

# Pillow Book of a Bayushi

*(Tournament of the Topaz Champion)*

## **1499 sakura blossom season, Tsuma, Kakita lands**

– I had finally been deemed ready to undertake my gempukku by my family. This year the Tournament of the Topaz Champion is to take place in the territory of the Kakita family, in the Crane lands. The town of Tsuma is just outside of Shira Sano Kakita. This has been one of the longest journeys I have thus far undertaken in my life, and the first without an escort. It was both interesting, and perhaps a bit intimidating.

Arriving at Tsuma, I did not find it difficult to ascertain the location of the local teahouse...a place called the House of the Laughing Carp. I had merely to follow the crowds of other young people here for the tournament. The teahouse is to be my home for the next few days, along with many other aspiring samurai. The most challenging matter so far has simply been to avoid unseemly contact among the crowd. There are so many others here. After a bit of rest and a chance to clean away the dust of the road, a bite to eat was most welcome.

That evening, the arrival of the Imperial family was a spectacle to remember. The splendors of the court are not unfamiliar to me, but still I admit I had never before seen a member of the most esteemed Toturi family. The Son of Heaven himself was too bright a sight to dare raise my eyes from the ground to encounter, but after he had passed, I discretely managed to glimpse some of the members of his entourage. The twin sons of the Emperor, Toturi Hatsu and Toturi Kobashi, have accompanied their father. I was not the only woman there to flutter a fan at the sight of them. They escorted their youngest sister, Toturi Chisa.

They were followed by the Imperial Herald Miya Shikan, who appeared monastic in comparison to the Toturi family. Behind the Herald came the Emerald Champion, Matsu Hoketsaku, and his son Matsu Nimoro. Nimoro has no school mon, he must be a competitor in this tournament. The Akodo daimyo,

Akodo Gintaku accompanied them. Alongside this group came a pair of Crane, Doji Sarutomo the Crane Champion, and the elderly O-Doji Koneko, Doji matriarch. She was accompanied by handmaidens.

With these arrivals, Kakita Saburashi, the Kakita daimyo appeared, and formally welcomed the Imperial party.

After the court formalities had passed, most of those at the teahouse turned their attention to assessing each other. Rumors flew as to what was to come, but they seemed empty of any real information. It seemed without doubt that several dozen samurai were to enter the tournament, however. Among them I spotted another member of the Bayushi, my own family, as well as another Scorpion, a Yogo. A samurai-ko of the Miya seemed the only representative of the Imperial families in this tournament.

Two Isawa were there, though I knew neither of them. I also saw two of the Dragon clan, both wearing Tamori Mon. There were two members of the Crane clan, a Doji and a Kakita. There was a Mantis as well, and several Unicorn and Crab. I also noticed several Ronin, though I know that for them to be admitted to the tournament they must have found sponsorship in one of the clans.

I could tell that I was not the only one in attendance who was concealing a bit of nervousness. Laughter in some cases seemed a bit too loud this first evening, and a few of those who were obviously bushi slipped away to a nearby sake house. I myself simply sat for a while where I could observe the room, then retired to my quarters to meditate and sleep. To fret over the future accomplishes nothing.

**First day of the Tournament** – The day dawned clear and bright, and after morning meditation, we were all instructed where to meet for the beginning of the tournament. All of our names had been inscribed upon ceramic tiles, and these would be drawn from a bowl to determine who our opponents would be for each of the various contests. There were five competitions on this first day.

The first competition was to be Sumai, judged by the Emerald Champion himself. I did not consider this an auspicious beginning, in my mind. Such a

physical endeavor is not something I had practiced, and I have no skill in such areas. The matter was made worse when my opponent was drawn; a great Crab named Hida Chorotaku. I could not expect to win, but at least I would try to give an acceptable effort to it. The Hida was hard pressed to pin me, I had no real chance to pin him; he was easily twice my size. He seemed to have enough violence in his stance that if I had been bushi, he perhaps might have hurt me. But my beauty being paramount, I think he considered me no threat.

At last he defeated me, as I fully expected. But I heard the Yogo competitor whisper about how long the match took, and how much the Hida seemed to enjoy it. I did not deign to dignify the comment with any acknowledgement, though I could not deny it was probably accurate. I know well that I am attractive, and such a brute is unlikely to ever hold such a form again.

The second test was one of heraldry, administered by the Imperial Herald. This second test alleviated my nervousness a bit. Miya Shikan was a demanding judge, but the mon presented were not beyond my ability to identify; Great Clan, Clan family, Minor Clan, vassal family, and individual. I noted some of the other competitors were surprised at the similarly good performance of two ronin; I was not. After all, a ronin must be able to recognize his shifting employers, mustn't he?

The third competition was a footrace, through a course of obstacles. My competitor Doji Keitomaru defeated me handily, but not by so great a length that I felt dissatisfied by the result. At least I managed to get through it without disgracing myself. After all, the Doji is a much more athletic figure than I. I had hoped for better, though.

The fourth of the five competitions for the day was horsemanship, and I feared the worst; to fail three of five tests would be unthinkable. But perhaps my determination saw me through. I rode against a Phoenix, one of the Isawa, and managed to gain a victory. Not used to riding, I managed at least to score several hits on the archery targets.

The final test of the day was a questioning on the tenets of bushido, law, and etiquette. It soothed my nerves to end the day on a positive note. Again I

stood before Miya Shikan, though I noted he was surprised to be called to judge the competition. I believe he expected one of the Crane to officiate. This questioning was private, rather than before an audience, but not beyond my training. Most were very basic questions, though they spanned a wide arena of thought.

That evening the competitors once again retired to the teahouse for a great dinner, but tonight the atmosphere was more festive. Gone was the fearful anticipation, replaced by revelry as all the others had, like myself discovered that sufficient success was achievable. Among many of similar skills, a friendly rivalry had even developed. Many of the bushi, especially those of the Crab and Lion, soon retired to the sake house, where a drinking competition took place.

I myself stayed at the teahouse, more interested in trying to gauge the abilities of the more courtly samurai. I placed myself near the center of the room, where I could most easily hear the greatest part of the goings on. But my own attentions did not wander very long. I found myself quite caught by surprise when a pair of finely dressed courtiers entered the teahouse – the twin sons of the Emperor Toturi! I could not politely watch them, but tried to catch a discreet glance or two to determine their intentions. I need not have bothered. They themselves surveyed the room, and both fixed their eyes upon me!

I was almost rendered speechless when they politely approached me and gave their greetings. I quickly got my wits about me and replied smoothly that I had never been more honored than to be graced with their presence. They both smiled, and though my glances were only polite and sideways, I could see that alike as they were, they were also quite different.

My awe faded as it became most clear to me that however exalted their positions, they are in truth not so far removed in age from myself. And they are still, after all, men. The Imperial brothers, like any other brothers of so close an age, were engaged in their own private competition. I realized they had chosen to approach me for one simple reason; I was the most attractive of the young samurai-ko in the room. Their brotherly rivalry tonight would be for my attention.

Such a game I know well how to play; I am after all a Bayushi, and well aware of my own physical charms. I even dress, as much as propriety allows, to accentuate my beauty. My mask is a mask in the same manner that a geisha's silken undergarments constitute clothing.

But to play the game with such as these can be quite dangerous. Despite myself I found it both exhilarating, and rather frightening, to trade expressions of favor with the Imperial heirs. They would take turns, each trying to outdo the other with poems or stories from their own travels, or mildly disparaging each other's offerings. And I in turn would compliment each on their great accomplishments. Despite my initial reservations, I found it rather pleasurable to favor one and then the other; but always in such equal measure that neither could consider himself to have taken the upper hand for more than the briefest of instants.

Only twice in the long evening hours was my attention momentarily distracted from this exchange. The first time was when another conversation became tense and heated in a corner of the teahouse. The two Dragon wearing the mon of Tamori, and the two Isawa shugenja, seemed involved in some unpleasant debate. It was clear that one of each side seemed quite upset, while the other of each clan tried to calm the temper of their clan mate. The foursome dispersed shortly after their words drew the attention of others in the room.

The second instance brought quick sideways glances from many in the room, including the Toturi heirs. A ronin samurai-ko, a bushi of the Maeda, had spoken loudly and disparagingly of men. I quickly deduced that her venom came because she had made a rather improper advance upon one of the Tamori, and had been quietly rebuffed.

As the evening wore on, the Toturi brothers' rivalry became more challenging. As one could not claim victory, it seemed they became reticent to give up the game. I myself did not wish it to end too swiftly, as their attentions flattered me. I carefully chose each compliment to be unique and yet still keep any impression of favor most perfectly balanced between them.

After a time it became obvious to me that they would no longer gauge themselves victorious with only a supreme compliment. After all, they are young men. This game too I could play, if I chose. But I judged it far too dangerous. To gain favor with one brother would certainly bring equal disfavor with the other, and to favor both without offending either unthinkable impossible. And besides, their extended presence, and attention to me here in the teahouse, had drawn many eyes. Discretion would be impossible, and their vastly superior status would completely negate any advantage I could have gained from such an encounter with any other samurai of my own standing.

And so the last part of my evening became the most challenging of all. I had to leave the room and retire alone, but I wished to do so without scorning either brother. In the end, polite goodbyes were said, and it seemed to me that I still retained the good graces of both Toturi.

And that, I judge, is the most valuable and most difficult victory for me in the tournament thus far. Always leave the cage door open so the songbird may return.

**Second day of Tournament** – The second day of the Tournament began once again with a physical competition. The kenjutsu test is not one I looked forward to, but yet not one I completely dreaded. I have, at least, had some training in the proper use of a blade, though I know myself no match for a proper bushi.

The crowds here were large and festive, and I noted that there was discreet betting on the matches, as they were declared, one by one. I truly did not wish to be defeated in this match. I felt my margin of victories too small to be comfortable with a loss at this point. It was imperative that I did well enough in this Tournament to be considered worthy of the opportunity I had been given to attend.

I found to my chagrin that the judges for this tournament were none other than the Toturi heirs; with whom I had spent the previous evening. While the first match was being arranged, they saw me, and gave the slightest of nods, and passed a few comments to each other. I could not overhear then,

and could only raise my fan slightly in acknowledgment.

I felt some trepidation, when my name was finally drawn. I was matched against Maeda Oroko, the ronin samurai-ko who had behaved so indecorously the night before. Despite the fact she was a bushi, I decided that I would do my best to succeed in this match. Bushi or not, to be defeated by a mere ronin, before the Imperial heirs, was something I could not stomach. I also wondered if she might harbor some jealousy towards me, as I knew she had seem me the evening before, engaging in pleasant conversation with our judges of this morning, while her own attempts at an evening's entertainment were thwarted.

And so I set myself to fight like a scorpion. Oroko struck first, and I only set myself to parry the first blow. Her strength was greater than mine, and she seemed much tougher than I as well. I judged that I had one chance. When I struck in return, it was not to injure her. I struck for her sword hand, to knock the blade from her grasp. I gave the blow all my effort, and focus. And it seemed the fortunes were with me. The blade slowly tumbled from her hand. I was declared victorious, as a samurai incapable of holding onto a blade is not worthy of the competition. I gave a silent and inward sigh of relief. If that ploy had failed, I would not have been able to defeat her, I judged.

A few things were of note from the competition. Doji Keitomaru, one of the other contestants, did poorly, much to the surprise of all. His father had joined the audience this day, when he had not been present before. Perhaps he felt the weight of his father's glance to be too heavy. He seemed under much strain.

Isawa Tsutakito was paired against Matsu Nimoro, the Lion daimyo's heir. When his blow was struck, everyone was shocked to see blood! The Phoenix's blunt yari had apparently been tampered with, and replaced with a sharpened one. The Isawa immediately offered his seppuku, but was spared, as it was obvious this was not an intentional act on his part. The Matsu was healed without difficulty. But I did see Matsu Chigitsu with quite a dissatisfied look. What did he have to do with this? Or was it merely

that he wished the Isawa to die for wounding a member of his family?

After my match, I watched those others, but then retired to clean up and meditate briefly. I did not wish the growing excitement outside to disrupt my focus on the rest of this competition. There were still many tests to come.

After the kenjutsu duels were completed, we were all gathered for a contest in poetry. This was judged by Doji Sarutomo. Although I sought to compose a most sublime haiku, my opponent Kakita Amiko apparently assessed the tastes of our judge more accurately. It seems I inadvertently stumbled upon a phrase that the Doji disapproved of, as I was given a poor mark. This disappointed me most severely, as I had thought myself better versed in the courtly arts.

My disappointment carried forward, and I feel I choked in the go tournament that followed. Akodo Gintaku and O-Doji Koneko judged. I felt I opened well, but quickly lost control of the board to my opponent Tamori Ryuko. The disapproval in the eyes of the judges unnerved me.

This left me with four victories and four defeats. I could not have felt more stressed by this competition. Two courtly test I had failed, and besides my ability to speak to the kami, I had considered courtly arts my strength. I felt that whatever followed, I had to do better.

Fortunately the next competition was in the debate skills demanded of courtiers. My opponent in debate was once again the ronin Maeda Oroko. Despite the hard eyes of O-Doji Koneko and Miya Shikan, I was easily able to outmaneuver the ronin. We were asked to debate which was most important in spirituality, the Tao, the Fortunes, or one's ancestors? The ronin foolishly tried to argue the benefits of ancestry, when her own was so weak. I myself supported the personal dedication to Tao, which can allow even one of no background to spiritually progress. It was childishly simple to defeat her in this way.

The last competition of the day was that of hunting. We were divided, not into pairs competing against one another, but into teams of three to work together. This change of pace was different, but in a

pleasant way. If we successfully brought back eggs of the Tsu fish within two hours, we would be counted victorious, with the first team to do so gaining extra points.

I was teamed with Yogo Yuji, whom I discovered was applying to the Imperial Seppun school, and a fellow shugenja, Isawa Kenji. Although we did not reach the finish first, we did manage to find some eggs after a bit of effort. The winning team consisted of Matsu Nimoro, Kakita Toru, and Moto Tsuto, which surprised me not at all. But at least this would be counted as a victorious result, which left me at the end of the day with a count of 6 victories and 4 defeats.

During the competition, we also came upon Matsu Chigitsu, apparently pressing a confrontation against Isawa Tsutakito. The Isawa was mainly unarmed, and sought to escape the Matsu. When our group stepped forward into view, the Lion backed down, muttering that he would settle the matter later. Tsutakito seemed to have no idea what the problem was about. I wonder if this was linked to the event of the kenjutsu tournament.

Dinner this night was hosted by the Kakita Dueling Academy. The invitation to attend that was issued to all the competitors in the Tournament was perhaps the greatest honor I had thus far been offered. I wore my most flattering courtly garments. After the most formal dinner I had ever attended, each of us in turn went forward to prostrate ourselves before the Sapphire Emperor. And after that, a less formal air seemed to possess the room. There was much conversation, and we were allowed to tour the premises.

I found that much to my dismay, Matsu Chigitsu began to quietly spread slanderous rumors about myself, as well as the Yogo and Isawa I was teamed with in the hunting competition. Although I despised him for doing so, I would not deign to acknowledge his spiteful words. It seemed this Lion was just spoiling for a fight; and I certainly would not gain anything by giving it to him.

My own intentions were elsewhere. Although I had initially hoped to have more conversation with the Toturi heirs, this was not to be. Other than a nod of acknowledgement, they were too occupied by

other matters. I found my attention instead caught by the ronin Kenji. During dinner, I had noted that he kept glancing toward the Lion Champion. Finally he seemed to gather his courage, and go forward to speak to the Matsu. The two then shortly retired, seeming to move towards the gardens.

My curiosity was piqued. What possible business could a young ronin put forth that would demand the attention of the Emerald Champion? And so I quietly and cautiously extracted myself from the circulating crowds and followed. What I witnessed horrified me. When they had reached a private spot, the ronin drew a knife, blade dulled with poison, and struck!

“This is for the Tsume family and Shiro Kyotei, Lion dog!”

There was nothing I could have done, had I even been close enough to try. It was over before I could react. The shout of Kenji brought Akodo Gintaku, who handily dispatched the ronin with a single strike. The Matsu daimyo perished in agony. The Crane are dismayed; O-Doji Koneko took charge as the Crane Champion seemed aimless. The Lion, of course, were furious. Matsu Nimoro and the other Lion competitors in the Tournament departed immediately.

It occurred to me to question who sponsored the ronin Kenji. When the Crane courtiers were able to show that the ronin had been sponsored by the daimyo of one of the Lion vassal families, the fury of Akodo Gintaku was somewhat tempered. He left with the promise of the head of the unfortunate daimyo.

With the festive atmosphere gone, the rest of us swiftly retired for the evening. There was nothing else to be gained from tonight.

**Final day of tournament** – The final day of the Tournament began with much more solemnity than the day before. Matsu Nimoro had withdrawn from the tournament altogether; with his father’s death he had to attend to familial duties. The other Lion were quiet and reserved.

Iajutsu was the order of the day; the final test is a great tournament. I knew that I would not win such a tournament; I had never received formal training in this art. But it was no longer considered honorable for shugenja to concede matches, as it was in the

past. And so I must fight, and resign myself to the fact that I would bleed before the day was done.

I managed to win my first match, against another shugenja, but failed in the second round. At least my own striving was at an end for this Tournament.

Kakita Amiko won the iajutsu duel ultimately, but that is not surprising, as she trained in the Kakita dueling academy.

In the end, all points scored were tallied. I was allowed to complete my gempukku, which was truly all I could wish for given the circumstances. The Topaz Champion, much to my surprise, turned out to be Isawa Kenji, the jovial shugenja. He had managed to meagerly edge out the others with a few unexpected victories. I had worked with him in the hunting competition, and so approached and congratulated him politely.

By the end of the day, many of us were already preparing to depart. With a long road ahead, I began my own preparations. I found myself traveling with the new Topaz Champion, as both of us were to begin lessons at the Isawa shugenja school following our successful gempukku.

I find it encouraging that the Fortunes have seen fit to place me so often in the company of greatness in these past few days. Though I myself have not achieved the highest glory, I am close at hand, and favorably looked upon, by those that have. And for me, perhaps, that is of greater value.