The humming-bulb arrow screeched as it broke the forest canopy. The buck erupted from a nearby bush with a cry, springing into panicked gallop. The woods swallowed it up. Shinjo Yasamura watched it bound away, then patted his horse and clicked his tongue.

"I should have taken a shot," he muttered. His horse grunted affirmatively.

Shinjo Shono appeared within moments, unstrung bow in hand. "Which way?" he asked, soft eyes searching.

Yasamura gestured with his bow. "It's tired-won't be long now."

Shono nodded and fished the bowstring from his saddlebag. He tied it to one end of his yumi, then thrust the bow into the metal hook at the bottom of his saddle. Creases formed on his smooth forehead as he bent the bow and guided his string.

Yasamura stroked the short beard carpeting his square jaw. "It was lying flat in the brush," he continued, "likely hoping we'd canter by. It's smart."

"Will you just finish the poor thing?" came Shinjo Haruko's voice from the edge of the clearing. She slid on her padded archery glove as her white pony brought her into the clearing. "If it is too stressed, the meat will be no good."

Shono finished stringing his bow. His boyish eyes sparked. "You can have the meat, Haruko-Chan. I am after a new trophy for the red hall."

"And someday, you may win one," Yasamura teased. His horse bolted, trailing Yasamura’s laughter in its wake. Shono’s protests rattled the clearing as he galloped after.

Haruko sighed, turning in her plated saddle toward the woman behind her. "I should just give up on my fresh seared venison and embrace my venison hot pot future."

From her horse, Shinjo Altansarnai warmly smiled. The summer breeze played with her tight midnight braid and lavender sleeves, the sun a splash of gold in her grey eyes.

Haruko tilted her head sideways, her walnut ponytail swinging. "You're staring again. What is it?" She looked down at herself, searching for anything askew among her purple kimono and the black padded muneate shielding her chest.

"It is nothing." Altansarnai looked up beneath the shade of the trees. Her smile touched her eyes, cracking faint wrinkles. "I am only admiring the peonies."

Haruko followed her gaze to florid blooms suspended among the swaying jade verdure of the summer canopy.

"Already they are dropping petals," the older woman continued. "They bloom so briefly, lasting only a few days. Just a breeze or splash of rain, and they surrender, popping like a burst bubble. Is it truly such a burden to hold their blooms for just a moment longer?"
Haruko's sharp eyes softened. "Mother?"
Altansarnai chuckled, shaking her head. "It is fine, Haruko-chan. I get this way when I see my children all together. We should do so more often." A nostalgic gleam twinkled in her grey eyes. "It was not that long ago that you were my little foal."
'Here we go." Haruko procured her bow and began to string it.
"You used to cling to my leg. I carried you everywhere I went. Even in the Five Wind Court, there you were."
Haruko's horse snorted. "I know, Yue," Haruko replied, "but it is best to just let her talk."
"Of course," Altansarnai continued, "had I known you were paying attention during those meetings, you would be the one handling them now."
A crash came from the woods. The two women paused at an indecipherable curse, followed by what was clearly Yasamura's laughter.
"I understand congratulations are in order," Altansarnai said. "It is a great honor to be considered for the Imperial Guard."
Bow strung, Haruko absently picked through her quiver. "Perhaps so, but I imagine that is as far as it will get."
"With all your recommendations? I am not so sure."
Haruko fixed her gaze, rejecting arrow after arrow. "An entire book of recommendations would not be enough to forestall an imperial censure, much less impress whoever becomes the Emerald Champion."
Altansarnai's horse moved to Haruko's side without so much as a whispered request. She patted her daughter's hand. "It is folly to predict what those in power will do. I have learned that more than a few times. As for imperial censure..." She shrugged. "I do not think the Miya would support it."
"Perhaps," came Haruko's reply.
Altansarnai looked up once more. Petals were falling. Her thin fingers curled around her midnight braid, and she tugged it.
"I could have made it certain," she whispered.
Haruko blanched. Her ponytail swept an arc as she spun. "No. Mother..."
"Had I agreed to the treaty, you would have your appointment, Yasamura would have his estate, and Shono would have his—"
Her mother trailed off, leaving the rest unsaid. A breeze raked petals from the arched canopy. For a long time, neither spoke,
"Why don't you appoint Yasamura as your heir?" Haruko asked. "He is the eldest, after all."
"It would not make him happy," Altansarnai replied.
"Is that required?" Haruko met her mother's stone eyes. "Some say not wanting the position is a boon."
"Is that so?" Altansarnai smiled. "We tried to teach you tea ceremony while you were a
child, and you fought your sensel With every step. You had no patience for it. Predictably, of course. Even the luchi at your birth declared you would be most at home in a storm." She gestured to Haruko’s yumi. "But the very first day they put a bow in your hands, you outperformed all your peers and proved yourself my daughter. The difference is simple: you hated one and loved the other. So you see, happiness makes difficult tasks easy. Thus we should pursue what we want."

"In that case," Haruko replied, "you were absolutely right to reject the treaty."

Altansarnai paused.

"You would have been miserable wasting away tied to the stall of some unworthy Ikoma warden, like a trophy to be showed off. Whatever we would have gained from the treaty, it would not have replaced what we would have lost." Haruko finally selected an arrow from her quiver and nocked it, looking into the woods. "It is easier to worry over a foal when it is in your stable. I will forge my own destiny, and I do not need some treaty to do it. Whatever stands in their way, the Five Winds must never be tamed!"

Altansarnai’s eyes shone. "You will have a great future then, Haruko-chan."

A shout broke the air. The deer leapt into the clearing, its pointed antlers raking the canopy. Haruko smoothly pointed the arrow, drew, twisted her wrist, exhaled, and released. The deer collapsed and lay still.

"Ha!" Yasamura’s hawkish face appeared only moments behind. "What a shot!"

Shono appeared next, frowning. Haruko’s arrow protruded from the creature’s eye like a planted flag. He sighed and lowered his weapon. "Che," he grunted.

Yasamura laughed, his hooked nose pointing at the sky. "She outdid you again, Shono-kun. But you should be used to it by now, ne?" He elbowed his brother in the side.

"Well done, Sister." Shono forced a reluctant smile. "I doubt I shall ever be as skilled at the bow as you."

Haruko calmly unstrung her bow. "It is silly to speak what everyone knows, Shono-kun, but it is still good to hear you say it."

Shono sighed and bowed. "This victory is yours, then, Haruko-chan. Well earned." He straightened. "I suppose the beast belongs to you, then."

"Well," Yasamura said, dismounting, "to be quite even about it, we all contributed to this victory. Mother is the one who spotted the buck and drove it from the herd, Shono tired it out, and Haruko ended the chase. And I," he added, straightening his back, "composed a poem about it."

Haruko smirked. "The most important role of all."

His eyes twinkled. "You might even get a mention, Sister. If I remember."

"Then I suppose we all four share this victory," Shono mused.

Yasamura kneeled beside the creature, seizing it by the antler.

"Indeed, Shono-kun. Therefore to commemorate our shared victory, I propose we commission four daggers, and let the handles be made from this antler."
A splendid idea," Haruko agreed. "Four points, four daggers."
Altansarnai smiled at her children and nodded. "I will commission them upon our return."
The siblings shared a triumphant look.
"And we should commission a fifth from the other antler," Altansarnai added. "So that there will be one for Shahai-san."
The last of the peony blossoms fell to the shadowed ground. The keening buzz of the cicadas fell suddenly quiet.
"What did she do to catch this deer?" Shono asked.
"She is here in spirit," Altansarnai replied. "The gesture would mean much, to her and to luchi Daiyu-sama: a reminder that she is welcome among us. She may as well be your sister, Shono."
Yasamura nodded, but Haruko looked away.
"If that is your wish, Mother," Shono uttered, dismounting to tie up their catch. Altansarnai watched his back in silence. He said nothing else for the rest of the trip.

Altansarnai found Shono in the family stables. He was brushing his horse’s mane and whispering into its ear. A knee-high gate enclosed the stall, and a painted shōji screen separated the "horse from the night-cloaked courtyard. Altansarnai waited in the aisle until Shono finally saw her, bowing his head in greeting.
"Tsubasa is looking quite healthy," she said. She stroked the beast’s neck and offered it a flat palmful of spindly maroon carrots.
He is restless,” Shono replied. ”I think he resents the fact that I brought Umeboshi this afternoon instead of him.”

She scratched the horse’s snout as it chewed the thin roots. ”It is for his own good that he is not ridden every day. He has always been a hard keeper. If you always take him out, he will get too thin again.” She paused, then looked pointedly at Shono. ”But then, those beneath your care do not always understand when you act in their best interests, do they?”

”Tsubasa understands,” Shono said. ”He just disagrees.”

Altansarnai watched Shono’s youthful face. ”When did this happen?” His brow pinched. ”When did you feel that you could no longer tell me everything? You’ve been avoiding me, even today. We used to have no secrets, Shono. When did that change?”

The horses shifted in their stalls. Shono’s fists clenched. He burst. ”Is it true that you turned down the Lion treaty simply to preserve your own happiness? That you put yourself before the welfare of the clan?”

She stared at her son with wide eyes. ”Who dared to say--?”

”No one, mother. No one but I.” Shono glared with a red face. ”You know better than most what the treaty would have done for the clan. If the Lion had accepted us, the other clans would have no excuse but to do otherwise! All it would have required was for you to endure for the sake of your kin.” He turned away. ”All my life, you told me that a good champion must put his best interests after that of the clan. How am I to tell my future Children the same, knowing that their grandmother, given the Chance, would not?”

”Is that what you truly think?” she whispered.

He did not reply.

She stepped forward, placing her hand on his shoulder. ”Shono, you are my sun and sky, and your heart is like an untamed river. But you have grown bold, and you are still young. You see only what is directly in front of you. Just as a horse that challenges its rider will surely doom them both, so too will you, should you not trust the path I have chosen.”

He looked back. ”Can you at least say that, whatever the reasons, your own desires were not among them?”

Her jaw clenched. ”We are all fighting invisible battles, Shono. It is not for one to judge those of another.”

”So you say,” he replied.

Altansarnai opened her mouth to speak, but then paused. Tsubasa lazily craned his neck toward the courtyard. Muted shouts erupted from beyond the shōji screen. She stepped away from her son and cast the screen aside.

A young woman knelt in the courtyard grass, surrounded by guards and retainers of Far Traveler Castle. The Utaku family mon, a solid lavender circle, beamed from her traveling garments. With both hands planted, she struggled for breath.

Altansarnai stepped out of the stables. As one, her retainers bowed, and the guards lowered their heads.
"What is the meaning of this?" she demanded.

"Honored lady," spoke one of the retainers, "this is Utaku Yumino-sama. She has come with an urgent message, but will not relinquish it." He cast the battle maiden a resentful glare.

"She claims it is only for your ears."

The woman panted. "Forgive me, my lady..."

Altansarnai looked down at the struggling woman. "Utaku Yumino-san?" She paused. "The one stationed at...Hisu Mori Mura, yes? Your mother was the hero of the Kōbaku earthquake?"

Yumino's eyes widened. Her cheeks flushed. "Y-yes, my lady," she croaked, "as you say."

Altansami frowned at the woman's hoarse voice. Only now did she notice the tan sheen of road dust on the woman's windswept kimono and curtain of frayed hair. "Bring this woman some water," she commanded. "She has been riding for some time."

"Four hours," Yumino said. Wetness gathered at the rims of her reddening eyes. "I nearly broke poor Kiso, but he understood."

"What has happened?" Altansarnai demanded.

"The Lion seized the village, Shinjo-ue."

The retainers exchanged looks. One of the guards spat. Altansarnai nodded. "How many?"

"A small force, my lady. Mostly ashigaru. They marched beneath the banner of the Matsu family."

"Casualties?"

"Only one. Lady Hisako challenged their commander. With her death, she secured our right to evacuate. The others led the villagers toward City of the Rich Frog. I was entrusted to deliver this news. I..." She closed her eyes. "I should have stayed and fought. I have failed Hisako-sama."

Altansarnai shook her head. "What point would there be in throwing your life away? No, Yumino-san. You did the right thing."

The Utaku reached into her robes and drew out a small scroll, which she offered with both hands. It was sealed with the image of a lion's paw clutching a sword handle: the Matsu mon.

As Altansarnai read, Shono came up behind her. His eyes narrowed. "Writ of Official Intention," he quoted, his voice rising in a questioning tone.

"Behold, Lion courtesy." Altansarnai looked to her retainers. "They claim that because Hisu Mori Mura was among the named villages to be traded in the treaty, they are entitled to it as compensation for what they attest was a broken promise."

"Outrageous," remarked one retainer.

As she continued, her grey eyes widened. She began to close the scroll, but Shono reached out before she could, clasping the edge of the paper. "Is this true?" he demanded. "The commander who led this attack, it was Matsu Mitsuko?"

The battle maiden nodded.

Murmurs filtered through the crowd. That Mitsuko and Shono’s betrothal was a term of
the failed treaty was no secret to anyone here. Shono looked away toward a pale and distant moon. It was waning and nearly gone, only a glowing sliver remaining to suggest it was ever there. "Mitsuko," he whispered.

A man with the Ide mon stepped forward. "My lady, it seems the Matsu have seen fit to equip us with adequate cause to request Imperial intervention. This is an illegal seizure of land. At your word, I can deploy a messenger to the Forbidden City. With the blessing of the air kami, it should arrive quickly."

Her retainers waited. At last, Altansarnai spoke. "I will not wait on the Imperials. The Lion must learn they cannot simply take what they want." She looked to the Ide. "Bring me no less than twenty-five warriors who are ready to ride. And prepare Yuki." The Ide's eyebrows rose at the name of the ancestral armor of the Unicorn. Altansarnai nodded. "I will handle this personally."

"Wait," Shono spoke. "This is a test. Such an attack is beneath your notice, mother. Send me instead."

Once more, the retainers exchanged murmurs. Altansarnai regarded her son. "Shono," she began.

He stepped forward, meeting her eyes with a determined face. "They sent Mitsuko because they believed it would divide us. They think they can leverage my personal feelings against the clan. Let me show them that such tactics do not work." He looked to the others. ",Let me prove to all that your future champion cannot be so easily manipulated!"

They all turned to Shinjo Altansarnai. Shono lowered his head. "Very well," she finally said.

Yumino leapt to her feet. "Shono-sama, I beg you...allow me to accompany you. I know the village layout and the forces holding it. I can be of great use to you."

"So be it," Shono said. "But I will not risk the health of an Utaku steed, and yours must recover from the ride. You will make do with one of mine." He looked to a stablehand "Show her Tsubasa and let them be acquainted."

Yumino bowed deeply. "I will not fail you, Shono-sama."

The guards dispersed. The retainers filtered out of the courtyard. Shono made for the keep, sending servants ahead to fetch his sword. But Altansarnai pulled him aside.

"You realize you will have to face her on the battlefield," she said. "I would have spared you that, Shono. Are you prepared to draw steel against her?"

"You mean, am I prepared to set my personal feelings aside and do what is best for the clan?" Shono met her gaze. "Of course I am, Mother. Is that not what a champion must do?"

As Shono walked away, Altansarnai stood cold in his shadow. The peach trees lining the courtyard had dropped all their blossoms and stood bare in the dusty night.