The rising sun filled the sky with gold, a favorable color. Matsu Mitsuko squinted into the wind, watching the dark shapes of mounted bushi approach at speed through the morning mist. The spikes on their helmets made them look more like horned oni than ki-rin. But these were no demons; the scout had seen the fire-maned unicorn of the Shinjo banners, alongside the ice-blue arrow of the Minami Kaze. Today, she would face the family she had almost joined. This would be a worthy challenge, and if she claimed victory with her small force, her name would be remembered well. She only waited to see who led them, and learn which friend had become her enemy today.

The riders were fast, sending up clouds of dust, but they stopped suddenly, just out of range of the bows. Between the riders and Hisu Mori Toride, the ground was rocky and uneven, treacherous for the heavy, armored horses they rode. From this distance she could not make out their faces, but she could spot the commander by his proud bearing. Shono... She caught her breath, willing her features to be hard as stone. His horse stood as still as a sculpture beneath him, while the others dipped their heads or stamped their hooves briefly before their riders could settle them. She was sure he must have spotted her watching from the wall. His keen eyes missed nothing.

"Near thirty riders," Hosokawa Tesshū said, moving to stand beside her. "They will not take the fortress with such a small force."

"We are here to fight," Mitsuko said.

"Commander—my apologies, but you haven’t the numbers to face them on the field."

She said nothing, but slipped down the ladder to where her soldiers waited inside the gate. They stood in four perfect rows, their faces set with determination, eyes gleaming with anticipation. Ashigaru all, but Lion ashigaru were worth more than those of any other clan. These peasants were loyal to the Matsu, trained to fight in the Sixth Legion. They lacked the skill but not the devotion of samurai, and were ready to die for their clan. For many of them, this would be their first battle, but they had been waiting for it their whole lives. They wanted to fight and die, to earn a better life, and that was what mattered today. Mitsuko had her orders, and she had the Lion heart and stomach for battle. There was no room for second thoughts.

"My horse," she commanded, and a heimin led the beast to her side. She placed a palm on its warm neck, and the head swung toward her with a snort. She nudged it back. It was a gift from her betrothed, but she preferred to fight with the firm ground under her, relying on
nothing but her own two feet. She swung up into the saddle and held the reins in the Unicorn way that Shono had taught her, careful that her stance remained relaxed but alert. She would show him that she remembered.

"Open the gate."

Her soldiers and the riders would see each other now, each unit taking the measure of the other. She did not give the signal to advance. She would meet him alone.

"Is this wise?" Tesshu asked, stepping into her path as she started forward. "Unicorn honor cannot be trusted."

"You are here to record and report, not to advise," she said. The historian was far too presumptuous. She kicked her horse into a trot and he moved aside as she rode out of the gate.

Mitsuko was glad to see Shono mirror her, riding alone from his lines to meet her on the winding path through the jagged rocks. A wise move—he would try to draw them out of the fortress if he could, onto clearer ground where his riders had the advantage. He might expect to win regardless, but he was no fool. He knew the fortress would be difficult to take, and he knew the Lion aptitude for war; she had schooled him in it herself.

As they neared each other, she almost smiled. Shinjo Shono’s long hair swept behind him in the breeze. The wind in his hair felt like freedom, he’d told her. They each reined in, two sword lengths between them. She could see the sky blue of his eyes.

"Matsu Mitsuko," he called, his voice clear and strong. "The Lion have seized this land illegally. I demand that you withdraw."

"Shinjo Shono, as the writ states, we take only what is ours by right." She paused, lowering her voice a little. "The Unicorn broke a promise," she said. "We deserve recompense."

His eyes fell to the mare she rode, his last gift to her, but he said nothing.

"I demand you withdraw," she said.

"Then I challenge you," he said. "We two will fight for Hisu Mori Mura."

She shook her head. It was a noble thought, but an impossible one.

"I have orders," she told him. "We must hold, to the last soldier. Hisu Mori Mura is ours. To take it, you will have to kill us all."

He paused, considering his answer, and she cursed inwardly as the horse shifted beneath her. Could it feel the tension in her, though she hid it from all else? The wind rose, its touch bitter, and a sudden gust forced her to blink grit from her eyes. She hoped Shono did not mistake the water in her eyes for tears. She needed him to be firm in his resolve, as she was, even though a part of her wished they could both just ride away together, into the wind.

"Then we must kill you all," he said, his cold eyes on hers.

She nodded briskly. She wanted to say more, but he whipped his horse about quicker than she could get hers moving, and galloped back to his lines. Mitsuko gritted her teeth and wrenched the reins, kicking the horse harder than she’d meant to. She raced back to her soldiers and dismounted. The gates were already closing behind her.

"Hosokawa!" she called, and the man appeared at once. "Watch," she said, "but if the
fortress is breached, ride hard to deliver the news to Lord Matsu Gohei. Whether we win or lose today, he must know the war has begun."

"Of course, Mitsuko-sama," the jizamurai answered. To record and to ride—this was what his family had sworn to do for the Ikoma. He bowed quickly and led her horse away.

Mitsuko climbed back to her place on top of the wall, and saw the Unicorn riding back the way they had come. What would happen if they simply kept going, and did not fight after all? But it was not to be. With a speed and precision she admired, half wheeled one way and half the other, hooves thundering as they circled to attack the fortress from two sides. Behind the fortress was the deserted village they were all here to lay claim to, empty houses that so many would die for today. The riders remained just beyond the rocks, but each was constantly weaving about, moving in and out of range.

"Signal arrow, now!" she shouted at the waiting archer, and he fired the whistling arrow into the air over the enemy.

She raised her fan. Her soldiers were already in position with their bows in hand. The cavalry charged. When most of the Unicorn came within range she signaled, and arrows rained upon the enemy. One horse stumbled and fell, then another, their riders jumping clear. Then Unicorn arrows sped into the fortress with remarkable accuracy, and the cries of the wounded rang out. She flicked her fan again and bows fired, but the Unicorn sped out of reach before the volley fell. No arrows met their mark. If the kami were on her side, the archers on the far side of the fortress had met with more success.

When they ran out of arrows, she would lead her soldiers out to meet them. Had she Matsu infantry at her back, she would have done so already. It was a better way to fight, but she had her orders. The Unicorn riders were coming close again, and a flame seemed to flicker in the palm of each.

"Fire!" she shouted, before the first arrows fell. She turned to see one soar through a window into the watchtower. She barked orders and heimin ran to put out the flames. Over the wall, the riders rode in a random pattern, giving no archers an easy target. She flicked her fan again and more arrows were wasted on the ground. Had she Ikoma archers, more horses would have fallen.

Another volley of fiery arrows plunged into the fortress—the wooden structure itself was the target. So the Unicorn were willing to burn the place to the ground rather than let the Lion have it? She would not wait to be smoked out.

"To the gate!" she called, clambering down the ladder and moving into position before her unit. She had lost four, that was all. She still had the numbers for the plan to work. As the gate opened she led the troops in a chaotic charge over the rocks to meet the horses, knocking the nearest rider from his saddle with her naginata. She thrust forward and was rewarded by the thud of metal piercing armor through to flesh. She swung her weapon and took the legs out from a horseless Unicorn, Scimitar flying from his hand.

"For the Matsu!" Mitsuko shrieked, naginata brandished aloft. "For the Lion!"
Her ashigaru lamed the horses within reach of their long naginata blades, each cut and thrust an attempt to dismount a rider. More horses fell, their riders rolling to their feet and hacking at the Lion with their scimitars. Mitsuko leaped into the way as one of her soldiers misjudged his attack and caught his weapon on part of a saddle, tearing it from his grasp. She jabbed her naginata hard into the side of an oncoming rider, pushing his body from his horse, and gave her soldier time to reclaim his sword.

"Redeem yourself!" she shouted, and fought her way through the throng, searching for Shono. He would be on horseback still, but she could not see him. Did he fear to face her? There was a cracking sound as a horse reared and kicked a nearby soldier, breaking his back. She leaped forward and struck out as the same horse tried to turn, but she lost her footing against a body beneath her. A flash of gold marked it as another of her own. The Unicorn had lost a handful of horses, but it wasn't enough. Everywhere she turned Lion warriors fell, taking as many as they could with them. Her numbers were dwindling. No one would see the fan now, so she roared at the top of her voice instead: "Into the village!"

The remaining Lion soldiers, surprising the Unicorn with their uncharacteristic retreat, clambered and scrambled over the rocks toward the village of Hisu Mori. They had been ready for her call, they knew the plan their lord had left them. She ran with them, leaping over the rocks, watching the Unicorn regroup and ride round, realizing her destination. They skirted the rocks, firing arrows at her soldiers. Two ill-fated Lion fell, pierced in the back like cowards. She passed their bodies and darted between the houses as arrows thumped into the ground at her heels.

Riders followed them into the narrow streets, hooves thundering on dry earth that had hardened into deep furrows. The Lion had already disappeared, taking up their new positions. A fresh supply of bows and arrows waited, hidden in the peasants' houses, along with swords taken from the fortress, untested blades that might earn themselves a name today. Mitsuko waited in a small shrine, where she had left a dagger as an offering to Bishamon before the dawn. She muttered a prayer that she might honor her ancestors by dying well today.

"Stay together!" It was Shono's voice. Mitsuko peered from the dark of the doorway. She was determined to face him alone. She had been forbidden to accept his challenge, but if she fought him now no one would dare interfere. She had already fulfilled her mission, whether the Lion gained victory today or not.

Shono rallied his troops, and they surrounded him as he moved toward the center of the village. A young woman walked at his side, speaking to him, but Mitsuko could not hear the words. The woman wore the armor of the Battle Maidens that Mitsuko had driven from this village in the first place. She might know which streets to avoid with the horses. Best to act now.

Mitsuko raised her fan to catch the light, and at her signal archers shot at close range upon the cautious band of Unicorn from the surrounding buildings, bloodying many. As Mitsuko
stepped out into the light the arrows stopped, and her warriors flew to engage with their blades. At that moment a great wind blew through the village, scaring the horses and almost knocking Mitsuko from her feet. It felt like a warning.

"Face me, Shono!" she called, letting the excitement of battle carry away her manners. "Fight me now!"

He turned toward her, ignoring the battle raging around him, but she could see the pain in his face, the tightness of his lips, the lines across his brow. His comrades were dying all around him, but now that he was unobserved he let compassion soften his eyes. His horse turned its head in her direction and she thought Shono would ride to her, but then he deliberately rode away to join the throng.

"No!" she shrieked, racing after him, cutting down men and horses in her path, a fury upon her. "Do not prove a coward! You are a Unicorn without honor, just like your mother! You will fight me!"

She leaped toward him and cut his horse across the legs, sending it crashing to the ground. Shono was on his feet at once, his scimitar flashing in the air, but she leaped back and tossed her naginata aside. That gave him pause.
“Now you must fight me,” she said quietly, drawing her katana and flicking it forward. Shono leaped aside, and brought his blade down toward her, but she rolled away and thrust forward again, striking the armor at his shoulder but failing to find flesh. His eyes seemed to burn blue, there was a ferocity in him she had never seen before, mirroring her own. Now both would fight well, and one would die well.

"Heartless Lion!" he spat as she lunged toward him, and too late she saw the curved blade she had once teased him for rising up into her path. Her own momentum forced the blade through her armor and into the soft flesh of her belly. The pain folded her in half but she kept hold of her own blade as she fell sideways to the hard ground.

Blood in her mouth, smoke from the burning fortress in her nose. The ground shook with the pounding of hooves.

The Lion had lost. She had lost. A great rushing in her ears made it impossible to tell if the battle was over or not, but then Shono knelt beside her and placed her head in his lap. He wouldn’t have done so if there were still soldiers to fight.

"Did you wish for death today?" he asked, the bitterness in his words stinging her. Could he not see it was necessary? His mother had brought this upon them by her actions. The Lion and Unicorn were alike in so many ways. If only they shared the Lion’s devotion to Bushido. She had thought Shono understood.

She stared up at his face, bright against the pale sky. The Fortunes had blessed his blade over hers today, but her heart was glad. She had no wish to watch the life bleed from him, the light to leave his eyes. While she joined her ancestors, he would live on alone, to face the consequences of his actions, to have impossible decisions thrust upon him.

"We won," he said sadly. "The village is ours."

She could not tell if he spoke to her then. His face was turned up, his gaze above her. if only she could answer, explain her true purpose. By taking the village today, he had begun a war the Unicorn could not win. She had incited the Unicorn bushi to shed Lion blood. The Emperor himself could not deny the Lion the right to wage war now. But duty made her mute; she could not warn him.

He looked at her then. His expression was fierce but his hands, cradling her head, were gentle. Where had her helmet fallen? Did she still hold her sword? She could not feel her fingers.

"Is this what you wanted?" he asked. "To die by my hand?"

"I wanted," she managed, and coughed, the jerking of her body more painful now than the site of her wound. "I wanted to fight alongside you," she told him. "You are magnificent in battle, Shono."

His eyes traveled to her belly, and she saw the pain draw lines about those lovely eyes. She wanted to tell him to be strong, but he was watching her life bleed away, she could see it in his face. She had little time left.

"Forgive me," she whispered. Her grip on life, and her selfcontrol, slipped a little.
Perhaps he did not hear her. Very gently, very slowly, he raised her head enough to shuffle his knees from under it. He placed her head on the cold ground. He rose and seemed like a giant to her, so far away, it hurt to look at him. She closed her eyes and listened, past the rush of blood in her ears, as his steps retreated from her.

When she opened her eyes, he was bending over his horse, putting it out of its misery. She saw the beast twitch, its belly rise and fall one last time as the life left it. Mitsuko cried out as a spasm of pain gripped her suddenly, but Shono did not look back. He left her, his dark hair whipping in the wind behind him, and the last of the living followed him away.

She was left with the bodies of her warriors, the dead horse, and the whistle of the wind through the nearby shrine.