

School Days

A Story from the Fall of the Onyx Empire
following the Events and People of Winter Court V

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Chapter 1

Shiro sano Kakita – Spring 1226

The castle was big, bigger than the one he had grown up in. But he knew that place, explored and ran through the hallways with his brothers, sisters and cousins. This place was full of people he didn't know.

And they're all looking at me, thought Kakita Harun mournfully. He stuffed his hands inside his sleeves, darker than most. He kept his head down, hoping no one noticed his dark skin or curly hair.

Unfortunately, it was even harder to stay invisible if your father was the Emerald Champion.

Kakita Karasu wasn't wearing the famed armour, but his emerald green kimono with the laurel and chrysanthemum mons were enough to mark his status as the Emperor's Champion.

People bowed as they passed, Karasu acknowledged them with a nod. He was used to it after eight years

since his appointment, seven since the tournament. But he wasn't acting in that capacity today. Today, he was a father seeing his son off to the Kakita Duelling Academy where he himself had began his education.

They came into a wide courtyard. The same, Karasu knew, where the junior students did their training. Through the crowd he could see Kakita Kousuda and his eldest daughter Arahime. As Karasu approached, Kousuda made the appropriate bows and motioned for his daughter to do the same. The formalities over, the two greeted each other as kin and friends.

"Still got the beard, I see," Kousuda said, absently stroking his own. "Kyoumi says I'm a bad influence."

Karasu smiled quietly. His own beard wasn't nearly as thick as Kousuda's, but it did make him look older and more mature. Adding to this were the grey hairs starting to appear among the black in his temples and above his ears.

Kousuda had settled into being a Crane quite well, even though he was still known by many, especially Karasu, as "the Ide".

"Kyoumi sends her apologies," said Kousuda. "She wanted to be here, but with the Voice and the new baby, it was best that she stayed. She is well, and asked me to tell you she is still waiting for that visit."

"I'll manage it, somehow," Karasu promised, running over in his mind the many things he needed to see to that never decreased. "I'm heading south after this for a few weeks. You may just get me turning up on your doorstep one day."

"Sometimes that's the best way, ne?" said Kousuda with a grin.

Harun and Arahime talked quietly. They knew each other well, and couldn't be more different. Harun so dark and so quiet. Arahime with her white hair in braids, and an air of mischief behind her grey eyes.

Harun was conscious of the curious stares directed at him. "They're still looking at me," he said. "I don't like it."

"Let them," said Arahime warmly. "You can always show them up later."

"Easy for you to say," said Harun. "You *look* like you belong here, I *don't*."

"You're a Kakita, your father is the Emerald Champion," said Arahime. "Where else would you belong." She leaned closer and whispered. "And they can deal with me, I always beat you at our sparring games."

Harun smiled, it was something.

There was a flurry of noise through the crowd. The academy sensei had arrived and motioned for the courtyard to be cleared so the testing could begin.

Karasu bent down towards his son and gently touched his shoulder. "Just do your best and let the Fortunes guide you," he said encouragingly, joining Kousuda at the edge of the courtyard to watch the testing.

The children were all about seven or eight years of age, fresh faced showing a little of the pressure of their families. Admittance to the Kakita Duelling Academy was a great honour, and hotly contested. They were lined up in rows, about a hundred in total, and less than a third would win admission. One of the junior sensei began to lead them through some basic exercises while others walked around, observing the students.

Harun kept up with the exercises, they were familiar to him due to his father and some of his trainer's instruction. He was conscious that every so often children were being drawn aside by the sensei and left the courtyard with their parents. Some were in tears.

The Master Sensei of the Academy, Kakita Kenshin, noticed Harun in the crowd. It was hard not to, a dark face in a sea of paler ones. He knew of the brood of war orphans that the Emerald Champion and his wife had adopted, but there was clearly something more there. Harun's features suggested a gaijin origin, perhaps Unicorn or even Zogeki. But for all that, in the easy way he moved and behaved he was the beginnings of the model of a Crane.

Perhaps even more than his father, Kenshin thought reflectively, remembering Karasu's own school days.

When the children numbered around fifty, the exercises stopped and each child was called individually inside the dojo building to talk to one of the sensei. Harun waited quietly, his expression neutral as he sized the other children up. And they sized up him.

Arahime was already making friends. A tall, boisterous boy named Hayate introduced himself to her, proudly proclaiming that his father was a kenshinzen and he would be one day as well.

Arahime was called before him, then it was Harun's turn. He was met by the Master Sensei himself. Harun bowed low, his forehead touching the tatami mat.

The first questions were standard. About bushido, what he knew of Kakita's The Sword and Shinsei's Tao. Basic things that most Rokugani children knew. But what was really tested was how he answered, how he framed his words. Harun gave good answers, but short ones. All with the slightest hesitation in them, as if slightly ashamed of knowing things. And his eyes were cast down.

Finally, Kenshin asked him another question. "Why is it you wish to study at the Kakita Academy?"

Automatically, Harun answered. "To bring honour to my family, sensei."

"Yes, yes," Kenshin said distractedly, waving away the standard answer. "I would expect that of any student, but I am asking this of you."

Harun dared look up. Examining Kenshin's careworn face, his white hair, his piercing blue eyes. He did not look unkind.

"I wish to find my place, sensei," said Harun, his gravity showing maturity beyond his eight years. "I want to know what it is I am supposed to do. What destiny has been set for me to fulfil. I want to serve, like my father does, and I want to know how."

"So young, and already so serious," remarked Kenshin quietly, to Harun he said. "May you fund that path, Harun-san, with the teachings and traditions of Kakita. But it may not be all that you seek."

When the questioning was over, about thirty in total would remain. Then there were goodbyes to be said and barracks to be assigned.

Karasu and Kousuda gathered with their children for their farewells. In a way, Karasu mused, it was almost a repetition of his own academy days with Kyoumi. He hoped it would go better, but given Arahime shared her mother's delight in mischief, he wasn't so sure.

Harun took the parting quietly, as he did most things. Not for the first time, Karasu wondered how such a calm, quiet boy had come from Yamada and Nakura.

I wonder where she is now, thought Karasu, if she was dead, we would have heard. One day I will tell him, when he is old enough to know.

The futon closest to the barracks door was Harun's, only because it was the only one not claimed. When he came in for the night, no met his eyes or even looked his way.

He pulled back the coverlet and saw a piece of paper hidden there. A single character written on it *Gaijin*.

He looked around again, anyone who was looking at him now looked away. He tore the paper into small pieces. If this was how it was going to be, he would have to face it.

Chapter 2

Shiro sano Kakita – Autumn 1226

The chill was in the air in the early evening when Kakita Harun practiced his katas. He found a quiet corner of the castle weeks ago to practice them undisturbed. And he did this in the short time they had for recreation before retiring for the evening.

Not that he wanted to do much recreation, few of the Kakita Academy students would talk to him. Except Arahime, and he didn't like how it made the other children treat her sometimes. She said she didn't care.

The notes hadn't stopped, it seemed every other day that he found them. Gaijin, dirty, tainted... He destroyed them as soon as he found them. He didn't want them to know how much they bothered him. Or bother the sensei with something so small.

There were the pranks too. His calligraphy work, someone spilling ink on it when he back was turned and he was chastised for his carelessness. He was repeatedly in trouble for leaving his sleeping area untidy, something he attended to with the utmost care. Last time they had beaten him for his "slovenly habits".

And then there was the morning he turned up for practice because someone had taken all his socks and thrown them in one of the garden ponds. He had turned up with dirty socks and a lecture on tardiness by Kakita Daichi-sensei.

"You need to tell someone about it," Arahime had told him.

"I don't want to bother the sensei with something so silly," said Harun. He was uncharacteristically angry. "And they can't know how much they're getting to me."

"They're jealous of you!" Arahime said. "They see how the sensei keep singling you out. How Kakita Kenshin-sensei talks to you!"

And she was right. This explained why it intensified. He still didn't want to tell anyone though. That was how they beat him.

"The seven tenets of Bushido, recite them," said Doji Yuriko, pacing the courtyard where the students were assembled, her walking cane tapping the rhythm of her gait.

"Jin, Yu, Rei, Chugo, Gi, Meyo, Makoto," recited the class.

"And who can tell me," said Yuriko, continuing to pace, "which of these virtues are most important to a samurai?"

Kakita Hayate raised his hand, and when given a nod of approval he stood and bowed. He had the slightest, smuggest, smile on his face. Pleased he could show off to the class. Harun remembered that

on the first day, and every other day after that, he had told everyone his father was a Kenshinzen and one day he would be one too.

“Meyo, sensei,” said Hayate. “Honour. For if a samurai acts with honour, then his every action is righteous.”

“No,” said Yuriko, a tad harshly. Stopping in her pacing. “With that view, any action could be justified. Including actions that bring disgrace.”

Hayate sat down, a frown replacing the smugness on his face.

Harun raised his hand, and stood and bowed when indicated. “Chugo, sensei,” he answered. “Duty. For a samurai who acts for the interest of his lord, not himself.”

“Just so,” said Yuriko with approval, motioning Harun to sit. She began to pace again. “To be a samurai is to serve. To bend the knee. To bow the head. To be an instrument of your lord’s will. To put the interest of one’s family, one’s clan before oneself.” She stopped and turned to look directly at Hayate. “To do less would bring dishonour and disgrace.”

The next day, Harun ran from the barracks to the courtyard where they practised. The run helped him avoid the chill, as he couldn’t find his quilted haori jacket. When he arrived, the other students were already lined up, bokkens in hand. Harun bowed to the sensei, Kakita Daichi.

“Sensei, I apologise for my tardiness,” he said.

A grunt of disapproval. “Get with the others.” He didn’t want to waste words again on the boy. Another bow and he assumed his place next to Arahime.

Daichi led them through the basic katas they had learned. Swift, disciplined movements, the bokkens moving like reeds in the wind. Then coming to a stop, standing still in silence.

Harun fell forward from a kick to the back of his knees, landing flat on his face and scraping his chin against the paving stones, drawing blood. He got to his feet, clutching his chin.

“He bleeds red,” came a whisper, somewhere near.

Daichi stood over Harun, frowning. “What is this?”

“My clumsiness, sensei,” said Harun, bowing in apology. The blood running through his fingers, down his arm and staining his sleeve.

“See to that,” Daichi said with a nod, he gestured to Arahime. “Go with him.”

“You need to tell someone,” insisted Arahime. “Hayate could really hurt you, you need to stop him.”

“I can’t do that,” argued Harun. “And it’s no different from what anyone else thinks. They’re right, I am gaijin. Why am I here?”

She stopped, putting her hand in his free one. “Harun, you wouldn’t be here if you didn’t deserve to be.”

Harun smiled.

Several days later, he was practising his katas in his secluded spot. Calming silence in his privacy. But today he was discovered. Hayate with his frequent offsidiers Kunta and Saburo. All with bokkens they had taken from the dojo.

“You dirty gaijin!” Hayate exploded. “You told! I’m going to be disciplined because of you. Just wait until I tell my father!”

“But I didn’t!” Harun protested weakly. He tried to explain. Had Arahime told? And how had they found him?

“You’re going to pay!” Hayate shouted, the three of them raised their bokkens in attack positons.

Suddenly, Arahime was there. Standing in front of Harun protectively. “No! Stop this!” she shouted.

“Get away, Arahime!” yelled Hayate.

“No! I won’t let you do this!” she yelled back. “You are the one who is wrong. You are horrible to him, Hayate.”

Harun hoped it wasn’t Arahime who had told. He had said not to and he would hate if she got hut because of him. He gently pulled her behind him.

“Three of you against one of me?” Harun mocked, looking them up and down. “And I’m unarmed! What are you? Afraid?”

“We are samurai, we are not afraid!” declared Hayate.

If this was supposed to rattle Harun, it didn’t. He just stood there, looking directly at Hayate.

“Hayate...maybe we shouldn’t do this,” said Kunta with a little hesitation. “You know, his father...”

“He’s not his father!” Hayate exploded. “Looking like that! He’s not a real Crane! Who knows what his mother fucked...”

Wham! Hayate was thrown backwards from Harun’s headbutt, seeing stars. Harun the tore the bokken from Hayate’s hands, hitting him as hard as he could, again and again. All he could see was red. All he wanted to do was hurt.

“Harun! Harun! Stop!” Arahime threw her arms around him, grabbing the bokken with her hands. Kunta and Saburo fled, dropping the bokkens as they ran. Harun looked down at Hayate, his face was a mess of blood.

“What have you done?” Arahime cried, clutching him.

Harun waited outside Sensei Kenshin’s study, his thoughts whirling. He was about to be expelled. He knew it. How could he face his father with such disgrace? Arahime was right, he should have said something earlier.

“Enter.”

Harun went in, prostrating himself on the floor before the sensei.

“Speak.”

“I freely admit my fault, sensei,” pleaded Harun. “If I had told you about Hayate, this never would have happened. I would not have hurt him. I fully accept my punishment, whatever you see fit.”

Harun felt like crying. He braced himself for Kenshin’s words, he knew he deserved them.

But Kenshin didn’t respond. Harun dared look up. Kenshin wasn’t even angry.

“Sit up, Harun-san,” said Kenshin gruffly. “Don’t flatter yourself for not telling me, I already knew. There’s not much that goes on in my dojo that I don’t know about. Even the small and petty feuds between boys that you don’t think are worth bothering me about. Am I right?”

“Yes sensei,” said Harun meekly.

“You won’t understand this, not yet but I hope you will remember,” said Kenshin. “We do not just make duellists here, but samurai who will go out into the world and represent the school and the clan. A good name which we will not have tarnished.” He looked down at Harun. “I wanted to see how you would handle it.”

Harun looked down. He wasn’t proud of how he “handled it”. “I lost my temper, sensei,” he said.

“You are to use your recreation time to meditate on this,” said Kenshin.

Harun’s heart leapt. “But...but I’m not expelled?”

Kenshin’s face was impassive, but was there a twinkle in his eyes? “In you, I see a capacity to reflect and to repent. To master your faults and to accept correction from elders. This is not a quality that Hayate has. See this lesson for what it is, Harun-san, and improve on it. You may go.”

Harun bowed low and left, his heart and heels considerably lighter than when he had entered.

Things improved from then on for Harun. He had a new found respect from his classmates. None of them had really liked Hayate, they just lacked the courage to challenge him directly. The fact that Harun had done that made them forget a lot of what they had thought about him.

Harun was at first suspicious of this until Arahime convinced him to see it for what it really was.

All was well.

Chapter 3

Spring, 1230 – Shiro Sano Kakita

In the fourth spring following Kakita Harun’s arrival at the Kakita Academy, his father Karasu brought Masami and Masaru to begin their education. Twins, probably Matsu in

origin. Both had red hair and this might have caused them a little grief had Harun not cleared the path for them earlier.

The boy Masaru was energetic and talkative. He was clearly suited for duelling; his sister was quieter and was accepted with the artisans.

They arrived with their cat, a stripey ginger named Yui. Sensei Kenshin looked sceptically at first at the animal, then said Yui could stay if she earned her keep catching mice.

Harun spent time with his father before he left to resume his duties as Emerald Champion. They walked together around the castle battlements, talking.

The war with the Onyx had changed, Karasu said when Harun asked him of news. Things had splintered since the death of Kanpeki, several of the warlords tried to take his place. Come summer, they would press the advantage.

“This doesn’t mean it’s ending,” Karasu explained. “It has just become a very different fight. The Onyx have shattered into smaller pieces, this makes them harder to stop.” He leaned on the battlements and looked out at the horizon. There was more grey in his hair and beard, making him look older than his thirty-two years. “It will be up to you, and Arahime and all the other children to finish what we started. I had hoped to leave you a better world.”

Harun stood close to him. “Father, one day I will ride out at your side. I could think of no greater honour.”

Karasu turned to look at his son. It wouldn’t be long until Harun would be as tall as him, he had lost a lot of his boyishness. In a few short years, Harun would have his own daisho, be swearing it and his service to the clan as a samurai.

He almost told him then. About his real mother, his real father. The whole story. But something held him back.

Almost a man, but not quite, thought Karasu.

He put his hand on Harun’s, smiling at him. “I couldn’t be prouder,” he said.

“Focus,” said Kakita Kenshin as he walked around the circle of seated students. “This is the essence of iaijutsu. This is how a duel is won before even your sword leaves its saya.” He looked around at the young faces. “Then, when the moment wills it, comes the strike. The draw and the blow are one.”

Harun watched the Master Sensei with interest. Even though he had lived in the Academy for four years, it still felt a privilege to watch the masters at work. And to learn from them where iaijutsu was in its most perfect form.

Kenshin stepped into the middle of the circle and looked over the heads of his students to a young man who had watched everything by the door. "Isamu-san, if you would?"

The students turned to look at him. They knew of Kakita Isamu, he after all had won the Iaijutsu tournament at the Emperor's Court earlier that winter.

Isamu walked into the circle, conscious of the stares on him and seeming to enjoy them. He bowed low to Kenshin. He was a young man, in his twenties with the brashness and overconfidence that seemed to be about all Crane duellists.

Kenshin bowed in return, much lower but still with the appropriate amount of respect. Then they both assumed the stance of Void.

All was quiet. Not a breath of wind, not a whisper from anyone. The two duellists stood, quiet in their intensity.

Then, like a flash of lightning, they moved. Their swords clearing the saya, a flash of steel as they came down on either side. Isamu touched his arm, there was a hole there where Kenshin's sword had cut it. Not a scratch on his arm at all.

Isamu bowed low to Kenshin, then left.

"He made it look easy," whispered Arahime excitedly to Harun.

"One day we will be doing that," Harun whispered back.

Several days later, Arahime was in the courtyard teasing Yui with a flower. She tickled the cat's nose with it, holding it just out of reach. Yui rolled on his back, trying to bat at it.

Harun found her there. He sat down next to Arahime. In many ways they had gotten closer since living at the Academy. But lately, it seemed as if she wanted something more from him than friendship. Harun wasn't sure what to think of that. Arahime was like his sister, anything else would be strange.

He took out a piece of paper from a pocket and held it out to Arahime. "Can you tell me what you think of this."

"More of your verses, Harun-san?" Arahime asked, taking it. "I thought the poets were in my family." She gave the flower to Harun and read the poem.

Harun tried to seem nonchalant as Arahime read it, teasing Yui with the flower.

A falling leaf, still

A single feather, frozen

Strike! The lightning flash!

Arahime smiled. "I like it," she said, "it's how I felt when we watched the duel."

Harun was relieved. "The stillness," he said, "I was trying to capture it. Not sure if I did."

"I think you did," said Arahime warmly, handing it back to him. "Is this what you want to be? A warrior poet?"

Harun smiled, the thought had crossed his mind. "Isn't a bit early to be thinking of things like that?"

"Perhaps," said Arahime. "But we should still think about how we will serve the clan when we leave here."

"We probably won't have much of a choice what we do," Harun reminded her. "We will be sent to serve the clan where we will be most needed."

Yui, clearly discontented with the lack of attention with the lack of attention, chose this moment to pounce upon Arahime. She laughed, quickly moving her hands away from Yui's claws.

"She probably smells the dried fish on your clothes," teased Harun. "How did that happen?"

"It was Masami, she put them in my clothes," said Arahime. "I told her that her first painting class was in the kitchens and she believed me."

Harun laughed. "Why do you torment her so?"

Arahime hit him with the flower. Harun held up his hands in mock surrender.

Yui seemed to think this was a grand game, starting to gambol about excitedly. Swatting Harun with her paws.

Harun waved Yui off, but this caused the cat to startle, running across the courtyard and towards the inside of the castle.

They looked at each other, then ran after her.

They chased him into the tenshukaku, upstairs, past guards and then saw Yui slip into a room with guards in front. They stopped Arahime, who was behind, but Harun got past them.

"What? What's all this? Who are you?" bellowed an unfamiliar voice.

Harun froze, bent over as he picked up the cat. On his right was a mortified and furious Kakita Rikuto, the Kakita family damiyo. On his left was, guessing by the purple he wore and the beard, a Unicorn samurai lord. Probably of higher rank than Rikuto, given his reaction.

“My profound apologies, Lord Chinua,” said Rikuto, bowing low. “I will make sure that this young scamp is...”

“No, no need,” Chinua said, waving aside the apologies. “Having youngsters around would certainly make things interesting.” He took a good look at Harun who was still frozen to the spot. “Though looking like that, are you sure he isn’t one of mine?” This last remark he finished with a laugh, which did a lot for breaking the tension.

Before anyone could say more, someone else came in. A woman wearing emerald green and yellow armour. Harun knew she was an Imperial Herald, he had seen many come to see his father. She bowed low to Rikuto and presented him with a large envelope with a chrysanthemum seal.

Rikuto looked between the herald and Chinua. The Unicorn Champion got to his feet, with a little difficulty. “We can talk on this later,” he said, then looked at Harun. “This one can see me to my quarters.”

As they walked, Yui jumped from Harun’s arms and ran back towards the dojo. Harun kept place with Lord Chinua who walked with a slight limp.

“What is your name, son?” he asked. The tone was curious, almost cordial.

“Harun, my lord,” he answered. “Kakita Harun.”

“Harun,” Chinua repeated thoughtfully. “I knew Harun, a long time ago. Who is your mother?”

“Kakita Hitomi, my lord,” said Harun. “She is the wife of my father, Kakita Karasu, the Emerald Champion.”

“Karasu?” Chinua frowned as if this wasn’t an answer he expected.

They walked on in silence for the rest of the way, when they almost came to the guest quarters Chinua spoke again.

“Harun-san, can you do something for me?”

“Of course, my lord,” said Harun meekly.

“When you write to your father next, tell him that you have seen me,” Chinua said. “I might have something he wants.”

“I will,” promised Harun, bowing low.

“You may go,” Chinua said.

Harun ran off.

Chinua watched the boy leave, he only had more questions. He went inside his quarters, his hands clenched into fists.

Damn it all, Yamada! Where are you and why is your son here?

When Harun arrived back at the dojo, the courtyard was filled with the students and masters. They were talking excitedly to each other.

Harun approached Arahime. "What is going on?"

Arahime's smile turned to concern. "Harun? What happened? Did you get in a lot of trouble?"

Harun shook his head. "I will tell you later, I promise. What is all this?"

"Oh," Arahime smiled again, "an Imperial Herald arrived earlier. The Empress has given birth to another son and the Emperor has declared twenty days of thanks giving. Isn't that great?"

"It is," Harun agreed.

The next day was a little more relaxed than normal. They spent the morning at the shrine, giving thanks and offering prayers. And in the evening they were permitted to join the castle's festivities while fireworks lit up the sky.

Lord Chinua was there. More than once, Harun caught him looking his way. But he was never approached.

He acts as if he knows me, thought Harun. Or knows something about me that I don't. Could he... could he know who I really am?

Chapter 4

Spring, 1234 - Shiro sano Kakita

Arahime and Harun stood in the dojo courtyard. Facing each other, perfectly still in the stance of Void. Each had a katana in a saya tied to their obi. The Academy's, not theirs, and while they were now allowed to borrow they could not own one. Not yet, but soon.

At sixteen, Harun had the look of a man of almost twenty. He was tall, taller than even some of the sensei at the Academy. His fuzzy teenage beard that had appeared the year before was now thicker

and had to be constantly kept in check. There was a confidence in him, a quiet one that did not flaunt itself but was still was apparent in his every word and movement.

Arahime had grown into a beautiful young woman. She wore her white hair long to the middle of her back, tied neatly off her face. She carried herself with an elegance that suggested more a courtier than a duellist. Her stormy grey eyes suggested what she was capable of, of the fire just beneath the surface that she called on in her use of the blade. Still with the mischief, the joy, but ready to cast it off like a garment if she needed to act.

Almost together, they struck, leaping flashes of steel in the sunlight as their blades went through their air to find their targets.

For a moment, there was silence, they locked eyes. Then Arahime bowed in concession.

“Your point,” she said.

“It could be yours next time,” said Harun softly.

From the door of the dojo building, Kenshin watched them. The years had thinned his form but not stricken his body or mind. He nodded briefly and went inside. He knew it, it was time.

A week later in the dojo, Kenshin called a few names of students to see him afterwards. Harun was among them, Arahime wasn't. She waited for him in the courtyard outside.

When he emerged, it was as if he was in a trance. He walked into the courtyard as if he could not believe what he was seeing.

“Harun-san?” Arahime walked towards him.

Harun started as if he hadn't seen her. “Arahime-san,” he said, but rather absently.

“What happened?” she asked, sitting down with him. “What was that about?”

Harun seemed hesitant to answer. “Sensei Kenshin says...” He paused, avoiding her gaze. “He says I'm ready to make my gempukku.”

At first, Arahime was pleased, then realised what Harun was not saying. “But...” Her voice petered off. “I thought we would make our gempukku together.”

Harun nodded sadly. “So did I.”

Arahime started to stand, angry.

“No, Arahime-san,” said Harun. “If you go now and ask the masters why you are not getting your daisho you only hurt yourself. Delay it more.”

“But...you don't want to?” Arahime asked, reluctantly sitting back down.

“Of course I do!” said Harun passionately. “But there are some things you can't change. It's only another year.”

“But you...” Arahime found herself blushing and looked down.

“Calm yourself,” said Harun. “You’re only proving them right. When you are ready, you will be unstoppable.”

“That’s not it,” said Arahime, shaking her head. “I...don’t want you to go. Not yet. Not without me.” She looked down. “You say it’s just another year. But we’ll change, you’ll change. You’ll...forget all about me...”

She looked up at Harun. He looked into the stormy grey depths of hers and he saw something he had never seen before but had long since suspected. He at once wanted to take Arahime in his arms and run far, far away from her.

He looked away, not daring to say anything.

“I’m sorry,” said Arahime, standing up and walked away.

He let her go.

Several weeks later, Harun and Arahime made their way with the other senior students to the village of Tsuma. It once had been a booming village, devastated by the Onyx like all of the Crane lands. But with the recovery of the land thanks to the now Imperial Treasurer, Doji Arami, things had improved significantly.

They were to stay at the Kakita dojo in the village with others from other clans from all around the Empire that had come to compete in the most prestigious gempukku tournament, the Topaz Championship. There were also a few tents surrounding the village from those who had come to watch.

Standing out among them, Harun could see the banner of the Emerald Champion fluttering in the wind outside his tent.

They were packed fairly tight in the dojo’s barracks, but there were so many there that Harun’s dark face wasn’t that noticeable among all the other varying ones. Once they had stowed their possessions and Harun had signed in, they set off to explore the town.

“They’re all here to make their gempukku,” said Arahime, a touch angrily. “I’m only here to watch.”

“Next year will be your year,” said Harun.

“Will you be here?” Arahime asked.

“Of course I will,” he promised.

Arahime smiled and seemed to draw closer to him.

“Arahime-chan!”

She turned at the sound of her name. It was Kyoumi, her mother, coming away from one of the bazaar stalls that had sprung up to cater to the abnormal number of visitors.

Time, children and her duty to the Voice of the Emperor had left their mark on Kyoumi's face, but it somehow seemed to enhance and not diminish her beauty.

"Mother," Arahime said with a smile. "I didn't expect to see you."

"We were always going to come," said Kyoumi. "I'm not sure where your father has gotten to, but he can't be far." She turned to Harun. "Harun, I swear you get taller and more handsome every time I see you."

Harun smiled, Kyoumi had always been like a second mother to him.

They walked through the village together, trading the news they had. Arahime's brother Hideaki was progressing nicely as a shugenja. She and Kousuda had seen Prince Iweko Hideyoshi at court last winter, but he usually was not far from his mother the Empress.

"A very sweet boy," Kyoumi said.

By then they had arrived at their destination which was Karasu's tent. The guards kept several petitioners back. But when they saw Harun, they waved him straight in annoying some of the people outside.

Inside, Karasu was at work. Standing at a table of maps and documents, talking things over with his right hand, Akodo Ryoichi. Behind them on a stand stood the brilliant Emerald Armour and Emerald Champion's daisho that were his badges of office.

Harun knew Ryoichi quite well. He was a sort of uncle to him and his siblings, he often was the one who gently escorted the children out of important meetings. There was even a story Karasu liked to tell about a four-year-old Harun who had wandered the corridors of the Imperial Palace when he had been promised a story. Ryoichi had found Harun asleep behind a shoji screen while his father and the Emperor were having a meeting in the same room and carried the sleeping boy back to bed.

"Do you ever stop working, cousin?" Kyoumi asked, amusement in her voice.

Karasu grinned. "When the war stops, I will," he said. He turned to Ryoichi. "Take care of that then, then go and enjoy yourself. That's an order."

"Hai," said Ryoichi, bowing and then leaving, nodding in greeting to the others as he left.

Work done for now, Karasu went to greet his son. Harun was taller than him now, looking at him made him feel old.

When the tournament is over, I'll tell him, Karasu thought, it could break his heart, but it's time.

Tea and mocha cakes were provided and the tent of the Emerald Champion was filled with stories and laughter.

Harun related of how Arahime had captured some small birds and hidden them inside her document box.

"Sensei Yoriko kept asking what the twittering was," Harun said, grinning wickedly. "When she finally made Arahime open it, there was dung everywhere. All over her calligraphy work."

Karasu had to put his cup down, he was laughing so hard. Kyoumi laughed, but she couldn't help noticing the easy Harun and Arahime were with each other. How natural.

They make a good couple, Kyoumi thought, I'll talk to her, she probably is thinking about it.
Karasu met her eyes, he seemed to know as well.

The tournament started the next day in the dojo. Beginning with the sumai contest, which was dominated by the Crab and Unicorn contenders. This was followed by a test of heraldry, a footrace though an obstacle course and then a test of horsemanship.

Finishing the first day were questions on the law, bushido, and etiquette. It was there that Harun did his best, having begun his studies early on these matters under the instruction of his father.

The competition was fierce, but Harun finished the day with three points of the necessary five to complete the tournament. He would have to make them up the next day of tests.

The second day began with the weapons contest. Harun, choosing a katana, faced a Hida with a tetsubo and came off second best. He had more success with the poetry contest, his verses on sunlight winning acclaim from the judges. His go match was close, his Mirumoto opponent achieving a narrow victory. The courtier debate follows next, the question put to him on the tenets of bushido. His Akodo opponent's responses seemed more thoughtful, at least to Harun, but then he remembered but then he remembered sensei Yoruki's lesson on it years ago. He was stopped by the judge and declared the winner.

The final test was the hunt, the competitors were broken into groups of three to bring back a Tsu Fish egg within two hours. Harun was teamed up with the Hida who had bested him earlier that day and a Moto who looked rather amused at Harun and asked a few questions.

Thanks to the Moto they found the egg and made it back with time to spare.

As he had attained six points in the first two days, Harun was among those who would compete in the iaijutsu on the final day.

The dojo courtyard was crowded with the spectators, everyone who had competed, come to watch and a lot of people from the village crowded in to see it. Arahime sat in the crowd with her parents, Karasu sat in one of the official seats near the judges.

Harun actually a little nervous. He was used to the small group who would watch their duelling practice at the Academy. It was hard to stay focused on the competition ahead.

His anxieties fell away the minute he started his first duel. In the stance of Void, he knew exactly where he was and all distractions fell away. This was where the Kakita lived, as his father had told him once.

After the first round, when Harun effortlessly dispatched his first opponent he emerged as the clear favourite. So it was no surprise when he made it to the final round.

All was silence as the Topaz Championship was decided. In the duelling rung stood Harun, his opponent was Akodo Takara who he had faced in the debate the day before.

When the judge gave the signal, Harun sank into the stance of Void. He examined his opponent for flaws, reached deep within himself for the reserves of energy that he would call upon when the moment came.

Then then, he struck! Harun's blade slashing through the air to cut Takara's arm before he even had time to move. Takara bowed to Harun. The judge came forward to proclaim him the winner to the applause and cheers of the audience.

Karasu burned with pride and joined in the celebration of his son's victory. He couldn't have done it better himself.

A little later, most of the villagers had scattered as the gempukku ceremonies began. One by one, each participant in the tournament that had gotten to this point was called forward, received their daisho from a family member and swore allegiance to the Clan Champion or appointed representative. Harun was called last of all. When he approached the altar, his father met him, resplendent in his emerald green armour, and handed him his daisho.

"Your grandfather's sword," said Karasu, with a small bow. "But Harun knew these were just the ritual words, as the daisho was entirely new.

The tsuba was wrapped in pale blue silk, so pale it was almost white. The Kakita mon proudly on the habaki. The saya was the most wondrous of all, it was covered in a bright enamel that appeared to be blue, but changed from turquoise, to indigo to purple depending on where the light hit it.

It was beautiful. Harun accepted his daisho with a low bow.

Harun then went forward and knelt before the Crane Clan Champion, Doji Ayumu, offering his swords. "This one offers you, Doji-no-kimi, his oath of fealty, his life and his sword to use as you see fit. This one wishes to serve you to the fullest extent of bushido and to follow you wherever you lead, as called Kakita Harun." He then bowed low.

Doji Ayumu accepted it with a nod. "I accept your oath, Kakita Harun, and the honour you will bring to the Clan of Doji."

Harun got to his feet, tying his daisho to his obi. Then he was presented with his prize. A gold decorated kabuto and the armour of the Topaz Champion.

The ceremony over, people came forward to congratulate Harun. But all Harun could see was Arahime.

Some of his fellow competitors had wanted to buy Harun drinks at the sake house, Harun let them but didn't stay long. He had promised his father he would be at the family celebration at his tent.

The weight of his daisho on his obi was a constant reminder of how things had changed. He was an adult now, a samurai, he would go where his superiors saw fit. Harun knew what he wanted to do, to serve under his father. Perhaps it would all be arranged tonight.

The family celebration was quiet and relaxed. Karasu made a speech of how proud he was, Hitomi said a few words of encouragement. As did Kyoumi and Kousuda, the latter seemed to be watching Karasu, as if waiting for him to do something. Finally, Karasu seemed to come to a decision and stood up.

“Harun, walk be a little, will you?”

There was something grave, almost sad, in his father’s voice. This confused Harun. What could his father have to tell him?

There seemed a silent agreement between them all, except Arahime who seemed confused as he was. Harun joined his father, both of them leaving the tent.

Arahime looked questioning at her parents. “What’s going on?”

Kyoumi smiled sadly at her daughter. “Harun will tell you, when he knows,” she said. “And he will soon.”

Outside the tent, the spring night was warm the Obsidian Moon made a waxing crescent. Karasu looked up at it and not for the first time that day wondered where Yamada was.

If only she could have seen him today, thought Karasu, and what I am about to tell something that could break his heart.

He looked at Harun. A man now, a samurai. And still, his son. Still the little boy that wandered into his father’s strategy meetings. Still the baby, swaddled for warmth, that had been placed into his arms in the dead of night.

“Harun,” he said, coming to a stop some distance from the tent. “I couldn’t be prouder of you, my son, than I am today,”

“Thank you, father,” said Harun. “I want to do you proud.”

Karasu nodded. “Even though you don’t share my blood, you are my son and I never saw you as anything less.”

“Like all of us,” Harun said.

“But,” Karasu added, “there is something that makes you different from my other children.”

“Is it how I look?” Harun asked.

“A little,” Karasu answered. “But there’s more, I knew your parents. Your real parents.”

Harun’s eyes widened at this, but still took it calmly. “My real parents?”

Karasu nodded.

“Are they...still alive?”

Karasu sighed. "It's best that I tell you the whole story." He set his mind back, sixteen years to fulfil the promise he had once made to Yamada. "I was at the Winter Court at Shiro Mirumoto in 1217. It was the first one held for many years. The Clans gathered, including a contingent of Onyx Spider and Scorpion. Your father was with the Crab delegation. And," he looked at Harun, "your mother was the Delegation Head to the Unicorn."

Harun took this in quietly, as was his way. Karasu continued.

"Her name was Utaku Yamada. She was a shiotome, a battlemaiden. Still strong despite the fact she had lost all her close family when the Onyx hordes conquered the Unicorn lands. Most if not all of the Unicorn had suffered in the same way. She had unwavering courage and was not afraid to be honest, even to her enemies. It was not long after court began that she met your father, Yasuki Nakura, and shortly after that they married."

"She married into the Yasuki?" Harun asked.

"No," said Karasu, "Nakura married into the Utaku, it's their way. I was at their wedding. They were so happy, so in love. We could hear their wedding celebration in the Unicorn camp from the castle, it went long into the night."

Harun listened, trying to picture this. "What was he like?" Harun asked. "Nakura, my father?"

Karasu winced at the use of the word, but still answered. "I didn't know him as well as your mother. From what I know from your Uncle Kousuda, he was a merchant, a brewer of sake privy to the secrets of Friendly Traveller village." Karasu grinned. "He had this bright pink kemari outfit he liked to wear."

Harun frowned, there seemed something that didn't fit. "I don't understand," he said, his tone angry, almost accusatory. "There's no great secret here. What you just told me, you could have told me years ago. Why didn't you?"

"Because," Karasu explained patiently, "I knew I would have to tell you how Nakura died. He didn't live to see you, Harun."

"Did he know? About me?"

Karasu nodded. "He knew Yamada was pregnant, and this probably explains a lot about what happened." He took a deep breath as if bracing himself, then continued. "The very day after they were married, Nakura was challenged to a duel to the death by the Onyx Scorpion. On the dais, in front of the entire court including the Chosen and the Emperor. Your mother naturally stepped forward as his champion. I helped her prepare, along with the other duellists who were at court and that was when I really got to know her well. She was worried, she was not a duellist and I was too. She had a better chance in a duel to the death though and I was trying to save her life. She did give me a good beating in the ribs though." Karasu smiled at Harun, then his tone grew serious again. "The day of the duel came, there were a lot of people gathered in the training grounds of the castle where it was going to be. And there was an argument between Nakura, Yamada and the Scorpion. I didn't know what was going on at the time, but I found out later that one of the Scorpion had approached your Uncle Kousuda beforehand and said was the best outcome for all was if Nakura committed seppuku, for if the duel ended in his favour the Scorpion saw the insult so grievous they would not let it rest. Yamada saw this as a threat and challenged them on it, saying the duel would be invalid if they would not honour the result." Karasu sighed, looking up again at the moon. "I wish

she had told me about this earlier, we could have done something, we could have stopped it all. But in the duelling ring it was too late, and it didn't work. Just before it was to start, Nakura stepped into the ring and waived his right to a champion. They killed him, right there."

Karasu looked over at his Harun, his son's face was impassive, expressionless.

"You saw it?" Harun asked after a long moment.

Karasu nodded. "Yamada, she was...broken by it," he said. "But the very next day she was fighting at my side when the Voice of the Emperor needed us. And after that she put forward my name to the dais for Emerald Champion. She had strength, Yamada, and she would be there if you needed her. He took another deep breath and then continued. "We spoke again just before we all left the mountain. She told me she had been approached by the Obsidian Hand, Shiba Michio whom we both knew. She knew she would need to show mercy when he couldn't. So, she asked me to take you."

"Wait, she said this to you before I was born?" Harun asked. "She...didn't want me?"

"No, no, of course not," said Karasu, feeling like he was comforting a much younger Harun. "She wanted you to have the life that she could no longer give you. And if she were to know you now, to know the man you have grown to be, she would not regret it for one moment."

Harun looked down at his hands, dark against the sleeves of his pale blue kimono. Was this from his mother's side? Did she have Moto blood? Is this what Chinua had meant when he saw him that day? And then there was the enigma of his real father, dying before he was born. Dying so that he could live?

Harun had always known there were things about himself he didn't know. He thought that finding out answers settle these questions. But all it did was create more.

Who am I really? Harun wondered. A Crane? A Unicorn? A Crab? Where do I belong?

"I thought finding out about myself, where I finally come from would explain everything," said Harun. "But it doesn't. And now I know, nothing is simple anymore."

Karasu put a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "And that's part of being a man."

The next morning, Harun left the dojo early and made his way to the tents. He fortunately found Kousuda was around early.

"Harun-san," Kousuda greeted him like he always did, with a handshake. "About early, I thought you would be sleeping off the celebrations."

"I was wondering you could help me, Uncle Kousuda," said Harun. "Can you help me get a horse? A good one?"

"A horse?" Kousuda raised his eyebrows. "Where are you planning on going?"

"West," said Harun.

Kousuda didn't say anything, but he was sure he could guess what was going on. "I should have something suitable."

Harun paced as he waited. His mind was made up. The plan was to first go to Shiro Mirumoto. He wanted to see where it had all started. Where his parents had met, where his father had died. And from then, further west to the Unicorn lands and whatever he would find there.

Karasu emerged from his tent. He could see Harun ready for travel.

“So, you are really doing this?” Karasu asked.

Harun nodded. “There’s things I want to find out for myself. Who I am...where I belong. I’m sorry, there’s no way I can really explain.”

Karasu sighed. “I thought this would happen, one day,” he said. “It’s just so strange that it is finally here.” He reached into a pocket and handed Harun a purple medallion.

Harun examined it. It was a piece of amethyst, round and polished flat. Engraved on it were the mons of the Unicorn and the Crab lands.

“Yamada gave this to me,” said Karasu. “It wasn’t hers, but yours. Meant for you.”

Harun examined it further, then put it around his neck.

“Harun,” said Karasu, sounding a little worried, “you are coming back?”

“I promised Arahime that I would be back for her gempukku,” said Harun. “This hasn’t changed things, and don’t blame yourself for this. It’s just...something that I have to do.”

Karasu embraced his son, something he had not since since Harun was a little boy. “Remember, you have a home here,” he said. “You have a family.”

“I know, father,” said Harun.

Karasu smiled, he could feel tears pricking the corners of his eyes.

Kousuda arrived with the horse then, a Unicorn mount that was well provisioned. They made their farewells and Harun mounted and rode away. Karasu stood with Kousuda and watched him go.

“I can’t help but think that I failed him,” said Karasu.

“Oh, you haven’t, Karasu-san,” said Kousuda, with the hint of a laugh in his voice. “You haven’t failed him at all.”