Bayushi Aramoro grasped the hilt of his katana and drew it out in one swift motion. He drove the blade forward with all his power, and the top section of the bamboo pole standing in front of him went flying off into the garden. Aramoro walked over to the pole to examine it, running his fingers over the cut surface. It was well done, but not perfect-and he needed perfection, or its equivalent. In a week's time, the Test of the Emerald Champion would be held, and Aramoro had to win it. His lord was counting on him. His clan was counting on him. Kachiko was counting on him.

The gravel behind him crunched slightly, and Aramoro turned around to glare at the servant kneeling on the path. "I said I was not to be disturbed."

"My lord, it is Magistrate Bayushi Yojiro. He wishes to see you."

Aramoro's irritation vanished. "One should not keep an Emerald Magistrate waiting," he said. "Bring him here at once." He kept the excitement out of his voice. Yojiro's devotion to honor marked him a tool, but he was an obedient fool-his presence here meant he had found a way to carry out Kachiko's orders.

A few minutes later, Yojiro was ushered into the garden. He did not wear the traditional mask of a Scorpion samurai, preferring instead to wear robes with high collars that shadowed the lower part of his face. Aramoro could see the other man's face clearly, and that face showed nothing but proper samurai reserve. It was a very good mask.

Yojiro did not speak, but simply bowed in greeting. Aramoro returned the bow, and waited silently until he heard the servant leave the garden. "You have something for me."

"Yes, my lord." Yojiro slipped his hand into one of his sleeves and produced a woman's hairpin. It was an elaborate confection of small paper flowers that dangled around a large central bead set with irregular shards of mirror. "This is your victory."

"What?" Aramoro said. "This is-"

A sudden flash of sunlight filled his eyes, blinding him. He held up an arm in reflex while blinking furiously. When he looked back, Yojiro was holding up the mirrored bead.

"Some time ago, we inserted an agent into the Otomo family by marrying her to an Otomo courtier. I have given her a hairpin just like this one, which she will wear when attending the final duel of the tournament. I know where the members of the Otomo family will be seated, and I will arrange for the final duel to be held at a time to give her the best possible sun angle to work with. She will blind your opponent, and you will strike."

"Ingenious," Aramoro said. "But what if someone else notices the flash?"

"It is unlikely," Yojiro said. He gave a shrug that Aramoro thought was a little too casual, but he couldn't be certain. "If it comes to official notice, she will be horrified that her fidgeting
disrupted the duel and will tearfully beg to commit seppuku, so as to remove any dishonor from the Otomo family.”

"Yes, that will do," Aramoro said. "You have brought me Amaterasu’s own favor. Well done."

Kachiko—now, I will be even closer by your side.

The sun was near the horizon and shadows were long on the ground as Akodo Toturi walked to his tent. He took a deep breath to clear his mind. One more duel, one more victory, and the first stage of his plan would be complete.

He followed the path around a corner and almost ran into another samurai standing in his way. As the two sorted themselves out, Toturi noticed first the red and black colors of the Scorpion and then the face of the man who wore them: Bayushi Yojiro.

He tensed. In his study of the Emerald Champion and the magistrates who served him, Toturi had come across frequent mentions of Yojiro, "the Honest Scorpion." he man had been in Imperial service for years, and at every moment he had acted as an honorable samurai whose only goal was to faithfully serve the Emperor. This meant either that Yojiro was one of the rare honorable Scorpions or that he was better than most at concealing his dishonor. It was an exquisitely dangerous ambiguity.

"My apologies, Akodo-sama," Yojiro said as he bowed. "I should not have allowed myself to become so distracted."

"We will not speak of it," Toturi said. "Is there a problem? I know the Emerald Magistrates have been very busy these past few days."

"Not at all," Yojiro said. "I was simply taking a moment to appreciate the sunset. These things show us the bright flame of the world’s glory."

Toturi recognized the quote from the classic play at once, and his eyes narrowed a bit as he stared at the Scorpion. "And the darkness that covers all when the pyre’s flame dies," he recited back.

Yojiro smiled warmly. "Indeed, indeed," he said. "And now, I must depart; as you note, I have many duties during the tournament." He bowed deeply and left.

A heart filled with Bushido could not be troubled. So Toturi had been taught from childhood, and this morning as he sat in meditation he sought the calm that came from the certain knowledge of honorable behavior. But disturbance lapped at him, like faint ripples on a deep, still pond.

His clanmates thought to distance him from the rest of the clan by bestowing one of the highest honors in the land upon him. He would be forced to spend most of his time away from Shiro Akodo and the rest of the generals. All the while, Matsu Tsuko roared for war.
and if she could somehow wrest the clan championship from him—Doji Satsume had been forced to defend his championship in his later years—it could come to that.

At the same time, his new wife, Kaede, was adjusting slowly to married life. Since the wedding, she still kept to her own quarters, maintaining frequent contact with her friends in the Imperial Capital.

And what was Bayushi Yojiro up to? The play he had quoted from ended in a duel and a death: two former friends had faced off against each other, and when the setting sun forced one of them to blink, the other seized the moment to strike.

The encounter had been innocent enough, when seen in isolation. But this morning, Toturi had received word of whom his opponent in the final duel was to be: Bayushi Aramoro. The Emerald Championship was a great prize. Great enough to tempt an honest Scorpion? But what purpose did quoting an old play accomplish? No one needed to be reminded that most duels end in death, and the duels here were specifically designed to be nonfatal. What was Yojiro’s point? Or was it merely coincidence?

He shook his head in irritation and stood up.

He had finished dressing and was sliding his swords into his obi when a guard announced that Ikoma Ujiaki wished to see him. Toturi agreed, and he was shown in. “Akodo-ue,” Ujiaki said, bowing, his fearsome hair bobbing up and down, not unlike a lion’s mane. “I hope to resolve this matter quickly. The Lion and Unicorn delegations have had several...encounters so far today.”

Ujiaki didn’t specify what the “encounters” were about, which meant Toturi knew exactly what they had concerned. Lady Shinjo Altansarnai’s breaking of her betrothal with Ikoma Anakazu was still sending shock waves through the Lion Clan that any samurai could behave with such disregard for clan and honor was incredible. It had created a major loss of face for the Ikoma family, and Toturi was not surprised that some Lion samurai had found opportunities to express their displeasure with the Unicorn Clan.

“I am sure they were merely drunk,” Toturi said. “I will leave to your discretion how to deal with the samurai of your family. The Unicorn will have to look after themselves.”

“Indeed. Not only that, my lord, but Gunso Matsu Mitsuko has led a raiding party against Hisu Mori Mura in Unicorn Lands.”

“What? Who dared authorize the—”

He answered his own question. Matsu Tsuko. Of course. Toturi frowned. War seemed to inch closer to inevitability every day. “We shall deal with this later.”

“As you wish, Akodo-ue. Lastly, Miya Satoshi-dono has sent word that the duel will take place in two hours’ time.”

Toturi nodded grimly. “I am ready whenever the Emperor calls.”

“As befits a samurai.” Ujiaki hesitated. “Akodo-ue, if I may. We could have easily recovered the Osari Plains had Doji Satsume not used his power as Emerald Champion to defend his clan’s claim of ownership. By ensuring that the next Emerald Champion is an honorable
samurai, we will no longer be bothered by such issues."

Ikoma Uliaki wasn’t wrong, but he was nevertheless shortsighted. The Emerald Championship wasn’t about a single clan—it was about all of them. Bayushi Aramoro would only ever be a pawn of the Scorpion, enacting Shoju and Kachiko’s will.

"The advantages of a Lion Emerald Champion are obvious," Ujiaki continued. "We should be so honored to have you win the tournament."

"Indeed," Toturi replied.

"By your leave," Ujiaki said, and he bowed before leaving the tent.

There are those Lion who can crash after the fish and get them, but there are also those who see where those people need to go to achieve greater things. This is why you were chosen. He would not fail.

The importance of the Test of the Emerald Champion was such that the Emperor himself witnessed the final duel. The importance of the Emperor was such that anyone else who could possibly manage it also witnessed the final duel. From where Toturi stood, the crowd spread out before him, the finery of their brilliant kimono making the tournament field look like a meadow of summer flowers. The great lords and their favored vassals were seated on stands that had been built on the east side, flanking the Emperor’s box, the less fortunate standing wherever they could find room. The murmur of the crowd as those present exchanged gossip, rumors, and the occasional morsel of real information was like the sea rolling onto shore.

These things show us the bright flame of the world’s glory. No. Now was the time for focus.
At the Imperial Herald’s signal, Toturi began to walk slowly toward the center of the field. Bayushi Aramoro walked from the opposite direction. When the two men were ten paces apart, they stopped and bowed to each other, then faced east and prostrated themselves before the Emperor. The Imperial Herald stepped forward to read a short pronouncement by the Emperor, and then a shugenja blessed both the combatants and the tournament field. As the comforting weight of time-honored ritual surrounded him, Toturi offered a fervent prayer to his ancestors, asking for their blessing on him.

Akodo-no-Kami-Brother—may you guide me to the right path.

These ceremonies done, both men arose and moved five paces away from each other. Now came the demonstration of skill, a last chance for a duelist to flaunt their skill before the real challenge of the duel. Aramoro, being of lesser status, went first. At his signal, a Scorpion boy approached, carrying two apples. As Aramoro dropped into his dueling stance, the boy quickly tossed the fruit into the air, one after another. Aramoro drew and swiftly made multiple cuts as the apples fell to earth. The boy gathered the pieces from the ground and carried them to the head judge, who counted them. "Sixteen!" he announced, and a burst of admiring comments swept through the crowd.

Toturi kept his face impassive as unease spread through him like a drop of ink in a bowl of clean water. It wasn’t the show of skill itself—while it was an impressive trick, it didn’t show Aramoro to be more skillful than Toturi had expected. There was something wrong with his opponent’s stance. There was a distracted air about it, as if Aramoro was concentrating on more than just the matter at hand.

These things show us—

He had no time for Yojiro’s distractions.

Taking a deep breath and releasing it slowly, Toturi moved forward a few paces. Then he slowly and carefully began a basic iai kata, one so old it was said to have been invented by Kakita himself. He slowly bent his legs into an iai stance, and then with equal slowness put his right hand on the hilt of his katana while the left steadied the sheath.

Moments trickled by in silence, and then Toturi drew his blade, slowly sweeping it in a smooth, clean arc. There was no time. There was no crowd. There was only the man, and the blade, and the erasure of the difference between them. At the end of the arc, Toturi stopped. In one careful, controlled motion, he performed the flicking movement intended to clean the blade of any blood. Then, he slowly went through the process of returning the sword to its sheath.

In the silence that followed, confusion marred the faces of most watchers; only a few samurai seemed approving of his form. He discreetly glanced over to the Crane delegation, where Doji Hotaru was doing a credible job of looking impassive. Kakita Toshimoko sat next to her, grinning broadly. Both had clearly recognized the insult he had just issued to Aramoro: You won’t see my draw when we duel, so I will show it to you now, slowly. It was tempting to look to—see if Aramoro had caught it, but—that would ruin the effect.
At a signal from the head judge, two assistants came forward to attach long paper targets to the forearms of both men. When his targets were secured, Toturi turned back toward his opponent and blinked in surprise. During the process of receiving his targets, Aramoro had contrived to move his position, so that he now stood farther to the east. There was nothing forbidding him from doing so, but in facing the westering sun, he had chosen to put himself at a slight disadvantage. This time there was no holding off the unease that surged through Toturi. Aramoro was clearly up to something, and there was nothing Toturi could do about it. The duel was now, and he could not stop it because of vague feelings of uneasiness.

Toturi centered himself, focusing on the simple process of breathing. He breathed in from his belly.

If Aramoro was seeking to cheat, then Aramoro was a weak opponent. He held his breath. He would not fear such a person, but he did want to know what he was facing. He breathed out through his nose, finding strength in his core.

As he stepped forward and bowed once more to Aramoro, Toturi studied him. Something linked Aramoro’s stance and his decision to face into the west. When he deciphered what it was, he could figure out how to defeat the trick. If he still had time.

Aramoro settled into his stance. Toturi did likewise, seeking deep within for the calm that iai required, trying to wall off his upper mind’s feverish attempts to unravel the mystery.

These things show us-

Aramoro moved his head slightly. His face was obscured by his mask, but his eyes squinted against the setting sun.

His stance.
The sun.
-the bright flame of the world’s glory.

Shutting his eyes, he drew, relying on his speed and the memory of exactly where Aramoro was.

His blade hissed through the air, and then he heard the startled reaction of the crowd. He opened his eyes. Aramoro stood with his sword half-drawn and both of his paper targets cut clean away.

Toturi had won.

After his acceptance of the Emperor’s official appointment and the Emerald Armor came the endless round of well-wishers, most of whom subtly or not so subtly wanted Toturi to appoint some relative or another as an Emerald Magistrate. Fending them all off was as exhausting as battle. The next to approach him was his wife. What was she going to ask him for?

"You have brought great glory to your ancestors," she said, bowing to him.

"I will strive to maintain that glory," Toturi replied.

"And your kata before the duel was a thing of great beauty." Kaede said.
Her eyes twinkled as she said it, and Toturi realized that she, too, had seen the insult behind it. He smiled back at her. "I am pleased you appreciated it."

Kaede gave a small smile in return, and then moved off. As she left, the crowd swirling around the tournament field shifted, and for a moment Toturi caught a glimpse of Bayushi Yojiro speaking with a Scorpion courtier. Then the crowd shifted again, hiding him from view.

What was Yojiro playing at? Why had he warned Toturi against Aramoro’s trick? Was he acting as an honorable magistrate, seeking to defend the integrity of the office of the Emerald Magistrates? Or was this some very deep Scorpion plan to get Yojiro into Toruri’s trust? Few things were certain when dealing with the Clan of Secrets.

At last, the Ruby Champion, his second-in-command, approached and gave him a deep bow. "It shall be an honor to serve you, Champion Akodo Toturi-sama," Agasha Sumiko said ceremonially. "We have much to discuss, when you have time."

"No doubt," Toturi replied with a slight bow of his own. "I look forward to working together."

The Dragon bowed once more, the ruby of her armor glimmering in the sun. Was she someone he could finally trust? Or had she been somehow complicit in the death of his predecessor? What new details about the death of Lord Doji Satsume would be revealed to him now that he would be overseeing the investigation?

For a moment, the Emerald Armor weighed down on him like the bulk of a mountain. The weight of the Lion Clan had been one thing, but now he served all of the Empire. Toturi reflexively straightened.

He was a Lion samurai, of Akodo’s own line.

He would not fail.