuki asked.

Norio tilted his head and mumbled with concern. "I didn't. I found them here in this chamber some days after I began preparation, when the last fortress fell."

"That's ominous," Kazuki ran his eyes across the glittering array.

Norio could not disagree.

