

# Truth and Lies

By Katrina Ostrander

“Thank you for taking the time to receive us, Chief Magistrate Bayushi,” Doji no Tsume Itsuyo began. She led her retinue in a deep bow in the side chamber of the main keep at Toshi Ranbo. The main audience hall was for proclamations and grand receptions, not the minutiae of actual diplomacy. The austere room with bare wooden beams, cracked plaster walls, and drafty windows signified the visitor’s lesser status as a mere vassal family daimyō. “We are grateful for your audience and the chance to discuss the most recent, if troubling, events.”

The reception would have been a grave insult had Doji Hotaru not accompanied Itsuyo incognito, dressed as a sword-for-hire.

Yet while the rest of Bayushi Yojiro’s retinue scrutinized the Tsume daimyō’s words to discern her intentions, Hotaru could only watch the soldier seated far behind Bayushi Yojiro in a place of low honor.

Of all the people she’d been expecting to find at Toshi Ranbo, Lady Kachiko was the very last.

Bayushi Yojiro remained solemn, his voice tinged with concern. “Dark clouds gather around Toshi Ranbo, my lady, and your arrival heralds even more uncertainty. For what purpose do we owe you the honor of your visit?”

Surely the Imperial Advisor was in Otosan Uchi, where she would be assisting her husband as he assumed the responsibilities of Regency while trying to locate the Crown Prince. It was madness for her to be out here at the edge of the battlefields, surrounded by warriors who were completely defenseless against her charms and cunning, but also completely irrelevant to the games of court. What use could she be to the clan out here while the capital boiled and seethed?

“As you know,” Itsuyo explained, “the Lion Clan has made many attempts against this castle, and most recently, one of their number attempted to wrest Kyotei Castle from its rightful rulers—the Tsume vassal family of the Crane. With the Matsu legions’ most recent aggression against the very heart of the Kakita family, we believe that the usurper Matsu Tsuko will use the blood feud as justification for a full-blown war.”

Kachiko wore an otherwise-unremarkable suit of armor made for a Scorpion Clan *bushi*. The suit must have belonged to one of the members of the Imperial Legion garrisoned at Toshi Ranbo, many of whom had been drawn from Scorpion forces. The fearsome *mempō* of the helmet could not conceal the dark intensity of her eyes or the delicate curve of her lips, but it was the subtle scent of sandalwood and jasmine that removed all doubt from Hotaru’s mind. Kachiko’s robes and letters always bore her signature fragrance.



“We, too, received the news of Kyūden Kakita’s fall,” Yojiro replied. “Its loss is no doubt a tragedy for your clan, but we have heard that its inhabitants have been taken for ransom, not killed in cold blood.”

Could it be that the Kachiko of Otsan Uchi was really her body-double? It was a crucial tool in Kachiko’s bag of tricks, but she’d never heard of Kachiko deploying her double while so far away. The further apart the two women were, the higher the chances of discovery. It was a potentially explosive secret, one that could irreparably harm the reputation of the Imperial Advisor and every promise, or threat, she had ever made. If one couldn’t know if one was dealing with the real Kachiko or just her double...

“That is true—for now. But my mistress, the Doji daimyō and Crane Clan Champion, fears that Matsu Tsuko may be just as rash as her late betrothed.”

Hotaru began the cadence of moves they’d both mastered over the years of knowing each other, the secret language that didn’t require words, only the slightest of gestures. Subtly upraise the chin for *yes*, lower the gaze for *no*. Different ways of resting the hands, the way the fingers were spaced or moved, could signify different words or individuals. With a few variances to avoid anyone picking up their coded movements, the gestures had allowed them to send secret messages to one another even when they were speaking in the public eye of court.



“We shall see,” Yojiro responded, conceding nothing.

While the focus of the room was on Itsuyo, Hotaru shifted her left palm from a fist to a face-down open hand, and then back to an attentive fist. If anyone had even noticed, it would have looked as though she’d only needed to flex a troublesome wrist. The face-down left hand meant *Hotaru. It’s me.*

Itsuyo wouldn’t give up so easily. “Steward Kakita Sukenobu still makes the castle his residence, as do a squad of the Daidoji Iron Warriors. I hope that you have found them valuable in bolstering the forces of the Imperial Legion.”

The figure in the armor replied with a slight tilt of her head, which stood for *Kachiko. I know.*

Yojiro continued, oblivious to their clandestine correspondence. “They have availed themselves to us, as would any honorable samurai, but we have not needed to lean on them for support thus far.”



*Why are you here?* Hotaru asked wordlessly.

“As you said before, dark clouds gather, and the need for allies has never been greater. I am here before you now to offer a pledge of friendship and support. Allow the army of Daidoji Netsu and my own to reinforce your defenses against what we believe will be another spate of Lion aggression before winter comes to Toshi Ranbo. My honored father, Shiba Katsuda of Nikesake City, has also arrived with his forces from the northwest to ensure that peace prevails.”

Kachiko’s right arm shivered, as if the bushi had felt a chill. That was the sign for Kachiko’s husband, Shoju.

“I appreciate your offer, but the Emperor’s magistrates have no quarrel with the Lion.” Yojiro snapped his fan closed for emphasis. “The Lion would dishonor themselves if they tried to take the castle now that it’s been brought under the Hantei’s protection.”

*And Yojiro?* Hotaru pressed.

“Yet with no Hantei sitting the throne, is it possible the Lion will no longer see matters in that light?” Itsuyo cautioned.

Kachiko waited for Yojiro to begin speaking before she made her left hand into a fist and delicately pounded it in her right palm twice. *Working for Shoju.*

“I’m certain the Lion know on whose behalf Regent Shoju serves.”

Hotaru timed her reply with Itsuyo’s. *And are you working for Shoju?*

“Already the Lion test the Regent to see how much bloodshed he will permit without an official edict of war. If they are not condemned soon, they will hunger for more conquests. And where the Lion are granted leeway, others may sense their own opportunities.” Itsuyo paused.

Kachiko made to reply, but hesitated.

Itsuyo made the threat explicit. “They may very well set their eyes on reclaiming Toshi Ranbo once and for all.”

*Do you need my help?* Hotaru signed.

Kachiko remained still. Hotaru tried the same question again, to no avail.

Something was wrong. Very wrong.

“Again, I thank you for your consideration, Tsume-dono, but I must also consider the alternative. Is it not possible that the addition of Crane troops would significantly aggravate the Lion, and invite them to attack when they had previously turned their attention elsewhere?”

Yojiro’s counter was a strong one. Itsuyo tried to collect her thoughts in an attempt to rebuff his argument, but the pause grew into an uncomfortable silence.

Tsume Itsuyo had been trained to spar with weapons, not with words. Even with Hotaru’s preparation, the young lord did not know enough about her current sparring partner to seize upon his strengths and weaknesses, his desires and fears, as a Doji courtier would. This was partially why Hotaru had insisted on coming.

Yet, Kachiko complicated things, as ever. It would look terrible to the other lords of the



Crane for it to appear as though Hotaru had diverted her forces to save Kachiko, but in this moment, Kachiko could be the very key to forcing Yojiro's hand and avoiding bloodshed.

The bruises and cuts that Kakita Toshimoko had inflicted on her last night throbbed. He was waiting for them in the castle town, pretending to be a nameless sell-sword unless the worst happened and their retinue needing rescuing. He'd taught her not to allow others to dictate her actions. She'd learned the hard way to stop caring about what her father thought, to stop caring whether he approved or disapproved. She had come here with sincere and honorable intentions—to lead the Crane back to victory, and that would have to be enough.

*Time to play for keeps.*

She reached for the sword placed to her right side—the side of peace—and got to her feet. She untied the ribbon under her chin and pulled off the *jingasa*, allowing her long white hair to flow free. The entire room reacted at once, the bushi shifting into tightly coiled stances, ready to protect their masters.

“I am Doji Hotaru, Daimyō of the Doji family and Champion of the Crane Clan,” she calmly proclaimed, with all the grace Lady Doji had passed on to her descendants. Strengthened by the certainty of one's own cause, there was no need to shout or intimidate.

“Chief Magistrate Bayushi Yojiro, I charge you with imprisoning the Imperial Advisor, Bayushi Kachiko, against her will. I declare you a traitor to the Emperor and unfit to hold this castle in his name. I challenge you to a duel.”

She presented her sword to reveal a golden crane on the plain-black *tsuba* and the glowing-gold *habaki* of Shukujo, the Ancestral Sword of the Crane, the weapon of Lady Doji's heir.

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He'd played right into Lady Kachiko's hands, and now those hands were at his throat.

As her status far exceeded his own, Bayushi Yojiro could not contradict Doji Hotaru's charge without accepting her duel. Accepting the duel meant he or another would soon be gravely injured or dead—there was no way he could face a duelist trained by the Grey Crane



and survive. Nor were there many in the castle who could oppose her without incurring a significant risk to their own lives.

*Breathe*, he reminded himself. But he had only seconds to compose a response.

If Kachiko could recognize Hotaru in disguise, it made sense that the opposite was also true. *Once upon a time, I got to know her very well...* His mind raced back to when he'd seen them both in court. Never had they been directly at each other's throats, despite the rivalries between their clans. He'd seen the



fierceness now burning in Hotaru's eyes before—it was the same look he'd seen in Aoi when she'd been defending her lover, Takao.

Was Kachiko playing Hotaru as well, or...

His heart pounded faster.

*If I reveal the truth—that Kachiko is here—I will betray Shoji. If I deny Kachiko's identity, I face almost certain death at Hotaru's hands.*

*But my duty is to the Scorpion, and Shoji is my champion.*

The Imperial Legionnaires looked to him now, to see what he would do—and whether he would order them to kill a clan champion.

Slowly, he rose to his feet, his heart pounding in his ears.

“Champion Doji, they call me the Honest Scorpion. Believe me when I tell you that I am not holding Bayushi Kachiko here against her will.”

It wasn't a lie. It was Shoji who ordered her here, not Yojiro. He'd sent Kachiko here to keep her out of danger, out of trouble. Kachiko had obeyed.

Even if Hotaru killed him and took the city, Kachiko could still remain here, away from the capital. He could believe that Hotaru wouldn't let any harm come to her.

“My challenge stands,” Hotaru declared.

“So be it.”

Now his duty to the Scorpion meant his death, as he knew it one day would. Yojiro reached for his katana as Hotaru prepared to fully unsheathe her own.

“Wait!”

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The gathered samurai turned to stare at the source of the voice. With a small amount of trouble, the slight figure lifted the samurai helmet over her head and held it to one side. The mask she'd worn beneath the mempō was sheer, with only a hint of fabric tracing her eyes and cheeks. There was no mistaking the identity—or the beauty—of the woman before them.

Bayushi Kachiko parted her delicate lips to speak. “Chief Magistrate Yojiro is telling you the truth; I am not here against my will—he was charged with my safekeeping. Doji-dono, you need not fight him.”

Hotaru searched Kachiko's eyes for treachery, but found none.

Kachiko took a few steps forward to address them both. “Chief Magistrate, will you permit the Crane Clan forces to reinforce those of the Imperial Legion's and winter here at Toshi Ranbo, as they have requested? Will you recognize Champion Doji Hotaru as the commander of those troops?”

Yojiro exchanged a look with Kachiko before he turned to face Hotaru once again.

“Doji-sama,” Kachiko went on, “will you accept the Chief Magistrate's authority here as the Emperor's chief enforcer?”

The room held its breath.



Hotaru looked to Yojiro, and then to Kachiko. She knew what those eyes said: Please, Hotaru.

“I will accept it,” Hotaru agreed, feeding her sword back into its sheath.

Yojiro breathed an audible sigh of relief. “Very well.”

It wasn't as great a victory as she had hoped, but she'd still managed to strengthen the Crane's position and regain Toshi Ranbo without losing a single soul. She should have trusted in Lady Doji that civility and peace could still prevail even in these tumultuous times. *Forgive me, Doji-no-Kami.*

“I am glad that no blood need be shed by any of the Emperor's servants,” Hotaru said, addressing the room.

Yojiro nodded, adding, “And I believe all of the Emperor's servants gathered here understand the importance of keeping the Imperial Advisor safe—by keeping her presence here a secret.”

“I would not want to contemplate the fate of any who failed in that duty.” Kachiko's threat was as sharp as the edges of the *maedate* helmet crest she caressed with excruciating care.

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Late that night, Hotaru was putting the finishing touches on her letter to Doji Shizue when the sound of silks sweeping against the floor alerted her to Kachiko's presence, never mind the Crane Clan guards that were posted in the hallway. Hotaru turned to see Kachiko sliding a trap door in the wall panel closed, her figure illuminated only by the soft candlelight.

“I am glad to see you've made yourself familiar with the escape routes hidden in the castle,” Hotaru said dryly.

“Mistress, is everything all right?” came a voice from beyond the screen.

“Yes, all is well. Please leave us,” Hotaru called back. There was a moment's hesitation, but the silhouettes disappeared from outside her chambers.

“I'll be sure to post a guard in the secret passageway next time to provide you with more of a challenge.”

“Do you really not want me to be able to visit you when I please?” Kachiko's words were meant to tease, but there was sadness there. Even a hint of desperation.

Hotaru didn't reply; she only held out her hand, which Kachiko took, before drawing her in for an embrace.

She felt something within Kachiko break, and the tights reins that the Bayushi-trained courtier kept on her emotions snapped as she sobbed into Hotaru's chest. Hotaru held her close, stroking her long black hair to comfort her, as though she could somehow hold on to this moment for eternity if she held Kachiko tightly enough.

For a moment, it was only the two of them. No obligations, no battlefields or politics. She knew it was not to last.

“Hotaru,” Kachiko cried softly.



She'd never seen Kachiko like this: out of control, truly afraid. Even when Hotaru was still a girl, meeting Kachiko for the first time at the Shosuro palace, Kachiko had always been more savvy, more confident. Back then, Hotaru wished she could have been more like Kachiko. That was before she realized the Scorpion woman was even less free than she was.

"I've never felt so alone as I have these last few weeks. But seeing you, it..." Kachiko took a deep breath, regaining her voice. "It feels as though there is now light rekindled where only darkness lay."

Hotaru lifted Kachiko's mask and wiped the tears from her face.

"Tell me what is wrong," Hotaru whispered.

In hushed tones, Kachiko explained that she had been sent to Toshi Ranbo, that only a scant few knew of her presence. She'd been completely isolated, with only an hour or so of company a day.

"I didn't dare write you," Kachiko murmured. "It was too dangerous."

"Dangerous?"

Kachiko stayed quiet. She was still holding back, not ready to face whatever it was that was aching inside her.

Hotaru kept on holding her, and the sobs slowly began to subside. "And yet, for me to find you again..."

They'd discussed the possibility before, but they weren't quite willing to believe it. Shinsei once taught that two souls could be tied together—their destinies linked—and that even when the folly of humankind drove them apart, they would find a way back to each other. "*I would fight by your side...*"

Kachiko slowly regained her composure. "I fear we have been reunited only in the most terrible of circumstances."



Hotaru recounted the calamities that had befallen Rokugan in only a matter of weeks. "The death of the Emperor. The edict. The Regency. The missing Crown Prince..." So much had gone wrong. How much of it bore Kachiko's fingerprints?

"Our clans can't be fighting now, when everything is falling apart. But also, the Scorpion need your help, Hotaru." The next words she spoke in a barely audible whisper. "I have done something terrible."



Hotaru's heart stopped. For Kachiko herself to admit that what she had done was terrible... Kachiko withdrew from her, then reached for a calligraphy brush. Hotaru watched as she committed her crimes to paper—crimes that were too terrible to speak aloud.

*I have destroyed her trust in me,* Kachiko thought, watching Hotaru read the contents for a second time. Hotaru could keep these documents, if she wanted, and use them as damning evidence in a courtroom where Kachiko could be condemned to a fate worse than death.

*This is it. She will abandon me, and I will be left alone again.*

"Is this all of it?" Hotaru finally asked.

"Yes," Kachiko confirmed. "I swear it." Sotorii's regicide, the cover-up, Aramorō's assignment against Toturi. What she had—and had not—admitted to Shoju. She'd left nothing out in her confession to Hotaru.

"They didn't find the Emerald Champion's body." There was a tinge of hope in Hotaru's voice, as though it meant Toturi could still be alive.

"They wouldn't, if it was done correctly." Kachiko said as quietly as she could. It was no consolation.

"Toturi was my *friend*." Hotaru's anger was rising. "He didn't deserve this."

No, he didn't. Kachiko had wanted power to make up for the power that had been denied to her when she was passed over for the title of Shosuro lord. More than that, she had wanted to deny power to others. She'd told herself she was trying to do what was best in a given situation, but she'd allowed her own ambition to blind her, allowed herself to believe that what was good for her was good for the Scorpion Clan—and for the Empire.

"I'm so sorry. Truly, I..."

Kachiko inched closer to Hotaru. Shoju was right. *I wanted power, but it was all built on lies. In the end, it all melted away like snow.*

"Hotaru. Years ago, at the Keep of White Sails, you showed me the need for allies you can trust. I'm finally starting to learn that lesson.

"Sometimes, when the script demands it, I must be willing to play the villain, but I cannot see everyone as my enemy anymore. I cannot continue like this, trying to puppeteer everything and everyone around me. It's impossible."

The *kuroko* stagehands knew they could not control the actors on the Kabuki stage. That didn't mean they weren't influential on the final performance, or that they were any less essential.

Kachiko reached out to touch Hotaru gently on the shoulder.

"I can be your ally, Hotaru, if you'll let me."

Hotaru looked down at the papers she was holding. Her hands trembled. But one by one, she fed the papers to the candle's flame, until all evidence of Kachiko's sins had turned to ash.

"I believe you, Kachiko. And you'll help me set this right."





