

A Simple Test

By Mari Murdock

A garish late afternoon sun pierced through the throne room windows, illuminating the dark floorboards in deep mahogany. Two servants, women, washed the floor with white linen on hands and knees, scuttling like insects back and forth between the dark and light spots. Bayushi Aramoro growled as he watched them from a shadowy corner. They tried to disregard his presence as they worked, though one girl noticeably trembled while the other's skin prickled with nervous sweat.

They wouldn't have been able to ignore me if I were Emerald Champion.

The humiliation of his loss against Akodo Toturi stung more than the loss of the championship—everyone at court had seen a Lion beat him. Worse still was that his defeat had caused a twitch in Lady Kachiko's composed façade, like a faintest crack in porcelain. Luckily, she had not turned her disappointment upon him. They both knew his failure had not been his fault. Aramoro suspected betrayal, but Yojiro was Kachiko's pet. She would merely torment him rather than punish him outright. Whatever that coward's fate, Aramoro's status was secure despite the loss. Instead of Emerald Champion, Aramoro maintained his position near Kachiko as her *yōjimbō*, a responsibility that kept him closer to her than anyone. He licked his lips.

The servants were starting to linger too long.

Is their work that slovenly? Or, are they loitering for reasons more menacing...

No, they were merely preparing the room for a court assembly that evening, dusting the windowsills and floor, and polishing the armrests and fluffing the cushions of the ornately carved, backless rosewood chairs and Emerald Throne for those who would sit there: The Hantei Emperor, his heir, and Lady Kachiko. Aramoro's lips ticked with a frown hidden by his crimson *oni mempō*.

During the last few weeks, Scorpion contacts among the less-than-reputable sake houses in Otosan Uchi had gleaned murmurs of death threats against Lady Kachiko. As Kachiko's bodyguard, Aramoro had plunged himself deep into investigating the plot for the last several days, surfacing with a list of anyone who might have connections to the taverns and access to the palace. The palace cook who prepared Kachiko's meals. The two servant girls who cleaned various rooms in the palace. A lowly courtier who could blend in with the rest of the sycophantic crowd. Invisible people. Aramoro had hunted each one of them.

Who would dare?

Stories of such traitors hidden in the capital and perhaps throughout other parts of the empire were emerging from many sources, not just Bayushi's Whisperers. Aramoro's chest



seared with anger, and he clenched his fists until his knuckles cracked. Assassination rumors involving powerful figures were not common. One involving the Emperor's own personal advisor was inimitable—near blasphemy against Heaven—marking the conspirators as dangerous beyond expectation.

As Aramoro growled to himself, a surprised gasp came from the door. The Scorpion locked eyes with a cringing Otomo courtier who had been skulking into the throne room through the open door. The man was followed by his thick-set, vacant-eyed yōjimbō.

“Otomo Utoshi-san,” Aramoro sneered, a grim pleasure lighting his eyes, “you are several hours early to court, I see, as one would expect from your zealous groveling.”

Utoshi swallowed hard, but his dry-mouthed reply issued little more than a stutter. “Good afternoon, Aramoro-san. I was simply...checking the state of the room.”

“Yes, I can see how a chattering monkey invited into a palace ought to check every room, in case he left any of his refuse behind.”

The blatant insult left the Otomo speechless. He quivered through a polite parting bow and ducked out of the room. Masao stared briefly after his fleeing master. He eyed Aramoro, a scowl puckering his forehead, before nodding to him and trudging after his charge. Aramoro sniffed in amusement. The young yōjimbō, a man named Masao, had recently been paid, rather cheaply, to spy on the Otomo households. If Utoshi or the other Otomo had any secrets, Aramoro would hear of it.

Out of the corner of his eye, Aramoro caught movement in the courtyard gardens below. A flock of courtly ladies sauntered near the lotus pond, their garments and hair ornaments sparkling. At their forefront strolled a sensuous figure swathed in scarlet and black silk. Despite the shade of the parasol poised in her slender hands, this woman glowed. Her regal beauty radiated through the mob of flamboyant nobles. She suddenly laughed at some comment, and all the other women followed suit, desperate to be seen joining in on the jest.

Despite her elegance, Aramoro frowned. In every aspect, this woman looked like Lady Kachiko. The delicate arch of her neck. The full, red mouth. Even her eyes, the same mesmerizing brown. But the truth marred the picturesque grace, dashing the illusion.

You walk too fast, Asami. Too eagerly. Lady Kachiko never hurries. She walks at her own pace.



He watched as Asami, Kachiko's body double, crossed a bridge over the pond with her impatient steps. Disgusted, Aramoro turned away to glare at the servants. They had gathered their cleaning implements, lingering only to check for perfection one final time.

"Corpses could leave this room faster than you two," Aramoro snarled.

Startled, the girls snatched up their cleaning rags and fled, leaving the ornately carved doors open. They skittered down the hallway, disappearing through a servants' exit. The sun was setting, basking the throne room in burnt orange hues. The girls would need to slink back to light the evening lanterns in another hour or so. However, they were not the threat he sought. He would come back with Kachiko for the court assembly that evening.

Aramoro took one more look out the window into the garden. The ladies were gone. He left the throne room, shutting the door behind him.

The door to Lady Kachiko's sitting room slid open, and Bayushi Yojiro emerged. Aramoro's jaw tightened, and he squeezed his katana hilt to prevent himself from seizing Yojiro by the throat. The high corners of the Emerald Magistrate's collar failed to hide the blush staining his cheeks. Confusion. Sorrow. Lust. Awe. Kachiko must have just scolded the wretch, though not nearly enough for what he deserved. Aramoro wrinkled his nose as they crossed paths.

"Aramoro-san," Yojiro said, his politeness remembered even in his moment of agitation, "I do apologize if I kept you waiting."

"I wait for no one when seeing Lady Kachiko," Aramoro sneered.

"I can think of one person," Yojiro replied, Aramoro's intimidation glancing off his swiftly rising composure. The magistrate bowed a quick farewell and left.

A sharp jealousy swept through Aramoro's already enraged blood, swelling into wrath. Yojiro meant Shoju. Of course, Shoju would have more claim to Kachiko. He was their clan champion. Her husband. His half-brother. The lucky demon.

Aramoro's hands ached to snap Yojiro's neck. The fool always acted superior, living above the rest of their clan with his smug morals.

I should choke the arrogance from him. Perhaps one day, Kachiko will let me do it.

He marched into Kachiko's chamber and slammed the shoji



screen behind him, rattling the wood and paper. To his greater displeasure, Asami was the one sitting inside with a group of Kachiko's ladies-in-waiting. She wore one of Kachiko's best evening kimono, crimson scattered with gold and black petals in the shape of scorpion stingers. However, the silk hung awkwardly around her shoulders, sagging ever so slightly in the front. Her legs and back strained to copy Kachiko's naturally seductive posture upon the *zabuton*. Worst of all, her eyes lit up as he entered, a desperate excitement that Lady Kachiko would never feel.

Does she really fool the entire court?

The true Kachiko must be busy writing a letter to Hotaru. He would have to give his report to Asami.

"Aramoro-san," Asami warbled with Kachiko's regal air still intact. "You are as punctual as the sun."

He sat himself across from her, careful to uphold the respectful posture despite her identity.

"My lady," he grunted, eyeing the women who sat staring with lacquered faces.

"Ladies, give me some privacy as I attend to matters with my guard," Asami instructed, smiling as they rose silently and disappeared into a back room. Her refined, dignified demeanor abruptly melted away to reveal Asami's country girl plainness. Her love and devotion paraded more blatantly across her face. Aramoro grunted, concentrating on Asami's mouth and throat, the parts of her that most kept Kachiko's likeness. The skin was so smooth.

"Aramoro-san," Asami greeted him again, her voice soft with degraded demureness. "It is good to see you."

"Lady Kachiko," he replied curtly, the misnomer curling his tongue. Asami would pass his report on to her mistress exactly as he said it, so he would need to temper his disdain lest it be relayed. "My search for the possible assassin continues. I have investigated the palace servants in question. They are mice, not vipers. During tonight's assembly, I shall search among those at court. You should stay close to me during the entire assembly, in case something should happen."

Asami paused, frowning slightly after realizing that his report was over. "What about the cook?"

"I will search his kitchen tonight after court."

His wife nodded, not in approval, but in agreement. "Thank you for doing this. I... appreciate your efforts."

Aramoro nodded briskly and made to stand, but Asami lifted her hand, entreating him to stay. "Please, Husband." The corner of one eye glistened with the trace of tears.

Her break in character startled him. She never did this.

"What is it?"

She choked on her tears once more before continuing. "Our son is ill. I received word of it from Kyūden Bayushi two days ago."

Aramoro blinked. "And?"

"I... I thought you might want to know."

He didn't have time to be concerned about a child when Lady Kachiko's life was at stake.



“The clan is taking care of him.”

“Yes, but—” Asami stifled a sob. She bit her full, delicate lip before continuing. “I heard it is very serious.”

Aramoro stared hard at her.

She asks too much.

“Such distant travel is impossible,” he snapped. “How dare you ask when *your* life is threatened?” He tried to return her to character. Even here, it wasn’t safe to break the façade for long.

Asami steeled her face slightly. “I know my duty, Aramoro,” she insisted sulkily. “My loyalty is stronger than my love as a mother. I only ask because Shoju-sama commands that you find the would-be assassins tonight. No more delays, lest you imperil us needlessly.”

Aramoro slid from kneeling to a one-kneed crouch, ready to spring, an enraged fire thrashing through him. “Shoju commands me to do what I already planned, does he? He wants to parade his dominion—his triumph—over me?” His eyes narrowed as he chuckled with a dry, wicked laugh at the irony. “And to do so through the wife I ended up with...”

Asami regained some of Kachiko’s manner, a tiny flicker of defiance dancing in her eyes. “You chose me, Aramoro. You helped me gain entrance into the Scorpion clan through my marriage to that Yogo emissary. His death is more on your hands than mine.”

Aramoro grunted in response, not denying the past.

I did make my choice—I didn’t smother Shoju in his sleep the night after his engagement to Kachiko was announced, after he was chosen as clan champion!

He shook his head, shredding the traitorous thought into a thousand black pieces. His clan meant more to him than a selfish desire. In the end, the Scorpion had severed him from Kachiko, relegating him to the status of yōjimbō despite his training, his loyalty! He lived with this clan decision—this burning sacrifice—even when it took marrying a body double farm girl to help him do it. He sat back down and looked at Asami’s mouth and throat once more.

The mousy sound of footsteps alerted him to the approach of a servant. Asami’s break in character had been far too dangerous, far too emotional. He would scold her for it later.

“I will do as Shoju commands, Lady Kachiko,” he growled. “You must do the same, here, in Otosan Uchi, until all the conspirators in the capital have been found and dealt with.”

Asami nodded slowly. “As you say, Aramoro-san.”

At the small, expected rap at the door, Asami regained Lady Kachiko’s demeanor without hesitation, the tears vanishing from her face.

“Enter,” she called.

A kitchen maid entered with Kachiko’s evening meal on a black lacquered table tray.

“The Emperor’s blessing upon you,” Asami crooned, gesturing for the servant to set the food near her. As soon as the door shut behind the servant, Aramoro moved to inspect the dishes. However, Asami had already snapped up the chopsticks with agile fingers. A tiny morsel of fish landed on her tongue before he could stop her.



“You fool,” Aramoro hissed, dragging the tray away from her. He quickly scanned the tiny dishes of rice, sesame-speckled seaweed, pickled plums, and miso, looking for traces of fatal powders, oils, or tinctures. They betrayed no poisonous ingredients. He looked to her mouth. She had already swallowed the fish. Were it poisoned, she could die within moments. His heart raced as he waited for a labored breath or cry of pain. Nothing.

Did she do that on purpose? To test me?

The flicker of defiance had burned out, leaving only Asami’s modest obedience. She appeared unaware of his panic. He frowned.

Would I care if Asami died?

The question melted as fast as frost. He pushed the tray back to her, gesturing for her to finish tasting the rest of the food for Kachiko.

No. Kachiko takes precedence, not Asami, in all things. It would be her duty to die for her lady.

As if reading his thoughts, Asami whispered, “You have taught me well, Husband, both in the ways of the Scorpion and the ways of assassination. I will keep Lady Kachiko safe with my life. But, should I fall, our son would become an orphan since the secrecy of my position prevents you from claiming him publicly. May I at least write to him? I can send the letter through our clan infiltrators in the Miya messengers.”

She met his eyes. The glint of tears had returned.

“No.” Aramoro stood to leave. “Concentrate on Lady Kachiko. Nothing else.”

Asami nodded, the corners of her mouth wilting. “As you wish. Will I see you again tomorrow? After your investigation has ended?”

“Not likely.” Her desperation had started to become tedious. “Shoju is sending me to Ryokō Owari Toshi for the next few weeks. The seriousness of that mission is likely the real reason he wants me to finish this investigation tonight.”

Her jaw dropped slightly. “I have heard nothing about your mission to Ryokō Owari.”

“Keep it that way.”

Another knock at the screen indicated the arrival of a messenger. Asami became Kachiko once more.

“Enter.”

“My Lady Kachiko,” the young herald said, bowing with practiced sincerity and humility. “I bring a reminder of your audience with the Phoenix envoys after tonight’s assembly—”

Aramoro stopped listening as he marched back out of Kachiko’s chambers—nearly cuffing the Phoenix boy—leaving Asami to her playacting.



The heat of the throne room itched Aramoro's face beneath his mempō as beads of sweat formed across his upper lip. The room teemed with dozens of silken sycophants who nearly clawed at the throne, attempting to feed their ambitions. He ignored their rhetorical babble, watching every flick of a fan or swish of a sleeve for hidden menace.

The Emperor, usually so patient and dignified as the Son of Heaven, listened with weary shoulders, the late hour and heat of the assembly obviously taxing his old frame. Prince Sotorii, seated to his father's right, glowered at the prattlers. At the Emperor's left, Lady Kachiko, not Asami, had taken her rightful place beside him as his advisor. Despite being seated beside the majesty of the Emperor, every alluring twist of her proud head asserted her dominance of the room as a master courtier. Mirroring Sotorii in perfect opposition, she smiled as she scanned the assembly. Her lips parted slightly in seductive delight and her eyes glittered with mischievous fire, as though she could divulge each person's darkest secret on a whim. Her gaze lingered longest on Doji Kuwanan, recently arrived from the front where Hotaru commanded the Crane forces.

Aramoro stood mere inches away from Kachiko's rosewood seat near the edge of the dais, blocking direct access to her from that side of the room. Not far from them, the cowering Otomo Utoshi approached. Masao followed him, the yōjimbō's gaze barely leaving Utoshi's back as he picked his way carefully between courtiers. While the rōnin debate escalated into frenzied accusations and deflections of responsibility—the cacophony churning the sea of nobles about the room—Utoshi inched closer and closer. He wriggled between the bodies to stand on Kachiko's side of the dais, Masao close behind, mere steps away from Aramoro.

Aramoro was not armed, having surrendered his weapons along with all the samurai before entering the throne room. However, the Otomo's nearness served no threat. Aramoro could snatch his eyes and tongue out within two heartbeats, should the need arise, but that hardly seemed necessary. Utoshi's face was pale, sick with anxiety, and he lilted from one foot to the other as if fear gnawed at his stability. Fear drove weak men to rash action.

Would the imbecile dare attempt anything in the throne room, before the Emperor himself?

Aramoro cracked the knuckles of his left hand, a signal he and Kachiko had devised



to catch her attention. Gracefully, she turned her gaze upon Utoshi and gave him a knowing smile. He gasped, alarmed at her personal attention. A shiver squirmed down his back, and he recoiled half a step. She continued to stare, eyes locked with his, mesmerizing him until, with a final silent squeal, he retreated into the silken throng. Masao frowned with annoyance at having to pick his way through the crowd of courtiers once again. He grimaced at Aramoro before disappearing. Aramoro grinned.

However, the sweat on his lip tingled again. Something was not right. Utoshi had risked the wrath of the heavens by approaching the Emerald Throne, only to wither like a cobweb before a candle. Perhaps the ploy lay elsewhere.

The room grew silent as the Emperor rose, adjourning the assembly until the next week, and after the Son of Heaven and his heir retired from the room, the crowd followed, thronging toward the doors. Aramoro motioned Kachiko to stay for a moment where she sat.

“My lady,” he whispered, leaning slightly over her, eyeing the courtiers as they filed past. Utoshi lingered in the back, watching them. “Your shadow grows long with the setting sun. Perhaps we should walk to where we might make it disappear.”

She nodded, tranquil in the face of danger, though her eyes darted toward the door for only the briefest glance. “As you advise, Aramoro. Perhaps a moonlit stroll through the palace gardens will soothe our heavy burden. It will most assuredly be private at this hour.”

Aramoro stood aside to let her rise before following her leisurely gait as she melted into the crowd, no more than a few inches from her side. He collected his katana and *wakizashi* from the attendants outside the throne room in the hall, nodding to Kachiko to spring their trap. Spotting Utoshi following them at a distance, Kachiko called out to him.

“Utoshi-san,” she sang, beckoning him with a sensual wave of her hand. “I am afraid the heat of this evening’s assembly has proven overpowering. Would you join me in the garden for a brief respite? I hear the perfume of night-blooming jasmine is an excellent cure for faintness.”

The Otomo’s mouth fumbled open, his eyes bouncing between her and Aramoro, searching for motive. Aramoro snorted at his scrutiny.

“O-of course, Lady Kachiko,” Utoshi stuttered, awkwardly offering her the hallway, so he could follow her. “If you would have company.”

As they entered the garden, the full moon glimmered over the wall. The light gilded the darkened bodies of the trees and gravel paths in a spectral silver, making a lantern largely unnecessary. Utoshi hesitated at the edge, hardly daring to step into the dark, but Kachiko had already pushed forward, calling him to follow her. Aramoro hung a few steps back with Masao, counting the distance between them and their masters in dagger lengths.

“How did you...enjoy the assembly, Lady Kachiko?” Utoshi mumbled, clasping his nervous, fluttery hands behind his back.

Kachiko chuckled, bringing a modest hand up to her mouth. “Oh, it was rather uneventful, wouldn’t you say? Not a single daring move by anyone.”



Suddenly, Utoshi tripped on a stone in the dark path, teetering a moment before crashing into Kachiko's side. She gasped and stumbled, nearly falling down with him. Quick as lightning, Aramoro drew his katana and seized a handful of Utoshi's garments. He snapped the courtier backward before throwing him to the ground. Kachiko regained her balance and skittered into the dark, running behind a copse of weeping pines. Aramoro lifted his blade, pointing directly at Masao.

"Don't move," he snarled, ignoring the sputtering, whimpering Otomo in the dirt. Masao froze, the tumult distorting his face with confusion. Aramoro smiled. Their ploy had trapped the right prey. "I have been looking for you, assassin, but cowering behind a shivering curtain is a wretched place to hide."

Masao glared down at Utoshi who sobbed, cringing in the gravel. Turning his baleful eyes on Aramoro, he bared his teeth for a second before tumbling beneath the blade point and lunging over the top of the fallen Otomo. Aramoro snapped his katana down, but only succeeded in slicing the trailing kimono silk in Masao's wake. Masao sprinted toward the weeping pines, crashing through the trees to where Kachiko had disappeared. Aramoro sprang to follow.



In the dim light ahead of him, two dark figures struggled. A small flash in the dark where Kachiko had drawn her sharpened hairpin dagger, but Masao crushed her hand and flung the weapon away. He whipped her arm around behind her back, securing his hold on her before drawing a long, poisoned needle from his sleeve. She writhed in his grasp as he attempted to stab her neck with its point.

For a split second, she locked eyes with Aramoro. Cold fear flashed behind their softness. They were Asami's eyes. Not Kachiko's.

Aramoro plunged his hand between the needle and Asami, clamping his other hand around Masao's throat, instantly crushing his windpipe in a *Claw of the Scorpion* grip. Not a sound issued from Masao as he seized for a moment before hanging limply from Aramoro's fingers.

Asami broke free from her assailant's lifeless hold and grabbed her husband's arm. "What have you done?" she hissed, pulling the needle out of his cloth armguard. She unwrapped the fabric, squinting in the darkness to find the pinprick in his flesh.

Aramoro slowly came to his senses, letting Masao finally drop to the ground. Asami was right. He had been a crazed imbecile, making a fatal mistake in his haste. And for what—for Asami? He paused, feeling the blood pounding in his hands.

He stared at his wife, once again seeing all the differences between her and Lady Kachiko. She was still the lesser woman, and her angry tears over his safety repulsed him.

But she was safe.

Aramoro turned to inspect Masao. The wretch still breathed, though the crumpled flesh at his throat would hinder any interrogation for a long time.

"At least he is alive," he grunted, not particularly speaking to Asami. "In time, the clan will be able to learn more about where he came from and who he was working for."

"Aramoro," Asami breathed. She let go of his arm. "The needle did not break your skin. It only caught in your armguard."

Aramoro said nothing. Instead, he grabbed Masao's collar and started dragging him away.

After only a few paces, he stopped. With the assassin's capture, Kachiko was safe for now. The Scorpion would have no need of Asami until Hotaru returned to court—which wouldn't be until late fall, after the season of war was spent. His wife could leave for Kyūden Bayushi before dawn, and he could protect the real Kachiko by himself, staying close to her side...

Aramoro frowned. Shoji was sending him to Ryokō Owari come morning. Kachiko would be vulnerable without her yōjimbō. Before all, their duty to the Scorpion took precedence.

"I will see you when I return, Lady Kachiko," he grunted, turning back into the darkness, the heavy body scraping through the gravel behind him, "and give my regards to the Miya."

