Reflections Part I - A Different Path

Chapter Four

Kevin Sanborn

Silk Beach

Sanctuary, four months after Landfall…

Nobutada ran his hand through his hair. *Damn!* He thought. *That was one of his favorite hats.* He looked out towards the cause of his misfortune: A single two-masted kobune sailed purposely towards the single dock that stretched out over the small harbor. On its mast foremast a simple purple banner waved in the afternoon breeze giving no hint to their identity, yet the horse that stood on the bow was unmistakably an Utaku steed. Only a Unicorn would know the difference. One part of him was shocked that only one ship approached the shore, the other part was relieved. A small handful of Utaku from… wherever… would not be a source of much trouble. The camps were tense with hidden ambitions, as well as the situation between the Crab, and a large contingent of Utaku would not make things any better. A small number would not threaten the careful balance he and his sister were walking till they could find a solution to their problems. They might be able to be hidden away from the eyes of other clans or even explained as always being here, just not noticed. What were a few Utaku? A harmless curiosity. Most couldn't tell the difference between a Moto pony and an Utaku War Horse to save their life, and oftentimes they lost their life due to that ignorance. Still, the longer they could keep them out of sight the easier it would be.

The ship docked expertly. The crew, Mantis sailors, began throwing mooring lines to the few workers on the deck of the Eastern Wind-turned-dock. Nobutada had instructed the handpicked workers from his sister's retinue to not ask any questions. *Be polite and leave the talking to him.* He waved to the people standing on the deck.

"Ahoy! Welcome!" He called out as the aft lines were secured to the post letting the ship's momentum pull it up against the side of the 'dock' before the bowlines were tightened. The ship's bumper shifted against the East Wind's hull a moment before the ship settled. A gangway was quickly extended and the ship's passengers began to disembark. A maiden dressed in a resplendent silk kimono walked serenely down the gangway and glided towards him. Behind her, three horses and two ponies began walking down the gangway and waited as Mantis and Utaku formed a chain to load a multitude of saddles, packs and other baggage onto the horses and ponies. Once one animal was set, it simply began walking through the interior of the great atakebune, making their way to the black sands at the far end without anyone leading it, to wait a short distance away while the next in line took its place to be loaded with gear. Nobutada was stunned at the orderly, no, *organized,* disembarkment. He remembered how hard it had been to get their horses off the ships after six weeks at sea and how stressed and skittish they had been, causing not an insignificant amount of trouble and injury to themselves and their handlers as they were taken off the ships.

He had to agree with his sister's assessment: it was very unnerving to see the horses simply walk off the ship without cajoling or any sort of guidance looking fit and healthy, without hardly any noise other than the sound of their hooves echoing on the wooden planks.

Such was his fixation on the horse's demeanor that he jumped when a sweet soft voice spoke beside him. "Good Afternoon, Ide-san. I am Utaku Keiko. Can you tell me if Shinjo Takame or Ide Nobutada is nearby?"

"Ah…" He struggled to collect his thoughts as he stared up into the eyes of the Utaku. "I'm Nobutada, Keiko-san," He said with a short bow. The maiden gracefully bowed low to him. If not for her mon on her kimono he might have thought she was a Kakita. A very tall Kakita.

"Excellent! " She said with a smile. One that Nobutada found himself returning. "Please forgive the silence of my sisters and brothers. They have been instructed to not speak to any, other than myself of course. I hope that is not an inconvenience for you or your sister?"

Nobutada breathed a sigh of relief. "Not at all. The men working the dock are from my sister's personal retinue. They have also been instructed to be discreet."

Keiko's grin widened. "I am glad we are of the same mind in this, Nobutada-dono." She reached out with a fan she had produced from somewhere and tapped Nobutada lightly on his sleeve. Nobutada felt the heat rise to his face as the maiden flirted with him. It had been over a year since someone had reminded him of his time in Otosan Uchi. "The words I have are for you and your sister." She turned to watch as supplies, too big for the horses, were

handed to the men on the dock. "We have also brought with us some extra supplies for your expedition. I hope you won't find us too… forward… to offer you these small gifts."

It had been too long since he had delved into the wordplay of the court. He hadn't realized how much fun it could be. He took up the lead Keiko had given him and politely declined the 'gifts'. They bantered about for a bit longer as they moved towards the beach, stepping aside at the end, letting the Utaku move to the sands beyond. In short order three maidens, two men, three horses, two ponies and a moderate sized pile of supplies came from the ship.

The mantis wasted no time after resupplying with 'shoving off' and returning to the open waters. Disappearing into the morning fog.

Takame stared down the spyglass watching the Utaku's ships dock and a small number of Utaku, horse, pony and supplies filing passed her brother. Her blood went cold at the sight of a maiden in the brightly colored kimono approaching her brother: an Utaku Tessen! Why was one of *those* here?! She gasped as the maiden glanced directly at her. The Utaku's eyes seemed to lock with hers through the spyglass for a moment before the Utaku returned her smile back towards Nobutada. A beautiful Utaku steed, a chestnut mare, walked up behind the tessen as she gestured to Nobutada's horse and then the path that led up to the plains above. The tessen easily slipped atop the mare and with little more than a pat on the neck of her mount she rode beside Nobutada up the path. Behind her four other Utaku and their mounts followed carrying packs and boxes. With each step of the mounts climbing the ravine she felt a growing apprehension. Her brief time with Utaku Tomoko during her time visiting Shiro Utaku Shojo had taught her that there was more to the silken wrapped Battle Maidens than just pleasant company. If one of the Utaku's warfans was here, it must be important… somehow. Takame wondered if the five visitors were all there were.

"So, that's it," Nobutada said. "You just *followed* the Mantis? Why did you not sail with us?"

"We have our reasons. My apologies if this news upsets you," Keiko said with a bow.

"What will the Utaku do now?" Takame asked.

Keiko adjusted her posture a bit, settling back on her ankles and laid her hands lightly on her knees. She looked at both, sister and brother. "Lady Altansarnai passed the Line of Shinjo into the fold of the Utaku through her son Yasamura. After centuries of waiting for the Circle to be complete, to begin again and with Lady U'taku's blessing; the Council of Himawariko has decided we shall search for Shinjo. We have waited long enough for her to keep her promise to us. Lady U'taku has sent us here to do her will."

"But what does that mean for us?" Takame asked. If, as Lady Altansarnai had said, that the promise to protect the Line of Shinjo was all that bound the Utaku to the Unicorn, what would happen when the Line of Shinjo was within the Utaku?! What would a sword do when it had no master?

Keiko smiled reassuringly, sensing Takame's concern. "We have no debt to pay, nor are we bound to serve another's interests, but the Utaku will honor our shared history. We will not speak another promise, Takame-sama, but you may count on the Mare's Breath to carry Shinjo's Light in her absence."

"I don't understand. How can we count on the Utaku to aid us in these new lands if nothing holds you to us?" Takame asked.

Keiko nodded her head to the Unicorn Champion. "The same way Shinjo no Kami trusted Lady U'taku. Before the Unicorn, we had a long history with the Ki-rin bound by mutual trust and love between us and Shinjo no Kami, not promises. We stood with her because she stood with us. We would like to return to that relationship, promises that bind are a source of disharmony and we Utaku have observed the fragility of words and the darkness within the hearts of man. You will find that action is stronger than words. As long as you stand with Shinjo, you shall stand with us, Takame-sama," Keiko said sweetly. She smiled at the two of them. "…is this

acceptable?"

Takame and Nobutada stood outside the lodge and watched as Utaku Keiko and her retinue, two maidens and two men moved a short distance away to begin setting up their three yurts.

"Well at least that is reassuring," Takame said.

"What is?" Nobutada asked.

"The yurts. At least we have that in common with them. I wonder where the rest of them ended up?" Takame asked, scanning the horizon.

"As Keiko said, 'out there somewhere.'" Nobutada pointed inland. "Just start riding off to the east and I am sure you will run into them eventually. By the way, Keiko brought some welcomed supplies for us."

"That's great," Takame said half-heartedly as she returned to watching the Utaku setting up the yurts.

"It's mostly odds and ends, good-to-have things we sacrificed to squeeze as much out of the ships."

"Good," Takame said.

"They even have a bath. I know how much you like that," Nobutada said.

"That's good," Takame said absentmindedly.

Nobutada looked at his sister, his brow creased in concern. "They even brought the Dragon Throne with them," He said.

"That's gre- wait, what?!" Takame said, snapping out of her thoughts.

"What's on your mind," Nobutada asked.

Takame gestured towards the Utaku encampment. "You heard Keiko. They… A legi…" Takame leaned towards her brother and said the last parts in a whisper. "An Utaku Legion! Three thousand Utaku and their horses!" She hissed.

Nobutada frowned at his sister. "I heard. It's a really big problem. Oktai would shit himself if he ever found out. You know how much the Utaku dislike the Moto on the best of days… add in the Deathpriest and they may decide to… ummm… *deal with them.* We are going to have to ride calmly in order to not 'spook the herd'. There is still a chance we can resolve this peacefully without killing half of our clan. We need to make sure *no one* knows about this until we need them. This land is empty enough that they can hide without revealing their purpose or numbers."

"How?" Takame asked. She gestured toward the five Utaku less than an arrow's flight away from where they stood.

Smoothing out his goatee, Nobutada smiled. "Unlike the Utaku, we can lie. Did you forget my hasty marriage to Lady Keiko just before we left?"

Caught off guard by her brother's exaggerated swagger, Takame snorted in suppressed laughter. "As if any woman would marry you-"

"Hey! I'll have you know I was quite popular with the ladies at Otosan Uchi."

"Bored, pampered, silk princesses seeking something exotic. No accounting for taste," Takame countered. "Your… 'bride'… must have taken pity on such a sad man."

Lodge of the Dawn Breeze
Six Months after Landfall…

Normally the Celebration of Brother Horse didn't last more than a week, ten days at most. Yet Takame had declared that two weeks both day and night were to be used to honor not just 'Brother Horse,' but as a celebration of their new home and the marriage of her brother and Lady Keiko, who had returned from a visit with her cousins to the south. Nobutada was surprised to find out it wasn't too far from the truth. Due to her Akodo father's youthful folly during a visit to one of the Utaku towns resulting in her birth, she did have a cousin-half-sister within the ranks of the Lions. Over half a year had passed since they had landed and several new members of the clan had been born into these new lands in the last few weeks. And what better place to hold the events than where they first landed, the cove of the Obsidian Cliffs. Yurts dotted the highlands surrounding the cliff-tops and the cleft leading down to the cove.

For two months the Unicorn had been stockpiling foraged foods, wild game, fish, and kumis, a fermented milk drink popular amongst the Unicorn save for the Utaku. With several calves within the herd and many more cows pregnant, a few steers were slaughtered and everyone was looking forward to some beef. Race tracks and archery courses were marked out. Several of the older members of the clan were selected as judges for the various contests. It was to be a long, drawn out affair.

Preparations were in full swing as all were involved in erecting the various fences, corrals, obstacles, cooking pits and many yurts across the sweep of land around the cove. Though the celebration was not to start until Lord Moon had turned his back to Ningen-do, there was already an air of excitement amongst the clan. Even the Deathpriest, Oktai, took time to enjoy the moments rather than stalk about, brooding.

In all this, the Utaku stayed distant to the preparations. Only Keiko's presence was of note. She, being Takame and Nobutada's almost constant companion during this time, advised the pair on how to navigate the treacherous landscape of politics.

With only three days left before the celebrations were to begin, most of the clan had arrived. Acting off of the tessen's advice, Takame ordered all the patrols off of the forest's edge. A hundred scouts, ten to a group, were to maintain a watch a day's distance from the forested border, to watch for treachery and guard their backs. Until things cooled between them and the Crab. It was best to take a defensive front, to use the land to their advantage.

As Lady Sun set, throwing long shadows across the rugged landscape, she cast a reddish-gold light, setting aflame the scrub brush that dotting the plain, her parting gift before she turned her sight onto the west. A dozen men approached the camp from the east, riding stocky ponies, indistinguishable from the arrival of dozens of small bands of far-flung Unicorn that inhabited the land. They brought with them several freshly killed deer, as well as some rabbits, pheasant, and grouse, hunted down while they journeyed. To an observer they were just another hunting party returning for the celebration.

Takame and Keiko were there to greet them as they offloaded their catch. They collected letters from Keiko then disappeared into the east before Lady Sun's return.

When the night of Lord Moon arrived the celebration began. Song and story floated above the encampment mingling with the flickering fire light that illuminated the hazy smoke and sea mist crowding the shore. Takame stood alone on the overlook and stared out into the darkness and fog. Ningen-do could have been a stone's throw away and it would not have been seen. Only the muted crashing of the waves below followed by the hiss as the water withdrew from the shore let her know that a vast stretch of ocean spread out, unseen, in the darkness separating this new land from the old. She closed her eyes to let the sound enveloped her senses for a few moments. A few seconds of peace, a rarity it seemed these days, ever since her meeting with Lady Altansarnai…

The fate of her clan rested on a blade's edge, one wrong step, one rash action, from her, her brother, Oktai, the Crab, or something yet unknown and it would be all lost.

"Sanctuary," Takame chuckled under her breath. "What a joke, We have brought all the tools necessary for our

own destruction with us, no need for some dark Kami to herald our doom."

"That was always the way of man, and yet they still survive," Keiko said only a few steps behind her. Takame jumped a little, startled. "My apologies, Takame-sama." Keiko bowed to the champion.

Takame returned the bow, uncomfortable as it felt. Somehow Keiko made her feel it was necessary. She remembered the bright, warm, orderly ryokan that looked out over the river and another tessen. She turned her attention back to the fog, barely illuminated by the fires. Takame gestured to her side. Keiko stepped next to her so they could talk comfortably.

"You're not enjoying the festivities?" Takame asked.

"Are you?" Keiko replied. She was, due to her training, more talkative than her sisters and brothers. "You should be."

"Why?" Takame asked softly as she continued to stare out into the darkness.

"Do NOT surrender to the darkness, it is the Path of Fear and Greed, stand within Her Light, *Shinjo* Takame-sama!" Keiko hissed in uncharacteristic vehemence before she returned to her normal calm demeanor. A rare peek behind the Utaku's *On*."Your people turned their backs on Shinjo long ago to follow their own path, *Unicorn*. It is time. Show your people a different path, *Her* Path, the Path of the Ki'rin: Courage, Honor, Compassion," Keiko spoke softly but the steel in the words cut through the mood Takame had been in.

Takame took a sudden breath, shaking herself out of her waking dream. She looked down into the darkness towards the beach. Takame had never fought such a battle before - for the hearts and minds of her people. To face Oktai and his carefully engineered machinations, to do battle using words was not something she had experience with. She wished her brother could lead this fight but Keiko had been insistent that she could not divide her power with Nobutada, that it would be a wedge Oktai could seek to exploit. Fear had settled deep into her chest. She tore her eyes from the darkened depths to look *up* into the eyes of Keiko. The Battle Maiden, typical of her sisters, stood over a hand taller than any Unicorn in the camp. Her eyes shined with the intensity of a bird of prey.

Keiko smiled. It was not a friendly smile.

"Will you ride with me, Utaku?" Takame asked as she felt the fear within her heart flee from that smile.

Without speaking, Keiko gestured behind them. Keiko's mount, the chestnut sirocco mare, walked up leading Takame's own gelding, Naran. He had been in the care of Keiko's grooms for the last month and he shined. Takame had her answer. They slipped onto the bare backs of their brother and sister and turned towards the festivities -Takame with a light tug on Naran's mane while Keiko and Melody just moved as one.

"Let's ride with Shinjo," Takame said, feeling something other than doubt filling her heart for once. She didn't need to see the smile gracing the face of Keiko to know that they were going into battle as they brought the Light of Shinjo into the midst of Her lost children.

To be continued…