Reflections Part I - A Different Path

Chapter Three

Kevin Sanborn

Rokugan, Himawariko's Blessing, several tokkuri later…

"So you are Akiko's aunt? How did that happen? There is no love lost between the Unicorn and Lions even before the canceled marriage…" Takame asked again, returning to her earlier question. This time sake had loosened her tongue and like an unruly mount it had taken the bit and charged across the field on its own, heedless of the quiet voice far in the back of her mind trying to regain control to no avail. The cool breeze took some of the heat from her face as she leaned on the table towards the Lioness.

Mitsuko picked up the tokkuri nearest to her and shook it, gauging the weight of the porcelain sake bottle. A frown appeared on her face as she realized it was empty. She scanned the table, spotting her prey: an unmolested bottle. With a smile she picked up the bottle and offered Takame and Tomoko a refill. Takame accepted while Tomoko declined. "You of the warrior's constitution have outdone my delicate nature. I will not be an able host if I cannot stand." She laughed, excusing herself from the rest of the festivities, consuming tea for the rest of the night.

Mitsuko pointed to Tomoko with her ochoko. "First, the conflict of Honor was? is? Between Shinjo and Ikoma, not Utaku and Matsu. We may fight for our clans but there has never been much enmity between our two families. Respect has been given and received from BattleMaiden and Lioness as long as I can remember. As for the other question?" Mitsuko gestured to Tomoko again, "Well, this devious mare came to the Matsu's winter court nineteen years ago, corrupted my brother, ruined my reputation, restored my honor and exposed a blood speaker traitor in our midst. If that was not enough: four years ago she saved my life," Mitsuko said casually. She paused a moment before adding, "and of course there was last year…" She gave the geisha a short bow which Tomoko returned.

Takame stared at the Lioness, then the geisha. "Ahh…" She said eloquently.

Unperturbed by the Shinjo's stunned reaction, Mitsuko took another sip of her sake. "So, Tomoko-chan, how is my brother anyway? I haven't seen him at all. I was hoping to at least have a few moments while I was here," Mitsuko asked pleasantly.

"I have not seen him since our respective Daimyo decided to combine our forces," Tomoko said. "He is out there somewhere, in the thick of it, working with the Kamoshika, Hakobu, and Lion's Pride to accomplish some level of harmony between the three. I do not envy him the task. I don't need to tell you, Matsu women are an aggressive, energetic bunch and Utaku men are rather… vigorous, but if he can succeed then I suspect that there won't be a greater infantry in all of Rokugan," She said. She fanned herself slowly as she looked out into the night thinking of her husband stuck between the two groups. The Matsu had fought beside the Utaku during many battles last year. The Council of Himawariko had recognized the potential and sent a proposal to Lady Matsu. Their strengths, combined, would be greater than the sum of their parts. That strength would be needed eventually.

Takame recalled another oddity of the Utaku: they had infantry. Part of that force was mounted infantry, that is, their heavily armored *men* rode their stocky, heavily armored ponies until they arrived at the battle then they dismounted and fought alongside their ponies… *alongside their ponies*… who fought with a fierceness that rivaled all but the most battle hardened enemies. Takame had seen it once in a minor border skirmish. It was like watching someone use a tetsubo to smash a row of porcelain tokkuri. The only thing more awe-inspiring than that was the Shiotome who charged through the hole the infantry had made in the line and *removed* the Lions from their lands. "I have always found it odd that the Utaku are of two halves," Takame said. The twin looks of curiosity from Mitsuko and Tomoko should have shown her the error of her words immediately, but she was feeling quite euphoric. She took another sip of her sake unaware what her words had caused.

"How so?" Tomoko asked. Her voice was sweet but a more perceptive person may have seen that her eyes were sharp.

Still bemused by her insight Takame continued. "Well, you Utaku of the towns, villages and farms are friendly, warm and normal, but your Battle Maidens are cold, menacing and strange, like they are not even human." Takame smiled thinking she had complimented the geisha. Only the best trained, with a keen eye would have pierced Tomoko's _On, _her mask of calm indifference, and witnessed the slight lowering of her eyelids.

"Battle Maidens?" Tomoko said. She ignored Mitsuko's sudden coughing fit. Some sake had gone down the wrong way…

"The Utaku's samurai-ko, the Shiotome," Takame said. "Why are they so strange? Of all the times I have talked to one of them I felt like I would have had better luck talking to their horses." Takame chuckled at her own humor.

Tomoko took a sip of her tea, letting the air settle for the space of seven heart beats before she answered. "Without going too far in detail, Takame-san, I will try to explain. The South, The samurai-ko, *The Shiotome*, have a great burden to carry: the Honor of the East and West; the Utaku of the towns, villages and farms, as you say. They can never fail. It is through them that we serve Shinjo no Kami. That duty requires a certain strength of mind; 'strange' as you put it." She turned and bowed to the south after she had spoken. She kept her head to the floor for seven beats again before she straightened. She turned back to the table and her guests. "More sake?" She asked warmly.

To Takame, the explanation made no sense. What did the south, east and west have to do with anything? She dismissed the explanation as more Utaku mysticism and held out her ochoko for a refill, nodding her understanding without understanding anything. "Oh, thank you."

"You are welcome, Takame-san. How is your brother doing?" Tomoko asked innocently as she refilled Takame's cup.

Outside, a light rain began to fall.

That night…

Whatever the cause, a relaxing bath, good meal, the pitter patter of rain or the sake but Takame fell asleep almost immediately after laying down. The sound of heavier rain pounding on the roof of the ryokan shook her out of her sleep. As she blinked in the pitch black of the room she realized that it was not in fact raining. _Just dreaming, _she thought. She closed her eyes to return to sleep when she felt the tremor that traveled through the floor: the thunder was the muffled thump of limbs on the bedding covered tatami mats only a few feet away. Adrenaline surged through her body chasing away the cobwebs in her mind. She flung back her kakebuton and rolled to her feet struggling to see anything in the dark."Who's there?! Is everything all right?!" she said in a whisper.

There was the unmistaken sound of steel piercing flesh and a muffled gurgle. *The last breath of the dead.* Takame's blood froze. She fumbled in the dark trying to find her sword. Her hand crashed into the stand and knocked her sword off to roll… somewhere. Fear gripped Takame as she flailed about for it.

"It's fine." Out of the dark, the voice of Tomoko spoke. "Be careful and stay where you are, I will get a light." Takame's heart pounded against her chest. There was the sound of someone moving and the sliding of the shoji. A few long minutes passed before the faint soft light of a lantern moved down the hallway. Even in the dim light Takame could see the body of a man in the middle of the room. His face was buried face down in Tomoko's bedding. A small bloody wound was visible on his side. Takame saw her sword had rolled towards her in the dark resting against the shikifuton.

Mitsuko stepped out of the shadows, her katana naked in her hands. "Is it just the one?" She asked.

"No others will be intruding on our harmony tonight." Spoke Bao from the doorway. Takame started in surprise for the innkeeper was dressed in dō-maru, an Utaku composite yumi in her hands, diasho at her hip. A practiced archer herself, Takame by reflex counted seven arrows remaining in her quiver. Akiko and Satami quietly moved into the room and gathered the corpse. They were also dressed in armor, diasho and yumi rested on their hips.

"How many?" Mitsuko asked. Her katana slid back into its saya with a loud click.

"Four, five if you count the one that waited on the shore. Miko collected that one with her yumi." Bao said calmly.

"It seems that someone doesn't want our dear sister-in-law accomplishing her task." Tomoko said. She cleaned the blood from her elegant kenzashi before slipping it into her hair.

"It seems that way. But you knew that, didn't you? Tessen turned yojimbo. This is the second time you have saved my life, Utaku." Mitsuko said. Mitsuko suddenly frowned, realizing that in all of this Takame had kept silent and unmoving.

"Are you hurt, Takame-san?" Mitsuko asked, moving over to check on her.

"I… I'm unhurt. What happened? Who are those assassins? …Why are the innkeepers in armor?! Why is a geisha guarding you?" Takame asked her questions rapidly, her adrenaline fueled mind trying to catch up to reality.

The Matsu held up her hand to stop Takame's questions. "In time…I don't suppose we will be getting any more sleep tonight. How long till morning, Tomoko-san?" Mitsuko asked with a sigh.

"Two more hours till Lady Sun returns to these lands." Tomoko answered. She stepped over to the corner of the room and retrieved her fan. A long tanto was wedged within its iron ribs. "Markings of the Crane on this tanto" she said, working the blade out of the iron fan. She handed the tanto to Mitsuko.

"Yes," she said. She glanced at it then handed it back. "Means nothing."

"Of course," Tomoko said. "But it is *Kakita* forged; a very fine blade. It very nearly cut through my tessen." She held up the ornate iron fan to show the neat hole in it.

"Give it to the one whose harmony was ruined by events not of her choosing," Mitsuko said, indicating Takame.

Tomoko nodded to Mitsuko. "As you wish Mitsuko-dono." She turned to Takame. "Please accept this gift from Lady Mitsuko, Takame-dono. She wished you to know that she regrets that her presence has disturbed your sleep and unsettled your harmony." Tomoko bowed to Takame, holding out the tanto in the palm of her hands towards Takame.

"Take it. Utaku dislike the false modesty of customary refusal," Mitsuko said. "Accept it and let's get some tea in us. Then you can ask your question. I think you deserve that." Mitsuko looked at Tomoko, who bowed back.

Five disposed of bodies later…

The tea was very strong. Enough that Takame sat up straight with a shudder. "Gah! What is this?" Takame asked.

"Gyokuro, Takame-san. Is it not to your liking? I can water it down or get a different blend," Akiko said.

"No, thank you. It's fine. It just took me by surprise." Takame felt the tea surging in her veins. She took another sip of the tea as she watched Akiko, still dressed in her armor and bearing her weapons, serve her mother and aunt.

Takame waited until Akiko had returned to the kitchen before she asked her question. "So… why are the innkeepers armed and armored like Battle Maidens?" She asked softly, leaning in towards Tomoko and Mitsuko.

Mitsuko looked to Tomoko, who ignored the question to take a sip of her tea. Mitsuko shrugged. She looked back to Takame. "Because they are Battle Maidens. Every Daughter of Utaku is a Battle Maiden," Mitsuko said.

Takame stared at the Matsu in disbelief.

"Every. One," Mitsuko answered the unspoken question. "Even…" She waved her hand towards Tomoko.

Takame's eyes followed Mitsuko's wave to stare at the pampered, silk wrapped geisha who calmly sat at the end of the table sipping her tea like she hadn't just killed an assassin with one of the kenzashi nesting in her hair.

"Every girl is taught the techniques of Shiko by the time she is seven, afterwards they continue to train, depending on their inclinations, in one of the Utaku's different specialties: heavy cavalry, light cavalry, scouts, magistrates, and ah…" She cast a glance at Tomoko again, "diplomats turned yojimbo. Shiotome, Yabusame, Shika, and of course our own illustrious Tessen. All are Battle Maidens. Tomoko, what unit does your kin ride with?"

"Besides Naomi?" Tomoko asked. Mitsuko nodded. "The Fourth Yabusame, of course. The Fifth Yabusame's precinct is upper Nodowa-cho. Naomi, Bao's daughter, is a Shiotome, she just completed her gempukku this spring. She carries our honor," Tomoko said, adding the last bit for Takame's benefit. Tomoko finished her words with a bow to the south.

"My simple innkeeper niece and her Yabusame sisters have spilled more Lion blood that I care to recall at the moment," Mitsuko said with a mix of pride and grudging respect warring in her voice. "I spent my life studying the Utaku, I fought against them and even managed some small victories against them: my first time against them I held my line against their attacks long enough for my previous lord to retreat, escaping his ill planned border skirmish many years ago. Rather than slaughter us…" Mitsuko paused looking at Tomoko then back at Takame. "…rather than slaughtering us the Utaku left the field, leaving us to return home in neither victory nor defeat…"

Tomoko held up the tetsubin, offering to refill Misuko's cup, which, with a nod from the lioness, she did with a polite smile.

Mitsuko took a sip of her tea, collecting her thoughts, letting her words settle before continuing. "…Why they did that, I have no idea and I have not gotten an answer that is satisfying. One month later this treacherous mare showed up in Lady Matsu's court with a personal letter from Shireikan Toshiko, at the time, praising my courage and masterful handling of the battle. That I was a paragon of the Lion's Pride and such skill could not be lost to the ill conceived tactics of ambitious men."

Mitsuko looked at Tomoko with a frown, remembering the events. Tomoko returned the frown with a polite nod, acknowledging the telling. Returning her gaze to Takame, Mitsuko continued. "For that and my expertise, I was looked on with suspicion within my own clan. None spoke of those suspicions but my days in the ranks were over, my duties were conveniently honorable but noncritical, relegated to bureaucratic roles." She sighed and shook her head, resigned to her fate after so many years.

"That was fifteen years ago. Then five years ago I was to be married off, a *convenient* way to get rid of me: the Purple Lioness… but I fell in battle and by the time I had recovered the wedding had been called off and the war… It took many months before I could return to my family… on the back of an Utaku steed in the company of a certain Tessen and ten Shiotome Emerald Magistrates. As you can imagine it didn't help my reputation much. This joining of forces is the only time I have led a Pride since that day and why I was given the 'honor' of being the liaison to the Utaku alongside my sister-in-law."

Seeing that Takame's and Tomoko's cups were empty, Mitsuko returned to courtesy.

"I would not be surprised if certain elements within my clan and the empire wished this to fail. Think of it; the Utaku and Matsu joining forces. If the Utaku didn't lack ambition then who could stand against us?" Mitsuko said all this as one who recounts a bit of interesting history and not an attempted assassination against her own life. Mitsuko smiled as she watched Akiko return from the kitchen with a fresh tetsubin of tea. "Simple innkeeper, by the Fortunes…" Mitsuko murmured, shaking her head.

Takame couldn't help staring at Akiko as she refilled their cups. Misuko's words echoing in her mind. ALL. *All* Utaku women were Battle Maidens. Takame remembered all the villages over the years she had visited with their women: farmers, innkeepers, carpenters, food vendors, geisha, *all were Battle Maidens*. Like a flash of lightning Takame understood them as they truly were: trained from birth in the art of battle, stretched along their border with a system of roads that could be traversed in even the worst weather connecting them. Those were not villages, they were war camps! They were like a yumi pulled back with an arrow notched ready to fly to its target. All that was needed was for the Utaku to let loose the arrow.

The Utaku had lost over ten thousand maidens in the Shadow War yet a hundred thousand maidens stood behind them ready to answer the call…

The Purple Horde.

It had never been raised in living memory, there was no mention of it even being assembled in the two hundred

years since they returned from their journeys. She had heard children's tales of it. It was only a legend. Even at the height of the Shadow War the Purple Horde had not been mentioned. It was whispered that in only times of greatest peril would The Champion call the Purple Horde to their aid, how nothing would be able to stand against this mythical Horde. That once called only Shinjo no Kami could order them to leave the field of battle. The Utaku … *All the Utaku*, a hundred thousand BattleMaidens…

Shinjo's Wrath. Altansarnai had called them that. Takame felt a shiver run down her spine, "Why have I never heard of this?" Takame asked.

"None believed me when I told my lord that he was unprepared 'to face simple villagers' on his raid into the Eastern Utaku Fields, thinking he would be the first to gather prisoners and ponies where all others had failed. His explanation for his defeat? It was a trap, the Utaku had been forewarned of his intentions. Many eyes turned towards me thinking the explanation was a way of hiding treachery ahead of time… *Innkeepers are not samurai.* Who would believe you? Would you believe you if you had not witnessed this with your own eyes?" Mitsuko asked.

Takame took a sip of a fresh cup of tea, wishing it was a different beverage.

With Lady Sun shining down on them, Takame, in the company of Mitsuko and Tomoko, retrieved Naran from the stable. As before, the stablehand gave Takame her tack, letting her place the bit, bridle, and reins on her horse. Takame was a bit surprised when two Utaku steeds without escort exited the stables with her horse, a gray mare and a black stallion. She was even more surprised when the black stallion moved over to Mitsuko. Mitsuko gave the horse a shallow bow before carefully mounting the black stallion, gingerly gathering the long lock of mane at the base of the neck.

"A few more weeks and we will have you riding like an Utaku, Matsu-san," Tomoko said pleasantly. She slipped into her saddle on top of the gray mare.

"I am just glad I can sit in the saddle without falling off," Mitsuko said with a light chuckle. "Don't expect me to be riding beside your Shiotome anytime soon… or ever, if I am honest with my skill." She lightly tugged on the mane. "Ok, Akira-san. I am ready,"

The stallion looked back at his passenger and grumbled something before he turned back and started to walk. Tomoko's mare whinnied as she fell in beside the stallion with a definite strut to her walk.

"Really, Kaze? Not very modest, are you," Tomoko said. Takame watched the whole event play out in front of her. She again wondered if perhaps she had fallen into some kami's trap, casting her into a dream. She snapped out of her wonderings to ride after her two guides.

She rode up the hill passing several switchbacks and gates before standing before the castle proper. She had thought it was big when seen from a distance, now standing before the mountain of stone and timber she felt very small. She, a person of the wide open plains and unfettered clear skies, felt oppressed by the castle, its mere presence was enough to cause a stirring in her gut.

Mitsuko, seeing Takame's wide-eyed expression, could guess at its cause. "There are not many in the Empire that can boast such a structure, but bearing the name of Utaku, I can imagine it would be an insult to their greatest hero to be anything less."

"It is incredible," Takame whispered.

"Just remember, Takame-san, it is not the stone that a castle makes but the people who defend it…" Mitsuko examined a column of Battle Maidens: Shiotome and Yabusame exiting the gate. "…and in this case 'incredible' is an accurate description," she admitted.

It took little time for Takame to be admitted into the presence of Lady Toshiko, Daimyo of the Utaku. While

Tomoko took her leave in the inner courtyard, Mitsuko accompanied Takame into the audience chamber. Takame felt the walls press in on her as she moved down the inner hallways of the tenshukaku; her feet, clothed in a pair of borrowed tabi, sounded unnaturally loud to her ears. Everywhere she looked she saw Battle Maidens, some were as she expected; stern looking samurai-ko and others wore the guise of servants, who bowed meekly to Lady Mitsuko and Takame. Now that she knew what to expect Takame could spot the calluses of archers on the fingers of supposedly "meek women" who scurried through the donjon.

She was glad that Mitsuko was there to guide her. The shoji lined halls with their polished wooden floors all looked the same to her. Large wide stairs led to the second floor and more maze-like halls until a long hall was before her. Halfway down the hallway, guards knelt before closed shoji. Seeing Mitsuko approach and recognizing her, they bowed and silently opened the shoji, allowing them to enter.

Takame froze in the antechamber. She had never been in a castle before, never been in an audience chamber. Her only knowledge was a rough floor plan Nobutada had sketched out before she had left the Shinjo's warcamp.

Why didn't she pick the left hand! She thought as she knelt beside Mitsuko and waited for her presence to be acknowledged by attendants…

She did not have to wait long before they were ushered into the inner chamber. Takame was unprepared for the plainness of the room. She was surprised to find that other than Mitsuko and herself, only Lady Toshiko and two others sat within the audience chamber. The Daimyo waved them to take their place next to the upper floor before her, sitting opposite two other women. From the looks of them, Takame assumed they were high ranking Battle Maidens.

Lady Toshiko waited for Takame to settle before she spoke. Her voice was pleasant, almost motherly. "Be at ease. You will not anger us with any breach of etiquette here, Takame-san. Speak freely if you wish," she said, hoping to ease Takame's very visible anxiety.

Takame felt a knot ease in her chest. Lady Toshiko somehow made her feel welcome. It was not at all how she had envisioned this. She momentarily forgot what she had been going to say. She spent too many seconds just staring at the Utaku's Daimyo before she felt Mitsuko's elbow in her side.

"I carry a request from Lady Altansarnai!" Takame blurted out. She reached into her sleeve, or started to before Mitsuko's hand rested on her arm.

"Slowly, Takame-san. Never do anything *quick* in the presence of your superiors," Mitsuko said. She kept her hand on Takame's arm pacing the younger woman's movement as she reached into her sleeve and retrieved the Champion's personal request. "And never hand anything directly to them either."

She held onto the letter unsure what to do for a second until the older Battle Maiden extended her hand to receive the letter. Takame passed it to her, who opened the letter before passing it to Lady Toshiko.

"Thank you, Tetsuko-san, Mitsuko-san." Lady Toshiko nodded to the older Battle Maiden then the Lioness before she turned her attention to the letter.

Takame waited as Lady Toshiko read the letter from the Champion. Time seemed to crawl as she waited wondering what kind of 'personal request' was written within the pages of the letter. A smile spread across the face of the leader of the Utaku. Remembering the advice she had received from Altansarnai, Takame felt her stomach sink into her belly.

"Lady Altansarnai mentioned an expedition. An expedition that you will lead," Toshiko said as she set the letter down on her table. "and requested we advise you."

"Any assistance the Utaku can render us on our expedition will be greatly appreciated." Takame said bowing low, her head touching the tatami mat before she straightened to see that Lady Toshiko eyes had never left watching Takame with that same smile on her face. She felt like a rabbit out on the open plains with the shadow of a falcon circling her position.

"And what help do you seek from us?" Lady Toshiko asked.

Takame was taken aback by the response. Her thoughts scrambled to frame an answer. What could the Utaku and their unique outlook lend her? "Any advice would be appreciated, Utaku-sama."

"I see. My first piece of advice Takame-san: Know yourself. The second? Know your enemy. In this case your enemy is the journey and the destination. And as for yourself, what have you to accomplish your task and what don't you have?" Seeing Takame's confusion, The Utaku Daimyo continued. "Have you made any plans as of yet?"

"Just the barest of a plan, Utaku-sama…" Takame laid out the plan she and her brother had put together.

"What do you see, Mitsuko-san?" Toshiko asked the Lioness.

The Lioness tapped her chin in thought before she spoke. "Iuchi for the spirits, Ide to scout, Moto for the skirmishers and Shinjo to hold it all together. It is a good balance. While the numbers are going to be less than the other clans, the horses and nomadic ways are going to be a decided advantage in the proper terrain. What of your supplies, Takame-san? I don't imagine that you will be farming. Your mounts may be able to eat the grasses, but I know enough about you Unicorn to know you require more refined food." Mitsuko smiled at her humor. "Farmers you will not be, that would nullify your advantage, chain you to one spot. So, that means foraging and food that travels with you. Will you be taking any livestock with you?"

Takame saw Lady Toshiko nod her approval of the Matsu's assessment. Takame bowed to Mitsuko. "Thank you, Mitsuko-san. I had not considered livestock." Takame grimaced at the thought of reducing the numbers of Unicorn anymore than the thirty-four hundred they had talked about. "Goats and chickens take little space. Cattle are going to be difficult." Takame mused out loud, thinking. "Maybe, a mated pair per ship?" She wondered. Could they add the livestock to the original compliment of passengers without endangering it all?

"Not an ideal situation, constrained by something you have no control over," Lady Toshiko said understandably. "But now you know yourself and your enemy. How would you defeat said obstacle, Takame-san?"

"Get more ships," Takame said.

"Then that is what you will have," Lady Toshiko said.

Takame had no doubt that when they sailed in three months they would have more than the one plus one-hundred and fifty the Empress had promised them. She spent several days with the Utaku, conferring with several Mantis merchant-sailors as well as Hyuga Stable Masters, figuring out exactly how much feed, water and supplies they could stuff into the ships safely. When she left she had several scrolls listing everything that they would take with them on their expedition right down to the number and type of spare arrowheads. As far as ships they sailed with?

They had thirteen more.

Fourteen if you counted the beautiful chokkibune lashed to the deck of Takame's great atakebune, *The East Wind*.

To be continued…