

Legend of the Five Rings™

THE CARD GAME

The Chrysanthemum Throne DYNASTY PACK

Court Games

By D.G. Laderoute

Kakita Yoshi paused his ambling stroll through the gardens of the Crane Clan embassy. A Kirishima azalea caught his attention, its blossoms bright crimson under the morning sun. It was, of course, perfectly trimmed: almost, but not quite, spherical, the slight asymmetry itself carefully crafted. Perfect imperfection, deliberately fashioned to complement the azalea's place in the garden.

Yoshi smiled his appreciation at the unseen gardener. How satisfying it must be, he thought, to be able to design the very flaws that afflicted your subjects. People, unfortunately, came with their flaws already included. The best he could do was learn those flaws, and then exploit them. Resentment, jealousy, ambition, lust...every delegate to the Imperial Court had some imperfection, some failure of character that could be leveraged. The trick—and the trouble—was determining how to work with what you were given. It would be so much easier if, like the gardener, Yoshi could simply decide that this courtier pined for a particular woman or that courtier craved opium. He could then arrange and shape the Imperial Court like this azalea, getting the precise outcome he desired every time.

Yes, the gardener had it so much easier.

Yoshi looked at a purple and yellow shion blossom. It represented remembrance...I won't forget. He still could not forget the last time he was here.

Yoshi walked along the winding path, toward the Crane Clan embassy proper, but he stopped when someone appeared in the path before him, blocking his way. Yoshi began to frown his disapproval, to prepare a sharp rebuke for whoever hadn't immediately made way for him, but he stopped as he recognized the grey kimono embroidered with cranes in white. It was Kakita Toshimoko, who was known as the Grey Crane—his own brother.

"Here you are, Yoshi-san," Toshimoko said, bowing. "I heard that you had found some time away from your duties as Imperial Chancellor."

Yoshi returned the bow. "Greetings, Brother. I see that, likewise, you have found yourself a chance to parade about the gardens."

"It is beautiful under the bright gaze of Lady Sun, is it not?" Grinning conspiratorially, Toshimoko added, "But it is even more beautiful in the softer of light of Lord Moon, with a fair woman by your side, eh?"

Yoshi suppressed a sigh. Toshimoko may be the revered sensei of the Kakita Dueling Academy, mentor and closest advisor to

Doji Hotaru and former mentor to the Emperor himself. But he was also ungraceful—sometimes even crude. Offering an indulgent smile, Yoshi replied, "If you say so, Brother."

"I do!" Toshimoko said, but his grin faded. "Still, you almost certainly have pressing business that demands your attention—you're not here to appreciate the foliage. What really brings you here?"

"I have not met with Hotaru-ue since her arrival in Otosan Uchi," Yoshi said. "I wish to offer my condolences to her regarding Lord Satsume prior to the funeral."

The remainder of Toshimoko's grin vanished. "Really? Condolences...or congratulations?"

Yoshi started to open and raise his fan, the instinct of a practiced courtier concealing his shock at such an outrageous statement. Instead, he glared at Toshimoko. "I did not realize that mastery of the sword entailed such a degradation of one's other qualities—such as simple decency and propriety."

"Bah. Spare me your courtly façade of indignity, Brother." He gestured at the shion. "That flower asks us to remember. Teinko threw herself off the cliffs at Kyūden Doji because of Satsume. Hotaru and I both well remember. So should you."

"Regardless of your feelings, that is an unworthy way to speak of the dead, Brother."

"Again, bah. The shion only cares that Satsume is remembered, not how. If it is less than fondly, then that is his burden to take into the next life; for he is the one who chose to bear it."

Yoshi looked back at the shion blossom. I won't forget. Yoshi wouldn't, but not for the unworthy reasons Toshimoko offered. He wouldn't forget Satsume because he had been a strong leader...and, yes, a demanding one. But demanding excellence from your vassals was how you made them strong, too. Nor would he would forget their sister, who had thrown her life away in the despairing belief that she could never live up to Satsume's expectations, rather than just trying harder to fulfill them, as was her duty.

People, unfortunately, came with their flaws already included. Teinko's fatal fragility had been hers. Hotaru and Toshimoko had decided Satsume was the villain of the piece, though. It was a nostalgically revisionist view, a willful blindness brought on by their love for Teinko. For each, it was their own weakness...their own flaw.

He looked back at Toshimoko. "Satsume was a great man," he said. "He represented and served our family, our clan, and our Empire with honor. You may choose to remember him otherwise, but I will not let that be forgotten." He considered adding, He is also the one now likely to be in Yomi, the Realm of Sacred Ancestors, while Teinko lingers in Meido, waiting to be judged...

But he didn't. Another of Toshimoko's flaws was passion. It made him easy to provoke—something Yoshi knew only too well. As children, he had once goaded Toshimoko too far over...something. He couldn't even recall the reason now. Toshimoko had knocked Yoshi into a koi pond and held him there, thrashing futilely, almost drowning him. The furtive, wet sounds and movements of koi made Yoshi shudder and draw away even to this day.

Toshimoko simply glared back at Yoshi. "I do not deny Satsume's service, nor his contributions, Brother. Just keep in mind, when you see Hotaru, that her feelings about him, like mine, are...strong."

"Of course."

A nearby stand of cherry trees swayed greenly in the sunlight, all traces of their petals gone. They had bloomed weeks ago: Before Akodo Arasou had been slain. Before the dissolution of a vital Unicorn-Lion marriage. Before the heir to the Crane, Doji Kuwanan, had come under attack in the Osari Plains. Before the kidnapping of Yasuki Taka and the hostage-taking of Kakita Asami.

Kakita Yuri awaited him near the gazebo, a perfect mask of cordiality betraying no hint of concern for his daughter's well-being. The man bowed deeply. "Greetings, Kakita-ue."

"Greetings, Yuri-san. You say you have important matters you needed to discuss." And away from the Imperial Court, no less.

"Yes, your lordship. The Unicorn continue gathering support for their petition: a new law, I believe, declaring Toshi Ranbo an Imperial holding."

"They do. It would appear that Bayushi Shoju has now endorsed their efforts as well. That leaves only the Lion in

opposition." Yoshi sniffed. "Hardly surprising. If the Emperor approves this petition, they stand to lose the most."

"My lord, it would be most desirable to have the Unicorn petition be the first order of the business for the court when it reconvenes. As the Imperial Chancellor, you oversee the court's agenda, so you can ensure this happens."

Ordinarily, he would only entertain such a request in return for something...useful. That the request came from his own clan, and one his direct vassals, made little difference. As chancellor, he served only the Emperor.

Moreover, this man had done no more than what was expected of him in sending his daughter to Lion lands to negotiate. Hostage taking was hardly unusual, especially in light of the losses the Lion had suffered at Toshi Ranbo. And yet...

Ikoma Ujiaki of the Lion had all but demanded to be granted the first petitioner's slot. And certainly, the Lion Clan delegation had offered nothing useful to the chancellor, assuming instead that the slot was theirs by right.

"I see no reason," Yoshi said, "why the Unicorn petition cannot be the first item on the agenda. I shall make the necessary arrangements."

Kakita Yuri's face remained expressionless, but he bowed. "Thank you. I shall inform the rest of the Crane delegation."

Yuri nodded, bowed again, and started back toward the embassy.

"And Yuri-san—"

The other man paused.

"We shall ensure that no harm comes to Lady Asami or her retinue."



"Thank you, my lord." At that, he bowed once more, even more deeply, and excused himself.

Yoshi gave the shion blossom a final look, then carried on, continuing his stroll through the gardens.

The Imperial audience chamber of Rokugan was the epicenter of the Empire's politics—a vast, soaring space at the heart of the palace in the Forbidden City. A place of mirror-polished stone and dark wood, its ponderous expanse accommodated the legions of courtiers, bureaucrats, and ministers who were the ceaseless machinery of Rokugani governance. Everything there was impeccably tailored, precisely arranged, and entirely choreographed. It was as far and different a place from the grime, blood, and confusion of a battlefield as one could possibly imagine.

But to Kakita Yoshi, there really was no difference. The Imperial Court was very much a battlefield, one where the consequences were often as dire as were the slash and thrust of katana and yari. And not just a battlefield, at that, but the battlefield, the one that mattered the most. Wars were won or lost there, before a single samurai even donned their armor. To underscore the point, he carried a *tessen*, a war fan whose bamboo ribs were cunningly lacquered and shaped to nearly the strength and sharpness of a katana blade. It was very much a weapon, something prohibited in the court. But he was the Imperial Chancellor, and the court was his to govern. Only the Emperor or the Emerald Champion might gainsay him. The concerns of anyone else were irrelevant.

Holding his fan prominently, Yoshi mounted the great dais, a massive edifice of polished stone and wood that loomed over the chamber. Upon each successively higher level of the dais sat correspondingly higher-ranking court officials, culminating with the Emperor himself at the pinnacle, upon the massive Chrysanthemum Throne. Pillars to either side bore inscriptions of wisdom: "All is right with the world" on the right and "Revere heaven, love people" on the left. Yoshi reached his own place on the level immediately below the throne, and then turned and faced the court.

Hundreds of courtiers knelt, blocks of color representing the Great Clans of Rokugan, the Imperial families, and several of the Minor Clans. They all waited for him to return their collective bow. First, though, he cast a critical eye over the proceedings. Failure in even the most minute detail would bring shame to the perpetrator, and then apology, dismissal to some distant and obscure post, or even *seppuku*. But everything was as it should be, a fact that left Yoshi both satisfied and slightly disappointed.

He let the moment linger a bit longer, then bowed to acknowledge the court's obeisance. As one, the assembly straightened. The only exception was Bayushi Kachiko, the Imperial Advisor, who knelt on the same level of the great dais as Yoshi, to the Emperor's left, whereas his own place was to the right. Of equal status, she hadn't bowed and simply acknowledged Yoshi with a nod. He returned it, noting that she had only just taken her place before him. Normally, she arrived in court well before he did—probably to oversee some petty scheme or other.

He looked away. A most unpleasant woman, as vile and dangerous as her clan's namesake scorpion. Like everyone else, she had flaws, of course...but Yoshi wasn't sure what they were. Kachiko was wrapped in too many veils of obfuscation and secrecy. Eventually, though, he would tear them away, and then—

The great doors swung open and Yoshi pushed Kachiko from his mind. Like every person present in the court, he prostrated

himself, forehead touching the floor.

The steady tread of *kōgake*, armored shoes, presaged the entrance of a squad of the Seppun Honor Guard. Behind followed a procession of retainers and more Miharu, the subservient retinue of a single man: Hantei the Thirty-Eighth, the Emperor of Rokugan.

With utter precision, the Miharu and myriad functionaries separated and moved to their places. The Emperor, followed by the Imperial Herald and other officials, ascended the great dais. When the Emperor reached his place at the top, he turned, facing the court and offering a simple bow before taking his place on the throne.

Moving as one, the court rose, but remained kneeling. A pause, then Yoshi stood.

"Loyal samurai of Rokugan," he said, "it is my honor and privilege to declare this session of the Imperial Court, on this tenth day of the month of Akodo, in the year 1123 by the Calendar of Isawa, to be convened." As he spoke, his voice carried throughout the chamber, carried to every corner by the cunning design of the place. "May the Ten Thousand Fortunes guide your thoughts, words, and deeds as you engage in the momentous business of the Empire on this day."

Yoshi paused and cast one more glance across the court. The ink brushes of the scribes were poised, ready to record the proceedings in minute detail. At the back of the chamber, the various delegations were lined up, each ready to approach the great dais in turn. At their head, Yoshi saw Ide Tadaji of the Unicorn. The Lion had lobbied furiously to take the first petition slot, likely to preempt the Unicorn. Yoshi had, unfortunately, only been able to offer them the third, following a Dragon delegation seeking to petition the court about their troubles with the heretical Perfect Land Sect. The glare of the Lion delegation head, Ikoma Ujiaki, was on him like a beam of hot sunlight. Yoshi ignored it.

All was ready. Yoshi raised his fan to signal that the first delegation should approach...but stopped at movement behind him.

The Emperor stood, apparently to speak.

Yoshi immediately lowered his fan. This was...unexpected. Yet, it was the Emperor's prerogative to do whatever he wished, so he simply turned to hear what the Son of Heaven would say.

"Samurai of Rokugan," the Emperor said, "prior to the commencement of this court's work, I will address a grave matter. The Empire recently suffered a grievous loss with the death of Doji Satsume, the Emerald Champion. I wish to commemorate Satsume-san and to recognize, with gratitude, his loyalty and tireless efforts for the betterment of the Empire."

Silence reigned, for a moment, before the Emperor continued.

"Lord Satsume's death has, of course, left the position of Emerald Champion vacant. I have instructed the Imperial Herald to arrange for the Test of the Emerald Champion to be held, at a time and place yet to be determined, in order that the Celestial Heavens, in their wisdom, may ordain a new incumbent for this revered office."

Another pause. Yoshi glanced back at the court, ensuring the delegations remained ready to approach when the Emperor finished speaking.

"Finally," the Emperor said, "I am issuing an edict. The ascension of a new Emerald Champion, by means of the customary tournament, is an ancient tradition and one that contributes directly to the stability of the Empire. To further ensure that stability, I am decreeing that, until such time as a new Emerald Champion has assumed the august position of

Chief Magistrate of Rokugan, no existing Imperial laws will be amended or repealed, and no new Imperial laws will be proposed or enacted. With that decree in place, the business of this court may now commence."

A decree...? No new laws, no laws amended...?

Why? Why had the Emperor done this? And why hadn't he been informed? He was the chancellor. Such a proclamation should not be a surprise to him.

Were there other surprises lurking in the court...?

Instinct almost caused Yoshi to raise his fan, concealing his shock, as dozens of lesser courtiers did throughout the chamber. But he didn't have that luxury. Fortunately, a flawless façade, cultivated over years in court, allowed him to maintain a nearly perfect expression of bland neutrality.

Yoshi looked to the far end of the chamber. The Emperor's decree had rendered the Unicorn's petition suddenly pointless. As Ide Tadaji stepped aside, allowing the Dragon to take his place, Yoshi sensed his surprise and disappointment. He exchanged a brief glance with Kakita Yuri, standing with the Crane, and could feel his shocked discomfiture as well.

Yoshi carefully maintained his mask as the Dragon approached the great dais. The Lion moved eagerly into place behind them, their simmering resentment replaced by enthusiastic satisfaction.

Why had the Emperor done this?

Movement to his left snagged Yoshi's attention. Bayushi Kachiko had begun fanning herself. Her fan depicted a castle landscape—and a young maiden.

Yoshi's grip tightened on his own fan.

Kachiko had been uncharacteristically late arriving in court. Where, exactly, had she been? With the Emperor?

For her part, Kachiko's interest seemed to lie only with the approaching Dragon. She did, however, favor Yoshi with a brief look, a fleeting glimpse that told him nothing...

And everything.

His knuckles tightened again, whitening.

Like everyone else, she had flaws...but Yoshi wasn't sure what they were. She was wrapped in too many veils of obfuscation and secrecy.

Yoshi turned away from Kachiko. The shion flowers in the gardens of the Crane still held their promise.

I will not forget.

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