Kakita Asami of the Crane Clan delicately refilled four teacups: one for each of her Lion Clan hosts, one for her bodyguard, and finally one for herself. How she longed to be a student again, when mastering proper tea-pouring techniques was the greatest of her worries, not whether she could prevent a war between her people and the Lion Clan.

She stifled a wistful sigh and settled back into a seated kneeling position on the tatami mat floor. The meeting room was small and plain by Crane standards, but then again, she was in a castle in the heart of Lion lands.

“Our priests have heard the laments of our honored ancestors. They demand the Crane return the Osari Plains to their rightful owners,” warned Ikoma Eiji, a Lion Clan historian and her diplomatic counterpart.

His attendant, the warrior Matsu Beiona, paced one side of the room, her mouth hardened into a frown. Beneath that mask of self-control, rage and frustration seethed. It wouldn’t take much to incite her into an outburst, but that wouldn’t serve Asami’s purposes here. Her father had bidden that she provide a diplomatic back channel in case tempers flared too hot during the more public rounds of negotiation at the Imperial Capital.

And if tempers flared here, too—well, that’s why Kaezin-san had been appointed her personal bodyguard, her yōjimbō.

Asami sipped her tea and smiled softly. “Perhaps your shugenja misread the omens. The Crane Clan is the rightful owner of the plains.” Even if the Lion shugenja were true mediums between this world and their ancestors, supernatural “evidence” wasn’t admissible as proof in any legal proceedings.

The Ikoma historian rose and gestured toward the horizon, his eyes narrowing in indignation. “Your warriors have occupied these lands for but two turns of the seasons. Before that, the Lion were its protectors.”

Asami looked to her own stoic guardian, who kept a close watch on the Matsu. She began tactfully: “For three short generations, yes, the Lion were its protectors. But our elders can remember the days when the Crane tended the beasts of those pastures and reaped the harvest of those fields—as we did for centuries untold.”
The Crane needed those lands now more than it had ever needed them before. After the tsunami, their rice paddies in the coastal provinces had been devastated, and their priests did not know when the Earth spirits would return to the fields and bless their crops once more. For the same reasons, her clan could not afford a war, especially while fighting intensified at Toshi Ranbo.

“The Crane stole those lands from the Lion!” The Ikoma snapped his fan shut and pointed it at Asami. “It was not through strength of blade and honor that the day was won, but through foul trickery. The Crane did not have enough numbers to prevail, and yet somehow they did. The Lion remember. Our ancestors do not lie.”

Asami took a deep breath. She had known this accusation was coming, but the foresight did not soften the sting of his words.

The historian stopped in front of a scroll bearing a quote from Akodo’s Leadership, the definitive treatise on the art of war by the Kami himself. “Without honor, there is no victory. Without fear, there is no defeat,” it read. He stroked his goatee as if in thought.

Asami recalled a different line from Akodo’s Leadership, and she considered offering its wisdom to her host: On the battlefield, all actions are honorable.

But he continued before she could speak. “At the dawn of the Empire, the first Hantei charged Lord Akodo himself with maintaining these lands on his behalf. The very Heavens ordained that they belong beneath the Lion’s banner.”

Asami closed her eyes, and prayed to Lady Doji that her next words would bear the weight of her determination and the levity of her foremother’s grace. “We cannot forever dwell in the past; it is in the present that we must live. If the Heavens had truly decreed that the Lion be its safekeepers, your forces would not have lost to our own.”

Uncomfortable silence pressed between them. Beyond the open screen doors and the veranda that circled the inner courtyard, cherry blossoms swirled in the breeze. The petals reminded her of a blizzard, of the long nights spent at home with stories, songs, and the smiles of her childhood sweetheart. But winter was already past, and spring would soon be over as well. Summer, the season of war, grew near.

The Ikoma began his counterattack. “The fact remains that the Lion are best equipped to ensure the plains’ continued protection. Your coastal holdings have fallen prey to pirate incursions on too many occasions. It would be a shame if a similar roving band of miscreants were to attack the Osari villages. Do we not want the same thing: to safeguard the Emperor’s lands as effectively as possible?”

Asami had to consider her words carefully, lest she insinuate that the answer was “no.” “We will protect these lands well.”
“Then let us try out the courtier’s theory!” the Matsu shouted. “Our honor demands we reclaim these lands by force! We waste our time bickering here. Let us test our mettle on the battlefield! My ancestors scream for justice. The Crane will scatter before our mighty roar!”

“Please calm your companion,” Asami said evenly, ignoring the bushi’s outburst. For a moment, she thought she saw the historian smirk.

Ikoma Eiji asked, “Are you afraid of Beiona-san making good on her threats? Isn’t Doji Kuwanan-sama posted along the front now, guarding the village of Shirei?”

Asami’s heart tightened in her chest. He could be, but she couldn’t know for sure. She hadn’t seen him in months, and his letters had ceased since the death of his father. Had she really been so obvious with her affections in public? Did the historian know about them?

No. Impossible. Surely Kuwanan was posted elsewhere, safely serving in a court on his sister’s behalf.

The screen behind them slid open, and a servant entered to proffer a scroll to his master. “An urgent letter, my lord.”

The Ikoma took the scroll and dismissed the messenger. The room grew silent as he read.

“Lady Asami, it appears that our conversation is over. It is just as I feared—a band of honorless ronin have slaughtered the Crane forces at Shirei Mura.”

Kuwanan’s body unmoving in the mud, blood and dirt dulling the brilliance of his blue-silver armor. A hideous ronin brandishing Kuwanan’s ancestral katana in a mockery of the Kakita family technique.

She banished the image from her mind, but her heart still beat loudly in her ears and her cheeks scalded red. Asami instinctively raised her fan to cover her mouth and lowered it again, in one smooth motion, as though she hadn’t tried to hide her reaction.

“This is terrible news,” she managed. Ikoma Eiji took a seat again, opened his calligraphy set, and began to compose a letter.

The Crane Clan forces would not have fallen—not to some “band of ronin,” as the Lion had claimed. Even if there had been ronin at the vanguard, the Lion had assuredly paid them off, and some bannerless Lion Clan ashigaru had no doubt supported the warriors as well.
Honor demanded that Asami believe his words, or at least act as though she did, but the hope in her heart refused. Doji Kuwanan could not be dead. If the Crane Clan Champion lost both her brother and her father in the same season, could she still pursue peace? Or would she be forced to avenge her kin?

With their diplomatic leverage gone, all she could do now was pray the Crane retook the village in time. If the Lion “overcame” the ronin first, the Crane would be dealt a serious blow to their case. Once again the Lion were attempting to provoke the Crane, and whoever struck first would lose the sympathy of the Emperor.

“Kaezin-san,” she said, standing at last, her yōjimbō rising beside her. “Let us return home.”

Matsu Beiona’s hand moved to rest on the hilt of her katana. Kaezin took a step in front of Asami, and she saw him discreetly unlock his sword, ready to strike at any moment.

Ikoma Eiji set down his brush and sighed. “The negotiations in Otosan Uchi have not yet finished, and our lord would have you remain our honored guest until everything is sorted out.”

The historian said one thing, but Asami understood the message that lay beneath: she, Kaezin, and their retinue were hostages. In case it finally came to war.

“Lady Asami, you are welcome to add a few lines if you please,” he said, gesturing to the parchment. “The Crane Clan delegation to the capital will be glad to see your calligraphy and know that you remain safe during your time with us.”

In her writing to him, Kakita Yuri would know with certainty that she had failed him—both as a diplomat and as a daughter.

The final cherry blossom broke away from the branch and drifted to the ground.