

A Bloody Harvest

By Josiah "Duke" Harrist

The sun rose crimson over the river, casting everything in its scarlet hue. A veil of mist lingered on the rolling plain, covering the bodies of fallen ashigaru, slaughtered horses, and broken spears. Smoke carried on the wind from the north.

At the top of the hill, Utaku Kamoko reared back on her steed, Reiko, tasting the wind. The clamor of battle came to her like a whisper.

She charged down the hillside, fixing her eyes on the line of Lion Clan ashigaru locked in battle by the riverside. Drawing her mother's katana, she tore through their ranks, leaving a spray of red in her wake.

Two, five, ten. She trampled a fresh-faced man, screaming, under Reiko's hooves. A pair of battle-worn soldiers leveled sharp spears at her mount's chest and would have run Reiko through had she not banked a hard right to shatter the formation of another cadre of warriors. Kamoko tasted blood. The death cries of the Lion Clan troops sounded in her ears, dissonant and clear and perfect, as the other Battle Maidens thinned their ranks. Across the field, her sisters slashed their way through wave after wave of soldiers, their armor slick with blood.

A sharp, clear whistle pierced the air from across the battlefield. Three sudden trills, in quick succession. Kamoko's jaw clenched as she gripped the hilt of her blade tighter.

The sound brought her home, over a decade ago. She was standing on a small wooden bridge, staring into a pool. The blue expanse of the sky was reflected, cloudless. The same three trills, high and sharp. Kamoko looked up to see her mother approach, resplendent in her battle armor.

"You should be tending the blessed herd," her mother said.

"But Haku said we could practice—"

"Haku is being disciplined for..." Her mother's mouth pursed. "Insolence."

Kamoko huffed. Her mother was slender and beautiful, her right cheek scarred by the nick of a blade. Everyone complimented her mother on her beauty and her ferocity on the battlefield and said Kamoko would grow up to be the same. But Kamoko did not like to be told so.

"I told you it was my fault!"

Her mother nodded absentmindedly, suddenly preoccupied. Near the front gate of the estate, a row of Utaku Battle Maidens stood in a line, having awaited her arrival with an air of urgency.

"It may have been your idea, but Haku is the one who loosed the marmot. And your Ide cousins, unfortunately, do not possess your sense of humor."



Her mother nodded to the Battle Maidens. One of them began walking toward the bridge, while the rest filed out the front gate.

“Tending the steeds is both your penance, and your duty,” her mother said firmly.

Kamoko’s hands balled into fists at her side as she stared back down at the reflecting pool.

“Kumi-sama.” She heard the low, clear voice of the Battle Maiden.

Her mother regarded the warrior with a stiff bow and received the woman’s message.

“We have the element of surprise,” her mother said gravely. “Ensure your sisters are ready to ride.”

A kind breeze swept through the garden, smelling of wildflowers from the steppe. The warrior left. Her mother came close, leaned down, and hugged Kamoko tightly. Kamoko struggled to stay stiff in her embrace, then relaxed her shoulders and allowed herself to melt into the hug. Her mother smelled of cedarwood and horsehair.

“I will bring us honor,” Kamoko huffed.

“You bring our family honor every day,” her mother whispered.

Kamoko smiled in spite of herself, wrapped in her mother’s arms.

The scene of bleeding, desperate battle played around her by the riverside. Kamoko’s face was streaked with blood and soot, her pulse ringing in her ears as blade clanged against blade. A samurai wearing a fierce *mempō* tore a path through rutted earth, swinging a blood-drenched *naginata*.

Like the wind. Kamoko smiled grimly. Coiling her legs, she launched herself out of the saddle toward the samurai. His angry mask met her gaze as he swung the unwieldy polearm out, ready to skewer her. Kamoko’s pulse fluttered for a moment before Reiko barreled past the samurai, knocking him off balance. The subtle shift was all she needed to strike.

She swung her mother’s katana in a clockwise arc. The blade nicked the samurai’s neck, spraying blood across the battlefield. She didn’t have time to watch him gurgle out his last breath; with a sharp whistle, she jumped deftly back onto her steed and rode north.

The field was littered with corpses—fur-maned Lion Clan infantry, slack-faced soldiers, fallen riders and battle mares—but the tide had clearly turned in the Unicorn’s favor. The blood was already seeping into the ground. Whatever crops were grown here would surely carry the taint of war for a generation.



Upriver, the Lion had commandeered a small farming village. Their best warriors had poured out of the dilapidated buildings to die at the hands of Kamoko and her sisters. She saw a trio of Battle Maidens skimming the edge of the battlefield, cutting soldiers down with their blades. A surge of pride welled up in her heart and emerged as a smile on her face. The sun in the east reflected in brilliant shimmers on the polished armor of scores of fallen ashigaru.

"Get!" She goaded Reiko on past piles of dead, following the black sand of the river north to the village. The Lion Clan *mon* hung from the eaves of rooftops, rustling in the breeze. Scattered across the field, mounds of discarded helmets and dirt shored up the bases of several rigged Unicorn banners that flapped in the wind. Beyond the village, scores of Lion tents stood in neat rows in the fields beyond. No stir of movement showed in the village itself.

Following the broad, muddy road into the village, Kamoko drew a breath. Dirt, sewage, bricks of mint and tea leaves. The scent of earth.

"Stay here, Reiko." Kamoko ran one hand down her mount's neck. Reiko tossed her head in reply but stayed in place. Kamoko dismounted and walked past empty huts, each hung with the Lion Clan *mon*. The houses were eerily silent. A breeze stirred prayer flags strung overhead and hung from windows. *This village had paid tribute to the Utaku family for years, she thought. Surely the Lion had threatened violence if they did not submit.*

The wide, muddy road was filled with footprints, hoofprints, and wagon tracks. Had they completely evacuated? She followed it into a cluster of tall, older buildings. An *izakaya* door hung open like a slack jaw. A heavy wind rolled down the street, snapping the Lion banners. A veil of clouds invaded the sky overhead as the dread silence returned. Kamoko kept one hand on the hilt of her mother's katana, every fiber of her being drawn like a bowstring. She was not alone.

A sudden movement. Three sharp trills sounded from up above. A dozen Lion Clan ashigaru emerged from shadowed doorways and hidden alleys. The one holding a bone whistle, fringed with a mantle of leonine fur, stood up from his perch on the balcony. Their leader, a large, scarred man with an imposing beard, stepped forward.

"Stand down," he said.

She drew a sharp breath.

Kamoko sat on a grassy knoll near her home, watching Reiko, Ishi, and Norio graze, the rest of the herd scattered across the hillside, when she heard her mother's whistle—three trills, high and sharp—pierce the stillness. Looking across the wide valley, she saw the jagged ridge of rocks that separated the grazing fields from her home. The sky was clear and peaceful. The three-whistle trill sounded through the emptiness again. Kamoko's blood froze.

She said a quick prayer and whistled for Reiko. They were both young and carefree—her mother had warned her against taking the young dappled horse as her mount, saying Reiko



could not be tamed. They had said the same thing about Kamoko. Reiko's dark mane trailed behind her as she trotted down the slope, chewing the stalk of a purple mountain flower.

"I need your help, my friend," Kamoko said firmly. Then, clutching Reiko's coarse mane, she hiked herself onto the horse's back. She clucked her tongue twice, slapped her steed lightly on the rump, and started down the broad slope back home.

The rolling waves of grass gave way to a wash of dry riverbed that snaked through a rocky gorge. The wind hissed through the tight space, whipping strands of her hair across her face; it carried a stale, bitter scent.

Kamoko's cheeks flushed as she breathed it in. A mix of cedarwood, horsehair, and something she couldn't place.

She rounded the final outcrop to see her home just as she had left it. Her mother's attendants stood in a line in front of the gate, as several Battle Maidens limped back along the main road toward their encampment nearby. Kamoko's ears rang with the sounds of imagined battle: metal upon metal, death cries. Haku stood at attention with her mother's attendants. His face was bone white.

"No. No, please," she whispered, urging Reiko on.

Her mother's blade was slick with the blood of three Lion. Their attempt at an ambush had gone poorly. As Kamoko charged a pair of ashigaru in the heart of the village, she heard a sharp whistle. Several Unicorn riders rushed into the fray, scattering the line of Lion infantry. These Lion must have been fresh recruits.

"You fight without honor!" Kamoko's blade caught one ashigaru in the arm as she spun around, parrying the other. They were just boys: too fresh faced to present a challenge. She ran the first through and charged another as a flank of Lion infantry closed in on her right. A deft move. The Battle Maiden stepped back and put some distance between herself and the infantry.

"The Unicorn holds these lands!" she shouted. "Submit, and you will be spared!"

A brazier of coals lay smoldering on the ground nearby. Someone had been grilling fish. In a single, deft motion, Kamoko swung her foot out to kick the brazier, spilling coals on the ground. Cinders flew up, blinding her opponents before scattering in the breeze. A cart filled with barley lit up with a crackle.



Fools. They are all such fools.

Kamoko stabbed one soldier in the chest and kicked another into the blaze. There was a rhythm to it, a dance: she moved like a tree swaying in the wind, following its currents. The last of the ashigaru fell to her feet, prostrate in the mixture of blood and dust.

"I submit!" he crowed.

Kamoko's throat tightened, went dry as she dismounted and stood at the entrance of her home. Several Lion samurai approached on horseback, each veiled in a mantle of blood-soaked fur. The leader slouched, favoring her right side as she rode. Kamoko blinked back tears.

"Utaku Kumi fought with honor and slew five noble Lion samurai in her final breath," said the Lion. Haku sank to his knees as the leader dismounted and untethered their mother's armor and weapons from a travel satchel.

The Lion samurai fumbled with her mother's armor, lost her grip, and let the pile of metal fall to the ground with a rude crash. Her mother's daishō lay in the dust, the wakizashi half-drawn. A bloodied scrap of yellow-gold silk caught on the blade told the story of her death.

In her mind, Kamoko walked past a gallery of wartime horrors—gutted horses and samurai, bloodied spears, burning homes—to the heart of the skirmish where her mother had died. A line of blood ran down her mother's perfect chin, and her neck lay open as a sluice. The hands that had held her just hours ago were cold and knotted. Her body was an empty house; her spirit was gone.

The Lion samurai bowed as Kamoko leaned down and picked up her mother's katana. The grave silence was broken by Haku, sobbing softly into his hands.

The Lion tore out your throat, mother.

The attendants, the gate, Reiko, Haku, her home, all faded away. Nothing mattered. The Lion Clan had taken the best thing from her. She clenched her jaw, drew the blade to eye level, and swung her mother's katana in a wide arc.

The Lion deflected the blow with an exhausted air.

"The battle is over," the samurai said wearily. "Do not waste your life."

She felt her eyes sting with hot tears.

"The battle has just begun."

"Fan out and search for any survivors. We lost our hold on this village because of dissenters. Kill any who do not swear allegiance to the Unicorn."

Kamoko barked the orders, then headed north through a narrow muddy street. A foul breeze blew, carrying the scent of dung and urine—and some faint fragrance. There was an intensity to the silence, like that of a held breath.

A prayer wheel spun lazily, breaking the quiet.



Her armor was scored with scratches and splattered with Lion blood. To her right, a dilapidated house stood with a tattered Lion banner hung over an open door. She smelled sweet roasted meat.

"Come out!" She stood at attention, hand crossed over her waist to rest on the hilt of her mother's katana. "I am Utaku Kamoko of the Unicorn Clan. We have liberated your village from the Lion Clan. Submit or accept the consequences."

A minute passed with no reply.

"Very well!" Kamoko shouted. "I have no choice but to come inside. If you resist, you will reap the harvest of your defiance!" Tightening her grip on the hilt of the katana, she crossed over the threshold.

A small bundle of energy tackled her as she stepped inside. A young girl of about twelve lunged at her from the side, stabbing at her chest and back. A small boy screamed from somewhere in the dark room.

"Do not resist!" Kamoko knocked the pommel of her blade against the girl's chest, pushing her away. The young boy—presumably her brother—wailed openly on the floor.

"Get out of our home!" seethed the girl. Her tone was coarse, low.

Brandishing her mother's katana, Kamoko felt her pulse pound, slow and sluggish, in her ears. A stray fly buzzed lazily in the claustrophobic dim.

"I would leave you in peace," she replied. "But before I do, I must ask you to pledge allegiance to the Unicorn."

The child spat on the ground in front of her.

"My family serves the Lion."

Kamoko's pulse fluttered. The katana felt heavy in her grip.

"Where is your father?" she asked the girl.

"Dead."

"And your mother?"

"Dead."

The girl spat again. Kamoko's face grew hot.

"And are there any elders in your home?"

"None."

"Then you are the last of your family," said Kamoko.

"Slaughtered by the Unicorn," snarled the girl.

"We have reclaimed this settlement. You must serve us now."

"I would rather die." The girl puffed out her chest.

Kamoko savored the stillness. She felt the moment wash over her like cool, clear water. The girl's face was flush with passion.

"Enough have died today," Kamoko said. "But the decision to resist is yours. You may face me in honorable combat, if you wish."



She watched a minute, insidious calculation crossing the girl's face for a single moment, before surging into rage. The Lion girl charged at Kamoko, slashing wildly with her knife. Kamoko drew a sharp breath and felt emptiness grow within her as she raised her sword to strike.

Kamoko fell back in the dust in front of her family's estate. Her face bled as a dark-violet bruise spread under her eye, her skin scuffed with dirt. The Lion samurai stood over her, swaying unsteadily from one foot to the other. One of her mother's attendants stepped forward, then demurred.

"Enough noble blood has been spilled today," the samurai said. "Do not dishonor your family home by making me spill more."

A slight breeze blew from the north, drawing out her mother's scent.

My mother was gutted like an animal.

Kamoko looked up and snarled.

"You have the ferocity of an Utaku," said the samurai.

Her jaw stung where the samurai had hit her.

"I must fight for the memory of my mother."

The Lion choked out a hoarse laugh.

"And who will bring honor to your mother's memory if you are dead?" The samurai drank from a gourd hanging at her waist. Haku let out a sob from behind Kamoko, as if to underscore the Lion's words.

"You come from an honorable family. Do not waste your life."

The samurai held the gourd out to Kamoko to drink. She waved it aside.

"If you desire justice, you will not find it. If you desire vengeance, seek it on the battlefield."

Kamoko looked up at the Lion samurai. Her face was silhouetted, ghostly, in the shade of a cloud. She could not discern her features. To Kamoko, the face was the face of every Lion: proud, unyielding, uncompassionate. Inside her, a surge of emotion rose up and flooded every corner of her being. Her mother was gone and she would never see her again, never feel her embrace. The wind would carry her mother's scent away.

As she began to weep, the Lion bowed to her, then hiked herself up on her horse and rode away. The other samurai followed.

Kamoko's tears fell in heavy drops on her mother's katana lying on the ground. The sun emerged from behind a cloud, reflecting up at her from the blade with dazzling radiance. A pirouette of dust whorled around her in the wind, whispering. Her tears fell, washing the dust on the ground into the rough shape of a bleeding sun. After what seemed like hours with only her grief, Kamoko looked up to the sky and then around with bleary eyes. Haku and the attendants had gone inside. She was alone.