

This is a summary style writeup of a set of three L5R campaigns. The first, Storm Rising, was run by my friend, Brigham Bentley in Wilmington, DE. The second, Storm Breaking, was written and run by me. The third, Calls the Lightning, was written and run by Shannon Kalvar. I have tweaked things to make a better narrative, but these are basically all events that happened in our campaign. The game is structured so that it can use just about any group of samurai. It is good to have at least one Shugenja, especially for the first campaign, and probably the game will be more intense as written if there are characters in the Crane, Crab, and to a lesser extent, Unicorn or Dragon.

In all these campaigns, you're playing in the big leagues in terms of rank..if you believe that no one of less than the most noble family's birth would ever be invited to a significant championship or a winter court, the characters would need to be able to act in those circles and be of a rank to be in those circles. This is heroic L5R, and your characters have the opportunity to become very important people in the world.

Storm Rising

Characters

The cast of characters from our retelling of this story are as follows:

- Kuni Kotori – Kuni Shugenja
- Togashi Hachi – Togashi Tattooed Monk
- Bayushi Kyono - Bayushi Bushi
- Dairu - Ronin Shugenja
- Moto Tsolmon – Moto Bushi
- Kakita Kaori – Kakita Bushi
- Kakita Toshiki – Kakita Painter/Artisan

Game Background.

It was 12 years before the Scorpion Clan Coup in year 1111, though of course none of the actors within the tale had any idea what was to come. Rokugan had generally known peace, at least from threats of maho-tsukai and similar cults within the Empire, for many years, though the clans were still in their perennial squabbling. The Emperor Hantei the 38th was reigning, and his young son had not yet quite reached gempukku. The Empire was on the verge of chaos, but it did not know it yet.

Like many things involving the Scorpion, the chaos began with a single drop of poison.

It began when the word spread that the aged daimyo of the Scorpion had died in his sleep, leaving his son, Bayushi Shoju, in his place. For most of the Empire, this was considered a natural event, but those most high up in the ranks of the Scorpion knew otherwise. A Bayushi from within the most dedicated ranks of the family, Bayushi Joro, had assassinated his own daimyo and disappeared, taking with him one of the precious Black Scrolls that had been entrusted to the clan's possession. Despite being a skilled assassin, talented in all arts of stealth, Joro had left clear evidence of his involvement and gone on the run. He seemed proud of his treason.

Shoju was livid. It was better for the security of the Scorpion for all to believe his father had died

naturally, but Shoju wanted the traitor bound to the grove and the missing scroll retrieved. The Phoenix knew of the scrolls, and the Phoenix inquisitors would be prying into his affairs if he began a search. They needed a distraction, so he began to plan one. He got his courtiers, and support from the Crane, Lion, and Unicorn, to begin to agitate for renewing the Office of Jade Champion, at least on a ceremonial level, to 'assist' the Crab and Phoenix in guarding the Empire against the perils of maho without or within. The Phoenix, naturally, boycotted the tournament, arranged to hold the tournament in a middle-of-nowhere location in mid-winter, and convinced most of the most powerful shugenja of the Empire to ignore it. They would not allow any true power or magistrates to go with the position, and convinced all that the position could not be held by one person for more than a year. But Shoju had put enough 'face' on the position that no one felt that they could ignore it completely.

So it was that the Jade Championship became a farce, only a tournament for a small number of junior-level shugenja from the various clans to compete in, and a ceremonial title.

A Plague of Treasons Part 1

One of those shugenja was a Crab, Kuni Kotori, and she won the title of Jade Champion. As an Imperial Champion, she had independence to go 'fight maho and magical evil within the Empire as she wished', and the Crab had little interest in using her victory to make a power play, so the Jade Champion was cut lose. She had managed to win as friends and allies: a tattooed monk from the Dragon Clan, Togashi Hachi, a ronin shugenja, Dairu, and a young Bayushi, Bayushi Kyono. Of course, the monk had been sent by Togashi to aid her, the ronin liked the meal ticket, and the Bayushi had been sent by Shoju to make sure she didn't become a political annoyance while he sent his scouts looking for Joro and the missing black scroll. But Kuni Kotori did not need to know that. Kotori was intelligent, skilled (for her experience) and, most of all, relentless. It didn't matter to her if her position was purely ceremonial or not...she was going to use it to fight some evil, wherever she could find it. Rumors came to her of some sort of cult targeting horses in Unicorn Lands and she and her small group of companions left immediately to investigate.

She did not find a whole cult of maho at that time, but a single traitor, Iuchi Kyoru, who they managed to engage in battle before she could destroy the Otaku stables. As they were closing in, and Iuchi Kyoru was making her final stand, the Jade Champion was very surprised when the beleaguered Shugenja opened a large black scroll, and a vast iron citadel erupted from the grasslands around her. The group decided to wait her out, knowing she was without food or support. After a week, they finally pushed the door of the citadel open and entered. The area was badly tainted, but empty. They found an iron statue of the Unicorn Clan traitor, frozen mid-scream, with the now-closed black scroll at her feet.

Bayushi Kyono realized that the scroll must be the one that Bayushi Joro had stolen and he knew nothing of the assassination. He convinced Kotori that the scroll must be quietly returned to the Scorpion Champion. A Moto of the Unicorn who lived in the area, Moto Tsolmon, asked leave to accompany them, for he wished to see more of the Empire, and this was granted. The party headed back towards Kuyden Bayushi.

They were travelling in a deeply forested area in Hare Clan lands when they were intercepted by Bayushi Joro, accompanied by a small number of black clad ninja, and captured. The traitor taunted them, claiming that the Wall would fall soon, and when the ronin, Dairu, attempted to start a fight,

he was killed. But the fight was enough to attract the attention of two Crane who were in area, an artist and painter, Kakita Toshiki, and his sister and yojimbo, Kaori. The two were travelling towards Kuyden Miya on their first trip away from Crane lands.

The two, rather than risking a direct rescue, instead set a string of torches, rock falls, and some other creative tricks nearby, managing to keep their activity secret from Joro. After nightfall, they sprung their trap, first lighting all the torches and springing traps that would shoot arrows from a number of directions at once, giving and receiving commands to make it seem to the captives and captors that they had been intercepted by a whole Crane patrol. They then were able to shoot and kill at least two of the ninja, and Joro fled without first killing the rest of their prisoners. The two Crane were able to free the prisoners.

Although Joro may have thought he'd left with the scroll, the scroll case that he had taken was empty, for Kyono had moved the Black Scroll to one of Kotori's own scrollcases. The Crane decided to accompany the Jade Champion for her protection (and, perhaps, to chronicle her adventures). They moved quickly to Ryoko Owari, where Bayushi Kyono left them to return the black scroll to his Daimyo. The rest travelled south, towards the Great Wall.

It seemed odd, that a single traitor from the Scorpion would steal a black scroll and give it to a single traitor in the Unicorn lands, and then speak of the Wall falling. And Kotori was determined to find the truth of it, despite losing two of her companions.

A Plague of Treasons – Part 2

Bayushi Kyono had arranged passage for Kuni Kotori, Moto Tsolmon, Togashi Hachi, and the Kakita twins south to the Wall where the traitor, Bayushi Joro, had hinted that Kotori might find a traitor among her own family. They travelled swiftly by boat down the river past Scorpion, Crane, and Kitsune lands until they arrived at Kuyden Hida. Kotori sent word to her daimyo, Kuni Yori, but was directed to await his response by serving on the Wall near Shiro Kuni and that he would meet her there.

Kotori travelled to that section of the Wall and waited for the opportunity to meet with her daimyo. Her guests, not under similar orders, but feeling the need to protect the Jade Champion in such a dangerous place, marveled at the unfamiliar warfare and the perpetual vigilance of the Crab, and took the opportunity to make friends among the Crab warriors. It took some doing, but Toshiki was friendly and jovial and quick to win friends despite his background, while Tsolmon was exotic, and the local Crab appreciated his stories. And they had never met anyone like Kaori before.

They were there for several weeks when, out of nowhere, there was a concerted effort from the Shadowlands to attack that section of the Wall. The valiant Crab defenders kept the non-Crab toward the reserves while they took the most challenging brunt of the attack, but the battle was fierce, and all were called on to defend.

The leader of the reserves was a huge shugenja by the name of Kuni Genru. He worked with Kotori to defend from the rear, supporting the front lines. But, two days into the pitched battle when the fighting was fiercest and the reserves were depleted, he summoned the wrath of Osano Wo, calling

down lighting and striking through the heart of the defenders. The lightning struck at Kotori in particular and badly wounded her. It would have killed her, but Moto Tsolmon was able to shield her just in time with his body, and Kakita Toshiki was able to pull her to safety. The oni and goblins attacking the wall seemed to be expecting the act, because they took advantage of the betrayal by throwing all their forces into a single attack. Kuni Genru raised his hands to cast another spell that would cut down the front lines of the defenders from behind, but Kakita Kaori streaked across the battlefield and slashed with all her strength at the Kuni traitor, her blade cutting a deep blow. The two then sparred for a few moments, the Kuni swinging a mighty Warhammer. Kaori took a shattering blow, but it was enough for the Hida defenders to realize what had happened and throw the Kuni from the top of the wall. The Crab managed to hold the line...but just barely.

It took a long time for Kaori and Kotori to recover from their injuries. Kuni Yori, the daimyo of the Crab, did pass through the area, but Kotori was not conscious to meet with him. Genru's body was not found. The locals began to nickname the twins Silk and Steel. During their slow recovery the group managed to put together a theory. Some force, some conspiracy that they did not understand, had been forged out of an individual traitor from each clan, each performing an act of treason that, by its very nature, was symbolic of the very essence of the clan they were betraying. They didn't understand why. Still, it seemed likely that a traitor from the Lion, Crane, Phoenix, or Dragon might be next.

In just one month, there was to be a treaty brokered between the Lion and the Crane, with the Emerald Champion, Doji Satsume presiding. If ever there was a time for a traitor to either the Lion or the Crane to cause havoc with a single act of treason, it would seem to be there. As soon as Kaori and Kotori were well enough, the group decided to travel to the place where the accord was to be made. If nothing else, they could warn the Emerald Champion of the conspiracy and prevent the chaos from spreading further.

Once the party had recovered, the Jade Champion and her companions made haste toward the site where the treaty was to be signed. A Phoenix Inquisitor was there and looked on the Jade Champion with disdain, dismissing her concerns. The Emerald Champion, though, was courteous enough and sympathetic enough to the foolishness of the Jade Champion's position that he permitted her and those with her to stay and observe the proceedings as long as they did not interfere. They did so, quietly watching all of the proceedings and looking for signs of treason. There was no sign until the day of the signing itself, where Kitsu Bashu, a well-ranked Shugenja, fired upon the Emerald Champion at the moment of signing with a poison dart. Kuni Kotori intercepted the dart with her tessan, only because she was looking closely for such a sign. There were some tense moments as the Lion and the Crane began preparing for a fight, but Satsume quickly nipped that in the bud and the Lion soldiers were able to capture their compatriot.

When he was questioned, the man was raving with fanaticism, blaming the Crane for bringing down the greatness of what was once the mighty Lion clan and telling Doji Satsume that he has no idea of the terrors that were to come or the plans that were in store for the Empire. The shugenja then, somehow, turned himself a swarm of bees and disappeared before he could be struck down. The Inquisitor, Asako Monoro, protested that this was clearly a case for the Phoenix inquisitors to address and pursue. Satsume agreed and suggested the Inquisitors begin their pursuit, but pulled Kotori aside. He said he feared that the most harm that such a treason could cause, especially if it were a traitor from his clan, would occur at the upcoming Winter Court, where most of the Imperial

Court would be present. He extended to Kotori and her companions an invitation to Winter Court, based on her title and the fact that Kotori had saved his life.

The Explosive Ending – Part 3.

Winter Court began, and with it the final months of Kotori's year as Jade Champion. There were many of the normal Winter Court distractions and hijinks unrelated to the main story. Kotori and her companions did their best to survive in the cut throat environment, mostly by keeping as far away as possible from the politics of the upper echelon and looking for any behavior that might be suspicious. They did find some things, but it was mostly unrelated.

It was not until the final day of Winter Court that the traitor revealed himself. A large fireworks display had been prepared to celebrate the end of court. An elevated viewing area provided all the members of the Imperial Court access to view the fireworks as they shone over the ocean. Kotori and her companions discovered hints that the display might be targeted, and followed the clues until they discovered a Daidoji preparing the stands. They found barrels of gunpowder packed beneath the stands and were able to avert the destruction before anything further occurred, with only minutes to spare.

While the destruction of the Imperial Court was averted, the end of Winter Court marked the end of Kuni Kotori's time as Jade Champion. The Phoenix stepped in to immediately take her place as being in charge of the investigation, though that was the last anyone heard of the matter through most of the Empire. (This was likely because Asako Monoro was the Phoenix Clan traitor and stifled the investigation completely.) Bayushi Shoji, having secured the missing black scroll, no longer cared if the Phoenix investigated or not, since his hunt for a traitor within his clan was not likely to reflect badly on the Scorpion. Therefore, he made no effort to retain the Jade Championship. The Jade Championship fell back into complete obscurity.

Kuni Kotori and Togashi Hachi travelled and settled down in Unicorn Lands, giving the remainder of their lives to guarding the tainted remains of the Iron Citadel that had been created. Moto Tzolmon returned to his homeland with them, and became a magistrate there. The Crane samurai-ko wed a Hida who had overcome many challenges to seek her hand after she had won his great admiration for her actions on the wall, while her brother wed an Otomo he had wooed at Winter Court. All was forgotten, except, perhaps, in the memories of Doji Satsume and Bayushi Shoji, and so it would be for the next twelve years.

And at that point, everything would change.

Storm Breaking

Characters

The cast of characters from our retelling of this story are as follows:

- Hiruma Izuko - Hiruma bushi
- Mirumoto Kenuchio - Mirumoto Bushi
- Moto Koshi - Moto Bushi, son of Moto Tsolmon
- Asahina Ayame - Asahina Shugenja
- Ikoma Neiji - Ikoma Spy

Game Background

It was the year 1123. After the death of his father and his ongoing failure to find his father's assassin, the temporary loss of the Black Scroll, and learning of the acts of certain persons who committed (or attempted to commit) great treasons against their own clans since he had come into power, Bayushi Shoju came to believe that something dark and terrible was going to happen in the Empire. He believed that the Traitors might be some version of Dark Thunder, sent to precursor or usher in the coming of their master, Fu Leng. This caused him to send his finest researcher, Yogo Junzo, to research the prophecies of the return of Fu Leng, and it was Yogo Junzo who showed him that the ultimate treason was to come, the treason by which the Last Hantei brings about the return of Fu Leng himself. He verified, at least to his own mind, the truth of the prophecy with Togashi Yokuni, and, per Yogo Junzo's recommendation, took up the bloodsword Ambition to drive himself forward to complete what must be done...stopping the Dark Thunders and most especially, ending the line of the Hanteis forever so that the final treason could never be achieved.

So began the wheels that would set the Scorpion Clan Coup into motion.

The Sword of the Hantei (Part 1)

Each of the PCs had been brought by various reasons to the Imperial Palace Grounds that fateful autumn night. Hiruma Izuko was a young widow, a good warrior, but attractive and able to keep a very civil tongue, and the Crab attached her to their delegation as a minor underling in hopes that she not make a complete fool of herself. Mirumoto Kenuchio did not know why he was chosen to serve as yojimbo to a courtier who was an assistant to the Dragon ambassador, but he had been first in his class and word had come from 'very high up' that he was to serve in the capacity. Ikoma Neiji....well, he's the one who had knocked the highest placing Crane out of contention at the Topaz championship that year, and if he hadn't taken the prize himself, his presence was considered an intentional slight at the Crane in court. Moto Koshi was the son of a magistrate that seemed to know the Emerald Champion and had sent him with a Unicorn Delegation to slip a message to Satsume when he got the chance. Asahina Ayame had a straight-forward reason for being present. Her father was a well-ranked member of the Ministry of Calligraphy and Seals, and she visited often. Of course, none of them were of sufficient rank or virtue to be actually in the presence of the Emperor, so when the very highest ranking members of the Imperial Court were summoned to dinner and an after-dinner play, such underlings were left cooling their heels and wandering the expansive gardens of the Palace in the twilight.

It was from various places on those grounds that they saw the luminous, translucent figure of a woman move slowly through the gardens, her face buried in her sleeves as she wept bitterly. The ghost of Seppun, they imagined later, weeping for the horrors that were to come, though they had no

idea at the time. They each gave up what they were doing and chose to follow her as she moved towards the moss-covered walls of what seemed an ancient tomb in a quiet area of the gardens. The ghost disappeared through the wall, but as they drew near, they could see a crack of light marking the edge of a partially open doorway, and hear the sound of fighting and shouts for help within.

They looked at each other and in silent agreement hurried down the steps to investigate. There, they found the bodies of eight fallen dark-clad Scorpion bushi, and three fully armed and armored Seppun guards. Three more guards were left standing, the two lower-ranked defending the third, and all three blocking entrance to another doorway leading deeper into the building. They were facing off against four more Scorpion, but those four seemed fresh, but all three of the guards were seriously hurt. There was barely a break in the battle before the Scorpion attacked the guards. The PCs were quick to join in the defense of the guards.

The battle was swift and fierce, but the two junior guards were killed in the fight, as were the remaining Scorpion.

The remaining Seppun, Ishikawa, had been hurt, but looked desperate, and latched onto the group of strangers as a last ray of hope. He explained that he had been checking the various guard-posts in the palace, and had heard the fighting at this place, the secret shrine where the true Sword of the Hantei was kept. He had not yet had chance to raise the alarm but feared terribly for the safety of the Emperor, for the sword was the symbol and soul of the Imperial power, and the only one who could possibly wish to take it would be one who sought the throne for himself. The one who held the blade had a strong claim on the throne itself. For the Scorpion to try to claim the blade must mean a coup in the Imperial Palace itself. Desperate, he asked the PCs to hide and protect the sword and keep it from the Scorpion at all costs, even if it meant getting it out of the palace completely...to take it to the Emerald Champion Doji Satsume. Accepting only the fastest healing from the Asahina, he raced towards the palace, where already the sounds of screams had started and the bells were beginning to peal.

The PCs knew they could not remain at the shrine...they could not defeat another wave of trained Scorpion Bushi such as this one. And it was clear from the screams that there was no help to be found within the palace and the charges that they may have originally been meant to serve or protect were dead. They navigated the grounds, joining where they could with pockets of fighting, fleeing others that seemed likely to go to defeat, until they reached the palace gates. There, they found the young Shiba Tsukune, who had been a guest in the palace at the time but who had not attended the feast, with a unit of Phoenix Bushi and Shugenja, in pitched battle with the Scorpion as they fought to break free of the palace and warn the clans of exactly all that had occurred. They joined her forces, breaking free of the gates under the cover of their firepower. Then they separated from her to go into hiding, moving through the streets of Otosan Uchi to make their way towards the city gates and Doji Satsume.

[The Sword of the Hantei \(Part 2\)](#)

Free of the palace, but still within the four enchanted walls of the inner city, the mismatched group of samurai had to escape out of the full city of Otosan Uchi. Fighting was fierce everywhere, but the forces of Shiba Tsukune were drawing most of attention towards the Phoenix Embassy, where she sought to draw on the remaining firepower of the Phoenix shugenja to transport herself and those Phoenix with her out of the city. Asahina Ayame was most familiar with the Chisei district and the

Southern Wall, and Hiruma Izuko observed that there must be ways beneath the wall to carry water and waste from the inner city to the bay beyond. They explored, dodging the fighting where they could, until they could find such a channel in the South Wall and entered. There, they learned that, naturally, the Southern Wall had magical protections. Only those with the highest standards of honor, motivated by purely unselfish reasons, could defeat the doppelgangers that protected the pathway and go beyond. Fortunately, each of them were concerned only with preserving the Sword of the Hantei for the sake of the Empire, and so were permitted to pass.

They emerged under the streets in the Juramashi district, discovering that it had been days since they had entered the enchantments of the wall. Then it was a matter of dodging the dangers of the streets, getting the help of friendly Heimen to move from one house to the other and avoiding the units of Scorpion that were taking over the districts. It took significant help for them to reach the outer wall, and waiting until a fight broke out close to the wall to draw away the attention of the guards to give them the opportunity to scale the wall and exit the city.

They fled Ootosan Uchi bearing the Sword of the Hantei, looking for the Crane encampment where they hoped to find Doji Satsume in order to turn the Sword of the Hantei over to him. Instead they were taken to the handsome young leader of the Crane forces, Doji Hoturi. Relieved, they asked to see Satsume, as they had been sent to bring him something very important. Hoturi sadly told them that the Emerald Champion was very sick, likely dying. The Lion, Ikoma Neiji, asked if his own daimyo, Captain of the Imperial Armies and at least on rank with the dying Satsume, was present, believing that he would know what was best to do with the blade. Hoturi gladly took them to the camp of his friend, Akodo Toturi, and the group gave the Sword of the Emperor to the Lion Champion, glad to be free of their burden at last.

It wasn't really their fault that Toturi drew upon the symbolic significance of the Sword of the Emperor as he made the claim of the Throne of Rokugan for himself. It is possible, if unlikely, that he would have been emboldened sufficiently to make the claim even without it. But certainly, with it, he felt no fear for his right to the throne. That led to his immediate stripping and exile when the last Hantei returned, with Seppun Ishikawa and Isawa Kaede at his side, their own passage won free, in part, by the distractions Shiba Tsukune provided escaping the city.

At least Ishikawa did not blame the party for turning over the Blade to Toturi. He was grateful to them for saving his life...and he desperately needed them. Nearly all the magistrates of Ootosan Uchi had been slain, and he needed honorable men and women to take their place, ones he could trust. He gave them the rank of City Magistrates (with permission, of course, from their Daimyos) and set them over the old Toyotomi district, a busy district with a wide range of people for them to get to know. Though, officially, their deeds could not be recognized, since that would lessen Toturi's shame and diminish the Emperor's reputation, Ishikawa considered them some of his most trusted, if young and not well tested, magistrates. That would become very important soon.

Magistrates of Ootosan Uchi

The Toyotomi district had its share of chaos, as did much of the Imperial City as it rebuilt following the Scorpion Clan Coup. A minor family samurai named Matsumoto Eiko seemed to be acting as a leader for many in the district, and considered it under her guardianship.

She was glad to see the magistrates and lend her aid, for the district was developing problems. The Black Cloud Yakuza came up with a scheme to enhance the potency and addictiveness of their opium through the power of the kami, and they kidnapped another Asahina shugenja (a cousin of Ayame's) to compel her into performing the rituals for them. The issue had been revealed to the magistrates secretly by the local Red Cloud yakuza. The party was able to free the Asahina and end the scheme, ending the Black Cloud and the worst yakuza elements in that part of the city.

A low-level samurai in the district thought that maho would ease his path to fortune and fame and worked towards wrenching open a gateway to Tengoku, angering the spirits of the dead who then needed to be put to their rest peacefully after the mahotsukai was slain. Again, the Red Cloud yakuza tipped off the magistrates.

Although the Red Cloud yakuza seemed to run a few well-maintained geisha houses and gambling dens, they seemed to be keeping within at least the letter of imperial law, and their leader, a young woman named Mio, was willing to give the magistrates information in exchange for a peaceful district. The magistrates made Mio aware they knew of her influence, but did not interfere with her.

News from around the Empire that trickled into the district grew disturbing. A letter from a friend among arrived for Hiruma Izuko, containing with it a beautiful netsuke of a carved jade crab and a warning that she could trust the jade crab, but should beware the obsidian crab. The eventual death of Doji Satsume shook the city to its core, and Moto Koshi feared that his father's letter never did reach the Emerald Champion's hands. Ikoma Neiji still felt shame about what had happened to Akodo Toturi and realized that some of the yakuza in Red Cloud were using Lion techniques. Mirumoto Kenuchio was considering asking for Asahina Ayame's hand in marriage after their time as city magistrates ended, but his letters raising the possibility to parents and to his Daimyo went completely ignored.

Still, the magistrates did what they could to keep their district safe.

The group were called to the office of Seppun Ishikawa, who was looking weaker and more unwell than they have seen him before. He said, after questioning some of the Scorpions that had been captured following the Coup, there was information that needed to be retrieved from a small village in what were previously Shoshoro lands. He did not trust any other clan leaders to retrieve the information without trying to put it to use themselves, and he could not afford anyone of higher rank among the city magistrates to go. He asked them to retrieve the information for him and return it, and gave them Imperial authority on the roads to do so.

The magistrates did as bid, ending up in a race to the village against forces from the Crab and Lion who also seemed interested in the information. They were able to get there first, and persuade the 'heimen' caretaker of the information, who had once been a Yogo, that the information was better in their hand than in the hands of the Crab, who laid an assault on the village that the party defended against. The Crab all carried an obsidian netsuke. The party was beset on the road several times until they reached Kitsune Mori. There they were

able to disappear, mostly running only into Kitsune who just wanted them out of their territory. A deal with a Mantis ship captain and they won passage through Otosan Uchi again on the even of the Dolls and Kites festival.

Ishikawa was able to receive them, and the information they carried, which was a list of the most recent locations of the Black Scrolls. Sadly, Ishikawa succumbed to his injuries (with some amount of Scorpion help) before the party ever learned what the list contained. Instead they were sent back to their district until the final arrangements were made for the next great event to occur in the city...The Test of the Emerald Champion.

Test of the Emerald Championship

Before his death, Ishikawa had already drawn up the plans for preparing and defending the city during the upcoming Test of the Emerald Champion. Everything was on hold through the stagnant days of summer as guests began to pour into the city, some to compete, and some to watch and some to profit from the arrival of all the clans into the city. Tensions in the Toyotomi district stayed stable, mostly, but they were growing hot in other districts. In particular, unusually, there was fighting between members of the same clan. Crab fighting Crab in brawls that rolled into the streets from the local sake houses, between those who bore the obsidian crab netsuke, and those who bore the jade crab netsuke, though when questioned neither could say what the netsuke (of either color) really meant other than that it stood for loyalty to the Crab. Lion were also dueling in the street...well, Matsu verses the ronin Akodo, and Ikoma Neiji thought the Red Cloud Yakuza might be involved.

The city grew more and more full, and tensions grew more strained, but the day of the Test finally arrived, and the group of magistrates found they had been assigned, by Ishikawa, the prestigious (if not exactly glorious) position guarding the gates to the dueling grounds upon which the contest was taking place. They had been instructed, most strictly, to allow no one to enter the gates of the dueling grounds to compete for the title save those with an invitation from the Empress, Kachiko. The invitations had been sent to the various most honored duelists of the clans, inviting them to compete for the glorious title.

Looking their very best, each magistrate stood at attention for two hours as the contestants entered with their retinues, each dressed in splendid armor and raiment from their respective clans. Mirumoto Kenuchio carefully examined each invitation and tucked it into his obi, then allowed the contestants to pass. Finally all arrived, though it seemed odd that Doji Hoturi...in fact, no representative of the Crane Clan, was present as a contestant. From their position, the magistrates could hear the beginning of the ceremony, but honor would not allow them to dream of shirking their duty of guarding the doors to watch the games.

So they were there when one, final contestant dragged in. His blue kimono and hakama were stained with the road and the smell of sake, and his hair was gray, in a long braid down his back. Even low ranked magistrates could recognize the daimyo of the Kakita, even out of splendid garments. They bowed deeply in respect. Toshimoko sauntered up to them.

"Let me in. I'm here to compete."

With deepest apologies, Kenuchio answered "I am so sorry, Kakita Toshimoko-sama. I have been

told I must allow no one in without an invitation."

Toshimoko grumbled. "Can't you tell I was hijacked on the road? I had Hoturi's invitation. Let me pass."

Again the magistrates had to bow deeply. "We understand, Toshimoko-sama. But we are not permitted to allow anyone to pass without an invitation."

Toshimoko took a step back and scowled, sizing up the value of fighting his way into the dueling ground, probably killing all these young magistrates, versus abandoning the Emerald Championship to Kachiko's pawns. While he grumbled, Kenuchio stood and made a very visible gesture towards his obi, and all of the invitations tucked with in. "We are so sorry, Toshimoko-sama," he said again, no longer in response to a complaint. "We would certainly allow you in if you but had an invitation from the Empress. If only you could get one...."

Toshimoko threw his head back and laughed out loud. "Of course!" With a blinding strike faster than the eye could see, he slashed Mirumoto Kenuchio's obi in half, sending a cascade of carefully written invitations to the ground. He sheathed his blade, picked up one of the invitations, and passed it back to Kenuchio. "I believe I have an invitation right here."

Kenuchio nodded. "Of course, Toshimoko-sama. Please proceed."

Toshimoko passed through the gates to the dueling ground and the doors fell shut behind him.

Calls the Lightning – Part 1

Characters

The cast of characters from our retelling of this story are as follows, all now magistrates of Otosan Uchi:

- Hiruma Izuko - Hiruma bushi
- Mirumoto Kenuchio - Mirumoto Bushi
- Moto Koshi - Moto Bushi, son of Moto Tsolmon
- Asahina Ayame - Asahina Shugenja
- Ikoma Neiji - Ikoma Spy

Game Background

It was the year 1126. Kakita Toshimoko had just been made Emerald Champion, and was desperately searching Satsume's notes and investigating in the palace to explain the unexplainable...that Doji Hoturi had sent him away to be ambushed by a ninja attack, then marched away without explanation, leaving no Crane to enter the championship. The Scorpion had been sent from the empire, but there seemed to be traces of their poisoned touch everywhere. Rumors from the south were coming that Hida Kisada had abandoned his duty the Wall and the Empire at disgust over Hantei's weak leadership, and were allowing Shadowlands madman to gather and raid the villages on the outskirts of Crane Lands. Some witnesses even claimed the missing Doji Hoturi was

leading them. Our group of magistrates were some of the few left in a capital city that was falling apart.

The Fires of Otosan Uchi

The death of Seppun Ishikawa and the dispersal of senior city magistrates had brought the tensions in the city to a head. Most of the Crab samurai had completely abandoned the city, taking with them the long-running feud between the Jade Crab and the Obsidian Crab. Quiet investigation on the part of Hiruma Izuko revealed to her that those who carried the Obsidian Crab supported Hida Kisada and his desire for strength to unite Rokugan behind him, no matter the cost. The heart of support for the Jade Crab was as yet unknown, but clearly there were those in the Crab who disagreed with Kisada's priorities. But it was not the Crab that truly erupted into battle.

Ronin, once bearing the name Akodo, had been pouring in the city since before the Emerald Championship. Looking for work, for a return their rightful place, for purpose, for forgetfulness. They were leaderless and rudderless. The city was also teeming with Lion from other families, the most ardent followers of Matsu Tsuko who had competed, and lost, in the Emerald Championship. One night, Mai of the Red Cloud Yakuza and some of her bodyguards came to the magistrates' station in the Toyotomi district. She carried word that the Hojize district was aflame and there was open fighting and warfare in the streets. Families were being burned alive in their shops, and the violence was spreading to the edges of the Toyotomi district. She offered the service of herself and all those who followed her to aid the magistrates to end the fighting before more people were killed and the fire spread.

The magistrates took her up on the offer, and also rallied the able-bodied of Toyotomi to begin the fire-lines, led by Matsumoto Eiko, the minor-family leader. Asahina Ayame prepared healing for the wounded, while Hiruma Izuko and Moto Koshi scouted the Hojize and HInjaku districts, evacuating innocents into Toyotomi where they could and confirming Mai's observations. Mirumoto Kenuchio and Ikoma Neiji went first to the Lion embassy to plead with the Lion to control the Matsu samurai. They were abruptly turned away, informed that there had been orders from the Emperor that the ronin filth that were staying in the city had to be removed.

Wars between brothers always burn the hottest.

After regrouping, the magistrates decided to rally the ronin together and use the Red Cloud yakuza network of smuggler tunnels to get them out of the city before the Matsu could kill them. The Matsu ignored the magistrate's orders to stand down in the name of Imperial peace, and it took some time to make their way to the ronin, working with one of their leaders, Akodo Yobi, to help set up a defensive action that would allow the ronin to retreat. Mai's yakuza were able to reach many who were not yet under assault. It ended up being a long running battle through the streets of the city, but the magistrates were able to restore order, get the ex-Akodo out of sight, and disperse the Matsu before more were killed and more of the city was burned.

In a quiet back room on the edge of the city, the head of the Red Cloud Yakuza, Mai, met with the group of magistrates, Matsumoto Eiko, and Yobi and some of her fellow Ronin. Yobi was angry at seeing who was helping them, swearing that even if they were Ronin, they refused to work for yakuza

or criminals of any stripe...they had their honor, no matter what the Empire might think.

The 15 year old, so young to be in charge of what was quickly becoming apparent to the magistrates a large criminal underground, shook her head. "I don't need you working for me. The Red Cloud serves itself...all men do, one way or another. But we are not blind. We can see what is coming. Disease and taint and war and death. None of them good for business. While all the clans play at war and bloodshed, no one is looking out for the people. You aren't willing to serve me, I understand. But I need the ashigaru. I need the heimen. The humble roots of the tree dig in the dirt, invisible to all, but without them, the tree will fall. Are you willing to serve them?"

Yobi was reluctant, and the magistrates were suspicious, but the Red Cloud did seem the best hope for maintaining peace, for now, and the best way to get the ronin to safety. Mirumoto Kenuchio offered, "You're saying Yobi should put together a ronin army to protect the heimen? It has no legitimacy. The clans would call this battle the start of a Ronin rebellion. That would make it worse for everyone." Ikoma Neiji, still feeling the weight of guilt about what happened to Akodo Toturi, shook his head. "Not if Toturi led them. There are many, even within the Lion, who think the Emperor was wrong to destroy the Akodo." He added softly, "Like me."

Mai smiled, her black eyes twinkling. "Done. I was thinking things are getting too hot in this city for a girl to do business any more. I do happen to know where the mysteriously missing Toturi the Black has hidden himself. And, so that you may trust me," she bowed to Yobi, "I will lead you and yours there myself." She turned to the magistrates. "Don't wait too long to follow me. I was serious when I spoke of what was coming. You've served the people of this district well. You are hopelessly naive, but I find that rather...cute. I'd hate for something bad to happen to you."

The magistrates were torn, but Yobi agreed at the idea of discovering where Toturi had gone. The next day, the fires were out, the remaining geisha houses and gambling dens of any repute shut their doors, and a sullen silence settled on the city of Ootosan Uchi. Any ronin who did not escape the city were killed by the Matsu, but most did manage to flee with the Red Cloud's help and intercession from the Magistrates where they could offer it. When that job was done, many samurai followed, disgusted at the Emperor's order and the way it had been carried out. The city just seemed more...dangerous now. Still, the Toyotomi district kept relative peace, hard as it was to win.

Answering Letters

One day, as the magistrates patrolled their district and its dwindling population, they received a summons, marked with the chop of the Emerald Champion. They immediately reported to the Inner City to meet with the Emerald Champion, Kakita Toshimoko. They were led to an inner chamber in the palace, a library room filled with maps and scrolls and all manner of correspondences and intelligence. The kenshinzen eyed them as they entered, scanning them up and down. He gave a weary smile. "Hah. I'd rather hoped it would be you." The magistrates made their obeisance and waited.

Toshimoko continued. "As you can see by this mess, I've been going through letters. Mostly not originally for me. Lord Doji Satsume received information from across the Empire. And Captain Ishikawa had much to say about the running of the city. And...one or two footnotes about you." He looked up with sharp eyes. "He was a trustworthy man. And he trusted you. Trust is a rare and valuable commodity, and not something that I can afford to waste."

Ayame bowed deeply. "You honor us."

A smirk twitched the corner of Toshimoko's mouth. "Few like the taste of my honor. Soon before he died, Lord Satsume received a letter from some barbaric spot in Unicorn lands. A...Moto Tsolmon..ally of his."

Moto Koshi stirred uncomfortably and Toshimoko cocked his head at him. "Ah...well...poor etiquette not to attend to it sooner, perhaps, but death has a way of doing that to the best of us." The Emerald Champion opened the letter. "The Iron Citadel, a cursed creation formed by one of the Black Scrolls nearly two decades ago, is crumbling, and the taint of the Shadowlands is erupting from the spot where it is standing. The Moto asks Satsume to send a trusted magistrate with experience with the Shadowlands to support the old Jade Champion there. Quickly." He shook his head.

Toshimoko folded the letter again. "News from the rest of the Empire is not good. The Crab have gone mad. They say Kisada's boy, Yakamo, the one who lost a hand during the Coup? Word is he has bound himself to an oni, and is on the march, and heading north. There's civil war within the Crab about it...but I suspect you knew." Izuko bit her lip, but Toshimoko pretended to ignore it. "Kisada himself is sailing to the capital as we speak. And the Shadowlands lies unguarded and pouring unchecked into Southern Crane Lands."

The magistrates glanced at each other, startled, plans to defend the city from Kisada already racing through their heads. Mirumoto Kenuchio couldn't keep the questions in. "Why aren't we mounting a defense? Recruiting magistrates?"

The Emerald Champion's eyes narrowed. "Magistrates where? The city is almost empty. But, no. That's not the reason." He pulled out one more scroll, this one of the finest and heaviest of paper, the gold seal of the emperor affixed upon it. "I have been ordered from the city. Sent to go and personally inform the Emerald Magistrates throughout the Empire that they will no longer be needed by the Hantei because of their failures in defending the Empire from the tainted Crab and the Scorpion beforehand. I am...assured...that my efforts in defending the capital are not necessary."

A horrified silence at the implications descended. Finally Toshimoko broke it. "There are a few pieces of old business I must conduct before I depart. This is one of them. Eiko?"

A door on the other side of the library slid open, and the humbly-dressed samurai-ko of their district entered and bowed deeply to them. Toshimoko smiled at their surprise. "Matsumoto is a very ancient family...related to the Imperials, rather than one of the clans, though mostly forgotten these days. When you are as old as I am, I suppose, you remember some old stories most people never knew. Her forefathers used to be commissioned by the Emperor to quietly watch the capital and Imperial staff for signs of Shadowlands corruption. They would combat any such forces they found there. It would be too..impolitic...for any of the great clans to discover such within the Imperial family itself. " Matsumoto Eiko blushed and bowed even more deeply. "That use...and that family...were conveniently neglected over the years. Taint in the Imperial household was inconceivable, of course. I believe your father ended up as a fishmonger to support himself, is that not correct?"

"Hai, Toshimoko-sama." Eiko was not normally so subdued, but it was understandable given the lofty company. "But we have kept our family traditions."

"Good." Toshimoko looked at the magistrates. "The Phoenix and Dragon have both withdrawn into themselves. Who knows what madness they're up to, and the letter from Tsolmon notes his suspicion of the Inquisitors. The Kuni are involved with this Crab madness and the Yogo are no more. I have no experts on the Shadowlands to send. But I have you. Matsumoto Eiko is versed in detecting and fighting the Shadowlands and its creations...as versed as anyone I have. You, I trust...you've held the locations of the scrolls and handled that dutifully. And I've read reports that you've dealt with more than one supernatural threat out there. I am sending you to this Moto Tsolmon, with Eiko as the experienced magistrate that was requested. Defend her. Take a look at the Citadel. See if the old Jade Champion has the evil in check, and deal with it if you can. Find out what the Moto wants. I remember Satsume speaking to me once about traitors in the Clans. It...was not important to me at the time. But maybe it can explain what is going on with the Crab." Toshimoko hesitated for a moment. "Or with Doji Hoturi."

He shook his head. "Bring me all the information you can gather. There is a geisha house outside Western Hub Village called the House of Dawn Lotus. If I'm not there, you can leave information with the okā-san. It will reach me."

The magistrates all bowed deeply to Toshimoko, agreeing, and prepared to leave, but he held up a hand to stop them. "No. Ikoma Neiji...not you. I regret, I must call upon your...other skills. I've been around a few years and I can see that you have training in...being a discrete observer. I need you to be a discrete observer. "

Neiji bristled at the implication, but didn't dare challenge the duelist.

"Don't worry." Toshimoko continued. "I would never cause you to compromise your honor. Eiko here has told me, with great appreciation, of what you did in the conflict between the Akodo and the Matsu in the city last month. This Mai...and sending the Akodo off to Toturi. I knew Toturi. I think he is an honorable man...at least he was once. I need to know what they are doing. I want to make sure that this Mai girl isn't turning them to some sort of strange yakuza ends...and that they don't decide they need to extract vengeance against the Empire instead of just leaving us all to rot on our own. I need someone I can trust to join them, and give me information about their movements. I mean them no harm. But I have armies enough marching through Crane Lands, friendly and hostile. I don't need the wrong armies tripping over each other and slaughtering everyone by mistake. Can you be this person for me?"

Ikoma Neiji, much more subdued, answered "Hai, Toshimoko-sama. I will join them."

Toshimoko nodded. "I will give you all Imperial papers so you may travel freely. Well, as free as any can these days. Good luck. Stay alive. Dead warriors can't win duels. And if you have to throw your life away...make sure you made it worth it." With a gesture of his hand, the Emerald Champion dismissed them.

By nightfall, they had parted ways and left the City of Otosan Uchi behind them.

The Iron Citadel

The group traveled from Otosan Uchi, past Western Hub village (and meeting briefly with the proprietress of the House of Dawn Lotus, just for good measure), onwards through Crane Lands without incident. Their papers allowed travel without much issue until they reached Lion Lands. They met with normal border guards at the edge of Lion Lands, but it was clear that the Champion of the Lion had called up her armies...the villages were without their normal soldiers as all samurai were called to the muster.

It was nearing evening when the group reached a village and asked for a place to sleep. The ashigaru headman was terrified, and warned them that 'shadows' killed any who went out after dark, and none of the Lion samurai were around or able to help them. The samurai, mindful of their edict, decided to investigate. An investigation of the shadows after dark turned up a number of gaki, angry spirits, that were clawing the life from the living after dark. Matsumoto Eiko proved herself and they could see that her techniques were quite effective, using salt to bound the space the gaki could operate in, and her weapon, blessed with jade, to dispel the evil ghosts. Searching outside the village and following traces of the gaki, the party found a Kitsu shugenja who had been unfamiliar to them. He was using his magics to lock in place the spectral form of an ancient Akodo warrior. While the warrior writhed, the gaki tore into the ancestor. It was clear they wanted to damage or destroy him.

The party was able to disrupt the Kitsu and battle the gaki. Just before they could slay the Kitsu completely, he turned into a swarm of bees and flew away, stinging their exposed hands and faces before he vanished. The ancestor, in a mild, tired voice, thanked them and told them he was returning 'home' to his wife.

When the party returned to the village, they learned that the unmarked grave where the shugenja had been was rumored to be that of the fourth follower of Akodo, and Matsu's husband. The Kitsu had sought to weaken her by destroying the kharmic link between the two by corrupting the spirit, who had been unknown and not revered for so long.

After another nights sleep, they continued on, running into normal bandits and the like, but no other major challenges until they reached Unicorn Lands, and the Iron Citadel.

The village in Unicorn lands itself was unremarkable....a mismatched array of disorganized houses hunched with stiff walls against the wind. But, looming above the village, though at least a mile distance, rose the rusting, crumbling edifice that dominated the plains around it...the Iron Citadel. Even from afar the cold touch of fear lay its fingers on the hearts of the magistrates as they approached.

Before approaching the citadel, they first rode through the village and asked for directions to the home of the old Jade Champion. The villagers directed them to a somewhat larger home on the edge

of town.

They were met at the door by a middle-aged Togashi. He wore his long hair in a graying topknot and his clothes were simple. The wakizashi he carried and the coiling of green and gold dragon tattoos winding around his arms told his family and rank. He introduced himself as Togashi Hachi. He begged their forgiveness, but the Jade Champion was sleeping, and he would take them to her when she awakened. In the meantime, he offered them tea.

As they knelt and he laid out tea for them, he explained the current situation with the Iron Citadel.

Ever since it had been unleashed by the reading of the black scroll by Iuchi Kyoru, it has been a source of evil in the region. Animals that strayed into it would come away tainted, attacking every living thing that came near. Men, the few who dared try to take possession of fortress, left as gibbering madmen after a few days. The Jade Champion had made her home here to keep watch over the Iron Citadel and make sure its evil did not spread and none may fall into its clutches. The village had grown up in the area around her to claim the bounties given for keeping away animals and people who might venture too near. Kuni Kotori used her spells and prayers to contain the corruption, or defeat any corrupted creatures who emerged from within. However, it was taking a great toll on her, more than he ever imagined it would. He was frightened for her.

The magistrates asked many questions, but Hachi did not know why this task was growing more difficult with time. Eventually, he stood and left to check on the shugenja. Discovering she had awakened and was willing to see them, he invited them in.

From everything they had learned, Kuni Kotori should have been a woman only in her mid-forties. But the woman lying under the heavy blankets on her futon looked as though she were eighty years old, her hair brittle and gray streaked with white, her hands lined with veins and her face worn with wrinkles. Her eyes were tired, but crinkled with a gentle smile. Her voice was similarly worn. "It is good to see that the capital is still responding with its typical haste." Ayame hastened to begin an apology, but the shugenja just held up her hand. "No, no. I understand. I am just glad you are here. I'm sure Hachi-san has told you what he could. He has taken such very good care of me, though I know he is being called back to the mountains."

Togashi Hachi modestly looked away, saying nothing. Kotori continued.

"I have fought the citadel for so long, I do not know if I am fighting to destroy it or fighting to keep it standing. But I have fought it, and I feel that my battle with it is coming to an end. Have you come to ward it? "

Matsumoto Eiko stepped forward. "I will do what I can with my wards....and to find out, if possible, what is causing the corruption to grow worse. I'm...not very skilled...at this sort of investigation, and I am sorry that this was all the Emerald Champion could send. But I swear I will do my best." She straightened. "Does the town have salt?"

Hachi nodded. "Hai."

"I will need probably all of it."

Kuni Kotori watched from her bed for a moment or two longer, and finally said, "I...think...I have been holding back a great evil from coming into the world. The scrolls are not safe. Tell him...Tell the Emerald Champion...that their power is coming forth. Tell him to be prepared...the storm is here. I see before me the flash of lightening in the distance. The full force of its fury will be upon us...with the sound of thunder. Tell him..." Her voice quavered into silence, and Hachi hastened to her side to soothe her.

"Go...go...hurry. Take what you must, but go!"

The magistrates hurried out of the Jade Champion's house and into town. Gray clouds rolled on the horizon. The magistrates dispersed across the village to procure their supplies of salt. The villagers brought out all their precious supplies, driven by the magistrates' urgency. A line of villagers bearing baskets and boxes were bearing the salt from the village towards the Iron Citadel when Asahina Ayame froze, startled, her eyes wide. "The kami....beware....a spell!"

At that moment, a huge earthquake set the ground to rolling like a tempest tossed sea. The villagers and magistrates alike were knocked to the ground with its power. After a few seconds, the sounds of their cries were drowned in a thundering din, a wrenching of metal and crashing of stone. The air became nearly unbreathable as dust enveloped them, and they could see nothing. Though it lasted less than a minute the shaking of the land seemed to roll on forever. Even after they stopped and slowly climbed unsteadily to their feet, they could not see well around them for several more minutes due to the dust that hung in the air.

Once the dust settled and the samurai got to their feet, it was clear that the earthquake had been devastating. Instead of the hulking ruin that had dominated the skyline, only a pile of rubble remained. Turning back towards the village, it was clear that many houses had collapsed. The villagers all broke, running towards the village to retrieve their belongings and find the (fortunately) few that had not joined in carrying salt.

The magistrate decided to hurry and gather the salt they could themselves and carried it to the rubble, trusting the villagers to have the task there in hand and allowing no risk of something evil to arrive from the tumbled stones. Matsumoto Eiko surrounded the ruins with wards of salt and jade, and Ayame chanted her prayers. All the magistrates examined every inch of the fallen keep but found no trace of creatures of the shadowlands or the caster of the earthquake spell.

They returned to the village empty handed. Already the ashigaru of the Unicorn were preparing to move on, always far more nomadic by nature than the heimen of other clans. There were four pyres being prepared for nightfall...fortunately only those too old and infirm to have made it out of the buildings that collapsed. The magistrates reached the home of the Jade Champion...and to their grief, found that little remained. Togashi Hachi sat wearily before the ruins of the building. Behind it, the broken boards of the home had already been built into one last large pyre of its own.

The magistrates bowed to him in grief and respect, each offering their condolences. Hachi accepted their regrets stoically.

Asahina Ayame presided over the funerals of the villagers and the Jade Champion, calling upon the kami of fire to light their way towards their final rest. When the last of the sparks had dispersed into the night sky, they met with Hachi a final time.

He carried a small travel pack over his shoulder and a walking staff in his hand, preparing to leave. Before he departed, he spoke to them, primarily to Moto Koshi. "Koshi-san....I knew your father. I think he should be told of what happened here. It seems to me that this has to do with the journeys we undertook and the enemies we fought, long ago. My heart is too tired and grieved to tell such stories, and my Lord has summoned me back to him now my duties here are done. Tell your father, and he may be able to explain more. I cannot explain it yet...these are koans to me. Travel safely on your way back to Ootosan Uchi. We always end up where we started, after all."

With that they shared a respectful farewell. It seemed at that moment that the journey back to Ootosan Uchi had a long, long way to go.

Unbeknownst to the magistrates, Iuchi Kyoru returned to her lord, the mission she had begun so many years before, the mission she had waited for so long to complete finally realized. She had been too hasty, once....eager to be the one to bring about the Dark Kami's return. And it had cost her...cost her years. But she had been forced through the trial of patience, and had learned to wait.

The time had not been right. The scrolls must be opened in order. And the new Iron Citadel could not rise until the old had fallen and her mistake was wiped clean.

Hers was not to be the glory. No army would follow her her in service to her master.

But Yogo Junzo had finally raised the citadel to the glory of Fu Leng, and the path before them was set.

It was enough.

The magistrates followed Moto Koshi to his father's house, and it was unlike anything they had seen before, save, of course, for Koshi himself. Moto Tsolmon had risen to a position of significance in the Moto hierarchy over the preceding years, and now held the rank, in their terms of chieftain or minor daimyo. His home was very strange to the samurai of Rokugan. He lived in an extremely large circular tent, made of leather and furs braced with wood, so tall that it stood in two layers, the main body or floor of the tent, and second story of the tent that formed a ring around its inner edge. The ceiling held a hole through which smoke could escape. Moto Tsolmon and his family and honored

guests were invited to sleep in the upper tier, while, on cold nights especially, his followers would sleep on the ground around the fire. Especially the Mirumoto and the Asahina were wide-eyed with wonder. On this night, the tent was particularly crowded, and there were many magnificent horses on the lines outside.

"I regret I cannot prepare for you the feast I would like, to show you my hospitality and welcome my son home. But we face imminent attack, and my bushi anticipate battle any day now." When the magistrates inquired further, he explained. "The Dragon, the Mirumoto, led by Mirumoto Hitomi, have brought a small army into our lands. They are attacking all our villages and encampments, driving their force deeper and deeper into our territories. They kill every messenger we send to negotiate with them or scout we use to find out what she is seeking. The Daimyo of the Otaku, Otaku Kamoko-sama, is on her way here with an army of our own to stop her. I am hosting the Battle Maidens' forward scouts." He looked across the group of magistrates, his eyes settling on Mirumoto Kenuchio. "The scouts would have killed you if not for the sigil of the Emerald Champion you carry." The older Moto raised his hand and thoughtfully stroked his beard, falling silent for a moment.

"It...may be that your daimyo, Mirumoto-san and companion of my son, would show similar hesitation to kill you. I have no desire for warfare with the Dragon. It is clear even to us in these distant lands that the true threats to the Empire lie with the Crab and the Shadowlands creatures they have unleashed." He frowned, "And I have my own thoughts about that. I am not political. But if we were to but know what it was that is causing Hitomi's wrath, we can turn her anger away from us. Surely there are others who have better earned her ire."

He fixed Kenuchio in his dark eyes. "You can go and ask her, where we can not."

Kenuchio, torn and rather alarmed at the actions his daimyo was taking, still was eager to defend her. "She has more reason than anyone to seek to crush Hida Yakamo. She must have a good reason for attacking."

Tsolmon nodded. "Perhaps. Though the world has gone mad. Please, then, I ask you...all of you, to go to the Daimyo of the Dragon today. I beg you to see if you can arrange a meeting between Mirumoto Hitomi-sama and Otaku Kamoko-sama. Send word back, and I will arrange with Kamoko-sama to meet you. Koshi-kun, you will prove hostage to my word, and Kenuchio-san, you will be able to verify the truth of who we are and our intentions. Ayame-san, the Asahina have a long reputation of advocates for peace. Your presence will bless such a negotiation also. And Izuko-san, I understand if you wish to stay here, but it may be that your presence will remind Hitomi-sama, gently, that she has other enemies to fight. It is good fortune that brought you here. I ask you, companions of my son, would you be willing to try to arrange such a thing?"

The magistrates agreed, knowing it was unlikely, given the situation in the empire, that a higher ranked and more suitable group of magistrates could be found in time to stop more bloodshed. They departed before dawn, following the Otaku scouts' directions to the Dragon encampment. They were brought by Mirumoto bushi to the tent of Hitomi, Kenuchio in the lead.

They were greeted with impatience and suspicion as they pleaded that the Unicorn respected the Dragon but did not know the reason for their quarrel and their attacks on the Unicorn lands. While

Hitomi gave little of her own emotions away, her advisers, especially an elderly adviser in yellow and gold kimono with a long mustache named Agasha Sano, argued that the magistrates themselves should be ignored or even killed for advocating for the Unicorn and ending Hitomi's effort. They claimed they had proof the Unicorn had allied with the Shadowlands and the Obsidian Crab, and as such, presented a grave threat to the Dragon and the whole Empire.

However, Koshi offered himself as a hostage for his father's good behavior, and Kenuchio and Ayame pleaded for a meeting so that these charges could be discussed. If there were taint or conspiracy to ally with the Crab among the Unicorn, the Unicorn daimyo needed to know. Izuko kept silent, but her presence was a quiet reminder to Hitomi of her hatred for Yakamo, her true enemy. Finally, she told her advisers that she would meet with Kamoko and, if need be, duel the battle maiden for allowing Shadowlands corruption in her lands.

Ayame and Koshi stayed with Hitomi, while Kenuchio and Izuko and Eiko returned to Tsolmon. Tsolmon dispatched riders to Kamoko and the negotiation was arranged for the next morning.

The meeting was held on a rocky outcropping, where the Dragon claimed the high ground, the Unicorn the plains below. A tent had been prepared to provide privacy the daimyo, who entered accompanied by their advisors. The magistrates sat to the side, aware of their low rank and their duty not to interfere. There was a period of anger and blustering and accusations, but the heart of the Dragon's claim came out. The Dragon had learned of the Iron Citadel in this region of the Unicorn Lands, and believed it was a Shadowlands source of corruption and the goal of Yakamo's drive north into the heart of the Empire, for Yakamo was surely driving north with anger and purpose. The Dragon believed he was moving his army into the Iron Citadel, and given the Crab's skill at defense, and the Unicorn's support, he would never be able to be dislodged from the northern part of the Empire and could attack from there at his leisure. The Iron Citadel was an endless font of power and corruption for him. Hitomi's advisor, Agasha Sano, was particularly passionate in these arguments. Otaku Kamoko tried to defend the Unicorn's position. She knew of the Iron Citadel and its origin, but did not know of its destruction, and her arguments were weak and she was growing impatient.

Fortunately, the magistrates were able to politely chime in that while the source of the Citadel was uncertain, the Citadel had recently been completely destroyed, and no trace of the Shadowlands remained in the area. At this Agasha Sano grew even more agitated and passionate, claiming the Magistrates were clearly lying and urging Hitomi to end the negotiations immediately. Hitomi stopped and turned to look at him suspiciously, though she said nothing. It seemed, perhaps, that she was surprised, or insulted, at Sano's response to such an easily verifiable claim. She made a gesture to two of her guards, and then to Sano, instructing them silently to take the Agasha under guard. Then she demanded Kamoko take five Dragon Samurai to the site of the Iron Citadel to inspect it, which Kamoko agreed to do. Then Hitomi sat down on the floor of the tent and began to wait.

The Unicorn looked at one another uncertainly, and, eventually, filtered in and out to do their daily tasks. Kamoko was restless, but not to be outdone, so she also waited in the tent, but allowed herself to be interrupted with discussion with her men when they came to her for orders or to bring her food. No such courtesy was extended to the Magistrates, so they kept face as best they could. It was a long wait. Most of the day and the following night later, the scouts returned and Hitomi stood. The scouts

reported that indeed, the Citadel had been there, but was now gone, and no taint of the Shadowlands remained. Hitomi sent for Agasha Sano, but when she did so, the men she sent reported that they had found Sano's guards dead and the Agasha was missing. Hitomi scowled, and told Kamoko that Dragon would withdraw from Unicorn lands and would face Yakamo's armies directly. The Unicorn would pay if they tried to exact vengeance for the Dragon's invasions, but would be troubled no more.

Kamoko understood and Hitomi left. Kamoko thanked the magistrates, briefly and indicated that they should convey her thanks to Koshi's father, Tsolmon, and rode away with the battle maidens, leaving the group with some of Tsolmon's guards to return to Tsolmon's house.

The celebration Koshi's father hosted for the magistrates upon their return was even more bewildering than their first entry into his encampment. There were many people and animals, whole families, gathered in the huge tent. There was rice, but little, compared to a wide variety of strange foods that the other magistrates had to decide how they would adjust to (reactions varied). A strange, alcoholic beverage that smelled terrible and tasted worse was very popular...fermented mare's milk. Even the music was strange. It seemed to be pleasing to Tsolmon to provide a bit of a shock to his son's companions, and share with them a taste of the world beyond the norms of Rokugan.

It was a little much for Hiruma Izuko. She stepped outside the tent for some air, and was glad to be out of the heat and strange environment. So she was out there when a low-ranking samurai, looking pleased, moved to enter the camp carrying a large porcelain bottle, and she stopped him. "A gift from Otaku Kamoko-sama for her loyal samurai, Moto Tsolmon. Real sake from Friendly Traveler Village! We hardly ever receive such a prize!"

Izuko recognized him as one of Tsolmon's followers, who had been assisting in serving for most of the evening, but her time on the wall had taught her to trust her instincts. "When did it arrive?" she asked.

"One of the Iuchi with her dropped it off. She said she needed to leave quickly, however, and couldn't stay." Izuko followed the Moto into the tent, and sat down next to Tsolmon as the sake was presented. She let herself at least to pretend to be drunk, and after Tsolmon had praised the sake and Kamoko, she snatched it from his hand to take the first swig, declaring that she, as Crab, deserved a taste of home.

Her intuition proved true as she could feel the tingling sensation of a poison of some sort. It was subtle, certainly not something that would be detectable to those not already familiar with the smooth Friendly Traveller variety of sake. But she was familiar. Normally, each samurai would take a cup of such a valuable trade-good and pass the bottle around, but instead of passing it, Izuko immediately dashed the poison to the ground, spilling it across the rugs. She bowed deeply and made profuse apologies to Tsolmon. Then she turned to Asahina Ayame and requested her healing.

Tsolmon was more confused than angry, for he was an even-tempered man, and he cleared space for Izuko to lie down. Ayame monitored her as the poison took its grip. It was a long night, but Izuko's endurance was strong and Ayame was a skilled healer. She lived, and it was very clear to all why she had spilled out the sake. The Iuchi who had given the sake was never found.

Once Izuko had recovered, Tsolmon summoned the magistrates a last time. He told them of the true reason for requesting Satsume to send a magistrate to him. It was, in part, the deteriorating condition of the Jade Champion and the Iron Citadel, but in truth it was more. He explained that, when he was a young man, he traveled with the Jade Champion and learned of a conspiracy of traitors among each of the clans, traitors who sought the Black Scrolls and traitors determined to bring Fu Leng into power within the Empire. He told of a Kuni that tried to allow the Wall to be overrun, a Unicorn who had unleashed the Iron Citadel, a Lion who attempted to assassinate Doji Satsume himself, a Scorpion ninja, and a Crane who had tried to blow up the Emperor and the Imperial Court. He had suspected others among the Phoenix and Dragon also, but had no proof.

Tsolmon had come to suspect that at least some of these traitors that they had thought dead were, in fact, still active in the world. He was not sure that it was possible, but he had been patrolling with his men and came upon the body of a peasant near the Iron Citadel. Hiding nearby was the heiman's young son. The boy described a huge, muscled man who wore the facepaint and mons of a Kuni. The man killed the boy's father with a terrible spell when he realized he was being watched, but missed the boy who was shorter than the height of the grass. The man matched the description of one of the traitors that Tsolmon had thought dead, and not long after that the statue of Iuchi Kyoru, the Unicorn traitor, crumbled into dust within the Iron Citadel. That was when Tsolmon decided to send his son to Satsume. The Scorpion Clan Coup and later chaos in the Empire only served to further his suspicions.

It was a thin thread of suspicion, but with a traitor in the Dragon spurring on Hitomi, and the madness throughout the Empire...it was a possible source? Tsolmon didn't know. Now that Doji Satsume was dead, Tsolmon knew little more and didn't know what to recommend to the Magistrates. Perhaps they could take word to Toshimoko, or, if they dared, venture to find more about the Crab army led by Yakomo. Hitomi would be moving towards the Crab soon...."

The magistrates thanked Tsolmon for his information and departed, deciding to meet with Hitomi and see if she would be willing to allow them to travel with her. She accepted them (in surly fashion) but was somewhat grateful that they had saved her further loss of face so she permitted them to travel with her. They learned that Dragons scouts had travelled to Beiden pass to prepare to meet Yakamo's army, and were surprised to find that Yakamo's goal seemed to be a small contingent of Crab samurai holed up in the Keep at Beiden Pass who were preparing to hold the pass against Yakamo against all odds. The scouts, of course, did not give themselves away to enter, but Hitomi was determined to reach the pass before Yakamo broke through, and perhaps those Crab in the keep

would know more. She dismissed them and allowed them to follow her army as she marched onwards towards Beidan Pass.

The Battle of Beidan Pass

The Dragon army made relatively quick time across southern Dragon lands, and were not impeded in crossing Lion lands on their way to Beidan pass. As in their previous journey across Lion lands, the lands were empty of samurai, and those few who challenged Hitomi's army allowed it to pass when told she was marching to confront the Crab in Beidan Pass. A small group of magistrates, of course, was nothing but driftwood in Hitomi's wake.

As Hitomi approached, she found the Lion army arrayed around the pass. Hitomi and her top commanders met under parley the Lion command, but the magistrates were no part of those negotiations. They did spend some time with the Lion troops, though the troops were well disciplined and tight lipped. From them, the magistrates learned that Matsu Tsuko held command, and the army had been there, near the pass, for days. It took some careful prying, but the magistrates were also able to learn that the Lion had been ordered by the Emperor to allow the Crab army approaching the pass move through and into Crane Lands, to target the Kakita. The order wasn't sitting well. The majority of the Lion samurai were angry and frustrated. They had seen a small group of Crab hold the pass for the better part of a week against a larger Crab army, one with whom the Shadowlands walked. Even if that army targeted the hated Crane, this was not right...

Soon the negotiations between Hitomi and Tsuko were completed, and the Lion army was ordered to allow the Dragon to pass. They moved aside, and the Dragon made ready for war.

The Dragon charged down upon the pass, moving past the keep without stopping to take the Crab by surprise. The magistrates stayed back from the battlefield, their own orders different, and turned into the defended kuyden as soon as the pass was clear enough of Yakamo's forces to enter safely. They were hailed from within and allowed to enter.

In the keep, they were greeted immediately by a familiar face. Kuni Ren had been a frequent correspondent of Hiruma Izuko through all her days in the capital. They had been friends since Izuko's first stint on the Wall. It was she who had sent Izuko the jade netsuke and warned her of the Obsidian Crab. It was clear from her face that Ren was at the brutal edge of grief and weariness, and that the morale of the Crab samurai was the same. After she and Izuko embraced and the rest of the magistrates were introduced, Ren made the Crab's desperate situation clear.

The Jade Crab, who held the keep, were Crab who disagreed with Hida Kisada, the Crab Clan Champion. Kisada had, with the guidance of Kuni Yori, found a way to use the power of the Shadowlands to support his troops. Kisada believed that the Empire was weak, the Emperor was weak, and once he, as one of the strong, claimed the Throne of Rokugan, he could then turn against the Shadowlands with the force and resources of all the Empire, and the Shadowlands own strength, and crush it as well, leaving the Crab victorious over the Shadowlands and the Empire and bringing peace. Kisada's sons were split on Kisada's decision. Hida Yakamo embraced his father's vision, willingly leading his armies, with Kuni Yori's support. Hida Sukune, his younger son, had disagreed. After long and vehement protests, Sukune had formed the Jade Crab, uniting those who believed that

the Shadowlands must be fought at every turn and to the bitter end, even if it were to destroy the Crab. First through passive protest, then active conflict, and finally with open rebellion, Sukune held the Jade Crab together, while those who sided with Kisada claimed the Obsidian Crab to declare their loyalty, and had the greater forces. Forced to retreat, Sukune withdrew to Beidan Pass, determined to make one last stand to prevent the Shadowlands from being unleashed against the Heart of the Empire and to make the Empire aware of the threat his brother posed. And Yakamo came after him.

Ren was frantic. Hida Sukune had gone out under flag of parley with promised insurance of his safety, to try to persuade Yokamo to turn from his course, but had been dishonorably kidnapped. Most of the other leaders of the Jade Crab had died in the previous days of combat. With Sukune's tactical genius and the Crab skill at defense, the Jade Crab had held the Pass, but they would not have held for another day if Mirumoto Hitomi had not arrived. Even now, she doubted Hitomi had brought enough.

The magistrates and the wounded Jade Crab listened to the sound of fighting, seeing the dust and fire of warfare just over the crest of the pass. Then a great shout went up from the battlefield, and they could see from the keep the forces of the Dragon falling back towards the keep itself. The Jade Crab opened their gates to allow the Dragon in.

Less than a third of the Dragon made it back into the kuyden, and, guarded on all sides, they carried the body of their Daimyo, Mirumoto Hitomi.

She was clinging on to life with an unbreakable tenacity, and one of the few remaining Dragon Shugenja had kept her alive with his prayers to the kami. But she was grievously injured. The greatest injury, which Ayame saw when she came to offer her skills at healing, was that her swordhand had been completely removed, the flesh around it mangled, as though rather than being sliced off by a blade, it had been pinched off by a mighty claw. The stories the remaining Dragons told confirmed this.

Hitomi had led her army straight into the teeth of the Crab's army, determined to take down Hida Yakamo, both out of her own enmity and as the best strategic move. It was costly, but the Dragon had driven a wedge through the Crab forces. There, at the heart, Hitomi confronted Yakamo in a duel. But Yakamo...was no longer fully human. His arm, which Hitomi had claimed in a duel during the Scorpion Clan Coup, had been replaced with a mighty, grotesque claw, like that of an Oni. It was this claw that had born down and severed Hitomi's arm. Once she had fallen, further tainted creatures of the Shadowlands poured out from behind the Crab forces and overwhelmed the Dragon's position. The Dragon were forced to withdraw into the keep. They had done enough harm that Yakamo had also withdrawn, for a time, but there was no doubt that the end would be soon now.

The Dragon and the Jade Crab were granted the sweetness of a quiet night in the keep, even though from beyond the ridge they could hear the sounds of Yakamo's army and could see the light of its

fires. The magistrates were snatching what little sleep they could, sleeping in a room near where Hitomi lay, until they were wakened near dawn by a soft cough.

"Time to wake up, magistrates," a cheerful voice offered. "You're about to be attacked."

The magistrates were startled out of sleep, the bushi immediately reaching for their weapons while Ayame quickly lit a lamp. Nothing could have prepared them, however, for the lamplight revealed the sly smile of none other than Mai, the fifteen year old Red Cloud Yakuza they had known in Ootosan Uchi. The girl straightened from her crouch. She was dressed in black, and a pink scarf hung loosely now about her shoulders. "You are good at finding trouble, aren't you?"

Koshi was the first to speak. "Mai! What are you doing here? How did you even get in? There's three armies here in the pass."

"Four." Mai laughed. "When I realized you were here, I had to come in and let you know I'd kept my promise."

"Which promise?" Ayame asked. "It's very dangerous here."

"My promise about the ronin. I thought it might surprise you. I like surprises. Still, I'm not lying about the attack. It's almost dawn, and you need to go fight if you're going to hold the keep."

Even deep within the Kuyden, the magistrates could hear the sound of battlehorns and gongs. The bushi began lacing into their armor as around them, the defenders of the keep awakened.

Mirumoto Kenuchio's lips pursed to a narrow line. "You're right. We will have to talk after this is over. I'm not sure who you are, Mai-san, but you're too young for this." He started to walk away, towards the battlements, then paused in front of Hitomi's room, abandoned of almost all her guards as her bushi had gone to hold the walls. He paused, and turned to Mai. "But...if you did have a secret way in....maybe you have a secret way out. We're not important, but if the tide of battle turns against us, Hitomi-sama must live. If we have ever helped you...I don't care what it costs....if the keep will be overrun, please take her from here. Take her and protect her and return her to the High House of Light. She's my daimyo, and she has many guards and advisors far more important than I. But if they fall..."

Mai stopped smiling, her eyes narrowing in careful consideration of Kenuchio and the others. "Not wise to not care what it costs. But...I have a way. And I know when to take a deal when one is offered. Very well. I promise I will protect her and return her safely to the High House of Light. You have my word."

Kenuchio nodded. Mai drew the scarf about her face. A battlecry sounded from the wall, drawing the magistrates attention, and when they turned back, Mai was gone.

The magistrates reached the battlements in time to see a tide of samurai and ashigaru crashing past the Kuyden Walls, but this tide was going against their aggressor, Hida Yakamo. They fought with few clan markings, but were a unified fighting force none the less, and above them rose the banner of the Wolf. Their battlecries... 'For Toturi!' 'For Rokugan!'rose as they crashed into the waiting claws of the Crab army that beset them.

The magistrates helped as they could. Some of the remaining Dragon sallied at a moment when Toturi seemed particularly close to pressing his advantage, eager to deliver revenge to Yakamo in Hitomi's name. But it was soon clear that the army of Shadowlands and Crab was just too great for the number of forces Toturi had. Horns and tessen signaled a retreat. It seemed a rout, the ashigaru and ronin falling back in a seemingly disorganized fashion. They did not retreat into the keep, however, instead continuing further, down towards the Lion army.

The Shadowlands and Obsidian Crab army surged, following the retreating ronin. The Jade Crab and Dragon peppered them with arrows, but it made little difference. The land around the keep was strewn with smoke and blood and pain and the bodies of the dead and dying. Then, it appeared...cresting the ridge as it was carried forward into battle. Kuni Ren gasped.

Borne on a mighty and monstrous standard waved over the troops of the Obsidian Crab hung the broken, bleeding body of Hida Sukune, leader of the Jade Crab and brother to Hida Yakamo.

The sacrilege and disrespect, the frustration of waiting, the grief of the Jade Crab who had fought so honorably, and the vile horror of the enemy was too much for Mirumoto Kenuchio to bear. A broken siege tower still leaned haphazardly against the walls of the keep, temporarily abandoned of its attackers. With a cry 'For Honor!' Kenuchio leapt from the battlements into the siege tower and scrambled down, followed a mere second later by Hiruma Izuko. Kuni Ren, her voice an incoherent cry of grief, followed them nearly as recklessly. Asahina Ayame drew to herself the kami of air and water, causing a mist to rise from the battlefield around her. She took a deep breath, mustering her courage, and asked quietly for Moto Koshi to help her down. He did so, following himself. The mist cloaked her, settling around the group of magistrates and blending into the fire and dust of war as they engaged the battle.

Hiruma Izuko led them unerringly towards their goal, the Cursed Standard that bore the body of Hida Sukune. Kenuchio and Koshi fought right and left, slicing any who would make their way through the mist towards them and protecting Ayame and Ren. Ayame maintained her mists with gentle prayers to the kami, while the Kuni unleashed her rage in strikes of pure jade at any tainted beasts that ventured near.

The greater part of Yakamo's troops had their full attention on Toturi and his rout, and did not notice how close to the keep the standard had come or the force that struck from the kuyden to take it. The fighting was bitter and bloody and fast and fierce, and none of the magistrates escaped unscathed, but the group was able to reach the standard and, for a moment, cut it down.

When they did so, they realized that the sacrilege that had been performed was even greater than they realized. For Hida Sukune lived. His face was fixed in a tortured grimace, he could barely lift his head. But he lived. Kenuchi cut him free of the vile standard, and Izuko gathered him up in her arms

without emotion. Ayame expanded the mists around them as they fought their way back to the keep. The Jade Crab within lowered ropes and a sling to permit them entry again without opening the gates.

The magistrates solemnly carried the body of Hida Sukune to an inner chamber of Beidan Keep. Still, there was no time to rest. Ayame and Kuni Ren stayed with the wounded Crab, battling for his life as if one life would make a difference in what was to come. The others returned to the walls, though they all bore significant injuries now. Toturi's army had fallen back into the Lion forces, but Yakamo had not followed. He retained enough control of his monstrous army that when the signal went forth, the Obsidian Crab and oni and goblins and all did not follow Toturi, but instead turned their vengeance to the keep proper.

The wounded remnants of the Jade Crab and Hitomi's Dragon were few, many dying. The Dragon were able to wield their fires against the Crab siege towers, though were forced to use restraint away from their mountain fortresses of stone. Jade Crab knew how to hold a wall against ladders and climbing oni. But the otemon, the main gates, had fallen, and the enemy had entered the sotoguruwa, the outer courtyards. Death was certain.

The keep was falling, and so it was that the magistrates did not see what was happening among the Lion.

If they had been able to turn back, they would have seen how a third of the Lion army cast off their mons and accepted a fate as ronin, sacrificing their name and honor to join with Toturi in defense of the Empire, here at the end.

If they had been able to turn back, they would have seen how a third of the Lion forces left the battlefield, marching with their banners raised towards Crane Lands and leaving the Shadowlands to enjoy free passage into the Crane Lands just as the Emperor had ordered. Victorious conquest against hated enemies at the Emperor's command drove them...and for that, they would allow the Shadowlands to pass into the Empire. After all, they were following orders. That was sufficient for their honor.

But the magistrates were unable to turn back. And therefore they were unable to see the Lion army that remained lined rank upon rank in respectful silence as they watched the pass. They were unable to see Matsu Tsuko, robed in white, walk out in front of her forces. Unable to compromise, unwilling to break, she was willing to sacrifice all for the sake of honor and for the sake of the Empire. The Lioness knelt on the ground, drew her wakizashi, and shouted one, final command to her troops. Then, striking swiftly and deep, she made the three cuts. The Black Toturi stood as her second, made the final cut of mercy.

That was not the end.

Immediately, one of the Kitsu completed the ritual that had been days in the making. The spirit of

Matsu Tsuko, fortified by the ancestors and especially the power of the Lion Thunder, Matsu, rose before the full witness of the Lion army, and her voice rang across the battlefield like the roar of the ancients. The first rank of Lion, a hundred long, responded to her battlecry and knelt on the ground, drawing their wakizashi. Three cuts, in perfect silence, while those in the rank behind them gave the final cut. The second rank knelt to do the same. Rank on rank of the Lions most elite, most loyal, and most honorable troops committed seppuku. To protest the orders of an Emperor gone mad. To show their honor to the end. And, then, to rise. The ritual of the Kitsu did not end with Matsu Tsuko. As each rank fell, the Kitsu Shugenja bound their honorable spirits close to the earth, raising their prayers to Tengoku to grant their reprieve. A Legion of the Dead was formed, filling the field of the fallen around Matsu Tsuko, blinding in their glory.

The magistrates caught up in their battle were unable to see...until the spirits of these newly released Lion samurai were unleashed. Together with the reinforced Toturi's army, the ghostly legion fell crashing down upon Yakamo's forces like a great wind. The oni and the Shadowlands were blinded by the purity of their honor, scarcely able to touch them. But the power of Tengoku was with the Lion, and their blades sliced through all things tainted by Jigoku with the strength of steel and the purity of jade. The ronin who fought beside Toturi plowed into the Obsidian Crab with their full power unleashed, unwilling to compromise a single step further and driving the Obsidian Crab before them. They swept into Beidan Keep and tore through the attackers, freeing the few remnants of the Jade Crab.

Yakamo did not have enough loyal troops left for an organized retreat, and many of the Shadowlands forces with him resisted his call. They scattered across the countryside, fleeing in every direction away from the pass. Those further from the keep were able to avoid the Lion and Toturi's forces, but they were fleeing, hiding, entrenching themselves into the mountains and the dark places of the earth. The Obsidian Crab were cut down. Hida Yakamo was barely able to escape with his life.

This defeat the magistrates were able, with thanks to the Lions' sacrifice, to live to see. And, as they stood shoulder to shoulder with Toturi's ronin on the battlements, they watched the spirit of Matsu Tsuko and her Legion of the Dead meet with Toturi and his highest command in the middle of the battlefield before them. They saw her raise her hand in farewell, and Toturi bow deeply in a gesture of greatest respect. And they could see the spirits of the fallen samurai turn, and with Matsu Tsuko at their head, march into the west and out of sight, joining their own radiance to the red-gold light of the setting sun.

Calls the Lightning – Part 2

Characters

The cast of characters from our retelling of this story are as follows, all now unofficial magistrates serving Kakita Toshimoko, the Emerald Champion:

- Hiruma Izuko - Hiruma bushi

- Mirumoto Kenuchio - Mirumoto Bushi
- Moto Koshi - Moto Bushi, son of Moto Tsolmon
- Asahina Ayame - Asahina Shugenja

Relevant NPCs

- **Ikoma Neiji** - Ikoma Spy who used to be a magistrate with them before he was sent to spy on Toturi's Army
- **Matsumoto Eiko** - Minor Family samurai-ko sent by Toshimoko with them to investigate current events.
- **Mai** - 15yo yakuza eta who seems to be quite the young crime lord
- **Moto Tsolmon** - Koshi's father
- **Kuni Ren** - Correspondent with Izuko, Lover of Hida Sukune, and one of the leaders of the Jade Crab.

Game Background

It was the year 1127. The Battle of Beidan Pass has been won, but at great cost. The forces of Hida Yakamo nearly crushed the rebels from the Crab who call themselves the Jade Crab. It was only the timely arrival of Mirumoto Hitomi, followed by Toturi and his army, and finally the spirits of Matsu Tsuko and her legion of the sacred dead, who were able to break the Crab army. But not before Hida Sukune, leader of the Jade Crab, was terribly injured and tainted by Kuni Yori on the terrible standard of Fu Leng, and not before Mirumoto Hitomi had her hand cut off by Yakamo's corrupted claw and was whisked away to be returned to the High House of Light.

Flight of the Crane

Ashaina Ayame was a pampered child of privilege before the Scorpion Clan Coup, beautiful and endowed with magical gifts. Only her natural shyness and her mild and compassionate nature kept her from being a belle of the court. She never imagined that she would be here, in this inner chamber, with the life of the son of the Crab Clan champion draining out beneath her hands.

Still, she was samurai. "I can save him, Ren-san...at least, I can keep him alive. But his wounds look like they have been corrupted. I am not sure I should....It may be kinder to allow him to die. I am sorry."

Tears were streaming down Kuni Ren's face, streaking her witchhunter facepaint as she bent over the wounds that covered Hida Sukune's tortured body. "No...I need him...." It was clear to Ayame, as it had not been before, that the feelings Ren felt towards Sukune were far more than a loyal samurai towards her lord. Then the Kuni stopped and slowly let the breath she had been holding go. She whispered "You are right....the wounds are tainted. He must...."

Hida Sukune, though he had seemed unconscious, raised his hand to grip Ren's arm. "No."

Ayame's breath caught, and she was ashamed of her presumption. She bowed silently, averting her eyes from Ren's loss of emotional control as she embraced Hida Sukune. Though his body was clearly tortured with pain, Sukune returned Ren's embrace; the feelings were shared. Sukune brushed Ren's tears away with his thumb as she lowered him to the

futon again gently.

"I know what you are thinking," Hida Sukune said softly, tightly controlling the pain. "And the darkness is within me...vile...bitter. " He looked on Ren tenderly. "Even if living meant I could be with you, I would beg for an end. But...I cannot die now. I must not die. If there is any way at all to prevent it."

The stricken Kuni tried to comprehend her lord's command. "I do not understand."

Sukune's eyes fell shut. "I must live. I am the only chance there is to redeem my brother. Without him, the Crab are lost. Without him, the Empire is lost."

Ren straightened, her eyes blazing with anger. "How can that monster be redeemed? Who told you that?"

Asahina Ayame stepped in, gently moving Ren aside before she could directly argue with her lord...or force Sukune to speak more. "We have many questions..." she said gently, "...and we yearn to know the answer. But if Lord Sukune-sama is to live, I must act quickly. We both must. The rest can wait for later. Please, Ren-san..."

They allowed the leader of the Jade Crab to drift back to sweet unconsciousness as they called upon all their healing skills, and Ayame's deft needlework and herblore, to save Hida Sukune's life. Outside, a fierce battle raged. Hida Sukune continued to sleep as the two shugenja turned their hand to heal others that had been brought back into the fortress from the walls, and they were exhausted to the point of collapse when Moto Koshi stopped in briefly to let them know that the battle had been, miraculously, won, though there was considerable cost.

Before taking her rest, however, Asahina Ayame spoke with Kuni Ren about Hida Sukune again. She offered the safety of the Asahina temples as refuge and healing for the wounded rebel Crab. There were healers there far more skilled than she, and, though she would never dare say it aloud, she suspected that at least one of Doji's Tears, the great artifact that could remove the Shadowlands Taint, was there also. If anyone would be able to keep Hida Sukune alive, and potentially even remove the taint, it would surely be the masters of the Asahina. If what Sukune said was true, in some way she did not understand, surely the healers of the Asahina were the best hope to save Hida Sukune, and through him, Hida Yakamo, and through Hida Yakamo, the Empire. Ren agreed. No one, even the Obsidian Crab, would dare attack the Asahina Temples. Hida Sukune would be safe there.

Ayame stumbled wearily to the small corner of the chamber that she had claimed as her own only one unbelievably long day ago. She walked past the larger room where Mirumoto Hitomi had lain, with her guards around her. She was not there now. Somehow, in the midst of all the fighting and the madness, Hitomi and her guards had disappeared from Beidan Keep. Ayame was not overly concerned. She had been there when Mirumoto Kenuchio begged Mai to rescue Hitomi and bring her to the High House of Light, no matter what it cost. It had certainly seemed the keep would fall many times during the day. Mai had clearly

kept her word.

Izuko and the others were already asleep, suffering the effects of their own wounds, when Ayame reached her bedroll. When she reached her futon she lit the small lamp in order to strip off her filthy robes. By the light of the lamp, she was surprised to see a letter tucked under the blanket. She opened it. The paper was pure bleached white, of highest quality, but smelled of opium smoke. The ink was red. The ragged petal of a cactus flower was tucked in the scarlet ribbon that held the letter shut.

"Dearest Ayame-san,

The old man told me I must leave this with you. That is not fair. This is just the sort of toy I enjoy the most, and I have more than earned it. Even if the old man claims I am partially to blame for everything. How was I to know? In any event, he says I must give it to you. You are to bring it to him in Western Hub Village. So here it is.

Still, it would be terrible for my reputation if I ever gave anything away for free, no matter who asks. So I have chosen my price, and it was offered freely...albeit, not by you. Too bad. I'm sure you will be very...honored...to pay the debts of the Crane.

He is very handsome. Loyal. Strong. Intelligent. Honorable but not rigid. Noble. Try and make sure he does not get that pretty face too damaged in the meantime."

There was no chop to indicate who it was from, but none was needed. Mai.

She pulled back the blanket from her futon completely. The tsuba was black with gold markings. The saya and tsuka were bound tightly in non-descript wrappings. But there was no need to open them. The blade shone to her shugenja-trained eyes with an internal fire. The most exquisite blade that had ever been crafted by mortal man, the blade that had forever forged the story of her clan from the time of Shinsei. She had never seen it before, but in her heart, she knew.

The ancestral sword of the Crane. Shukujo.

The advantage of taking significant wounds in battle is that, in that short moment of peace after a victory, there is no dishonor in resting for a time.

Asahina Ayame informed the other magistrates of the letter and "gift" she had received, though she ripped the letter in half to hide Mai's "price", too ashamed of the implications to let the others know. There was much speculation, but nothing certain, and the mystery of the sword continued.

Hida Sukune, Kuni Ren and the remaining Jade Crab left as soon as Sukune was able to be moved. A palanquin carried the son of the Crab Champion. The group was headed for the Asahina Temples as quickly as possible, though the journey would certainly be dangerous. Their hope was to reach the coast near Kuyden Doji and travel by ship the rest of the way. Ren and Hiruma Izuko made a fond farewell.

Ikoma Neiji, the Lion magistrate who had been sent to join Toturi's Army at the behest of the Emerald Champion, caught up with the group he fought beside during the Scorpion Clan Coup. He managed to find them in only two days...a testimony to his ability to gather information. They were delighted to see him, and eager to hear news from around the Empire from someone they trusted...and someone so skilled at being a "discrete observer," as Kakita Toshimoko had put it.

Neiji told them that, while they were heading towards Unicorn Lands, the Emperor had hired Mantis mercenaries to harry and delay the Crab fleet headed for Otosan Uchi. The leader of the minor clan, Yoritomo, had done as bid, but Neiji felt he was holding back, using the wealth from the contract to build power and influence while not making a major dent in the Crab's forces.

His observation may have been fueled by personal anger. The Emperor had also set the Lion's primary army, in defense of Otosan Uchi, even while sending the Lion's secondary army, along with Matsu Tsuko, to Beidan Pass to 'observe' the Crab there. Without the Lion's greatest leaders, and with only half their full strength, the Lion were not able to overwhelm the Crab army led by Hida Kisada when he landed. The Emperor would also not permit the Lion army to use the fortifications of Otosan Uchi against the Crab...not allowing them in the city. Instead, the two armies were slowly chewing each other apart, and the attrition on both sides was horrendous. The Ikoma spoke his share of bitter words about it, but when he suggested that Hida Kisada would have to break the stalemate one way or another now that Beidan Pass was lost, he was more than angry. He was afraid.

On other fronts, Moto Koshi in particular was pleased to learn that Shinjo Yokatsu had finally decided to send the Unicorn armies, led by Otaku Kamoko and her battle maidens, out of Unicorn Lands to defend Beidan Pass and keep the peace in the northwestern Empire in the absence of the Lions. Toturi had begged for Unicorn help for months, but Yokatsu had refused, always citing imminent threat from the Dragon. But he had very recently responded positively and was sending his armies to reinforce Beidan Pass, allowing Toturi to move against the Shadowlands incursions more aggressively.

Mirumoto Kenuchio was eager to hear word of the Dragon. He knew of their recent interactions with Mirumoto Hitomi, but Neiji told them news of Mirumoto Daini, her brother. Daini had been travelling back from the capital, in truth, fleeing the imminent invasion, when he had been intercepted by a group of beings called the Naga. They were a strange race of half-man, half-snake beings, but surprisingly

civilized. Daini was taking them to Kunden Mirumoto for further negotiations, but it seemed their goal was to fight the Shadowlands threat. Mirumoto Hitomi hadn't been seen after the battle, but Kenuchio still believed she was on her way to the High House of Light.

As to the Phoenix, Neiji knew that a small unit of Shiba, led by Shiba Tsukune, had been sent to defend Kuyden Kakita from the Crab. He assumed it was at the Emerald Champion's behest. The Crab had made well-known to the Lion that that Kuyden Kakita was their eventual target...that was why so many of the Lion were willing to stand by and watch the Jade Crab's suffering. Neiji's theory, based on rumors from Mai's allies and what information he could procure, was that somehow the Council of Elemental Masters had gotten ahold of the list of locations of the Black Scrolls the magistrates had given Seppun Ishikawa. The Phoenix Inquisitors were engaged in an Empire-wide sweep to secure the Black Scrolls, now that the Scorpion were gone. If the Masters had gotten the list, it was probably given them by Toshimoko, perhaps even in exchange for Tsukune's aid defending Crane lands. The Isawa were allowing no one to pass into their lands.

When Asahina Ayame inquired more about the situation in her own clan's homelands, Ikoma Neiji's face grew grim. "Not good. At first, when I heard that the rumors of Doji Hoturi, your Champion, leading the Shadowlands in the lands to the south were false, I was moderately...relieved...on your behalf, Ayame. But that was before we travelled here. We've received word, from very reliable scouts, that Hoturi is not to the south, but was travelling through Scorpion lands, and now he is here, in these northern Crane lands, and he is leading cast-off Scorpion samurai who have renounced their honor and allied themselves with the Shadowlands.

Ayame's face grew whiter than porcelain. "How can that be true?"

Neiji shook his head. "It doesn't make any sense. Not unless he's been ensorcelled in some fashion. I don't know. But the armor, the weapons...his appearance...they're impossible to miss. He doesn't seem to be concerned that the peasants who survive his passage see him and know him. They speak to our scouts. There can be no mistaking."

Ayame laid her hand on the blessed sword at her side. "It seems so impossible.

Hirumo Izuko scoffed softly. "Madness comes in many forms. You see it on the wall. Maybe he is one of the traitors that Koshi-san's father warned us about."

Koshi shook his head slowly, thinking. "He's too young."

"But...perhaps that explains the sword," Matsumoto Eiko offered. "Maybe Lord Toshimoko-sama sent Mai to steal it back from Doji Hoturi-sama, so he would not profane it further. He had her give it to us since we were the closest people he could trust with it, and he wants us to bring the sword back to him."

The other magistrates discussed the theory, and decided that that was the most likely meaning of Mai's mysterious letter

Neiji reported no further word of the whereabouts of Toshimoko, but speculated that it was possible that the Emerald Champion may have travelled to Kuyden Kakita to intercept the Crab. And if he didn't, maybe the Phoenix at Kuyden Kakita would know more about where he was.

"We should go to Kuyden Kakita first," announced Kenuchio. "Perhaps we can get him the sword earlier, if he is also at Kuyden Kakita. He is the one who needs it. It's not safe with us. Ayame-san can't even use a blade, and none of the rest of us dare carry it. Besides, it's on the way to Western Hub Village."

Ikoma Neiji had to take his leave. But the rest of the group decided. As soon as all were well enough to walk, they would leave for Kuyden Kakita. If Lord Toshimoko could not be found there, they would follow word of him. If there was no word, they would take the risk of getting closer to Ootosan Uchi and Western Hub Village, to see if, there, they could find and carry the Crane Clan sword to him.

Hiruma Izuko felt a sense of foreboding before they had even left Beidan Keep. No one had noticed their departure...there were many samurai from many clans in Toturi's army and the Jade Crab had already left. The guards were more interested in the fore-riders of the Unicorn that were just arriving anyway.

That foreboding led Izuko to suggest not taking the main road towards Kuyden Kakita. They knew the Lion who had abandoned Matsu Tsuko were traveling that way, and there would no doubt be complications in encountering their tail. But even following just the back roads in the midst of an unseasonably warm and bright late winter day did nothing to ease the Crab bushi's mind. It had been ten years since she lit the flames of her young husband's funeral pyre, watching stoically as he burned, victim of a goblin raid. She looked on the silly, naïve samurai of these luxurious lands with impatience, but a certain amount of fondness. Yes, they played foolish games, but they generally meant well, and wasn't that the reason that the Crab fought, to free the children of the rest of the Empire to play their games and make their pretty pictures and polish their shiny armor and live in peace?

But maybe not now. Only a pair of desultory Daidoji challenged them on the border to Crane Lands, but barely glanced at their papers as they let them pass. The unease grew stronger, not less. The columns of cooksmoke no longer rose into the morning misty sky. The sound of birdsong no longer chorused their mornings. The very air was wrong. The land was wrong. It was not something she had ever hoped to see north of the Kaiu Wall.

One evening, they traveled off the road to an isolated farmhouse for the night, but found the farmhouse empty. A pot of half-cooked rice hung over the ashes of a cooking fire. A stench filled the air, but there were no traces of the inhabitants, only a single smear of brown across the steps leading out of the back of the house. Izuko scowled and urged the other magistrates back to the road while she scouted deeper into the rice paddies.

They met her on the road. "Oni," she told them all, and spat on the ground as an invocation against the

word. "There are goblins nearby as well. I can see their traces. Even the insects are dying. They are keeping away from the main road and large habitations...they are small and not emboldened. Maybe they are fleeing Beidan Pass, or maybe something else draws them. But we need to move quickly and quietly."

After that, Izuko led the way. The further they traveled, the greater the number of traces of Shadowlands creatures collecting in the area there were.

At the end of the third day, Mirumoto Kenuchio frowned. "We will need to warn the Kakita. Can't we find out what we are up against without being noticed?"

Izuko considered. "I don't like the look of the road ahead anyway. There's some high points along the crest line that have a view across the valley. If there are large movements of the creatures, we may be able to see the road from there for a number of miles, and the hills to either side. If we see a large oni, or a significant force of goblins, we can climb over the crest and down to the Imperial Highway north of us. That is the best we can do. We don't have the men or the jade to fight a group of any size."

Kenuchio assented and the group left the road to move to high ground.

The whole group began to feel the unease as they climbed, following the ridgeline parallel to the road, hidden amidst the light forest shrubs and pines. They moved quietly, Izuko in the lead. After a few hours, they reached the edge of the escarpment and followed it around a bend in the road to where the ridge opened up to a broader view of the countryside ahead. Another road intersected on the one they had been traveling. Above, a flock of some sort of black-winged bird flew by, screeching, and the eerie quiet caused the magistrates to duck down and hide at the ridgecrest, observing the roads.

The shrieking of the birds, strangely, did not die. Instead it grew louder, and from a distance they could see them, screeching and tumbling about the lumbering hulks of five large oni, a swarm of mountain goblins. All held their breath. Behind the oni and goblins came shambling ranks of dead samurai, some wearing the familiar colors of the recently-dead Crab. After that followed more disciplined ranks of samurai in red and black, their backs bearing the banner of the Scorpion. And there, at the center of the marching Scorpion army, mounted on a fine steed, they saw from afar the figure of a man in beautiful blue and white armor, his white hair streaming in the wind behind him. Doji Hoturi was marching towards Kuyden Kakita, and evil marched with him.

Not one magistrate made a sound as they withdraw, further back along the valley wall. After some difficult climbing, they crested the ridge between that valley and the next and, as fast as possible, raced down the hill toward the Imperial Road, not caring any more if they ran into Lion or Daidoji.

Kuyden Kakita must be warned at all costs. They only prayed they would make it in time.

"A Dragon, a Moto, a Crab, and a maiden were traveling to the Kakita Academy..." The laughing voice hailed them from atop an artfully-placed boulder on the side of the road. "Either this is a great story in the making or an equally terrible joke." The magistrates had passed through the nearby village and were approaching the markers that indicated the academy grounds. The open gates of Kuyden Kakita lay beyond.

A man jumped with easy grace down to the road before them. He wore a well-made haori and hakama of sky blue silk, and his hair streamed from a long topknot. A sword moved at his side as if it were a part of him. He grinned. "Magistrates. My name is Kakita Hideyoshi. Welcome to our home. May I see your papers?"

Kenuchio offered the Kakita his papers, wracking his memory for the name that seemed so familiar. Hideyoshi got there first. "Mirumoto Kenuchio! I should have recognized you. Have you returned for a rematch?"

Kenuchio blinked as the Kakita's words caused the memories to slide into place. He was from a wealthy Dragon family, and as a child his father had taken the opportunity of his position to visit many of the finer gatherings in Rokugan. Once, when he was eight, he and his mother had traveled with his father to Crane lands. The Crane had been hospitable, as far as he could remember, and had arranged a children's tournament where the young students of their iaijutsu school could show off their developing skills.

For reasons Kenuchio had never known, his father was encouraged to enter his own son, who had been studying in the Mirumoto school, in the contest. Kenuchio did the best he could, of course, and did manage to win points against a number of his challengers. However, in the final round of the exhibition, he faced another child his age. The child laughed at him before defeating him completely in the duel that followed, but was serious as he lifted up the fallen Dragon and thanked him for such a good test of skill. That little boy, he now remembered, was named Kakita Hideyoshi.

How many years had he struggled to win the look of pride in his own father's face that Hideyoshi's father had shown that day?

Kenuchio gave a tired gesture of greeting. "No rematch, I assure you. We are racing here with terrible news and must speak with Lord Toshimoko or Lord Yoshi immediately, if either is here."

Hideyoshi shook his head. "I regret to say they are not. Lord Uji is in the area, coordinating our forces from an attack by the Lion, though why they strike at us now I'll never understand. Why start a war with us while Crab armies storm across the Empire? Word is that the legions of Jigoku march with them." Even as he spoke, he began leading them back into the keep.

If he glanced at Izuko's mon, he didn't make it apparent, and she pointedly ignored him.

Moto Koshi looked around. "Is that why so many have fled?" he asked. He was well aware of the signs of a group of people who have moved on.

Hideyoshi nodded. "If the Lion are attacking our borders, that meant they did not intend to fight the Crab. It seemed to us that the Crab therefore did not intend to fight the Lion either. Who else was there to attack? We cannot hold Kuyden Kakita against an army of tainted creatures. The academy is primarily a place of artists." He gave a self-conscious smirk. "And a few kenshinzen."

The Crane led the magistrates through a most beautiful courtyard to a larger building on one side of it, rather than the Kuyden itself. "This is the council of the head sensei," he warned. "They are the head instructors of the Academy, and are in charge of the Academy and the keep in our daimyo's absence."

Though eager to report, the magistrates knew that decorum was important, and tried their best to be courteous in the presence of such a diverse group of masters.

They were first asked by the Calligraphy master who they were and where they had come from. Hideyoshi politely took their papers to him, and the Calligraphy master nodded approvingly. "Toshimoko-sama never took enough time on the lower cross stroke. This is his document," the master informed the others while the magistrates explained they had been sent by Toshimoko to investigate a report of problems in Unicorn lands and were returning when they were caught up in the battle at Beidan Keep.

"Is Beidan Keep still standing?" the painting master asked. "We heard that the Crab had been defeated most gloriously, so we no longer need to evacuate the Academy, but I am concerned about the keep itself. It was a beautiful structure, especially when the sun set over the western mountains from there."

The magistrates regretfully informed him that the keep was quite damaged, but still stood, thanks to the actions of Toturi and the Lion.

"Ah, Mono no aware," the sensei responded. "I will have to paint it in another season."

"Did anyone collect the Lions' final haiku?" the poetry master asked, but the magistrates had no idea.

"These Lion," one of the iaijutsu sensei cut in aggressively. "If they committed seppuku. Then who is Lord Uji fighting?" The magistrates tried to explain the fracturing of the Lion army, but the stodgy iaijutsu master just fired off more questions, unable to get past the idea that only part of the army broke off to march on the Crane, as though it were impossible that the army was sufficiently large to fight in both Beidan Pass and Crane Lands at the same time and not be easily defeated by Daidoji Uji.

The ikebana master laid a gentle hand on the iaijutsu master's arm, bringing him to a sputtering halt. "My friend," she said gently. "You have asked twelve questions already and I know you have more. But they are already wilting with weariness and still have not told us their important news." She turned to the magistrates. "I apologize. Please tell us what you have come so far to say."

Kenuchio stepped forward. "We were traveling by the back roads, trying to avoid both the Lion and your own Daidoji troops on the way here so as not to be caught in battle. As we traveled, we saw signs of corruption along the road. Thinking some oni may have escaped Beidan pass, we scouted further. We

regret to say it was worse than we imagined. We saw, with our own eyes, the passing of a large army, at least four thousand strong. They are maybe a day and a half away. Oni. Goblins. Scorpion. They were being led by..." he trailed off when he saw Ayame shaking her head quickly. He thought for a moment. "We could not be certain. A man in blue and white armor." Ayame looked a little relieved.

The council erupted into discussion, and messages were immediately sent out. They could already hear the commands to resume the evacuations. Hideyoshi quietly led them away.

"So...about that rematch..."

The courtyard was filled with activity, a coordinated dance that swirled around the two bushi as they walked together towards the gardens.

The magistrates had taken a few hours to eat and rest; the hospitality of the Crane overwhelming even in the midst of an evacuation. They then scattered to do what they could to help...Izuko and Eiko offering advice to the Daidoji on trapping the grounds around the keep, while Koshi helped handle the ponies and oxen that were pulling carts of the artifacts Ayame was working with the artisans to prepare.

Mirumoto Kenuchio found himself walking with Kakita Hideyoshi through the academy grounds, watching the preparations with a bleak resignation. He looked up. "I told you I didn't come to duel you."

Hideyoshi smiled. "I know. But I was hoping you would anyway. Just with boken. For old time's sake?"

Kenuchio was flabbergasted. "Now? This whole Kuyden is about to be overrun by a tainted hoard of madmen. There is no way the Shiba or the Daidoji will return in time to save it. Your people are fleeing for their lives, and you want to have a duel now?"

"Well, given all that, there won't be much opportunity to after, will there?" Hideyoshi's tone turned serious. "Please. One last duel for the joy of the art. I doubt the oni are going to appreciate my skills."

"You're staying." It was not a question.

"This is my home. Our home. We are abandoning it, now, I know. The treasures here...the skills in the hands of the artisans. The stories they tell, the works they created. These are the things that elevate us above the beasts around us. They remind us we are children of the celestial heavens, teach us to look upward, to strive to be our best selves. These things must be protected. We are fleeing to save them." Hideyoshi slowly turned in place, looking over the early springtime beauty of the garden around him. "Still...there is much that is precious here that we cannot take with us. This place is ours. We won't dishonor it by leaving it undefended. Hoturi will pay dearly for what he destroys today."

"You know it is Doji Hoturi, then?"

Hideyoshi nodded. "We guessed. We'd heard rumors. The Master Sensei know it too, of course, but your Asahina maiden was wise not to let you tell them. They would die of shame to hear it said from another clan samurai's lips." He grinned again. "You should hurry up and marry her before she decides you'll never get around to it."

Kenuchio choked a bit and blushed. Quickly changing the subject, he returned, "You'll defeat me, of course."

Kakita Hideyoshi reached a weapon rack on one side of the garden and carefully removed his katana. Kenuchio did the same. As Hideyoshi retrieved some practice weapons, he answered, "Of course. But you'll learn from me. Only a fool fails to learn from a defeat, after all. You will take that learning with you, deeper into this great story of yours, and then I can be a part of it too. I am eager to find out where it will take you."

"Hideyoshi-san..."

"Catch." The Kenshinzen tossed the wooden boken to Kenuchio, and, after a second, tossed him a shorter wakizashi-length practice blade as well.

The two took their stance.

There are moments where time stops, when haiku can be composed between two heartbeats, when the wideness of the world distills down to a single point. Until all explodes into motion and fury and is still again.

Kenuchio's arm stung from the strike of the boken, but he knew he had heard at least one solid wooden click as his blade had intercepted his opponent's, if only for a moment. He forced himself to remember the exact move that Hideyoshi had used to circle around his guard after the first hit. He bowed.

Hideyoshi bowed in return.

The remaining hours did not stand still; they went by in a blur. The magistrates, at the politely-hinted request of the Master Sensei, agreed to help guard the last of the wagons and refugees fleeing the keep until they were a safe distance from Hoturi's army. Some of the wagons were traveling east, to Kuyden Doji, while others headed south, to the safety of Shinden Asahina.

The smell of the goblins reached them before they had traveled a thousand yards southeast of the keep, the creaking wagon beside them loaded to bursting. The magistrates could not help themselves; they had to pause and turn back to watch the end, however briefly.

The goblins and oni maintained incredible discipline for their kind, waiting as the mounted, white-haired rider approached the keep. The magistrates could not hear what was shouted, but they saw atop the walls the twenty kenshinzen who guarded the keep, flashes of white and silver and blue sparkling in the morning sun. At the center, they could see the distinctive cerulean of Hideyoshi's kimono among them. Hoturi gestured with his drawn katana. With an obscene roar, his madmen and goblins surged forward. The kenshinzen leapt down into the fray like lances from heaven, and chaos erupted around them. Time and again Hoturi's creatures and Scorpion samurai pulled back from the whirling death that had erupted in their midst, but always they flowed back upon the kenshinzen and overwhelmed them.

Some of the creatures, eager for the easy prey found in the caravan, came after the magistrates, and they were not allowed the privilege of watching that last battle at Kuyden Kakita. But Kenuchio, after slashing down a red-armored samurai with a scowling mempo, had a moment to breathe, and looked up to see if any trace of the kenshinzen remained. Smoke was already curling in the walls of the Kuyden. A glimmer of sky blue caught his eye. On a large rock near the road, surrounded by foes grabbing at him from every side, his childhood rival danced out of their reach, his sword flashing. Drenched in blood, he waved at the departing caravan from afar before diving into the armies before him to make his last stand.

Kakita Hideyoshi. The Last Kenshinzen.

A Higher Cause

Western Hub Village was full to bursting. The town when they had departed had been bustling, filled with merchants selling their wares, monks chanting praises to the fortunes, farmers bringing their crops to market, and travelers moving from one side of the Empire to the other with energy and purpose. That had all changed. The refugees that lined to roads leading up to the town sat listlessly atop piles of their meager belongings, lacking any safe refuge, too tired and lost to walk further. Merchants hawked their wares still, but fights broke out for some overpriced necessities while other merchants shouted their calls with rising desperation in their voices. Farmers carried empty baskets, trying to avoid the eyes of beggars pleading for rice. And on at least two street corners on the way into the village, self-acclaimed holy men cried out about how the time had come and the end of the world was nigh. Rokugan was being punished for her faults...though each preacher decried different failings.

Looking around them, the magistrates could almost feel these holy men might be right. From the lowliest eta to the mightiest samurai they passed, there was an air of hopelessness. They were relieved to reach the House of the Dawn Lotus, where at least a façade of calm and beauty remained.

A beautifully dressed maiko met the group of magistrates at the door, bowing and welcoming them most graciously. "Please, come with me," she offered. "And please allow your blades to be polished by our expert Kakita-trained craftsmen." The bushi surrendered their blades, but Ayame refused, claiming that the sword she bore was a holy artifact that she may never allow another to touch until it was returned to its true resting place. Her sincerity, her family name, and clear lack of weapons training, convinced the guards to allow the weapon to pass, especially since it was convincingly well-bound. Ayame did, of course, draw some eyes.

The maiko led them into an interior room where other servants of the house, brought them food and sake and water to wash away the dust of the road. Around them, from other rooms, came the sound of music and laughter, where other wealthy patrons were being entertained. After a short period of time, the oka-san of the geisha house came to them and knelt before them.

"Welcome once again, samurai-sama's, to the House of the Dawn Lotus. What service can we do for you?"

Mirumoto Kenuchio took the lead. "Thank you for your gracious welcome. We were told that Lord Toshimoko, the Emerald Champion, might either be here or we might direct a message to him from here." Moto Tsolmon pulled out their travel papers, and laid them out before her.

The old woman's eyes twinkled. "I remember you, and I thank you for showing me your travel papers. You are fortunate that we have met before, for I am forced to be more suspicious now than once I was. However, I must humbly inquire after the fate of your obi, Mirumoto Kenuchio-sama. Lord Toshimoko was quite concerned."

Ayame hid a smile with her fan as Kenuchio answered stiffly, "After Toshimoko-sama cut it at the Test of the Emerald Champion, it could not be repaired. I put it away for safe-keeping and trust that it will be at the heart of an interesting tale to tell my grandchildren."

The oka-san smiled broadly, demonstrating a sad lack of teeth. "Lord Toshimoko is behind a good many tales that I remember. And he has not forgotten you either. He is not here, and it has been a month or more since he passed this way. You may leave a message and I can try to get it to him. In addition..." she glanced over her shoulder towards the back room she had come from. "He has left something for you also. I beg a moment to retrieve it."

She stood, gracefully bowed, and retreated into the back room. The magistrates could just hear the sound of whispering, but decided to wait patiently for the oka-san's return.

A few minutes later, she did come back, carrying a letter on a black lacquered tray. She lay it before the assembled magistrates and left. Kenuchio broke the seal's green wax. The letter read:

***"To my gate guardians,
Do not return to Otosan Uchi. I have learned what I needed to know and I know what I must do. The Emperor has decided his own protection. Now the Empire itself must be protected also. This old duelist must try to wield an army, I suppose.***

Wait here. Keep the peace of Western Hub Village if you can. In time, there will come a man, an ashigaru, wearing a green cloak and hood. He will greet you in my name. Ask him for an invitation. He will provide you with proof of his identity. If he provides proof you can accept, then my orders are to follow him. Do as he bids, and help him where you can. He speaks for me to you in all things. He will not bring you dishonor.

Kakita Toshimoko”

Kenuchio silently passed the letter to Ayame who looked at it carefully. “It is from him,” she said after he had read it. “You can see by the lower cross stroke.” She passed it to Eiko, and it was passed on until each magistrate had read the letter silently in turn. Izuko returned it to Kenuchio.

“How long are we supposed to wait here, guarding this town, while the Empire falls apart around us?” a frustrated Hiruma Izuko asked aloud.

The shoji screen opened again. A tall, middle-aged man, dressed in simple, but well-made clothing, entered. Over his shoulders and head was a hood of dark green fabric.

“Not long, I imagine,” the stranger replied.

How quickly this man had captured their loyalty! It was surprising to Moto Koshi, but, perhaps, simply having a direction, any direction, that would seem to help resolve a world gone wrong, was enough. Koshi might not even know his name, but he had certainty of purpose and a clear vision. That, and Toshimoko’s assurances, were enough for Koshi.

The others took a little longer to trust.

The group of magistrates turned quickly to the hooded man who approached them. The stranger smiled and raised his hands in a gesture of peace. "Never fear me. I come in the name of Kakita Toshimoko, the Emerald Champion and a dear friend. He told me that you would be coming eventually, and I see I have arrived right at the correct moment."

Hiruma Izuko cocked her head suspiciously. "I have seen no invitation for you to be here."

The ronin reached into his obi and pulled out a piece of paper. It was clear that the paper was fine, but older, and somewhat worn with the passage of time. He passed it to the Dragon bushi that stood before him. "I understand, Mirumoto Kenuchio. But I do have one. See?"

Kenuchio opened the paper slowly and glanced down. "An invitation to participate in the tournament for the Emerald Championship. These were returned to Seppun Ishikawa following the tournament. Only Ishikawa or Toshimoko would have had access to them, and only Lord Toshimoko would know of their significance."

Izuko was still unsatisfied and turned to Ayame. "What do you say?"

The shugenja smiled softly. "I don't know him. But the kami do. He is not shugenja, but he is much beloved. I don't know why."

The stranger smiled at that. "That, I hadn't known. Don't be concerned, Hiruma-san. You are Hiruma Izuko, yes? While I appreciate that Toshimoko-sama has entrusted me to your care, I will not ask you to do anything that you would not wish to do yourselves, if you had learned what I had. It would make the Doji-kami weep to see a blade born by an Asahina, and it is vital that it be returned. I will take you to its true owner."

Izuko's eyes narrowed. "And who would that be?"

The ronin frowned, the first expression of anger they had seen on his face yet. "Not the monster who wears Doji Hoturi's face now, if that is what you are asking."

Ayame sighed softly, then asked with hesitation, "I believe that you will do this. I am willing to go with you to return the sword. But you know our names, and we do not know yours. If we are to go with you, what should we call you?"

"Ayame-san...your faith gives me heart. I am sorry. I cannot give you my name, because there are many forces, of this realm and Jigoku itself, that are dearly searching for its mention in order to use it to find me. But I am a teacher of sorts. You may call me Sensei."

The preparations took a few days. The proprietress of the geisha house had seen that they were provisioned. The bushis' swords were returned well-polished and their armor was cleaned and re-laced. At Sensei's direction they were given traveling clothes that were well-enough made and appropriate to their clan, but less distinguished than the uniforms of magistrates of Otosan Uchi that they had previously worn. The ronin seemed to desire anonymity for the next stage of their travels.

It was for the best. The Empire was growing increasingly dangerous. Moto Koshi asked the news of every Unicorn that rode through the city, for news rarely carried faster than Unicorn steeds. He received word that Shiba Tsukune had reached Kuyden Kakita, finally, joining Daidoji Uji and reclaiming the land the keep had stood upon. But she had found the place destroyed, that the army of madmen that had captured it had disappeared into the hills once more and left at best a token force behind. The Lion

army that had rebelled against Matsu Tsuko's suicide orders had ridden deeper into Crane Lands after Uji had withdrawn to retake Kuyden Kakita. Even now, the Lion were laying seige to Kuyden Doji, where Doji Kuwanan was standing a solid defense. As soon as Uji had secured Kuyden Kakita, he set out with his fastest troops to try to break the siege, leaving Shiba Tsukune in charge of the defense of Kakita lands. But, unlike Matsu Agetoki, Daidoji Uji lacked cavalry. It would take more troops to break a Lion siege.

News from the West was equally dire. Plague so afflicted the Imperial Capital that, now, the orders the Emperor had made that the Lion must not enter the city in order to defend it almost seemed prescient. None entered or left the city save a few Imperial Heralds, carrying new orders from the Empress. Winter Court had been cancelled due to risk of spreading disease. Koshi had overheard a few Lion samurai drinking sake at one of lesser sake houses; they were discussing how long it would take Ikoma Tsanuri, commander of the Lion army defending Ootosan Uchi, to recall Agetoki to drive off the Crab assaults on Ootosan Uchi. Kisada would...must...fall soon.

Four days after meeting the man they called Sensei, the group of magistrates, now to all appearances, a misfit collection of low-ranked samurai forgotten by their clan leadership, left Western Hub Village, traveling north towards Northern Hub Village, the borders of Phoenix lands, and the boat that awaited them.

Fire and Smoke

The trees grew thicker along the border of Phoenix lands. Cassia and cherry and plum began to give way to pine. The well-tamed woodland criss-crossed with pleasant sunlit paths became thick and overgrown tracts of forest, intent on sheltering their own secrets. The road to Northern Hub Village skirted such trees as it traveled north, circling Ootosan Uchi but giving it wide berth. The road itself was empty and well-maintained, but thick brambles barred further passage through the forest undergrowth. The green shade beneath the trees was dark and gloomy, and the evening sun cast long shadows upon the magistrates as they walked.

A column of thick, oily smoke rising from those woods first drew the samurais' attention; they picked up their pace. As the road curved they could hear the rattle of metal and the crackle of flames, cut with a cry of pain. The battle was concealed from the road by the dense trees, but one could tell it was nearby. The samurai looked to Sensei.

"Go," he answered.

The magistrates dove into the dense undergrowth.

Pushing through the brambles, they reached a clearing, scorched and smoking. Kneeling in the clearing was a thin, bookish, middle-aged man, panting heavily. His kimono was scorched black in places, but they could see he wore the robes of an Isawa. He clutched his wounded side and shook with weariness.

On the opposite side of the clearing, masked and armored samurai advanced, swords drawn. But these were not normal samurai. Each suit of armor was identical, armor of the Shiba clan of the Phoenix. Each carried, instead of a blade of steel, a drawn blade wrought of pure flame. And behind each, identical mempo, no eyes, but burning red flames. Thin columns of white smoke rose from between the chinks in the armor. The fire-samurai advanced slowly upon the wounded Isawa.

The Isawa held up his hand, sending a gust of air that was able to stagger one of the fire samurai, but the rest advanced regardless. The shugenja let his hand fall with resignation.

Mirumoto Kenuchio was the first to break through the undergrowth. It took him just a moment to assess the scene. He decided to defend the Isawa against these inhuman enemies, then determine from there the reasons the shugenja was being pursued. He drew both his blades and leapt into battle with one of the metal warriors. At his side, Hiruma Izuko and Moto Koshi also charged into battle, blades swinging, while Asahina Ayame called upon the kami of wind and water to drive back the flames and protect them from harm. Sensei also joined them, driving the fire-samurai back with his staff when they grew too near the wounded shugenja. Matsumoto Eiko devoted herself to guarding their charge specifically. The battle was fierce, but the magistrates discovered that the suits of armor were hollow, animated only with a kind of living flame. Once the kabuto were forcibly removed, the fire-samurai's bodies could be driven back into a small stream that would quench the flames, and they would not arise again. Only a thick, oily smoke rose from the twisted metal and lacquer.

The magistrates were victorious. But scarcely had their battle been won when they turned to challenge the wounded shugenja.

Moto Koshi voiced the challenge. "You have no taint in you. But who are you and what were these that hunt you?"

The shugenja's voice was thick with pain. "My name is Isawa Natsune. I am...I am just a librarian. I swear. But I have seen...such terrible things. Things that the Empire must know..."

Ayame lay a gentle hand on his brow, unwilling to permit him to suffer under the Moto's interrogation. "Rest now. We will take you to Northern Hub village, where you may recover and tell all that you can. We will help you if we are able." They gathered up the Isawa, a light enough burden, and pushed back through the forest and onto the main road. Only the lingering columns of smoke marked any disturbance behind them.

Northern Hub Village was busy, but Sensei had little trouble identifying an inn that would accommodate them. The Eagle's Rest was comfortable, but plain. The magistrates settled Natsune on a futon in a private room and allowed Ayame to properly attend to his wounds.

She emerged. "He will live. He has barely eaten or drunk for a week, barely slept. He has been heavily wounded. But he will live. He is feeling better now, and has eaten. He is eager to speak with you."

The magistrates and Sensei entered the room and knelt around the wounded shugenja's futon. After a moment of uncomfortable silence, Sensei spoke. "It is time to tell your story, Natsune-san."

The pale and weary samurai settled back in his futon and began to speak.

"I served as a librarian to the Council of Five. It was my honor to keep the records of the halls, aid them in their research. So many things. The Phoenix are the keepers of the secrets of the realms, of the kami, of lore poorly understood and long forgotten outside our libraries and temples, and the library of the Isawa holds the beating heart of knowledge in the Empire. Our agents across the Empire dance the dance of fan and blade to bring us more.

"We have known for years that there have been those seeking to undermine the Empire. The Asako Inquisitors warned of traitors in the clans. They warned us of treason by the Iuchi, the Kuni, the Kitsu...terrible disgraces in the years before the Scorpion Clan Coup. And then the great treason of the Coup itself...it was obvious a terrible threat was arising in the Empire. Asako Monoro-sama warned us that we were just as vulnerable...maybe moreso. He vowed to hunt down all traitors within the Phoenix...and made good that threat. I watched as he executed twenty men at once. They were weak, disaffected, low-ranked. It seemed excessive...but a small price to pay to not be betrayed from within. But now I am the one hunted, and, maybe a traitor."

Sensei stiffened at the name of the Chief Inquisitor, a thunder-dark expression in his eyes as he gestured for the librarian to continue.

"With the full backing of the Council of Elemental Masters, Monoro saw more and more treason in the shadows. More threats against the Phoenix and the Empire. You must have heard of it! Tadaka's own nephew, Aruka, calling up Oni. Crab allying with the Shadowlands and turning on the Empire? The Champion of the Crane leading an army of demons against his own lands? It could not be coincidence. " The Isawa shugenja struggled to sit up, gesturing broadly with the passion in his words. "They must be connected to the previous treasons...you have to understand. We have looked at the Prophecies of Uikku. I pulled them from the archives myself! The prophecies have revealed that these things foretell the greatest threat our age has ever known....they portend the coming of an evil God!"

Ayame covered her mouth with her hands, her eyes wide. Izuko glowered, while Kenuchio shifted his weight from one foot to the other uncomfortably. Matsumoto Iyeko started to speak, but caught herself and stifled the words in a cough. Only Moto Koshi seemed unmoved.

Sensei simply nodded. "We live in troubled times," he answered. "But that does not explain what happened. Please continue."

Natsune sank back again, his voice growing flat as he stared upwards at the ceiling. " We did not dare turn to other clans...who knows how many traitors remain? But the inquisitors sent our agents

everywhere. Some alone, some marching with our forces as we tried to aid our allies...and search their libraries at the same time." He shook his head. "All we had learned, knowledge gleaned from across the Empire. It was never enough. What god was coming? In what form would he come? And, always, always, if he were to come, how would we bind him again?"

"It was Asako Monoro who suggested the obvious solution. The original scrolls of Isawa. They had bound the god Fu Leng, in the deep recesses of history. They contain so much knowledge, from the oldest days, knowledge that is ours...knowledge that was lost to us. Surely they had the answers we sought."

"The Black Scrolls," murmured Asahina Ayame. "But they are cursed."

Isawa Natsune shifted his head to gaze at her for a moment or two before returning his focus to the patterns of cracks in the ceiling. "So I told them. I begged the Elemental Masters, before they took this rash step. Was there not the possibility, however small, that we might be misreading the signs, that the prophecies were wrong? But I am just a librarian. And it is not my place to question. And the High Inquisitor, he was so certain. By the time the master of Earth returned with another scroll, there was no doubt in any but Kaede, Master of the Void, but they would not be swayed by even her. Before the end, the Master of Water, Tomo-sama, came to me and told me he knew the scrolls were cursed, but for the good of the Empire, the Phoenix must accept this curse upon themselves. It was the only way to chain a god. I...think...he pitied me.

"The masters....they have opened the Black Scrolls. At least four of them, maybe more. I do not know what they contained. As soon as they opened them, they...changed. Tomo has become a beast. Uona weeps blood and speaks with madness. Tadaka's eyes burn green with taint. And even they, the Elemental Masters, have fear in their eyes when they speak of Tsuke. His darkness is deeper than any I have ever seen.

In the silence that followed the librarian's words, each magistrate could hear his own heart beating. Natsune sounded ashamed. "After I had seen, I could not stay and serve them. What they have done is unspeakable. Surely their actions will speed the return of this god far more than it could ever prevent it. And so...I....laid a trap for them. I tried to kill them, so new, wiser, Masters could be raised. Perhaps it would have seemed as if they died of the curse of the black scrolls. But my trap failed, and I fled. I fled to beg the champions of the other clans, those not allied with the Shadowlands itself, to bring a stop to my own masters. To reveal the prophecies." A single tear slid down the Phoenix's cheek. "So...they are hunting me. Master Tsuke sent the beings of flame. They will not rest until I am dead. I am dead either way."

Sensei laid a compassionate hand on the Isawa's shoulder. "Rest now. We will think on this and do what must be done." He led the others out of the room. In the hall, Sensei told his magistrates. "Any decisions we can make must wait for morning. But you should keep a watch. It should take time for the Elemental Masters to send more servants, but you never know." Kenuchio and Izuko took it upon themselves to set a watch on the wounded man's door, while the rest of the magistrates went to their own chambers to rest.

"I smell something," Hiruma Izuko was immediately on her feet, hand resting on her wakizashi.

Mirumoto Kenuchio stood also, smelling the air cautiously. "Smoke. From last night's battles?"

Izuko turned to face him. "It is smoke. But this is fresh." She immediately threw open the shoji screen that separated the two bushi from the Isawa Shugenja whose sleeping, wounded body they had been protecting. The room was pitch black. Kenuchio stooped to pick up the lantern that they had kept on the floor near them through the night's watch, thrusting it into the darkness.

The darkness only pulled back a little from the lamp's glow. To their horror, the room was filled with black smoke. But the smoke itself moved, as though it were alive, forming the shadowy outlines of what they could only call ninjas. In an instant, Kenuchio's katana was in his hand, while Izuko raised the alarm. The smoke writhed about them for a moment longer, but then fled through the narrow, open shutters just below the eaves.

Kenuchio raced around to the entrance of the inn in pursuit, but the smoke was lost in the night air. Matsumoto Eiko quickly joined him, but she had no way of tracking the smoke...there was no taint of the shadowlands about it, despite its fearsome appearance. Izuko approached Isawa Natsune's side and knelt beside him. The man did not stir. Asahina Ayame came in within seconds and confirmed what she had seen. The shugenja was dead...stifled in his sleep before he was ever able to utter another word.

The magistrates gathered again after all hope of pursuit towards the magic smoke had been lost. Shock, mystification, and helpless horror fell upon them, and they looked at each other in silence. Finally, Sensei entered himself, taking in the scene with a look of great sorrow in his eyes.

"Sensei...what do we do now?" Hiruma Izuko asked. "This man carried vital news, and surely was killed by the Elemental Council for it. The Isawa are opening the Black Scrolls. The Elemental Masters have become corrupted. Surely we must tell..." she paused, uncertain how to go on.

Sensei leaned on his staff tiredly. "I do not know." He turned to Moto Koshi. "At dawn, you will go meet the riders from the capital and the front who are passing through, Koshi-san. Kenuchio-san and Eiko-san?"

"Hai?"

"You will ask in the marketplace for news from the Empire. We will decide then. Ayame-san, Izuko-san...stay with me. We will ensure that this brave shugenja is at the very least given proper rites fitting to his courage and sacrifice. Until morning...we may as well rest. "

The next morning, Koshi, Kenuchio, and Eiko went out to the marketplace to gather news, while Sensei, Ayame, and Izuko arranged the funeral for Isawa Natsune. But the three were not out long before they came running back through the inn gate. The news was on every Rokugani's lips, from the eta to samurai. The Lion commander at Otosan Uchi, Ikoma Tsanuri, recalled Matsu Agetoki from Kuyden Doji, and the Lion had withdrawn. The move forced Hida Kisada's hand. In a daring raid, Kisada had breached the walls of Otosan Uchi and fought his way right through the inner walls of the city, to the very throne room of the Hantei himself.

And...amazingly...the scrawny young man that had claimed the throne not that many years before had defeated the Great Bear and his son, Yakamo, in mortal combat. He had laughed as the Crab fled with the sword of the Hantei plunged into Kisada's guts. The Crab fleets were retreating south. No one knew what would happen next or what these strange signs meant.

Ayame, Izuko, and Sensei listened silently to the outpouring of news.

Kenuchio tried to wait for Sensei's response, but his impatience got the better of him. "Sensei! You realize that the Sword of the Hantei is the soul and the symbol of Imperial power...holding it was the ground for Toturi's claim, and almost Shouju's. How could Hantei do what they say? And, even if he did, he would never throw away the symbol of his power."

Moto Koshi folded his arms. "The answer is simple. The story being spread must be false."

Sensei held up his hand, and they fell silent. "The story is not false. I am sure of it. I know now what we must do regarding the matter of Isawa Natsune and the Council of Elemental Masters."

Ayame looked both worried and relieved. "What, Sensei?"

"

"Nothing. We do nothing."

The group of magistrates stirred uneasily, and finally Izuko's bluntness took hold. "Why is that, Sensei?"

Sensei granted them the kindness of an explanation, his eyes cast over the pile of wood being prepared for the body of Natsune with a tender and sad expression. "There is no one that can help them. There is no one we can tell. Shiba Tsukune will learn soon enough, and every day that delays her knowledge gives the Daidoji more chance to build their defenses in Crane lands against Doji Hoturi and protects the Crane from the Shadowlands incursions we saw there. Shiba Ujimitsu undoubtedly already knows...and has done nothing. He cannot move against the will of the Council. Who else can they turn to? The Crane? The Lion? The Crab? None are possible at this time. And the Emperor? No other armies can come, or save them. We must go on and trust the heavens will spread the word when the time is right."

The magistrates thought it over, but realized there was no other choice. They were still not happy with it. "This isn't right," Kenuchio declared, still angry at himself for failing his charge.

Asahina Ayame laid her hand gently on his arm. "No...it's not. But it is what must be. But I have an idea."

She turned to Sensei. "May I please withdraw until Natsune's spirit is returned to the heavens?"

Sensei nodded.

After the funeral, Ayame returned with a thick scroll, curled up with the rest of her papers. She showed them all before she put it away. "I have written every word he told us. His sacrifice may not be shared now, but I can take it to the Libraries of the Asahina and copies can be sent to all the libraries of Rokugan, so what Isawa Natsune had witnessed and gave his life to share will not be forgotten."

As soon as the last smoke had ascended from Natsune's pyre, the magistrates were on their way once more, headed for the harbor and the journey Sensei had in store for them.

Lost Souls

The sun sparkled on a crystal blue ocean, while the gulls wheeled in giddy circles through the azure sky. Above her, the wind strained at the ribbed black sail of the Mantis kobune, and the air kami teased and tugged at her hair, wrapping its white threads around the blade that she bore on her back. Asahina Ayame loved the beauty of the sea, and had often watched the sun set over the bay from her father's home in Otosan Uchi. It was easy to let the winds carry away her worries on a day such as this one.

It did not do her well to think of Otosan Uchi. When the Mantis kobune had left the harbor north of the city, the sun had barely painted a slim red streak across the eastern sky. But though the captain had tried to give the city wide berth, the sun had risen and they were close enough when they passed to watch it crawl slowly along the horizon. Otosan Uchi lurked like a giant toad on the edge of the brightening sea, while a morning fog, typical of the season, had settled about it. The fog spilled down in lazy waves across the surface of the ocean. It was strange not to see the fishing boats out, but the city was very quiet. Ayame felt no desire to go near. Her father might have delved into her fears; he was a superstitious man, given to the study of omens. She had no idea what the omens would have said about her situation now. Her father had died years before, just after the Coup. She was rather glad she didn't know.

Amaterasu continued her ascent and the day brightened. The crowded shoreline gave way to smaller fishing villages. The coastline had turned to the green rolling slopes, and terraced hillsides marking the eastern edge of the Doji plains when the ship took anchor for the night. Rather than be crammed into the tiny cabin with Izuko and Eiko, Ayame was glad to spend the night under the stars. The journey resumed at dawn.

The kobune traveled south as the white Doji cliffs slowly rose from those green hills a mile or two west of them. Through the morning, the seagulls began to flock in ever greater numbers along the coastline and in the sky above, wheeling and shrieking. It was just after noon when Koshi's spyglass first spotted the reason: a body floating in the surf by the rocky beach. First just one body, then a few more. A smoky haze rose from the cliff tops above, though its source was hidden by a small cape. The

magistrates gathered on deck as the kobune rounded the cape and one of the most spectacular views in the empire came into sight.

The gleaming white Doji cliffs were crowned with the towering beauty of Kuyden Doji, its blue slate roofs and glistening white walls radiant in the afternoon sunshine, bedecked in a delicate robe of red maple and golden ginkgo. Beautiful. But now, despoiled. Here, a tower crumbled as though struck by some gigantic club. There, whitewashed walls scorched black with ash. A body dangling from a chiming rain chain. Flying creatures, far larger than seagulls, diving at the grounds, plucking scraps to devour. The spyglass revealed with cold clarity that horrors had happened here. And, as the kobune traveled further south, the sound of metal on metal, the screech of horns and the hammering rhythm of the taiko drummers, revealed that the horrors were continuing.

From the deck, the magistrates could see that a pitched battle was happening right at the cliff's edge high above. Rains of arrows would spill over the cliff-edge to the sea. Backbanners and flags of blue and white showed that a large force of Crane samurai were being driven back, step by step, towards the cliff edge. The Mantis sailors paused, slack-jawed, at the sight of a large ogre snatching up a silver-armored samurai and fling him into the ocean.

Sensei shook his head. "They will all die," he said sadly. He then turned to the Captain and gestured towards the deeper ocean. "There is nothing we can do here. Raise the sail and move to deeper water."

Ayame's eyes widened with fear and she ran to Sensei's side. "Please, Sensei! No! The water here is deep; there is no shoreline. Even if the battle is lost, the Crane samurai will drown if no ships come to help them!"

Sensei laid a hand on Ayame's shoulder. "You don't understand. This is the wrong place. This battle is lost, and we will lose precious time if we delay here. It puts many things at risk. Maybe everything."

One of the Mantis sailors sucked in his breath, and Ayame glanced over her shoulder to see fifteen Crane soldiers get knocked from the edge of the cliff and into the frothing ocean below.

Sensei looked resolute. The kobune captain gave a signal to his first mate, who began to sharply order his men back to their posts.

Ayame, tears in her eyes, knelt before Sensei, bowing herself before him in most humble supplication. "Please...I beg you. I know you have the authority to leave, and I know you have reasons. But there must be another way. There must be something we could do. I could not bear to let them die, knowing we had done nothing."

Sensei looked sternly down at the humbled shugenja. But his voice seemed less certain than before. "I...Perhaps there could have been. But there cannot now. Not with you here. The others are less risk. But you are here."

Ayame pressed her forehead to the floor. "Please," she begged. "I will do whatever you say. I will even

leave completely, if you could but save a few. I swear."

The man they called Sensei looked distinctly uncomfortable, but found himself unable to deny Ayame's fervent plea. "Very well. But you must keep your word." He turned to the Captain. "Signal your men to move closer, and send the message out for any other ships in the area to come. We will catch who we can from the ocean."

The Captain laughed, shouting to his crew to take oar, making a jest about fishing for birds.

Sensei turned and looked grimly at Ayame as she stood. "We will sail as close as we can and rescue from the sea whom we can. This is what you must do, and you must not fail. You must return, now, to your cabin. You must take the sword. You may make no sound nor cast no spell nor lift the slightest finger to help this rescue, and your companions must breathe no word about you. Do you understand?"

Ayame let go a breathe she didn't know she was holding. "Hai, Sensei. Thank you so much for your mercy."

The other magistrates watched as she went to the tiny cabin, while Sensei just rubbed his forehead with his hands and sighed.

Ayame remained in the cabin, silent, as the kobune reached the Crane soldiers being driven off the cliffs, knowing her magic could have saved more. She whispered prayers to the kami as Sensei offered a monk's blessing for the dead, as those who did not survive were lowered back into the sea again. She held the blade of the Crane clan champion across her lap and listened as Crane bushi packed the decks, dangerously overburdening the sturdy Mantis vessel. She overheard them speak of Hoturi and the legions of the Shadowlands he had brought to Kuyden Doji, killing every man, woman, and child within.

And Ayame wept bitter tears as she knelt, ear pressed against the cabin wall, listening to the distressed breathing and gasps of pain as Sensei stitched closed the wounds of the suffering man in the cabin next to her own. Izuko had brought her the name when she came with food for the imprisoned Asahina. It was Doji Kuwanan, son of Satsume. All that remained of her Champion's line.

The creaking ship was mostly quiet on the third morning in the hours just before dawn. Izuko and Eiko slept, but Ayame was growing desperate to escape the stifling cabin. Praying that all were asleep, she tiptoed to the door for just a breath of fresh air. She cracked the door slightly and froze.

There, standing before the door of her cabin, was a stocky man wrapped in a simple under-kimono, the kind that would be worn under armor. Daidoji tattoos marked his arms. A daisho was tucked in his obi. His face was masked with a heavy black cloth; only his fierce black eyes visible. He swayed with the rocking of the ship, which, combined with his natural power and grace, gave Ayame the impression that this man was very much like a great, dangerous snake. Fortunately, he was not looking towards her, but into the door of the cabin next to hers.

"You should not get up. You are still badly hurt." The serpent's voice was the sound of stone dragged on

stone. It was not an easy voice to disobey.

There was the scrape as of a table shifting, and a muffled thump from the cabin next door. She could hear the sound of a shoulder bumping into the door as someone in the cabin next to hers leaned against the doorframe.

"I have to. The men...need to see me. They need to know I'm alive." This man's voice was taut with pain, but it brooked no argument. It had to be Kuwanan. Though his words shook from grief and weariness, what surprised Ayame most was how young the Crane Lord sounded. Young...and bitter.

"As you wish," the serpent growled.

Ayame could hear Kuwanan taking a few deep breaths to steady himself after the effort of rising from his bed. "Where...where is he going strike next, Uji-san?"

Through the tiny crack, Ayame saw the serpent, who must be none other than Daidoji Uji, shrug. "He passed up better targets to strike Kuyden Kakita, then Kuyden Doji. His goal cannot be to hold territory or win glory. He has bypassed fat villages and rich mines. He does not seek fodder for his beasts or wealth. What remains is his hatred as his only goal. He wants to destroy the essence of the clan. He looks to destroy the Crane." Ayame covered her mouth with her hands, hardly daring to breathe as Uji's rasp continued. "He will go to Shinden Asahina."

Kuwanan coughed roughly. "All the artisans and courtiers from the Academy and Otosan Uchi that did not die at Kuyden Doji have fled there. There are artifacts, sacred treasures. Who knows what he could do with that power? Of course he would go there."

Uji said nothing.

The hacking, wet coughs strengthened and Ayame could hear Kuwanan doubling over with pain as they threatened to overwhelm him, though Uji made no move towards him. She ached to call the healing kami to the Crane lord's aid, but, obedient to Sensei and her promise, did nothing. When Kuwanan had recovered, his voice was haggard. "Do you think we can hold it? That there is the slightest chance.?"

"No." Uji's voice was the sound of an executioner's blade across a whetstone. He did not move, his dark eyes glittering as he watched Kuwanan steadily.

Ayame could hear two more slight coughs, and then movement. She watched through the narrow crack as Kuwanan stepped forward. He was a young man, stocky and strong, his head bald and clean, his bare torso wrapped heavily in bandages. "I didn't think so." He clenched his fists at his sides. "We can't hold the Fields of the Morning Sun. Trying to defend the temple will burn out all our resources, every bushi we have left. Even the attempt is useless, the stuff of lost families wiped out forever. Sad songs with bad endings." Kuwanan straightened, thrusting his jaw up proudly, eyes bearing down on Uji with an expression of defiance. "We are going to do it anyway. Tell the captain to set us ashore at the port nearest to Shinden Asahina."

Uji did not answer, but gave an ever so slight nod of assent.

Kuwanan returned the nod with fierce certainty, and, stepping past Uji, climbed the ladder up to the deck.

Uji's black eyes followed Kuwanan as he passed, but as he turned to go after him, he stopped and looked back. His gaze fell upon the cracked-open doorway, directly at Ayame who was peeking at him through that crack. He hesitated, saying nothing, and Ayame held her breath. Finally, Daidoji Uji turned and climbed the ladder after his lord.

Ayame threw herself onto her futon roll and refused to move from there until the Crane lord and the rescued soldiers had been set ashore near Shinden Asahina and the ship was again underway, sailing on towards the Yasuki provinces.

The kobune set the group of magistrates ashore in a sleepy fishing village. The Mantis captain accepted the koku from Sensei with a smile. He offered to return to take them to more civilized lands on his return trip, but Sensei waved him on his way. They would not be travelling again by sea.

A few rice balls and a bottle of the local sake later, and the group was walking inland towards the next village. Finally, Hiruma Izuko's impatience got the best of her. "All right, Sensei. We have travelled halfway across the Empire. We hid that sword from the best man I can think of to wield it. Where are you going?"

"A geisha house." Sensei answered drily. He trudged on ahead of them, leaning on his staff and provided no further explanation.

Mirumoto Kenuchio scowled. Though he had been able to hide similar questions, he too was growing impatient. He might only be one minor magistrate, but he was a solid swordsman and there were armies slaughtering heimen that needed to be fought. Yet here they were travelling to a geisha house in Onnetagu's end of nowhere instead of helping defend the Fields of the Morning Sun, or fighting with Toturi's army, or even rousing the Dragon, which he longed to do. "Thank you for the lesson in duty, Sensei," he muttered under his breath.

Sensei stopped and turned to face the magistrates. He seemed to be studying each of their faces carefully before he answered. "You're right. I claimed the title of Sensei, but I haven't taught very much, have I? Secrets and silence have their place. They protect against the spying ear. They preserve honor. But there's a time when that must be put aside. I think that time has come."

He slowed his walk to allow the others to gather around them as he spoke.

"I said we are going to a geisha house. And that is true. But it is a very special geisha house. It has no customers. Its geisha come from all across the Empire, from the highest and wealthiest palaces to the poorest seaports. But all of the occupants there have one thing in common." He paused to make sure the magistrates were listening. "All those staying at this geisha house have suffered. Terribly. Some mortals, even samurai, can when they choose, turn themselves into beasts. They rip away by force that which must only be given freely. They wound and destroy that which they cannot steal. They violate the Celestial Order to break the spirit and will, for their own pleasures, or from their own anger, or some other selfish end. Who could say why a monster does these things?"

"If a geisha finds herself the victim of such a one, too often, she takes her own life, unable to rebuild her spirit or find her place after what has been done. Most keepers of the geisha houses, whether they belong to a clan or to the yakuza, see that the strongest, those who are able, are granted a marriage to a good man, or given a quiet job far from the suffering she experienced. They are, if the fortunes are kind, permitted to live out their remaining days in relative peace."

Hiruma Izuko nodded. The fates described by Sensei were not unfamiliar to her; samurai who had suffered too terribly in the lands over the Wall but did not carry the Taint were often treated with similar terms.

Sensei continued. "But there are those in between, unable to start a new life, too fierce to end their old life, who do not know how to heal. They cannot move forward, and cannot escape the past and the wrong that has been done to them. All here live in a willow world, a half life, where dreaming is easier than waking. This house belongs to them. You must remember that."

The village of their destination was in sight. It looked gloomy, especially with Sensei's 'lesson' and a heavily overcast gray sky. They could see the geisha house below them. It seemed non-descript, but pleasant enough. Someone had clearly taken the time to try to coax some flowers to grow in its small courtyard, at least. Sensei stopped and turned a last time to the group.

"I received a message from one who knows the willow world well, that the one we seek is here. I can only hope it is true. But say nothing unless I give you leave. Come."

The geisha house looked more worn as they approached. The entranceway was guarded by a huge man, tall but with muscles that had given way to fat -- clearly a eunuch. Resting on his shoulder was a well-made naginata. Beside him sat a slender, handsome boy whose eyes were wrapped with a black cloth. Blind.

The boy greeted them. "The House of the Nightingale is not taking guests today."

Sensei leaned forward, grasping the boy's hand and laying it on his cheek. "I know well the ways of the

willow world, my friend. You know me and why I have come."

The boy ran his fingers across Sensei's face thoughtfully. "Yes, I know you. You may enter. You must leave your blades here. But you may come."

They again set aside their weapons, except for Ayame's burden. The eunuch said nothing, but stepped aside to allow them to pass.

A middle-aged woman met the group of magistrates at the door and led them inside. Some of the women in the geisha house tittered and spun away. Others looked up at them with blank eyes as they passed. "You mind yourself, now," their guide scolded. "It's not right. Everyone should just leave him alone. He's /our/ guest, always a gentleman, and the girls all like him, even the ones sworn off men. He can stay as long as he likes as far as I am concerned. There's nothing out there that's any good anyway....wars and oni and everything."

Sensei offered some mollifying words.

The matron reached a closed shoji. "I still think he's best off staying here."

Sensei sighed. "I know." With a last warning glance towards his magistrates, he slid open the screen.

The room was clearly the finest this small geisha house had to offer. Threadbare silks hung the walls, and ikebana brightened the two side alcoves. Seated amidst a pile of pillows and silks was a man who looked towards Sensei and the others with eyes that seemed to see nothing.

Beside him there were two women lounging to either side, while a third, little older than a child, slept wrapped in silks on a futon near the man's feet. One of the women was wary as she watched them enter, her dark eyes filled with fear and suspicion even though she said nothing. Her gaudy kimono hung loosely about her, but Kenuchio could see that the right sleeve was empty...one of this woman's arms had been cut off at some time in the past, and yet she had survived. It was impossible to see the expression on the face of the other, for while her body was beautiful and lithe, clearly belonging to some noble line of geisha by her graceful bearing and perfect hands, her face had been dissolved into molten flesh. One eye had melted shut, while the other peered lidless through the twisted mass of scars. Only acid flung into the face could do such damage. A ripple of anger on her behalf caused Kenuchio's swordhand to twitch.

The man was between thirty and thirty-five years old. His long white hair streamed unbound across the shoulders of his silver-gray kimono. The kimono was open, revealing a thin chest that displayed every rib. His skin, that had once been tanned, now was pale, like after a long illness. His face, if gaunt, was still blindingly handsome, but it seemed affectless. Face, chest, and arms were pocked with mysterious scars. In many ways, he looked completely unfamiliar, but Kenuchio recognized him. He'd seen him from afar, but met him personally only once. A young Crane commander with laughing eyes and casual grace,

willing to toss aside all formality to personally lead a group of low-ranked misfits to Akodo Toturi in the middle of the battle to retake Ootosan Uchi during the Scorpion Clan Coup. The laughter was gone.

"Leave me." The man's greeting was little more than a whisper. The scarred woman drew protectively closer to the man.

Sensei shook his head and took a step forward. "I cannot, Doji Hoturi-sama. We have our roles to play and I have come to you now to call the Thunder from your soul. I know why you walk this willow world. I know what was done to you. But the time has come to take up your sword and reclaim your name and your honor. There has come an evil to the world such as has not been seen since ancient times, and I swear to you, if you do not stand against it, the Empire will fall."

"You are looking for another man. The one you want is not here. The Empire needs nothing from me. Leave." Hotui's voice was flat and without emotion.

Moto Koshi sniffed the air. "Not tainted. There's no Shadowlands stench about him."

Matsumoto Eiko tossed a thin strip of paper up into the air and watched it flutter to the ground. "There's no evil magic or bindings on him," she answered Koshi nervously, keeping her voice soft though it was clear Hoturi had heard everything. He didn't seem to care.

Sensei tried a second time. "If you act now, you can stand with us on the Fields of the Morning Sun. You can defeat that which has been stripped from you and build yourself anew. And if you do that, you will save your clan. Does that mean nothing to you?"

A hint of anger tainted Hoturi's voice. "My clan is already destroyed, Monk. By me, and well you know it. Let someone else sweep up the bones."

The girl who had been sleeping on the floor opened her eyes and looked at the group with confusion.

Sensei's voice shook with urgency, "It is not dead. The Empire is not dead yet! You have power, Hoturi." He gestured Asahina Ayame forward. "See? Here! You have only to grasp it."

Ayame took a trembling step forward and carefully removed the non-descript wrappings from the Ancestral Blade of the Crane, letting them fall to the ground. The beautiful lacquered saya seemed to glow with inner fire in her hands. She knelt before Hoturi and offered the blade to him.

Hoturi's eyes widened at the sight, but he made no move to take it. His voice darkened further. "It's a sword. And one I am no longer worthy to bear. Do not tempt me with it! Take it away and leave or I swear I'll....!" He almost made as if to stand, but then fell back. His voice trailed off into a bare whisper. "Useless. I am nothing. No more. Go."

A long silence stretched as Hoturi and Sensei glared at each other. Finally Sensei glanced around at the other magistrates and seemed to crumble in about himself, falling again into the role of the humblest of

monks. "Very well, Doji Hoturi-sama. The blood of Doji and Kakita flows through your veins, and I am but your humble servant.. I shall not pursue you further. I will go. I only ask that you listen to these samurai as they take their leave. They have come very far and sacrificed much to reach you and call you home. " Sensei bowed his head in supplication.

The woman with the acid-scarred face touched Hoturi's arm, while the one-handed woman whispered something soft and encouraging in the Crane Lord's ear.

Hoturi said nothing, but did not refuse the request. Sensei gestured at Ayame, then bowed and backed out of the room.

Ayame timidly rose and came forward, her eyes downcast. "I...am glad you are alive, My Lord. I am glad that the good that is in you is still alive. We...were afraid it wasn't so." She swallowed, then knelt to lay the sword across Hoturi's lap. The man made no move to take or touch the blade, but he didn't shove it away either. "I'm sorry. I can't take this sword any further. I am Asahina...I was never supposed carry a blade. I was a flower of the court. I was never supposed to see a battlefield. But so many things have happened that weren't supposed to." She laid her hand gently on Hoturi's own hand, blushing at her impertinence. "I need to go, though. I may not be able to do much on the battlefield. But the Crane need me. My clan needs me. I'll do anything I can do, for as long as I can, for my family."

Hoturi stared blankly at her and did not respond. She bowed very deeply and moved out of the room.

Moto Koshi stepped forward, taking a respectful bow. But he straightened. "I am still learning the ways of the Empire and their differences with my people. In my clan, my father is a chieftain. His band of warriors is small, but they are his own, his family and his responsibility. He would rather crawl on his hands and knees to die with them in battle than allow them to fight without him. " He shook his head. "I presumed such was the way of all leaders." He bowed and took his leave. Hoturi did not move, though he glared after him as he left.

Matsumoto Eiko followed her, saying simply, "If you are afraid that the evil spell left its trace in you, it hasn't. It was a vile and terrible thing, I can tell. But you aren't bound by it." She bowed quickly and left.

Hiruma Izuko bowed in perfunctory way on her way out. "Even if you were one of the Damned," she said tartly, "You'd be redeemed in death on the battlefield. I had friends who joined the Damned, and I respected them for it." She turned crisply on her heel and marched out.

That left Mirumoto Kenuchio alone with Hoturi and the women around him. The swordsman had come so far and been so helpless to fulfill his most basic duty: to protect the people of the Empire from evil. And this man, who wore the face of the one who slaughtered so many at the Kakita Academy, refused to answer the call. Kenuchio was ashamed to imagine what Kakita Hideyoshi would have thought of his Clan Daimyo now.

He stepped forward, his voice low and menacing. The women froze. "There was a man, a kenshinzen, at the Kakita Academy named Kakita Hideyoshi. He was my friend. He was witty, intelligent, handsome. He

could have done anything he wished. But all he wanted, everything he wanted, was to be a single blade for the Crane clan. The best swordsman he could possibly be. He spent every day, even the day he died, living for that. That was joy enough."

Hoturi didn't answer.

Kenuchio focused intently on the pulse beating in Hoturi's throat. "It would shame Hideyoshi to know what you have become. You have all that he had and far more. But you call it nothing. If you truly are nothing, then you are right. You are danger to us all and I know my duty." With that, he struck forward like lightning with both palms, a pressing strike to the heart. It was one of Kaze-do's most lethal waza, and one that will kill an unarmored man in the space between heartbeats.

Faster than blinking, Hoturi drew the Ancestral Sword of the Crane five inches from the sheath, just enough to block Kenuchio's blow with the tsuka and tsuba of the katana. For a single second, they were frozen together, while a crystal chime seemed to shake the whole building with the purity of its tone. Kenuchio stepped back while Hoturi stayed frozen, his grip holding the blade's tsuka with Kakita Toshimoko's own expertise.

The women gasped and cringed away.

Kenuchio's voice was filled with sorrow, anger expended, as he filled the silent void. "So...you are a swordsman still. Isn't that enough?"

He silently backed out of the room, leaving Hoturi in the silks and shadows of the willow world.

Kenuchio found the other magistrates sitting on the side of the road a few hundred yards from the geisha house. Sensei's head was bowed and his eyes were hidden under the green hood he wore. The others looked equally lost and dejected. He sank down next to Ayame.

"I suppose that's it," offered Izuko.

"Shinden Asahina then?" Koshi sounded calm, but Kenuchio could hear the disappointment.

Ayame rubbed her eyes with her sleeve.

But the man they'd been told to follow didn't move, so they waited.

Kenuchio couldn't tell what caused Sensei to look up sharply, but he turned to look in the same direction. The door to the geisha house had opened. Wearing a broad-brimmed iron jingasa that masked his features, a samurai dressed in ronin armor of brown and gray emerged, appeared to speak to the eunuch and blind boy who guarded the doors, and took the eunuch's naginata. He walked towards

them, head down, and stopped as he drew close.

Sensei and the other magistrates rose to meet him.

The samurai looked up, and the magistrates met the black eyes of Doji Hoturi. He gave them a small nod of his head, and said, "One more sword for my family...is enough."

The Battle of Asahina Fields

It is a journey of some weeks by foot from the village near the coast in southern Yasuki lands to Shinden Asahina. Since they were still in Crab lands, it was important to avoid most inns and villages, even if the land was mostly free of patrols. Doji Hoturi kept to himself the first few days, brooding silently and only allowing Sensei to lead him away to talk a few times. But within a day or two he awkwardly asked to take on some of the camp chores, and the magistrates did not feel like they could refuse. They welcomed him to join them at the fire, and soon he fell into the daily patterns of their journeying that they had experienced so far.

He insisted on being treated as a bushi of equal rank, and would not allow any to defer to him. If any of the magistrates slipped, he would either politely ignore them, or say simply that they were speaking of a man that was gone now, or that the Lord of the Crane was Doji Kuwanan. By the end of the first week, he asked the bushi if he might be allowed to practice his kata with them, which, of course, they freely granted. They could see from the way he moved that Doji Hoturi still bore the damage of his past torture, but each day of traveling and training, he grew in strength, and his technique was flawless. He refused to fight with or even draw Shukujo however, using only the naginata he bore. Moto Koshi asked why, one evening. "This sword is not for me," he answered. "It is for the Lord of the Crane." He would not speak more of it.

They were ambushed by bandits near the end of the second week. Active scouting and avoiding the roads had avoided earlier groups of Obsidian Crab, but this group claimed the narrow mouth of a wooded valley and were able to set an ambush. The magistrates and Doji Hoturi, however, were able to easily dispatch them. Breathing heavily with the exertion following their victory, Hoturi allowed himself the first smile they had seen since they had met him again. That night, once they'd tracked down the bandit's shelter and were able to replenish their supplies from the stolen loot, they sat around a cookfire sharing stories of past bandit raids that had been driven off. Hoturi told an tale of traveling with Toshimoko in his younger years that left the magistrates laughing. Hoturi smiled a second time.

There is a simplicity and rhythm to living off the land and traveling with good people, and if wounds can't be forgotten, there is healing in it.

It was they who set the ambush when the group encountered a patrol of Obsidian Crabs deeper in Crane

Lands. Hiruma Izuko greeted the patrol, confronting them on their netsuke. They attacked immediately, and she bolted, drawing them into an ambush by the other magistrates. Doji Hoturi unconsciously took command, and Ayame and Kenuchio shared a private smile as the Crane gave the order to strike. When the battle was over, all pretended Hoturi had remained silent, and they continued as equals as before. The Obsidian Crab were a stark reminder of battles lost, as were the traces they began to encounter. Though most of the bodies had been burned by the faithful eta, there was no hiding the damaged buildings and broken arrows that littered the countryside.

Near the southern border of Asahina lands, they encountered another Crab patrol. Izuko again confronted them, asking after their netsuke. Though the Crab were initially hostile, when they realized she was Jade Crab they welcomed her gladly. The other magistrates emerged to greet them. The patrol members recognized the magistrates. Especially Izuko...they were among those Crab who had fought beside them at Beidan Pass and who had traveled to Shinden Asahina with Hida Sukune. Doji Hoturi and Sensei kept their faces down and did not speak, and the Jade Crab did not seem to recognize them. The Jade Crab offered to escort the group back to the Fields of the Morning Sun and one ran ahead to report. On Sensei's assent, the magistrates agreed.

The Fields of the Morning Sun were beautiful, broad-open plains, now tall with rice that would soon be turning from green to gold. The temple itself was nestled at the opening of a U-shaped valley. A river with a waterfall cascaded behind it, then braided across the plains before it bringing water and life.

But the plains had changed since Ayame last traveled that way. Long rows of pointed spikes dominated the landscape, cutting across the fields. Wide areas of earth were trampled. And hundreds and hundreds of straw archery targets had been prepared. No one was firing at the targets, however; even the farmers seemed absent from the fields. Only flat-eyed guards watched them as they approached the temples. Doji Hoturi kept his jingasa low as they passed.

When they reached the temple doors, they heard a stirring. Two dozen hardened Daidoji warriors lined up to either side of the road, carrying yari. When they looked up, they could see high on the walls of the temple a row of archers, their bows trained down upon them. They stopped immediately.

The temple doors opened. Nine more men emerged from the temple. Four were bushi in heavy armor. Two were shugenja, whom Ayame did not know. And, protected between them, were the faces of men they recognized: Doji Kuwanan, Daidoji Uji, and the leader of the Asahina, Asahina Tomo. The magistrates bowed deeply to honor the Champion of the Crane.

Kuwanan ignored Sensei and the magistrates, a thunderhead of fury animating every gesture. He marched straight past to stand face to face with Doji Hoturi. Hoturi went down to his knees before Kuwanan, head down in a gesture of supplication.

"Hoturi!" Kuwanan growled. "What manner of deceit are you trying now, to come here like this? Or are you here just to mock us? You will pay dearly for it."

Hoturi removed his jingasa and laid it on the ground at his feet; it was no longer necessary. "I know you cannot forgive me for the things that have happened. I would not ask you to. All I can do is swear to you that the monstrous creation that bears my face was stolen from me using vile magic and my own weakness. It is not the man you see before you, though I am responsible for it. I have come here only to offer all that I have left to give: my swordarm for your battles, and this blade that I bear." He carefully removed the sheathed Shukujo from his obi and offered to Kuwanan the ancestral sword of the Crane. "You are the Champion of the Crane, little brother. You were the one here to fight for it."

Daidoji Uji's eyes were hooded, staring intently at Hoturi, though the daimyo's expression was hidden by his mask. Asahina Tomo stroked his beard thoughtfully. But bitterness and anger burned in Doji Kuwanan's heart as he saw the gleaming blue of the sword of his grandfather held up before him. He snatched the blade from Hoturi's outstretched hands and ripped off the saya, casting it aside. Neither magistrate nor yojimbo nor daimyo dared break the silence...all were frozen. With an incoherent roar of grief and loss, Doji Kuwanan lashed out with the blade at his kneeling brother. The swordtip traced a narrow line of blood across Hoturi's arm and chest, but Hoturi did not move or flinch. Kuwanan raised the blade for the down stroke that would remove the kneeling samurai's head...and stopped. Despite everything, he did not want to kill his brother.

Kuwanan's whole body trembled...love, hate, grief, joy, all at war within him, though he kept his face hardened. Daidoji Uji stepped forward and grabbed the wrist of Kuwanan's sword arm.

"Wait," he hissed.

Kuwanan slowly lowered Shukujo to his side when Uji released him. Uji stooped and picked up the discarded saya. He then carefully, reverently, took the ancestral sword from Kuwanan's grasp. Kuwanan released it to him. Uji wiped the blade clean and resheathed it. He offered it across his wrist to Hoturi.

"Draw it," whispered the old Asahina. "Draw it and we shall know."

Hoturi stared into his brother's eyes as he drew the ancient blade. A chime rippled through the air, causing the bells in the Temple to ring a thousand answering notes.

Smoke rose in columns over the horizon from the broad plains of the Morning Sun, more columns than Kenuchio could count. The attack will come any moment now. "What do you make of their plans?" He paced restlessly. From this vantage point, he could see the battlefield that was to be laid out before him. The main road. The hidden traps. The arcs across which the arrows would fly. If it were a narrower

valley, it would be easier. If it were closer to the sea, perhaps. But he could see before him a fight long and bloody, no matter how ingenious the battle plans.

Hiruma Izuko followed his gaze, her fingers wrapped around her yumi. "You should trust Sukune-sama. He is one of the most brilliant strategists in the Empire. The plan is sound. Perhaps if Doji Kuwanan had not spent every minute since he arrived here training ashigaru, turning them into archers, promising the best a place as ji-samurai in the Asahina family...it would be impossible. But now the Asahina have hundreds and hundreds of trained archers. With this many, the Crane can hold the left and right central flanks. And Daidoji Uji-sama has pitted the sides of the valley out of reach of the arrows with traps."

Kenuchio scowled. "Any competent leader can find ways around the traps and the arrows. There are so many of them"

"Oni and undead....not the brightest strategists " Izuko's lips curled in a small grin.

"But two armies? The False Hoturi, the undead, and Scorpion strike from the north. And Hida Yakamo and the Obsidian Crab and their oni strike from the south. To come together at the same time like this...they must have some alliance."

"Or they both have something they both want very much. Right here. As long as their leadership remains fixed and focused on the center point, the rest don't have the brains to deal with the archers and traps."

"The center point. Doji Hoturi. Hida Sukune. The handful of heavy infantry remaining. And us." Kenuchio's voice was even. He wasn't sure whether he felt excited about the prospect of fighting the commanders of the two armies that were bearing down on him, or appalled.

Izuko's voice turned serious. "It's not the forces we know about that trouble me."

"What does?" Kenuchio cocked his head. He knew there was something wrong with the battle plan; maybe Izuko had found it.

The Crab looked out over the deceptively peaceful plains. "The earthquake. The war between Hitomi and the Unicorn. An unexpected traitor. There are other traitors out there, Kenuchio. We've confirmed this. This battlefield is the hinge point on which the fate of at least two clans is decided. If Yakamo wins, all resistance within the Crab will be crushed out. The Crab will follow the oni and fight on the side of Jigoku for certain. The uncommitted would commit, for there would be no other path for them. And if this False Hoturi wins...here lies everything that is left of the bushi of the Crane, and almost all its rulership. There won't even be a Crane clan any more after this." She hesitated. "Is there a better place where a single act of treason, perhaps from a hidden, but powerful, shugenja like the one that cast that Earthquake spell, could cause more harm to the Empire?"

Slowly, the Dragon nodded his head. "You're right. It's too fragile. We have to march with Hoturi. We're too distinct. But maybe Ayame could keep watch specifically for a traitor. She'll have to miss the rest of

the battle....” He didn’t mention how privately happy he was to keep the Asahina away from the front lines.

Izuko grinned. “I think she knows how to wait.”

“I’ve come with tokens from the Asahina, Lord Hoturi.” Asahina Ayame bowed and kept her eyes down as she waited to be permitted entrance.

Doji Hoturi gestured for her to come in with a small sigh. “No more fellow adventurer travelling the outskirts of Mori, I suppose, Ayame-san?” He did not reject the title. He had dressed in the armor provided for him...blue silk and bright steel, of decent quality associated with rank. Hoturi was fastening on the arm guards. He still looked thin and wan, like the ronin he had been as they had travelled together. But now, he was clearly, unmistakably, Crane. Unmistakably Doji Hoturi.

He had to make a tempting target for the False Hoturi.

Ayame entered, carrying a basket before her filled with feathers. “No, Hoturi-sama. I’m afraid not. But those travels were...fun.”

She set down the basket beside her and lifted out a single white feather held on by a thick strand of silk thread. “The Asahina fetishists have been creating these since the fall of Kuyden Kakita. They tell me each feather will prevent a small amount of damage from befalling you.”

Hoturi nodded as he finished lacing on the arm guard. “At least my enemy won’t have the blessings of the Asahina with him, whatever other gifts Jigoku has offered him. If only it is enough.”

Ayame tied the first feather to the bottom of Hoturi’s left sode. “I know that you will defeat him, Hoturi-sama.” She picked the second from the basket and tied it beside the first.

“How? How do you know, Ayame-san?” The daimyo’s voice was grim, still heavy with a weight of self-disgust.

The Asahina tied on another feather. “You’ve already fought the hardest battles. You fought for your soul, and won. Now, you only fight for your life. The smaller the prize, the easier the battle. You will be victorious.”

"Death as light as a feather," Hoturi smiles wryly. "True enough. Thank you for the reminder."

Ayame smiled softly and continued tying on the feathers. Her face showed only pure confidence, but in her heart she was praying for this man as fervently as she had ever prayed for anyone in her entire life.

Moto Koshi held his face firmly impassive as an ashigaru archer fell beside him, pierced through with an arrow as long as he was tall. The hissing winds of the Asahina caused the Crane archers' arrows to fly further than any he had ever known, but an ogre-pulled bow could match the range.

These were only the first volleys, a battery of tests between the armies that stood with only the open valley floor between them. The patch of green covered by the arc of the arrows' flight was the only green nearby. Beyond that range, the land was black with the forces arrayed before them, kept at bay, barely, by the will of their commanders. Undead. Oni. Goblins. Humans, both tainted and fallen, or dangerously misguided. Black now. Red soon.

Koshi could hear Doji Kuwanan shout for a cease fire. The Crane Lord tried not to let the grave injuries he still bore color the tone of his voice. The command carried down the wall. A young Asahina shugenja standing nearby began to read from a scroll in a quiet voice. When he was done, he gestured to the man standing next to Koshi. Time to begin the play.

Doji Hoturi returned the nod, and stepped up onto the edge of the high temple wall.

"I demand to speak to the one who leads you!" the Crane beside Koshi called out, and the power of the Asahina's spell carried his voice clear across the battlefield, shaking the very stones with its power. "I demand to speak to Hoturi!"

There was a rumbling from within the ranks arrayed before them, a bubble of movement that rippled across that tainted sea. A man emerged from the darkness, dressed in the brilliant silver and blue of the ancestral armor of the Crane, his white hair flowing behind him on the unseen dance of the kasen. Koshi could see him through his spyglass, could make out the mocking smile on his face. The figure amidst the tainted troops said something in response, but the voice did not carry over the distance.

The Doji Hoturi who stood at his side was not dissuaded. He continued. "There. We see each other now!" Hoturi shouted. "You remember me, don't you? You know I was tortured. You know how you despise my weakness!" He gestured at the False Hoturi with the naginata he carried. "But you should know that I know you also! The emptiness. The sense of incompleteness. That you will never be enough. Do you know why, Hoturi? Because I hold that part of your power. I am the part of you that is missing.

You will never be able to win back that power unless you kill me. You do want to kill me, don't you, Hoturi?"

Koshi watched the False Hoturi's face carefully through the spyglass. The dark reflection of the man speaking suddenly leaned forward, with far more attention, and listened as the true Hoturi spoke. "I thought you said there was no connection left between that False Hoturi and Doji Hoturi," the Moto muttered to Matsumoto Eiko, who stood just behind him,

"There's not," the woman answered in a whisper. "He knows because he speaks of himself."

The true Doji Hoturi laughed, and the laughter was a rumbling across the whole valley. "As you can see, I no longer lead the Crane. You have taken everything from me. There is nothing...nothing...stopping me from taking my life right at this moment. And then, you will /never/ have the power that you lack. You will never get to kill me."

The spyglass revealed the False Hoturi's anger. The leader of the forces of Jigoku rode forward a short ways, though his words were still beyond Koshi's hearing.

The samurai speaking with a voice of thunder beside him continued. "But I won't. If you hold your forces back, and face me fairly in a duel, you could defeat me. I could defeat you. Otherwise, I kill myself the moment this battle begins. If you agree, ride out with the colors of parley within an hour and we shall meet in honorable combat."

His last words echoed through the nearby hills as the Crane Lord stepped down from the edge to prepare for the duel. Koshi watched through the spyglass as the False Hoturi withdrew. By the expression on his face, Koshi did not doubt they would be meeting each other soon.

The stench of the bodies of the enemy grew as the group walked slowly forward through the green, sheltered by the space defined in the sky by the arc of the Asahina ashigaru archers and the flag of parley that they bore. At their lead was Doji Hoturi. His armor was steel and blue silk, the sode trimmed with white feathers. The sword at his side, saya and tsuka, was wrapped with narrow strips of plain black silk. He carried his naginata over his shoulder. He wore no kabuto...his long white hair streaming behind him, his face visible to all. His back banners clearly marked his loyalties.

Just behind him, acting as Hoturi's second and the next piece of bait to lure the eyes of the enemy, walked Hida Sukune. His armor was laced with the black of rebellion, but clearly of fine Crab make in heavy iron gray. Every inch of him was wrapped with white bandages, but wisps of black smoke rose faintly between the seams as a visible manifestation of the taint within. Behind the bandages, there was no mistaking his dark, intelligent brown eyes. His back banners rippled in the hot wind. He walked with a clarity of purpose, and despite the vile smell of taint that remained with him, Koshi felt the serenity and

stillness of the man, as though he had determined the true course of his mysterious destiny and was going to meet it.

Closely at Sukune's side walked Kuni Ren, Hiruma Izuko's good friend from the Wall, and, Koshi knew, Hida Sukune's lover. They had spent much time with her during the Battle at Beidan Pass. Armor covered her shoulders and peeked out in places from under her black robes, and her head was bowed under an iron gray jingasa. Her face was painted with the white, black, and red of the Kuni, and both served to keep her expression completely masked from the Moto. He could not begin to tell what she was feeling.

Moto Koshi, his face concealed behind a new mempo made of solid stone, marched behind the three with his fellow magistrates: Mirumoto Kenuchio, Matsumoto Eiko, and Hiruma Izuko. And behind them, a full twenty mixed Hida and Daidoji Heavy Infantry...an honor guard to ensure their safe passage towards the duel.

Across from them, the False Hoturi led, a beautiful but warped mirror of the wan Crane that led them. On seeing who was acting as the true Doji Hoturi's second in the duel, another stirring erupted in the forces of the enemy, this time to the south, among the oni and goblins. The advance halted, and a towering presence joined the False Hoturi's retinue. Hida Yakamo. The man seemed the size of a mountain, his face shielded by his heavy kabuto. Muscle rippled across his mighty right arm, while his left was completely overwhelmed by a huge oni claw.

They were accompanied by an honor guard of similar size, twelve Scorpion in scowling mempos, faceless in their hate, standing close to the False Hoturi, and twelve mighty Crab warriors standing with Yakamo. While the Scorpion showed unity of purpose, the Crab seemed restless, uncertain, and hesitant. They refused to go near the Scorpion, guarding only their champion, and Koshi could see the weariness of a long and uncertain war in a world turned upside down in their eyes.

The two forces walked into the middle of the green space before the gates of Shinden Asahina under the flags of parley.

While Hida Yakamo and Hida Sukune hung back, each acknowledging the other with a tight nod, the False Hoturi and the true Doji Hoturi continued on to meet in the middle.

The False Hoturi's voice was cultured and smug. "You are even more pathetic-looking than I expected." Koshi had to admit that the leader of the enemy seemed...perfect. The priceless armor gleamed. Healthy, powerful, rested.

The man who had journeyed with Koshi did not rise to the bait, instead stepping back and setting his stance. "And yet, you will never be enough without me," the Crane said. He passed his naginata to Matsumoto Eiko. "Let us begin."

The bushi gave the pair a wide berth, forming a circle around the central fight, while both armies waited for the moment where void and motion become one. The False Hoturi assumed his stance with perfect

confidence.

The two came together in a blur of motion as a single, clear chime rang across the battlefield when a nondescript blade in a black-wrapped saya was drawn and set the temple bells to ringing once again.

Emptiness. The Void. Asahina Ayame closed her eyes to the cries and violence around her. She blocked out the harsh commands and the sounds of frightened breathing. She focused only on the beating of her own heart and her own breath, allowing the air to flow into her and from her.

Senses first. She poured those into the void until all else was blocked out.

Then emotion. The worry she felt for Doji Hoturi, for Mirumoto Kenuchio, for her fellow magistrates, for the success of Hida Sukune's plan. Poured into the void.

Her own doubts. Her own fears. They followed into the emptiness.

She felt the ancient obi of the Asahina settle its weight firmly around her, and she welcomed its embrace, shutting out every other sensation.

Then, in the darkness of her mind's eye, she could see the obi flowing before her like a road out onto the battlefield. She began to walk along it. Though it spun further, she reached a place where she knew the battlefield lay around her, were she but to open her eyes.

It was that moment she made her call out to the Air Kami.

"Come!" she called to them. "There will be one that is different here. Powerful, likely shugenja, but loyal to none of these leaders. I do not know the name or the face, but I know the intent. The intent is treason and chaos. To strike a quick hammer blow to change everything. Air kami, let us play! Find him for me, and we will see who can strike first!"

He could hear their rippling laughter from across the battlefield. The obi had far extended her range, and the air kami had accepted her game.

'It will cost dearly if no traitor comes. And then I won't be able to help at all in this battle.' Ayame shoved the tiny bubble of doubt into the void quickly before the air kami sensed it.

"I can wait." she said to the searching winds. "I can wait and I am ready."

The head of the False Hoturi rolled to land at Hiruma Izuko's feet, and she jerked the Crab banner she bore away so it would not touch the thing. Body and head slowly melted into a thick black slime that seeped into the grass below.

Doji Hoturi stood with the Ancestral Sword of the Crane extended, caught in perfect strike that brought him to Victory. 'The False one underestimated him,' Izuko thought with satisfaction, but there was not long to linger on it. There was no way that the honorless dogs that made up the False Hoturi's army would simply surrender now their general was gone, though any Scorpion who were still sane might deem it wise to retreat.

The calm voice of Hida Sukune broke the frozen moment. "Yakamo-kun...Brother. Can we end this in a duel now, too? End this bloodshed? End this war? Surely you see that you fight at the side of oni and undead, necromancers and Scorpions? This is not who we are! This is not the way of the Crab."

Hida Yakamo...almost...hesitated. But his response was a roar of rage. "I know my duty! I know how to obey my Lord and Father! You are the traitor, Sukune. Your treason makes us weak, forces us into this shame! If we were unified behind our father we would have already been victorious!"

There was to be no duel between them. With a great cry, Hida Yakamo bore down with the mighty oni claw upon the group of Crane and Jade Crab, and all were forced to fight for their lives. Swords and tetsubos clashed around them as Sukune pulled back from the onslaught. Izuko knew that the Crab strategist was still far too wounded to lift a sword; the offer of a duel had been a bluff Sukune had known his brother would refuse.

Hoturi slowly turned to face the oni-tainted Crab in Hida Sukune's place, but Izuko could see already the exhaustion draining the strength from the weakened Crane's pale features. But before she could say anything, Mirumoto Kenuchio stepped forward. "Hoturi-sama...you have earned enough glory on this battlefield. Please grant others the chance to earn their place as samurai."

The Crane hesitated for just a second, then nodded and darted past him to support the Daidoji and Jade Crab that fought behind them.

The four magistrates quickly drew together in a line between Hida Sukune and the charging Hida Yakamo. Yakamo roared, preparing to throw them aside as he had every other similar unworthy that had faced him in battle. But, from the right side, Matsumoto Eiko tossed one of her prayer strips up towards the mighty warrior. Moto Koshi stepped forward to meet the half-oni head on. The prayer strip seemed to do nothing, and certainly did not prevent the oni claw from gripping Koshi around the waist. But instead of the claw severing him in two, the stone mempo the Moto wore shattered and broke. Instantaneously, the Moto turned into a statue of solid stone, both hands gripping the claw fast. The

prayer strip had weakened the claw just enough that it could not sever the stone. The claw, for one instant, was stuck in the statue's grip. Darting in from the right side, still holding the Crab banner, Hiruma Izuko threw a simple gemstone at the furious Crab warrior. There was a flash of brilliant sunlight, blinding Yakamo for a moment.

And, spinning around from behind, Mirumoto Kenuchio struck with both of his blades, exactly at the point of Yakamo's arm where the oni-claw met human flesh. The jade tokens that dangled from both swords shattered as he struck, just for that moment reinforcing both swords with the power of jade.

The claw was severed from the arm, falling to the ground at Moto Koshi's feet. Hida Yakamo howled with rage, confusion, and pain, while Hida Sukune looked calmly on like a man who has seen the results of his strategies come together. "Yakamo-kun....you are needed. I will help you find yourself again." Sukune's voice was serene, even tender. "Now, Ren-chan." He reached out to take her hand.

Tears streaking her white facepaint, the Kuni took his hand and chanted. The very air around her trembled with the power of her building spell. With a burst of jade light, she poured power and prayer into the target of her spell...Hida Sukune. The corrupted samurai froze in place, entombed in a statue of pure jade, his hand still held in hers. More and more power poured into him, turning armor and wrappings, flesh and bone, each piece into solid stone.

The instant the spell reached his cold fingertips, Kuni Ren drew her wakizashi and used it to strike at the elbow of the man she loved. The arm broke free, still gripped in her own fingers. She darted forward and slammed the stump of the jade arm against the stump of Hida Yakamo's arm that had been left from cutting free the oni claw.

The magics that had originally caused the claw to become bound to Hida Yakamo's originally untainted flesh reached out and fused with the...almost...living jade hand that was set upon it, and the two fused into one. A light of reason returned to Yakamo's eyes, and he lifted his other hand to his head, shaking it to clear it. He looked around the battlefield, the forces of Obsidian and Jade Crab fighting around him, and the jade statue of his brother standing before him. It took a moment of hesitation, but the leader of the Obsidian Crab shouted across the battlefield. "Retreat! All loyal Crab! Retreat! Retreat!"

The Obsidian Crab, hearing their leader's cry, immediately passed the call down the line, pulling back from the fighting and drawing behind the armies of the Shadowlands. They began their retreat from the field.

Hiruma Izuko, her sunstone fetish expended, watched Moto Koshi slowly turn from stone into flesh, and hurried to assist him. The Obsidian Crab, retreating, left her free to do so.

Two leaders down. Now they had only to survive the wrath of the undead and oni that filled the Fields of the Morning Sun.

Getting back into the temple suddenly sounded like a very good idea indeed.

The din was unbearable. The screams of the living, the dying, the undead, all blended in a horrific cacophony, mixed with the hum of flying arrows, and the roars of Jigoku-driven monsters. This deep in her meditation, however, the sound washed across Asahina Ayame like a hot breeze. The ancient obi she wore glimmered with twinkling light all its own, but, though her eyes were open, the shugenja could see nothing but the movements of the air spirits.

One of those spirits finally came dancing before her eyes, laughing and gesturing that he had won the game; that she should follow him. With the vision of her mind's eye and carried by the strength of her meditation and the powers of the obi, she raced after the kami to see who he had found. 'There.' A tall, lean older man with a cruel face, he stood apart even though he was hidden in the middle of the the armies that surrounded him. Neither undead or oni, Scorpion or Crab dared draw near. Not to a man who wore the robes of the High Inquisitor of the Phoenix clan. Not to Asako Monoro.

He held up a scroll, focused on the power of the spell he was building, relying on his anonymity in the masses while he prepared the deadly devastation of stone that he hoped to use to bring the valley walls down upon the traps the Daidoji sabateurs had prepared. The spell would likely crumble at least one edge of the walls, prematurely activate the traps, and grant the oni free access to the temple. In her mind's eye, Ayame could see him beginning to chant.

"Not if I get there first."

The Crane shugenja let the power that had been building in her, the half-complete prayer she had been preparing all day, fill her senses. With a final cry to the kami of air and void, she lashed out with her power, slicing in a single strike at the Asako traitor. The blow struck deep, and was completely by surprise. It severed the connection between the Phoenix and the elements, disrupting the spell and tearing away his connection to the kami.

The blow would not kill him. Ayame had been taught the spell by Asahina Tomo himself, and her daimyo would never permit her to use her powers in that fashion. But it would be many days before the Phoenix would be able to cast another spell.

Ayame slumped with exhaustion. Around her, the blood of one of the archers pooled near where she sat in mediation, and arrows flew overhead as the undead ranks advanced. Arrows sizzling with jade-green light sprang from the ashigarus' bows, while other shugenja up and down the wall cast their enchantments of support for those that lined the wall.

She had no power left for fighting. But as she heard the first explosion of firework-propelled jade powder as an oni stumbled into a Daidoji trap, she knew that the plan had paid off. She had done her part.

A Flash of Lightning

The battle of Asahina Fields had been on a dry, hot day of mid-Autumn, unnatural in all ways. But cold descended quickly in the days following the battle, and hung on to dog their weary steps as they travelled northwards towards Otosan Uchi.

Mirumoto Kenuchio tried his best to ignore the chill, choosing instead to pour over the end of the battle if only to better prepare him for the battles to come. Once he had struck the claw from Hida Yakamo, and Kuni Ren had replaced it, it seemed like the battle only intensified. But in truth, the defeat of the armies of the Shadowlands was already in hand.

About a third of the enemy forces quit the field when Hida Yakamo called for the retreat, those Scorpion and Crab whose souls were not yet lost to the madness of the Shadowlands taint. Still, the undead forces that had followed the False Hoturi pressed closely about them, and it was hard fighting as they withdrew back towards the temple. The enchanted arrows of the Asahina's ashigaru archers provided fair cover, the sky black and green with jade. There was a rumbling, and then the sound of explosions to either side of the valley as the oni moved towards the temple out of the range of the majority of the archers. However, they met the traps of the Daidoji. The sound of fireworks...and the explosions of something far, far stronger than fireworks...filled the air and Kenuchio could catch glimpses from the corner of his eye of oni being ripped apart in balls of fire. Other oni, pressing forward through the ashes of the previous oni, would fall into pits filled with jade-tipped spears, or, if they were clever enough to move around, found themselves engaged with hidden forces of Daidoji saboteurs or caught in unleashed oil and flame or the jade strikes of the few Jade Crab Kuni who remained other than Kuni Ren.

Even so, the numbers of the enemy had been overwhelming. Though they had made it back to Shinden Asahina, the traps had become overwhelmed and the arrows were running out when a mighty shout arose from behind the army of the enemy. It was then that Mirumoto Kenuchio could see the might of the Crab unleashed as Hida Yakamo returned to the battlefield with the forces of the Obsidian Crab behind him. The light of the Jade Hand could be seen even from the walls of Shinden Asahina and it seemed to be with a strange joy that the Obsidian Crab struck at the remaining undead and oni on the field. The backbone of the two tainted armies shattered before the might of Hida Yakamo's forces, and their remaining generals called for a retreat.

Shinden Asahina was free.

Mirumoto Kenuchio could remember slumping to the ground with exhaustion, remember having his wounds tended by an equally exhausted young Asahina, having a cup of water pressed into his hands.

Later, he remembered a blur of meetings, treaties and negotiations between this new Hida Yakamo, the bearer of the Jade Hand, and Doji Hoturi, Doji Kuwanan, and Daidoji Uji. And Sensei, always acting as the diplomat, soothing wounds of honor, pouring salve on rough words. Creating peace between them.

There was little for the magistrates to do, but all had suffered wounds and exhaustion in the battle so they were grateful for the respite.

It was maybe not quite enough time for them to fully recover from their wounds. Kenuchio's still ached. But winter was approaching quickly, and the evil may have retreated but still flooded the Empire from every side. The Emperor had cancelled Winter Court, but if ever there was a time the clans needed to gather and speak, this was it. So now they marched, through the growing autumn chill, towards Kuyden Doji, to free it from any lingering Shadowlands presence, if that were possible, and to treat and plan the next move to save the Empire. The days were long, the nights cold, and there was a weary despair settling in around the Dragon that needed to be fought.

Three hundred Crane soldiers had survived the battle in the Fields of the Morning Sun sufficiently to make the march north, and their troops were led by Doji Hoturi. Daidoji Uji acted as his second in command, while the still injured Doji Kuwanan remained behind in Shinden Asahina until he was able to make the trip north with any additional troops he was able to gather. Each day, the Crane commanders sent riders scouring the villages for any magistrates or bushi that had become cut off and isolated by the battles that had torn the Crane lands apart. Their numbers had grown to five hundred, and they hoped for more before they made Kuyden Doji. Other riders had ridden to the coast to recruit mercenaries and Mantis, opening the Crane treasuries for any aid they could make against the darkness.

Behind the small Crane army marched the larger forces of the Crab. The army was led by Hida Yakamo, but many of his senior advisors, Kenuchio knew, were now dead, executed for the roles they played in pushing the Crab towards a path of darkness and overcome, when taking the test of jade, with the taint. Now Jade Crab and Obsidian Crab eyed each other warily, carefully monitoring for all signs of corruption. Those fallen to the taint not shugenja and deemed still loyal to Hida were kept in a separate unit deep within the Crab ranks and closely monitored by the loyal Kuni. They marched in silence, and seemed eager to die. Kenuchio did not linger near.

The cold wind sent Crane and Crab banners cracking fiercely taut, but also leached out more of his warmth and strength. He found himself worrying about Asahina Ayame and how she might be holding up, and remembering the words of Kaktia Hideyoshi.

Kenuchio looked forward to the fires tonight.

It was an hour before sunset when they reached the outskirts of the open fields around Kuyden Doji. Once the beauty of these lands had been referred to as the Fantastic Gardens of the Doji, but they had been trampled by the forces of the Lion and Doji Hoturi, and now were little more than bowed trees and shattered teahouses buried under an early snow. *'The snow is a blessing of the water kami,'* thought Asahina Ayame *'It hides the scars of the lands and lets us recall the memory of beauty.'*

The shugenja hurried closer to the hooded ronin who led them, walking side by side with Doji Hoturi. In the march north from Shinden Asahina, the magistrates had seen less and less of him. He was always deep in consultation with Doji Hoturi or Hida Yakamo. Even though he was never without a kindly word, he offered few straight answers. By now, though, she was used to it. Besides, she was so tired, she didn't even have the energy to ask.

The Crane Champion, or acting Champion, raised his hand to call a halt and the signal ran down the line. By now, the Crane banners had managed to gather about seven hundred samurai to their cause, and the Crab, no longer separated by the barriers of Obsidian and Jade, had gathered about two thousand, though there were rumored to be at least two thousand more here with the forces that had remained with Hida Kisada after his failed attack on Ootosan Uchi. As Hoturi sent runners ahead to determine a place to camp, Ayame moved aside to stand with her fellow magistrates while Hida Yakamo came forward from the Crab forces to join them.

Shyly, she slipped her icy hand into the hand of Mirumoto Kenuchio. It was all she dared do; but they'd grown closer over the last month, and with death so close it seemed like she should seize the moments she could. She felt his warm fingers close around hers. Hoturi, Sensei, and Yakamo stepped forward to the red torii arch to enter the gardens.

A figure that seemed far too large to have been hiding beside the torii arch, stepped out in front of them, startling Ayame. The man who met them was even larger and more muscular than Hida Yakamo. He wore armor of gold lacquered with green, and a mighty kabuto on his head. Covering his face completely, all save his eyes, was a featureless mempo. The helm cast even his eyes in darkness, but they shone with golden light from behind that mighty mask. They held an intensity that made Ayame tremble.

Mirumoto Kenuchio immediately released her hand and dropped to one knee, while the others around her, including the acting Champions and Sensei, bowed deeply. Ayame, of course, did likewise.

Sensei straightened from his bow, and Ayame was surprised to detect a note of familiarity and cheer in his voice.

"Togashi Yokune-dono. Please may I introduce Hida Yakamo-sama of the reunited Crab Clan, and Doji

Hoturi-sama, of the Crane." He bowed again.

The mighty armored figure bowed in return to the three men who stood before him. When all had straightened, his rumbling, deep voice seemed to resonate in the very stones beneath their feet.

"Shinsei. Thunders. I greet you."

The figure, the one called Togashi Yokune, then looked past the ronin, the Crab, and the Crane. Ayame could feel his eyes sweep across her and her fellow magistrates, towards the southwestern horizon.

His voice rumbled again, and it seemed to rattle the shugenja's bones. **"A flash of lightning. All is in readiness. It is time. Follow me."**

Ayame straightened and shared a glance with her fellow magistrates, a thousand questions pouring into her head at once, and, perhaps, two answers.

They followed Togashi Yokuni in silence as he led the armies of the Crane and Crab towards an area of encampment. No one dared say a word.

The bowl of hot soup with seaweed and fish was a welcome change after the pickled vegetables and cold rice so common to their forced march, and Hiruma Izuko was going to make the most of it. She found a place to settle by the Crane Champion's fire; she was probably unworthy by rank, but their service to Sensei...**Shinsei**...and Doji Hoturi... had earned them the spot for one last day, at least.

She wondered if she'd be sent to join the rest of the Light Infantry in the Crab forces. Or perhaps Toshimoko was here? There were troops enough. The entire area was lit with campfires as far as the eye could see. Kenuchio had already left to visit his father.

Doji Hoturi was sitting quietly nearby and eating his own soup with his back turned away from her, ignoring the Magistrates and everyone else to be alone in his thoughts. He'd left the House of the Nightingale behind but the Willow World was still in him, even after the Battle of Asahina Fields, and the Magistrates respected him enough to allow him his peace and privacy. The politics for him would begin soon enough, with the formal meetings of the Clan Champions and Generals beginning tomorrow.

Izuko shook her head. "I don't even care about the politics and the discussions they're having tomorrow. As long as they point out a direction and hand me a bow, I'll be content at this rate." Beside her, Moto Koshi nodded in agreement

"You don't care about politics, Hiruma-san? How very Crab of you," A sweet voice said softly beside her, and she pulled away in surprise. She'd never even seen the speaker approach, though the voice was familiar.

Her eyes met another's...a pair of familiar brown eyes with an expression hidden behind a soft pink scarf. Izuko could bet, however, the expression was a smirk. "Mai!"

The young Yakuza they had known in Otosan Uchi nodded and straightened to give the Hiruma and Moto a bow. Other than the scarf, she was dressed in a lightweight black armor. A pair of sai were tucked into her obi. as was one other thing that had never been there before...a beautiful, black-lacquered wakizashi. "Izuko-san," Mai offered cordially. "I am so glad you are alive and I would love to catch up on all the latest gossip, but I'm afraid there is something I must do first. Please excuse me."

Izuko and Koshi followed the young woman with their eyes, and from the opposite side of the fire, Ayame also realized who had approached and watched her silently.

Mai did not flinch but held her head up proudly as she walked straight up to Doji Hoturi. When she drew near she coughed politely.

Doji Hoturi turned to face her. His eyes narrowed questioningly, and then he smiled. "Akiyoshi-san! I had hoped to see you again. I take it your return to join the army of ronin being built by Toturi-san was successful. Does that mean he is here now?"

Moto Koshi raised his eyebrow questioningly, but Izuko just shook her head silently.

Mai bowed to the Crane Lord. "I am surprised you remember so much, Hoturi-sama, considering. We traveled far together to escape to the House of the Nightingale, but you were not in a position to understand complex matters. But now you must know. And, I hope, come to accept my sincere apology."

Hoturi frowned, a puzzled crease forming between his black eyes as he studied Mai. His face grew hard as he studied the woman before him carefully. "Go on, Akiyoshi-san." He set down his empty bowl of soup and stood to face her.

Mai straightened to look Hoturi in the eye. "I have never lied to you, not once. However, not is all as you think. I am not the ronin Akiyoshi. I never gave you my name, though you remember correctly that Akiyoshi is what others called me. Such is the name of a skilled actress who wears my face while performing as a geisha for the Emperor. For myself, considering my clan is exiled, I certainly could be considered ronin. My brothers were killed during the Scorpion Clan Coup, while my father died shortly before. And when I left you, I did go to join Toturi's Army, as I said I would.." She gestured at the magistrates nearby, including Izuko. "I have also never lied to these magistrates, though they know me far differently. When they lived in Otosan Uchi, they knew me as a crime lord, the leader of the Red Cloud Yakuza, by the name of Mai. And that is my true name and one of my roles, but it also is not all.

For my name is Bayushi Mai and I am the true Champion of the Scorpion Clan."

The magistrates and the Crane Champion all grew very still, watching the young woman. The silence stretched between them, Mai smiling pleasantly the whole time, until Doji Hoturi spoke again. His on hid all expression and his voice was flat when he spoke. "I thought the Champion of the Scorpion was Bayushi Shoju." he said softly. "The Scorpion were disbanded. Only the Empress remains. Bayushi Kachiko."

Mai bowed deeply, the expression in the dark eyes above her pink scarf calmly sympathetic. "Yes. Very few even within the clan know of the secret of human masks. Bayushi Kachiko has been my mask, as Bayushi Shoju served as my father's. It is...difficult...when your mask decides it is not content to be only a mask, but decides to act out of its own will."

Hoturi frowned, and gestured at Mai to continue. The magistrates looked at each other.

Mai just looked amused. "The Scorpion can be justifiably accused of many things, Hoturi-san. But foolishness should not be one of them. Each Scorpion wears an outer face," she gestures at her scarf, "and an inner face. The outer face can be disposed of. Changed. Removed at need. It is the acknowledgement that we wear many faces and play many parts. But certain people themselves act as the outer face of the whole clan. As such, they are public, held up to public scrutiny, and requiring...at times...public removal. But in a world of changing faces, public and private, the inner face must retain the blood so the blood cannot be lost. The inner face expresses the heart. The inner face must provide the conscience and speak unquestioned truth. The direct descendants of Bayushi, then, have long worn human masks, to be the public faces of the clan, while secretly directing the clan from within."

The young woman coolly scanned the group of magistrates and Hoturi. Her expression seemed calm, but Izuko could tell from the way she looked at her that anyone who chose to mention this in public would likely end up dead very promptly.

Mai's gaze switched back to Hoturi. "Shoju's treason was not first against the Emperor. It was first against my father. He wished to be real. He convinced himself he deserved to be so, that my father's authority was a lie, a plot against him. My father and brothers died when I was only a child, but I was hidden away, protected by the faction of the Scorpion that knew the truth. When he was killed, Kachiko, now inheriting her role as a mask for me, knew it likely that I existed, but not where. I have...made things clear to her since then."

She stepped back, and gave a full bow of apology to Doji Hoturi. "I am still responsible for the actions of my clan. Bayushi Kachiko used my clan against you to extract personal vengeance for the death of the son you share. The Scorpion's loyalty, however distasteful the other clans may find it, should always be to the Empire, not to our own ambition, or our own revenge. I am here to offer my apologies, Doji Hoturi. And this."

She held something out to the Crane Champion. Izuko, mind reeling at what Mai's words implied, dragged her eyes from the two faces to that which Mai held in her hands...a long braid of dark brown

hair, tied at either end with a blue ribbon.

Doji Hoturi's face was as pale as the snow as he accepted the braid Mai pressed into his hands. He did not answer her, instead just staring down at it.

Mai straightened. "And that is enough apologizing." Her voice was tart, even cheery. "The past won't resolve the future. Bayushi Kachiko probably has words for you, but she knows where her loyalty lies now. The prophecy Shoju was pursuing was not incorrect after all. The last Hantei fell with the last Akodo. Now it is time to put to rest another beast that wears another's face. "

She started to turn and walk away, a strut in her step, but just as she was about to leave the circle of firelight, she turned back to look at the magistrates' perfectly frozen faces. "Ha! Such control. These samurai do not even blink. And they say we wear masks."

She disappeared into the shadows.

The Dragon encampment was the strangest of all in the blossoming tent city that had come to surround the wreck that was Kuyden Doji this Winter Court. For moving in and out amongst the tents from an encampment just beyond the garden borders, were great, shadowy, slithering shapes in the darkness. Things, creatures, with the body of a man or woman and the tail of a giant snake of inconceivable size. They made Mirumoto Kenuchio shudder to look upon them, but he kept his tongue still and any thoughts firmly locked in his head. These beings, strangely enough, were the allies of his clan, and he did not dare to question or challenge that alliance. The Empire had enough enemies as is.

But it was not to come gawk at the naga that Kenuchio had come to the Dragon encampment this evening.

Once they had arrived, he put out an inquiry to determine which families of the Dragon were encamped on the Doji plains. He learned his father was here. Tonight, he was going to go speak to him.

"Ssssssumimasssssssssen, Dragon-sssan." The voice was a sibilant hiss.

Kenuchio jumped back.

Before him, stretching out like a log across the path before him, a long round body. And rising from the shadows of the tents next to him, the body of a man who seemed impossibly tall. His skin was glistening and naked, save for the do and sode he wore, and the glittering scales across his skin. The being bowed at the...waist? and moved his tail aside, clearing the path for Kenuchio.

Kenuchio was flustered, but returned the bow. "It is nothing, Naga-san."

The naga straightened, and slithered on its way with a nod of acknowledgement.

Kenuchio struggled to find his center again, and then hurried on to his father's tent.

Mirumoto Iyeasu was a grim man with a hawklike nose and long, gray hair tied up in a cue. He had served as a member of the Mirumoto House Guard for many years, and was now committed to defending the current brother and sister who led the family. To Kenuchio's eyes, he seemed just as remote as the snowy peaks of the mountains he had grown up in....in other words, no different at this moment than he had been the day Kenuchio had left to report to the capital on his Champion's orders so many years before.

The guards who had let him let the tent flap fall, leaving the pair their privacy.

Kenuchio bowed. "Otosama," he offered politely. "It is good to see you again."

From behind his writing desk, his father returned the bow, though the reserve that had always been there remained. "And you, also. I heard you fought honorably at the Battle of Beidan Pass. You have my congratulations."

Mirumoto Kenuchio bowed again. "Thank you, Father. How is Mother?"

"She is well. She was pleased to receive your letter regarding the request to marry." The older Dragon kept his voice perfectly neutral, and Kenuchio felt a pang of nervousness regarding the letter he had sent so long before. "She believes that it is about time you moved on to consider such things."

"Hai, Otosama. I had hoped there would be the opportunity to speak with you this winter about that. Asahina Ayame is beautiful, talented, and courageous. Her father served in the Ministry of Calligraphy and Seals before his death and she is of noble family. I would be honored to have her as a wife."

Iyeasu eyed his son up and down. "So you said." He frowned. "Despite the scandalous behavior of the Crane clan in the last year, we did not dismiss the request out of hand. Perhaps, under some circumstances, it could have been considered beneficial. But an Asahina is truly useless in a time of war, and the Dragon have no need of one. Her rank is high enough with her father's role in the ministry that the Doji might require you to marry into their clan, and then the skills you have spent a lifetime refining would indeed be useless. Unless you plan sitting around composing poetry all day?" Iyeasu's tone was withering. "You could, perhaps, curry favor for the Dragon in court. But what court? Things have changed, Kenuchio-san. This match does not serve the clan."

Kenuchio thought he could hear a buzzing in his ears as his head grew light with raw disbelief. All that had happened, all that Ayame and he had been through together, her courage and grace in the face of death, and his own father said she did not bring enough to the Dragon Clan? His voice was tight, and to his ears he felt a child again. "But mother said...you said she was pleased..."

The older Mirumoto held up his hand to cut the younger off. "Kenuchio-kun. Your mother was pleased that marriage entered your considerations. You have grown much in the last few years. We have received a very promising and honorable offer for your marriage. It will mean leaving the clan, but with it comes the promise of the renewal of old alliances, turning an enemy into a friend for our future battles. The one who made the offer is one the Dragon, and specifically the Mirumoto, owe a large debt to, one that we are required to repay."

Kenuchio closed his eyes against the roaring in his ears. "And who am I to wed?" He sounded distant to himself.

"A young woman, kuge of the Hidden Scorpion Clan. A number of years younger than you, but pretty. It was you she has chosen, and it was for you she sought out Lord Togashi. He has approved it. "

Stunned silence.

Iyeasu nodded once, sharply. "Good. I knew you would understand. When Bayushi Mai-sama returned Hitomi-sama to us, and replaced her missing hand with that magical artifact, there was no way the Mirumoto could allow our debt to go unpaid. We all must make small sacrifices in service of the clan. I am sure you will see that the arrangements are properly made before spring."

Kenichio felt sick, but there was nothing to say. "Hai, Otosan." He bowed before leaving as fast as he could. How would he ever tell Ayame?

Shinsei.

Moto Koshi rolled the word around in his head, trying to get used to the sound. *Shinsei and the Seven Thunders.*

The Day of Thunder.

The end of the world.

Shinsei had told the magistrates to wait for him, and so they had waited. The front hall of Kuyden Doji

was mostly intact, save for where once the heavy door that had blocked entrance had been. The door and the area around it were torn loose, allowing snow to drift in. The door that led to the main chamber, on the other hand, was firmly shut against them. A few times, they'd been asked to bring food or paper or sake. But other than that, there was nothing to do except wait.

"Let me pass!" The man's voice was thunderous. The magistrates all jumped to attention as an intimidating figure pushed his way past the door guards into the entrance hall, followed by eight armed bushi.

It took Koshi a moment to register the leader's mons. He was very tall, dressed in a green kimono with a broad shouldered kataginu that made him look even larger than he was. He had a severe, weather-beaten face, green eyes, and long black hair heavily seeded with gray. After a moment, Koshi recognized the mons as marking him as a member of the minor Mantis clan. But he showed no modesty normally associated with members of the minor clans as he forced his way forward, and with the deference showed him by the others that followed him, he had to be a leader of significant rank. Likely the clan daimyo, the one known as Yoritomo.

The magistrates bowed, and Moto Koshi stepped forward. "My apologies, Yoritomo-sama. The clan champions have requested privacy within for their deliberations. But I would be happy to insure that a message is carried to them so they can meet with you as soon as they break."

A low rumbling started to build in the Mantis Daimyo's throat. He was not interested in waiting any longer and certainly was not interested in being thwarted by this Unicorn magistrate. He took a menacing step forward, and a thousand options flashed before Koshi's eyes, each leading to an enormous and ugly political incident. Fortunately, he was saved when Shinsei opened the door within.

"Yoritomo-sama. You are welcome. Please forgive these magistrates; they are doing their duty well, but were not informed you would be attending."

Yoritomo sighed, a sound more of frustration than weariness, and followed Shinsei inside. The door shut behind them.

The eight other Mantis stepped out to join the other guards on the main entrance, leaving the magistrates in the entrance hall again.

To wait.

And wait.

And wait.

Several hours later, Yoritomo left the meeting looking smugly satisfied. He did not even acknowledge the magistrates as he disappeared into the darkening gardens with his bushi.

Another two hours passed and it was late in the evening when those in the room finally emerged.

Doji Hoturi, looking tired and pale after the long day of deliberations.
Hida Yakamo, the Jade Hand glowing with an inner light in the shadows.
Bayushi Mai, a smirk of dark humor in her warm brown eyes.
Togashi Yokuni, golden eyes glittering behind the mempo he still wore.

Those they had seen very recently. But there were others they knew, but it had been long since they had seen them.

Otaku Kamoko, looking glorious and defiant in her white and purple armor, grown only more beautiful since they'd seen her in her camp in the Moto lands.

Toturi the Black, his kimono worn and fraying, gray streaking his temples, aged a lifetime since the Scorpion Clan Coup when they had presented him the Sword of the Hantei.

Mirumoto Hitomi, her missing hand now replaced, they could see, with a hand formed of crystalline darkness, a derisive sneer the magistrates' only reward for their protection during the Battle of Beidan Pass.

Kakita Toshimoko, clad in the armor of the Emerald Champion, who did not hesitate to give them a wink and a smile as he sauntered past.

And two others they had not met.

Isawa Tadaka, emerged, his face masked by his broad-rimmed hat and the black cloths he'd bound around his face and hands. Moto Koshi could smell the stench of taint upon him, could see his glowing green eyes and the black fire about him. It would be enough to challenge, but he was not alone. Shiba Ujimitsu, the Phoenix Clan champion, looking calm and assured, walked by his side. Shinsei had made clear that the Phoenix were to be accepted, even trusted, despite what had happened to Isawa Natsune. The magistrates in this had to follow their orders and hope the monk knew what he was doing.

The magistrates waited until the various dignitaries dispersed. Finally Shinsei emerged alone.

The Hooded Ronin spoke with one of the door guards, and beckoned the magistrates into the room the Champions and Thunders had so recently left. The room was littered with sake bottles and maps and books of prophesy and the Tao, but Shinsei ignored all to lead them towards the fire. Rice and vegetables were brought then the servants were dismissed. The man they had known and traveled with for so long accepted his rice, then looked at them with a smile.

"You have been very patient, but I think you have more than earned answers. Please go ahead and ask all your questions. I will have no more secrets here.

Izuko was direct. "You are Shinsei, correct? The Shinsei?"

The man they had followed nodded. "His descendant, indeed. Come into the world again when the time was right for me to do so."

Kenuchio cut in. "Then they," he gestured at those who had just left. "Are the Seven Thunders, and the Day of Thunder is coming. Fu Leng is loose in the world."

Shinsei nodded again. "The Seven and a few others. Fu Leng is loose in the world. But in this room were those who have the wherewithal to defeat him. And he will be defeated."

Ayame was more hesitant. "Fu Leng has replaced the Emperor, hasn't he? That is why he was doing the things he has done."

The Hooded Ronin looked down into the flames. "Sadly, yes. It was partially, perhaps, due to the deeds of Bayushi Kachiko. It was partially the weight of prophecy. Primarily though, it was the endless nature of the challenge between Tengoku and Jigoku that led the Empire to this moment. All that was Hantei is gone from the Emperor. Only Fu Leng remains."

Ayame nodded, withdrawing into herself.

But Koshi had little patience now, at the end, for the prophecies of the age. He wanted direct answers. "We are in this room. You sought us out too. What role do we play in all of this?"

Shinsei smiled again, pleased with the question. "Yes. You have touched so many of these events. Preceded them. Followed them. That little flash on the horizon. The pebble by which the avalanche is begun. You are called, yes. Just as much as they. But you are not the same."

The magistrates drew forward to listen. Shinsei continued.

"There never were just the Thunders. The Thunders are heroes of the age. They will be the ones remembered, the foundation upon which the next age rests. But what if the next age is a dark one? It still would rest on the legend and will of the Thunders. The Dark Thunders. Traitors. Murderers. Foes wholly sworn to evil. Foes who, just as those before us in this room, would do anything to ensure their victory."

The teacher smiled. "But evil does not understand the greatest strengths of bushido. Evil grounds itself in selfishness. In a thousand selfish decisions that steer towards their end. But Good grounds itself in selflessness, and therefore has the power of creation, making a whole that is greater than the sum of all of its parts. Just that tiny bit more, that small contribution offered without personal gain, made for the good of all...that is the advantage Good has over Evil. While Jigoku can raise fanatics to act as dark mirrors to the Seven Thunders, it is blind to the thousand of little decisions and sacrifices that, bound together, will stop those Dark Thunders."

He turned to each one of the magistrates in turn. "A group of samurai, seemingly selected at random from the wideness of Ningen-do. United only by the sacrifice within their hearts. You, my friends, are the flash of lightening that precedes the Thunder. You will be the hand of Tengoku to strike at the Dark Thunders before they can prevent the chosen seven from reaching Fu Leng, the avatar of Jigoku. You will light the way. The Thunders arise as the avatars of Tengoku. You stand for the mortal man."

The Day of Thunder

The battle raged around them, but the magistrates followed the orders Shinsei had given and took no part, doing what they could to stay away from the thrust and parry of the forces on the field save when such forces came to directly intercept them. It rarely did. They carried no banner, their armor, as it had been since Western Hub Village, was indistinguishable from any other minor bushi on the field. A squad of goblins, quickly cut down, and a few air spells to ward off any intercepting arrows as they moved towards the walls of Ootosan Uchi. The armies of the Empire pressed forward.

The gates, though. Fortified by timber as thick across as a man, hauled into place with the power of ogres, there was no way that even the siege engines of the Kaiu or the spells of the shugenja would not prevail against its might. Not that any could close on those gates anyway. For in command of the outer wall of Ootosan Uchi was an insane man who rained fire and death upon all those who drew near. The Master of Fire, Isawa Tsuke.

Warriors burned, engineers burned. And Tsuke stood on the battlements laughing.

The closer the magistrates drew to the walls, the harder it was to avoid the flames and the more intense the fighting became. There had reached a stalemate as the armies were trapped before the walls and the flames of Isawa Tsuke.

The armies of the Phoenix, led by Isawa Tadaka and Shiba Ujimitsu, were the forces able to close the furthest on Tsuke's fiery hellscape, strengthened by their gifts. Great boulders tore through the sky towards the Master of Fire, but he knocked them away with his flames easily. The magistrates had to shelter their eyes from the heat and flames, not daring to approach further. They could barely see the flash of red and gold that was Shiba Ujimitsu...somehow...leap from the ground to the top of the battlements at the maddened shugenja's side, and plunge a katana into Tsuke's fiery robes.

Isawa Tsuke **exploded**. The nearest section of outer wall of Ootosan Uchi was devastated in the eruption of power and flame, coming crumbling to the ground where every previous siege engine and ram had failed. The magistrates could not see the body of Ujimitsu as he came tumbling to the ground, blinded as they were from the glare. The armies surged forward to capture the breach and enter the outer city. In a momentary break from the fighting, the magistrates heard a bright clarion call of a woman's voice cry out to the Phoenix army "Shiba Arises!" The Phoenix troops roared their Utz and charged forward.

The magistrates slipped in behind the front of the charge, finding themselves in the familiar haunts of the Toyotomi district of Ootosan Uchi. There was fighting all around them, but the mission they have been given by Shinsei was clear. And here, in this district, they knew every alley and basement.

The streets, however familiar they might have been once, were in another sense completely alien to them now. An oozing green mist seeped from the cracks between the buildings. The daily bustle of carts and shops and the turnings of small lives had come to a complete stop. The air was scented with the breath of death. The familiar corner of the papershop, the fishmonger, all empty now. The samurai ducked in and around the knots of fighting, traversing the back streets, making their way deeper and deeper into the city. Further in and across, through parts of other districts now, less certain, towards their destination. The South Wall of Otosan Uchi. The place where their story began.

Their orders from Shinsei were clear. They alone, of all the people in the empire, had traversed successfully the South Wall. The Thunders, while mighty, suffered terrible flaws. Their flaws gave them strength. But the South Wall, the only wall that allowed the outflow of water through it to go down to the sea, and therefore, the only wall with passages below it to allow effluent to escape, had been built by the Crane. Its enchantments created the most severe challenges to both will and honor. The magistrates had survived the passage out. The more serious test was returning.

The fighting was still near the outer wall as they approached the south wall of the inner city. They found the hidden doorway that led down into the stormwater drainage, granting passage for the water back to the ocean. Fortunately, the area was mostly empty; the true strength of the tainted followers of the Emperor, of Fu Leng, were fighting at the gate. They'd only faced a few goblin patrols so far. Moto Koshi pulled up the hidden trap door and, one at a time, they lowered themselves down.

A thin channel of water trickled past their feet. Although they expected this dark place to be filled with the greenish fog that swathed the city, this close to the sacred wall, all taint of evil recoiled. Still, as they approached the underpinnings of the wall itself, glowing white mist arose around and between them, muffling sound, dividing sight, separating them. The challenges of the south wall were to be faced alone.

Mirumoto Kenuchio lost track of the others, gone in the white mists. But, emerging from the uncertainty before him a shadowed figure stepped. As it drew close to him, he could see its face, the mirror of his own. The figure drew katana and wakizashi, again, the mirror to his own. He did likewise.

The figure only voiced these words, “Turn back, or die.”

Kenuchio shook his head. “I cannot.”

The figure paused. “I see your failures. I know all that you have done. You have not even told her, have you? Your dishonor will destroy you.” It plunged forward to attack.

The moments seemed to last forever, and it was possible than none of them could fully describe the battles each of them made against their own worst selves in the darkness under the South Wall. However, finally, each of them pushed through the mist to reach the stormdrains on the other side. They rested, not speaking, though Kenuchio felt Ayame’s eyes watching him and could see the wounded expression that haunted them. Once the magistrates had recovered enough, they continued until they could reach the point they originally entered the drains as they were escaping with the sword of the Hantei.

The inner city was not deserted, but most of the forces of Fu Leng had been emptied onto the plains or into the city. The green mist returned and, while vile, it helped to shelter them from all eyes. When a pack of curious bakemono stumbled upon them, they were dispatched quickly enough. Ayame raised her hands in healing again.

“I need to get something,” Matsumoto Eiko said after the latest fight. “We will not survive like this.” She led them away from the gates and up to the Shrine of the Seven Fortunes, one of the holiest places in Rokugan.

Though the city was fast becoming defiled, the Shrine of the Seven Fortunes had not faltered, at least not yet. Its purity shone and the green mists recoiled from it. Eiko hurried the others along and headed straight for the doors.

The temple itself was empty of the tainted, samurai, or monks, and Eiko opened the doors without trouble. Eerie quiet pervaded the sacred space. Each of the seven great shrines opened onto the central courtyard, and, lying in the center of the courtyard, a large, cracked bell.

Eiko led them past the bell directly to the Shrine to the fortune Bishamon, where he stood in all his stately glory, an ancient naginata in one hand, and a castle in the other. She knelt before the statue, closed her eyes, and pressed her face to the ground. Unwilling to not share her full reverence for the Fortune, the other samurai did the same.

“Great Bishamon, Fortune of Strength,” Eiko intoned, “The time has come for the Empire to stand and fight the greatest evil it has known in a thousand years. My name is Matsumoto Eiko, servant of the

Celestial Dragons, born of the line of Matsumoto, and guardian of the city. Lord Bishamon, please grant to me my family's birthright, so that the Thunders may fulfill their destiny and we may do what we must."

With that prayer, she stood, stepped forward, and firmly lay her hand on the shaft of Bishamon's great naginata, and suddenly, though no one exactly saw when it had been released, the naginata was free, and Eiko was holding it in her hands. She looked at it with a small, satisfied smile, and bowed again. "I thank you, Lord Bishamon, and promise to return this to you when today's fighting is done."

Then she turned to the others. "This is not for fighting," she explained. "It is to give the chance for strength to be victorious. So my family has guarded and served for many centuries, since long before the days of Ichuban."

The others nodded, and Koshi grunted. "Let's go. We need to be by the gate before the drums begin."

They made their way to a small Seppun guardhouse near the wall, fortunately near the gates, that had been left deserted. As the day's fighting continued, they could do nothing, - save for Hiruma Izuko who slipped out of the guardhouse to determine exactly what forces held the gate itself. After about two hours, the sound of taiko drums began, its sacred rhythm driving lesser tainted creatures away, warning all that the battle had grown near.

It was the cue that they should strike.

The magistrate's strike on the two ogres that guarded the gate mechanism was swift and silent, for Asahina Ayame had cast a spell that would prevent all sound from traveling further from the gates. Izuko and Koshi's initial arrows wounded the ogres before they could see what was facing them, and Eiko and Kenuchio closed swiftly to defeat them. As soon as the ogres were felled, they ran to the gate mechanism and began to turn the heavy wheel that opened the gates just enough to allow Shinsei and the seven Thunders to pass.

Bayushi winked at Mirumoto Kenuchio as she entered. Asahina Ayame turned away, hiding her expression. Doji Hoturi gave the magistrates a weary nod. Shinsei favored them with a smile, a crow sitting on his shoulder. "Well done," he offered. "Only one more task for you to fulfill." Once the Thunders were rested, the magistrates followed the Thunders up the road to the Imperial Palace.

Nothing challenged them on the road to the palace. What could dare? They reached the barred great doors to the Imperial Palace.

As if they sensed the approach of the Thunders, the great doors slowly swung open. Standing at the doors, still holding the mechanism that pulled them open, was the most staggeringly beautiful woman

the magistrates had ever seen. Hair the color of a raven's wing cascaded like silk across her perfect shoulders. Her kimono of scarlet and gold matched the red of her lacy mask and the ruby hue of her enticing lips. Her eyes were pools of midnight and promises, but were darkened with the colors of grief and long suffering. Every samurai in the Empire knew her name: Bayushi Kachiko. The Empress.

The Empress lifted her head, and her eyes met the black eyes of Doji Hoturi. The magistrates could not see the private expressions shared between the two at that moment, but they did see the beautiful woman kneel before the Crane Champion.

"Forgive me," she said quietly.

Doji Hoturi closed his eyes as he chose to allow her words to reach him, though the magistrates knew, better than any other here, perhaps, the depth of pain that this woman had caused him. He reached out to her and offered his hand. "Arise, My Lady. We must move forward."

Bayushi Kachiko took the offered hand and stood, but she frowned at Hoturi's response. She picked up her lantern, turned back to the group of Thunders, and said, "Follow me."

The palace was a maze of shadowed halls but all was echoing silence. Kachiko led the way swiftly through the darkness until she emerged under the pillared veranda that surrounded an interior courtyard garden. A familiar figure emerged out of the shadows.

"He is in the Throne Room. Togashi challenges him now." Bayushi Mai said simply. "No others have joined yet, but a summons has gone out. There are sounds in the palace. It will be a matter of moments before he is joined." She pointed to the large doors on the other side of the garden. "The throneroom is just beyond."

Mai then turned to Kachiko. "You should go and hide yourself. You are not trained in combat. You can do nothing here."

Kachiko's eyes blazed, but she bowed to the fifteen-year-old girl.

Shinsei turned to the magistrates who had come with him. His eyes were kind and sad, knowing well that his next words may consign them to their deaths. "Matsumoto Eiko. Moto Koshi. Hiruma Izuko. Mirumoto Kenuchio. Asahina Ayame. You are to wait here. The Dark Thunders are moments behind us. It is your task to delay them. Defeat them if you are able. Let no enemy pass that door." He gave them a bow. "This is your time."

They returned the bow to Shinsei and the Thunders, but nothing else needed to be said. It needed to be done, though an icy lance of fear struck Hiruma Izuko's heart. She, at least, had not forgotten that at least half the enemies were shugenja. The magistrates took up a position in the inner courtyard, ready to defend the doors to the throneroom with their lives.

From within the Throneroom, they could hear the sounds of words spoken in a strange, hissing language, the crashing and swirling and rumbling of some great combat. Hida Yakamo pulled open the

door to enter, and the other Thunders followed in after him. Shinsei entered last, leaving the magistrates alone in the courtyard with Bayushi Kachiko.

The woman waited in the courtyard with them for a moment or two, just long enough for the Thunders to begin their engagement with their enemy. She turned to the magistrates directly and looked at them with eyes full of burning contempt...and guilt. "You may stay if you wish," she answered, chin lifted with pride. "I have debts I will repay. And I will earn Hoturi's forgiveness before I will allow him to die."

Moto Koshi stepped aside to allow the Empress to pass through the doors. They fell shut behind her.

The magistrates shared a look between each other as they were left alone in the courtyard.

"The Dark Thunders," said Asahina Ayame. "If they see us, they could simply go another way in. Or through a wall. We saw the Kitsu turn himself into bees. They could even summon an oni."

Matsumoto Eiko nodded. "The naginata and the power of Bishamon will act against them, and maho will not work near it. But we must be faster than they.

Mirumoto Kenuchio gestured to the garden. "Perhaps they won't expect to be met. They have chosen to wait until the battle is well joined, so they are confident in their lord. They have no reason to believe we would be here."

The samurai scattered themselves across the garden, waiting in ambush. The garden seemed empty except for the four standing lanterns that marked the path to the Throne Room.

They did not need to wait long.

A high-pitched nasal laughter preceded them. "When we're done, I want the Unicorn. So pretty...so very pretty." It came from a sly, unpleasant-looking man they recognized: the Kitsu shugenja they had fought for the soul of Matsu's first husband. Kitsu Bashu.

A deep pitched grunt. "No so pretty when I'm finished with her." The man who went with those words was a hulking tower of a man, with his face painted in white and black. He carried over his shoulder a massive weapon, like an iron staff with blades on either end. They didn't recognize him, but Koshi remembered his father's description: Kuni Genru.

A woman laughed nervously. "I still think we must be careful. Isawa Tadaka is a powerful shugenja." She wore the colors of an Iuchi shugenja, her long hair threaded through with gray. Around her neck, she carried twin strings of round yellow gourds, like giant prayer beads crossing her chest. "He will never expect my polvara, but we should be quiet and not attract the attention of the Thunders until we

strike." Iuchi Kyoru.

A man clad in black, a mask over his face, chortled quietly. "Besides," he said barely above a whisper. "The Crane is much prettier." With the mask, they could only guess that his identity was Bayushi Joro.

"Enough! I may need to associate with you for the good of our lord, but I am not required to listen to your blasphemous prattle." THAT one many in the Empire, including the magistrates, would have recognized, at least by his mon. Asako Monoro, Head Inquisitor of the Phoenix. Ayame felt a familiar chill.

The next who entered the small inner garden they also recognized, as the Agasha courtier who had led Hitomi so far astray in her attacks on Unicorn Lands. "No need to fight...we simply are here to serve the Dark Lord. Though...I sense a presence in this courtyard...." Agasha Sano.

The last of the seven did not speak, but immediately fell into stance, resting his hand palm-up on the grip of his katana. His long white hair hung around him. Daidoji Hitsuo.

Asahina Ayame didn't wait; she knew her role. From her position hiding in the shadows on the far edge of the garden, she immediately cast the spell that she had prepared. An explosion of wind surrounded the entire garden in a circular wall of wind, trapping the magistrates and the Dark Thunders in the confines of the garden. It would not last against a concerted effort to dispel it, but for the moment, it kept the Dark Thunders trapped within. Her hope was to at least buy time for the Thunders by prevent the Dark Thunders from getting past or leaving.

Some kind fortune was with them, for the winds whipped so fiercely that they knocked over one of the standing lanterns that had been lighting the courtyard, turning the whirlwind, momentarily, into a circle of fire. The fire licked out at the Dark Thunders that had been startled in the courtyard, and lashed out at them. A tongue of flame touched Iuchi Kyoru. She screamed and pulled away, but it was too late. The polvara that tainted her clothes and the gourds she carried hungrily seized the flame and exploded, sending a great fireball throughout the courtyard. The Kitsu and the Agasha stumbled in the blast.

The other Magistrates took no time at all in attacking, leaping out from hiding to strike out at their attackers. Asako Monoro immediately tried to pull away from the attackers to give himself the space to cast a spell, but Hiruma Izuko darted from the shadows and struck, burying her blade in his chest. He fell to his knees, bleeding heavily.

Matsumoto Eiko dove at Bayushi Joro, the purity of Bishamon's naginata cutting through the strands of Shadow he tried to summon about himself. Once struck by the blow, the Scorpion found himself unable to draw on the dark magics of the Shadow Brands.

Mirumoto Kenuchio leapt in front of the Daidoji, ready to block him from striking at his companions, and certain that any man trained by in the Kakita school could not be caught flat-footed by their ambush. The Crane eyed the others arrayed against his fellows and then gave Kenuchio a resigned nod and fell

into a dueling stance, making a gesture of challenge.

The Mirumoto was torn. He knew the Daidoji was just stalling for time and taking one of the fastest bushi out of the melee, but in his heart he knew that his honor would not allow him to refuse the challenge of the duel. The world fell away as he embraced the Void.

The Kuni was unslowed though he had to turn to face the attackers. He readied the large two-bladed sword he carried and turned to face his attackers. Moto Koshi made the first strike at him, a telling wound, but there was no doubt the power of Earth was with the mighty shugenja.

There was a burst of noise, barely audible over the swirling winds, as the door to the throneroom burst open and the body of Otaku Kamoko was hurled out. But the body did not reach past the wall of winds Ayame had constructed. Slowly, painfully, the Unicorn Battlemaiden crawled back towards the throneroom as the battle raged. But the magistrates were engaged with their own battle and could not help her.

In a well-practiced dance, Izuko traded partners with the Matsumoto, closing on the Scorpion, while Eiko whirled away to slash with her naginata at the Kitsu. The Lion shugenja was swift, but not faster than Eiko's naginata, and found his maho-fueled magic unreachable thanks to the power of Bishamon's blade. He drew his wakizashi and lashed out.

The Agasha recovered quickly and directly attacked Asahina Ayame with a powerful spell, having determined the source of the whirlwind that surrounded him. But Ayame had prepared the spell she had used to good effect at the Asahina temples, casting quickly to strip the Agasha from the power to commune with the Kami. He was staggered, but continued to chase after her, finding in her the key to continuing to the throne room.

The Daidoji and the Mirumoto's duel began in a flurry. He felt the wakizashi chime against his opponent's sword. Kenuchio could feel the Crane slip around his guard, and then he had a flash of recognition. This was the maneuver Kakita Hideyoshi had used back at the Academy to defeat him. The memory of that fight came back in a flash, as did all the time he had spent afterwards to counter the move. He twisted his wrist up just so, and lunged, his katana plunging deep into the duelist's chest.

Thank you, Hideyoshi. You were part of this story.

The Kuni swung a mighty blow at the Moto, and the Moto fell back, wounded. But still, he was able to get a second strike in of his own against his opponent before he was hit, and the Kuni was beginning to show a little weakness.

Now wounded, Koshi moved on to attack Ayame's opponent, the Agasha, while Kenuchio closed on the Kuni. Izuko and Bayushio Joro sparred, but without his magic and with her skill, she was able to master him in such toe-to-tow fighting. Eiko quickly dispatched the Kitsu with only a small wound, and then closed with Kuni Genru, who was already engaged with Kenuchio. Genru was having a difficult time hitting the Mirumoto, but was unable to cast spells under their persistent attacks. Koshi caught his

second wind and was able to prevent Agasha Sano from closing with Ayame, and Ayame turned herself to healing his wounds while they fought. The dance of the battle continued until only the Kuni was left standing, but even he was unable to hold against their combined might. The Dark Thunders were brought down. Izuko felt no compunction about finishing off the fallen Dark Thunders who still lived; it was more honor for them to die than be tried.

The wind died, and it was only then that they could hear silence from the chamber within. Heavily wounded, limping, the magistrates stumbled to the door to the throneroom to find out if Shinsei and the Thunders lived.

The days that followed were a whirl. Toturi was proclaimed Emperor. The bodies of Togashi, Doji Hoturi, and Isawa Tadaka were given honorable funerals. The magistrates found themselves mourning Hoturi in particular, remembering the months they had traveled with him. They hoped that in his final moments he had found the peace he sought. At least Bayushi Kachiko seemed to have some sort of peace and the forgiveness she was seeking, though she did not acknowledge them. Bayushi Mai had slipped out of the throneroom before the armies had reached the throneroom, leaving all the glory and consequence, for good or ill, upon the Shosuro actress. Many years later the twinned sai buried in the eyes of Fu Leng were described as Kachiko's jade hairpins, something which probably would have amused Mai greatly. Shinsei privately thanked them for all they had done and then left, a crow on his shoulder. They never saw him again.

They found themselves at a loss. The glory of the Thunders, the victory, all had completely passed them by, and they drifted on the tides of the events in Otosan Uchi, waiting to be recalled. Kakita Toshimoko personally honored them, but he too was mourning the death of Doji Hoturi and it was hard for him to think beyond that great loss.

In the end, each was released to their clans. Hiruma Izuko was granted permission by Hida Yakamo to continue to remain as a leader among the Emerald Magistrates, along with Matsumoto Eiko. Ikoma Nejii continued to lead in the Legion of Two Thousand serving Akodo Toturi. Moto Koshi eventually returned to the lands of his father to take his father's place as leader of his father's men. Mirumoto Kenuchio, in accordance with his father's will, and after several interrupted attempts to change his will, married the "high-ranking Scorpion maiden", Bayushi Mai, and served her loyally if unhappily, while she, in turn, respected his honor while enjoying her small victories. Asahina Ayame became an Asahina Temple maiden, and spent many years becoming the greatest expert in the Empire on the nature of the walls of Otosan Uchi.

There were other stories, sadder stories, but they are not told here.

Such stories are ones for a different age.