

AMBUSH



A SHORT STORY BY ANDREW ROBINSON

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Shion strode toward the council chamber. She knew why the Hashimoto elders had summoned her—though they weren’t brazen enough to phrase it that way. Overwatch had intercepted the majority of Vendetta’s shipment of anima avatar weapons, and they were looking for answers. “No, I don’t have time for this,” she seethed. “Not with Mizuki and the Yōkai roaming freely in the stronghold. If my men fail to bring him back . . . I’ll burn the city to the ground until he crawls out.”

The other elders did not know that the Yōkai had infiltrated the stronghold and made off with one of her most valuable prisoners. But that loss barely registered beside Mizuki’s betrayal: her ward of more than ten years, attacking her in the very place she’d raised him. “Mizuki will pay for what he’s done,” Shion angrily muttered to herself.

She could hear the elders arguing as she approached. Kohaku Ogata rolled their eyes and shifted in their embroidered tiger-skin blazer as she entered. “Lady Shion, we have been eagerly awaiting—”

“Enough.” Shion slammed the door so hard it rattled the light fixtures, startling them all, and studied Kohaku for a moment. “You dress like a tiger, Kohaku, but you have the sense of a magpie. And magpies don’t live long.”

Kohaku had the good sense to pale at this. “My apologies.”

Tsubaki Serizawa, whose makeup in the *Mukimiguma* style was meant to convey youth and sensuality, belied her fifty-something years. She fanned herself with studied calm. “Lady Shion. Thank you for responding so . . . promptly.”

“This had better be important,” Shion snapped. “I have people to kill.”





Yaemon Ijuuin, a thickset man in his sixties dressed in a traditional samurai's *montsuki hakama*, slouched heavily at the end of the table. He gestured to the chair at the table's head.

Shion looked around the room, almost anticipating an ambush, and ignored the chair.

Yaemon stole a glance at Tsubaki, whose makeup gave away no secrets. "Lady Shion . . . we would only like to discuss our current position."

"What about it? Are you not happy with how I've handled our affairs, advanced our standing? Spit it out."

Yaemon shifted uncomfortably. "This recent . . . event . . . has put us in a somewhat disadvantageous light relative to Talon. Perhaps if we had been focused more on our operations and less on . . . indulgent pursuits . . ."

Shion squinted at him, unsure of his meaning.

Kohaku smirked. "He thinks you party too hard. You know old Yaemon's never happy."

Yaemon glared at Kohaku, who laughed.

Shion thought how life had changed from when she was just an omnic chained to a metal bench in the training dungeon, recovering from a sparring session at the hands of the former clan elders. And now these fools were holding her back. "I enjoy myself. Have I not earned that? I do all the work here, after all," Shion said. "Or do you question my commitment?" Her hand rested easily on her anima pistol.

Seira Horvath, whose platinum-blond hair was pulled tightly into a ponytail that highlighted her severe features, looked down at the table. "No, not at all, Lady Shion. We merely seek your guidance and direction."

"Seira seems to know her place better than the rest of you." Shion pretended to ponder, though Seira's deferential pose could be hiding ambition.

Tsubaki used her fan to gesture, and Shion's attention snapped to her. "Perhaps we could conduct a . . . well, a postmortem, as it were, of today's events."

Shion smirked. "Postmortem? Once the enemy's stopped breathing, the fun part is over. Or have you become so soft you've forgotten what that feels like?"

"The train station," Tsubaki continued. "The less-than-promised weapons delivery to Talon because of Overwatch's interference. We may have let a golden opportunity to consolidate power slip through our fingers. Let's analyze what

went . . . adrift from the intended outcome and discuss how you—we—can ensure that it doesn't happen again. Perhaps a small change—”

“How about I make a small change,” Shion snapped. “You remember what I did to the elders before you—the ones who tried to hone their blades against my steel, who showed me their weaknesses with every missed blow?” Shion narrowed her gaze. “The Hashimoto have more power right now than we’ve ever had before.”

“Yes, for the moment,” Tsubaki protested. “But this ‘Vendetta’—”

“A usurper. A barbarian,” growled Yaemon. “She cares only for her own agenda. We’re just a means to an end for her. I was against bringing this outsider in—”

Shion cut him off. “Yes, and I overruled you—and now *we rule* Tokyo! So why don’t you leave the thinking to me.”

“What if she’s angry at how much she’s lost on the deal?” Seira asked, holding Shion’s gaze now. “What if Vendetta wants recompense?”

“Let her whine,” Shion scoffed. “I made sure she got the most important part of the shipment—no thanks to anyone at this table, I’ll remind you. Besides, it’s her own fault; she had her chance to wipe Overwatch out and failed.”

“With respect, Shion, we are only as powerful as we are perceived to be,” Tsubaki demurred. “Even now, Vendetta is pulling her people out of Japan, and we will be hard pressed to protect our gains without them—or all those anima weapons. Your deal seems to be falling apart. Why didn’t we have more people on that train?”

“Where exactly were *your* people, Tsubaki, or yours, Yaemon? Seira? Kohaku?” Shion demanded.

Yaemon thumped a fist on the table. “It’s not just a loss of control or territory—it’s a loss of *face*,” he said. He leaned forward onto the table. “Particularly for our *leader*.”

Her free hand moved to her jawline. She hooked one metal finger under the seam of the mask she’d had made all those years ago, tugging it away from her neck. The beautiful but eerie facade she presented to the world came away, revealing the omnic plating that the previous Hashimoto elders had dented and scraped in countless battles. Her visual receptors burned red as she leaned farther toward him. Now she could definitely see the sweat. Her neck began to emit a menacing red glow as she spoke.





"I can lose face and feel nothing, Yaemon, do not worry. But what will it feel like when *you lose yours*?"

Barely daring to breathe, Yaemon inclined his head. "Apologies, Lady Shion. I misspoke . . ."

"That's what I thought," Shion said, replacing her mask.

Abruptly, she stood tall and smiled—this time brightly, which was somehow even more disturbing.

"Now then," she asked, "would anyone else like to raise a concern, or can I finally speak?" The others said nothing. "What we were contracted to send Talon was just a fraction of our arsenal of anima weapons. And while Talon was allied with us, we *took* Tokyo, eliminating the only two rival families remaining—and infiltrating the police force." She leaned in now, punctuating each point with one titanium finger, denting the table each time. "Never mind Overwatch. Ignore Talon. Forget those teenagers in Kanazaka. All we need is the ferocity to keep what is ours."

Shion straightened her posture and readied her hands on the pistols at her sides. "If the Hashimoto are to hold Tokyo, you can either fall in line behind me, or I can replace you with someone who will. You may sit on this 'council' for now, but there are plenty of warm bodies I can find to fill those seats."

