

# Wildcats and Dragon Teeth

By Lisa Farrell

*"The sharpest bite comes from hidden teeth."*

– Shinsei

He was as the young wildcat that had once stood in her path and hissed at her horse. It had been on a narrow mountain path, the last time she rode from Castle Agasha to Ootosan Uchi. Although the cat snarled, its golden fur bristling, her horse had demonstrated the quality of its training by walking on. The cat bolted, disappearing down the mountain rather than be trampled. So it would likely be now.

Agasha Sumiko's opponent watched her every move, a fierce intensity to his gaze that would have had her punish him for his defiance, were he any other student. She stood before him without her armor and wielding only a pair of wooden *bokken*, but she moved as she would have on a battlefield: her stance relaxed, the practice weapons extensions of her limbs. She demonstrated again the exercises from *niten*, her movements elegant and fluid. She clacked the swords together in a cross above her head, swept them down and thrust with the longer bokken, the shorter sword arcing under to disable her invisible foe. Then another clack, another move, another clack, and on went the rhythm of the dance.

Hantei Sotorii had not yet found his rhythm. He mimicked the thrust, sweep, the dull thud of wood on wood. Yet there was no intent in the prince's movements despite the grim determination in his eyes. He was an imperfect reflection: all the forms were there, but there was no flow, no unifying grace. While Sumiko handled the bokken with the respect she would her own weapons, the prince gripped them tight as though to punish them.

Dissatisfied with his performance, she began to demonstrate again.

"Enough!" the prince shouted, and she ceased at once, bowing low to her student.

"You did well, Your Highness," she told him. "To master the two-sword style takes many years. I will gladly guide you in your pursuit of the art."

"I was only curious," he said defensively. "Satsume-sensei taught me everything he knew, and I need no more than that to win my own battles!"





“As you wish, Your Highness,” she replied.

Attendants stepped forward to offer the prince water, for his face was red. They did not offer such courtesy to Sumiko, the Ruby Champion, but she had been teaching the way of the sword since before the young prince was born, and it took more than a few drills to wind her.

“We must duel with katana, like real warriors,” the prince exclaimed suddenly. “I have invited those present to witness my training. Let us give them something worth watching!”

He lacks patience. He did not excel on his first try, so he means to compensate and succeed elsewhere instead. “If that is your desire, Your Highness,” she said, relinquishing her bokken to the prince’s attendants.

The gaze of the courtiers upon her back was as hot as the sun bearing down on them. Poor souls—none had a sufficient reason to excuse them from attending the spectacle. Kitsuki Yaruma was there, too, wilting in the heat. He did not deserve this. She would cut the exercises short, for his sake. He’d helped her too many times, and she owed him at least this much.

She took up her stance.

The prince took his place and faced her, ready for the mock duel.

Had this been a real encounter, the fight would have been over before it began. Sumiko stood like the mountains of her home—taller than the prince, with longer reach, and weathered by years of experience.

The prince facing her in his silks was like the little golden cat, but he was still the heir apparent. His power and position demanded unquestioning respect.

They drew their swords, her Agasha blade blindingly bright in the sunlight. As she readied the specially forged katana, its sharp edge was shadowed for a moment, revealing the *choji* pattern, the dragon teeth that gave the katana its name.

She would give him but one blade for now.

Sumiko extended her arm slowly, giving the prince time to react.

He jabbed prematurely, and she barely had to move to avoid the blow.

The Kakita style was precise, lightning fast. This young Hantei was no Kakita duelist.

Doji Satsume had trained him, but had he taught him anything? The old sensei’s loyalty to the Emperor and his line had been a great virtue, but it may have blinded him as well. Had honor and protocol kept the man from criticizing the young prince?

Sumiko stepped back, allowed him a breath to recover, to attack again. Sotorii had undergone his *gempuku*, had his head shaved into the topknot style, and had been formally invested as the crown prince. But at heart, he was still a boy. Only a child would feel such a need to prove himself before the court this way.

Sumiko gave him chance after chance to prove himself with her exaggerated movements, which were also meant to remind the audience that this was still a lesson.

The prince furrowed his brow, realizing with frustration each missed opportunity. His attacks grew wilder, the thrusts and cuts harder, metal clanging painfully in an affront to their





razor-edged blades.

The prince seemed intent on provoking her into fighting him as an equal, yet she held back. She had to, as his old sensei must have done.

Sumiko attacked again, and the prince knocked her sword aside in a hurried swipe. If they continued like this, he would damage his blade. The Agasha forging techniques would lend hers some protection, but not against the most flagrant abuse.

Still she did not end the duel, waiting instead for the prince to find an opening and gain the victory he so coveted. He grunted in frustration, crying out as he tried again and again. He refused to vary his moves, expecting to win by determination and sheer force, despite his size disadvantage.

At last, Sumiko swept her katana in a smooth arc, bringing the blade to rest gently at the prince's shoulder. Refusing to acknowledge that she could have severed his head, the prince darted forward and thrust his katana at her belly. She twisted slightly, felt the bite of cold steel in warm flesh. As blood bloomed on white fabric, a gasp escaped the crowd.

For a moment, there was silence in the garden. Sumiko studied the young Hantei. His gaze was on her wounded side, his eyes widening with excitement, his lip curling into a satisfied smile.

He cared for winning more than he cared for honor.

Sumiko bowed to the prince, letting the courtiers know she had not received a serious wound after all.

She had let him cut her a little, to satisfy his pride. She did not know what would become of her if she hadn't.

"Isn't your sword enchanted?" the prince crowed. "What good is it if it cannot win you duels? Does it pine for its companion?"

"They were made as a pair," Sumiko conceded calmly, sheathing her sword.

Courtiers rushed forward to congratulate their prince on his victory as he motioned for his chair.

Sumiko sought out her old friend, nodding politely to the courtiers that passed her, the Crane in their fine embroidered kimono, the Scorpion hiding behind their masks, the Lion with stony faces. It would have been impossible for them to miss the demonstration of the prince's temperament.

Then there he was—the Dragon Clan ambassador to the Imperial Court, standing tall with green silk hanging in heavy waves from his bony shoulders.





"The prince has teeth of his own, Champion," Yaruma said as she approached.

"He will not lose battles through lack of effort, Yaruma-sama," she replied, pitching her voice low so the words would not carry.

He frowned slightly, but only changed the subject.

"I should like to see your blades at work together," he said, "the dragon's teeth and claws."

It was a subject close to her heart, but it also gave her the pretense she needed to meet with him and discuss matters she could not mention here.

"You are welcome to visit and view them properly," Sumiko said, "I hope you will come to see me this evening, Yaruma-san. You have an eye for detail, and you sometimes see things that I do not."

He was no investigator, but he was still Kitsuki, and she trusted him. If she could voice her fears to anyone, it would be him.

He regarded her for a moment, seeming to grasp her meaning. "I thank you for the invitation," Yaruma said. "I will gladly view your *daishō* this evening. Now I have work to do inside, out of this sun, and you had best see to that wound."

Sumiko allowed herself a smile. "It is nothing," she insisted. "I look forward to your visit, and I promise the sake will be cool. Good day to you, Yaruma-san."

Sumiko looked back to the prince, only to find him watching her from his cushioned seat. He waved away the other courtiers, and she approached him with her skin prickling, a strange heavy feeling in her gut.

"What did you talk of with the Dragon ambassador?" the prince demanded as she bowed to the ground before him.

"We spoke of your prowess, Your Highness," she said. "I will continue your training personally, if you wish it. Perhaps you will desire to continue our lessons in the niten style another day."

"Ha! Satsume-sensei said that only a fool needs two hands where one will do. I will master that style one day, but I think I will practice proper swordsmanship first. Akodo Toturi can take over my training."

"Of course," she said. "You wish to duel as the Emerald Champion dueled."

"Did I not best the Ruby Magistrate herself today? Why not the Emerald Champion tomorrow?"





His ridiculous boast made her forget herself, and she looked up into his eyes. They were still bright with excitement. She dropped her gaze. Young though he was, he had power over everyone but his father. Perhaps she had been wrong for allowing him to hurt her, reminding him of that power.

A shadow fell over her, the unrelenting sun replaced by a sudden gloom. She thought for a moment that he had stood, about to make some terrible proclamation, but it was only clouds gathering.

"Tell me," the prince demanded. "What do you think of the Emerald Champion?"

"His draw was very fine," she said. "Superbly executed."

"Yes, I know that, but do you think he will be as great an Emerald Champion as Satsume-sensei?"

Sumiko did not know how to answer without answering, as Yaruma would have done. She did not yet know Akodo Toturi, so could not yet trust him. She had not been a friend of Doji Satsume's, but she had never questioned his loyalty, nor he hers. She had respected him, and they always worked well together. Everything would be different under the new champion, but she could not voice her uneasiness.

"Speak up," the prince said.

Thunder grumbled through the gardens, and the prince stood suddenly, without waiting for her answer.

"Curse the rain! What's the point of *shugenja* if they can't even keep the skies clear?"

She kept her mouth closed. Did the prince really expect *shugenja* to interfere with the seasons and the natural order, just so he could train in the sunshine?

The departure of Hantei Sotorii became a parade as his bodyguards, courtiers, servants, and attendants fell into step behind him. Colorful silks swept around the figures in the rising breeze, many marked with the Imperial chrysanthemum, trailing like tail feathers, but the sun did not return.

Perhaps Lady Sun herself had been ashamed to witness the prince's behavior.

