“There! Do you see that?” Doji Kuwanan’s armor, lacquered in the blue and silver colors of the Crane Clan, clinked as he pointed to the thin column of dust rising along the horizon where plains met sky.

His patrol partner, Takeaki, shielded his eyes from the bright glare of the sun and squinted. “A merchant’s cart? The spring rains are late this year,” he said, kicking up dust of his own under his armored zori sandals.

Around them, birdsong mixed with the chants and drumming of the peasants as they rhythmically tilled the soil and spread seeds atop the furrowed earth. A cool breeze brought the earthy smell of fertilizer to the pair of samurai warriors and sent ripples across the plains.

Kuwanan shook his head. “There’s too much dust for a single cart. And no caravan’s due for weeks yet.” He hurried atop the nearby arched bridge to get a better look. A blur of dark brown silhouettes emerged from behind a gently sloping hill, speeding toward them.

“Quiet!” Kuwanan bellowed at the farmers, who ceased their dance of sowing and planting in an instant. The distant thunder of galloping hooves soon overtook the sound of chattering birds, and Takeaki muttered a curse.

“Someone’s coming! Get back to the village!” Kuwanan shouted, and the peasants scrambled up to the road. He and Takeaki strung their bows and took up defensive positions atop the bridge. “If the Lion are finally mounting an attack, let them try to take this village from us!” He nocked an arrow and prepared to take aim.