Reflections Part I - A Different Path

Chapter Five

Kevin Sanborn

Five Month after LandFall
Sanctuary, Breeze of Dawn's Lodge

Ide Nobutada held the oilcloth up to the light seeing the telltale signs of sharp corners imprinted on the fabric. They were the exact distance apart as the iron book Iuchi Tadamatsu and Moto Oktai had discovered in the shrine beneath their feet within the warren of caves that ran deep into the land. "You found this near that shrine?" Nobutada asked his 'wife' Utaku Keiko. She merely bowed.

He silently chastised himself for questioning the word of an Utaku. She had told him where she had found it already, folded, under some loose rock, in a side cavern, a few ken from the entrance to Oktai's 'shrine'. Between that and her other evidence: paint brushes cast aside in the dark with dried pigment clinging to the hairs, already flaking away and the unmistakable traces of oil, wax, and rust already forming on the book, spotted when he had examined it carefully with Keiko's help. The air around here was heavy with salt and humidity. Any exposed metal started to rust if not constantly seen to. "So, Oktai fabricated the entire story." He didn't even need to know the reason, he knew: Power. "He seemed so sure of it." Nobutada prided himself on his ability to read people.

"He *is* sure of it. He is living in his own lie; he believes what he is saying, yet he arranged everything in advance." Keiko said. She tapped her head. "He is injured here. His companions on the trip over tell that he suffered an almost fatal blow to his head from an errant wooden pulley. He had been unconscious for several days before he recovered. Afterwards they say he wasn't the same. I think he believes that the Shi-Tien Yen-Weng speak to him; that he is chosen. I also think he was planning on seizing power from the moment he volunteered to join this expedition."

"Then what of the secret message from Lady Doji hidden within the foreign writings? How did they come about."

Keiko frowned. A rare look from her. "I looked and could find no such writings, Nobutada-dono, can you show me this message?" Nobutada bent to the task, fetching a mirror and opening the heavy book. He remembered the words in the reflection, floating into his vision as he had examined the pages. His brow creased as he concentrated, a look of confusion crossed his face. "I don't understand. The message was right here." He held up the book tilting it to catch the light streaming into the lodge. "Did I dream it?" Nobutada put the book down, closing the cover on the jagged writing.

"Perhaps." Keiko said. "Lack of sleep and stress can twist a person's vision. Maybe you sought to find a way around Oktai's pressure?"

Nobutada ran his hand through his long hair, trying to remember those days, only two months past. "That sounds reasonable. Well, we can expose his fraud to his followers and end this nonsense." He said, yet hesitated when Keiko sadly shook her head.

"You cannot fight a lie with the truth or belief with facts, dearest Nobutada. Those who believe the lie will ignore the truth, clinging to the lie even harder, rather than lose face."

"Then what are we to do? Every day a few more flock to his call!" Nobutada ran his hand through his hair again, an unconscious habit, in frustration. "In a few more months it won't matter if the Shi-Tien Yen-Weng are not here. Something must be done if my sister is to keep control of the expedition."

"You show them a *different* truth." Keiko said. "Offer your people what they desire. When your enemy pushes, you pull. He wishes for power? Give it to him while taking it away. The Unicorn are feeling weak and afraid? Offer them what they desire as well as more than what Oktai offers: Pride. Your sister must lead us into this battle for the Spirit of the Unicorn during the Celebration of Brother Horse."

Six Month after LandFall
Breeze of Dawn's Lodge: Celebration of Brother Horse

The Celebration of Brother Horse had gone better than Takame had expected. With Keiko beside her, offering moral support, Takame had ridden amongst her expedition. Takame hesitated to use the word 'expedition' to describe the Unicorn. Their entire history and culture could be considered an expedition to the sedentary. No, for the Unicorn they had different words for their people and their culture. A better word to describe their group on these foreign lands and all lands were foreign to them, was either, depending on a person's outlook; a large minggang, which typically numbered 1000 people, or an under-manned tumen that normally numbered 10,000 People of the Wind. These were the words they had used to organize their forces when they had travelled far over the horizon, as a force to be respected and feared. It was hard to think of the thirty-four hundred people as a clan. It was even smaller than the Empire's minor clans and if Nobutada's estimates were correct, there was a good chance that the Otter now outnumbered them. Still the small number of Unicorn, while it had its disadvantages in some areas, such as the border dispute with the Crab, in other ways it was a decided advantage. They kept their horses. They were mobile. And their homes could *move*. Still, she had some cause for concern until looking at Keiko and remembered that out there, somewhere, an Utaku Legion was waiting. It gave her *Hope*, the knowledge that they, the Unicorn, were not lost or alone. Takame felt confident and serene as Keiko rode by her side, much as the Lady U'taku had ridden beside Shinjo no Kami. The Unicorn would survive. She had no doubt. That feeling swept through the celebration, easing the minds of all except one…

Oktai could feel his carefully acquired influence wane as the days went on, as the always present Takame presided over the ceremonies, as storytellers spoke of Shinjo no Kami and her time in the Emerald Empire as well as many of her adventures on her journey. It was always the same message, over and over. Courage, Honor, Compassion: these were the legacy of the Children of the Wind. Embrace it, our home is where we are, we have adapted to a thousand different places and survived following the way of the Ki'rin.

He could not escape it. He struggled to remain calm as the days turned into weeks.

He had been on the verge of seizing control, bringing the rule of the Shi-Tien Yen-Weng to these heretics. He had forced that woman and her weakling brother into a corner as more and more had listened to his message. On the one hand he had promised the Unicorn power which had gotten him some to follow him, but not enough. So he had promised them safety, that the Shi-Tien Yen-Weng would contain Akugawa… just as long as they followed the Shi-Tien Yen-Weng… and *him*.

And then that woman, that *wife* of Nobutada, a pampered, silk-wrapped harbinger of disaster, had arrived by ship two months ago and everything had changed. Suddenly his words had less weight than they once had. No longer did he see the edges of doubt, of fear, in their eyes when he spoke. Now they looked upon him with kindness and pity! They smiled and asked how his day was! Feigned interest in his gospel, would say something along the lines of "Interesting, thank you for bringing this to our attention, or I'll think about it…" His eyes spotted the pair of women riding across the field, having returned from presiding over another event. His stomach turned thinking that a woman bore the title of *Khan*. It had been bad enough back home with Shinjo Altanansarnai claiming the title, but she had inherited it from her dead husband and her son would have claimed the title if the marriage had gone through with the Ikoma, instead the fickle woman had broken the arrangements to the great embarrassment of the Unicorn and cost many Moto their lives in the ensuing war with the Lion. Then that woman had appointed another of her kind to lead this fool's errand. It was the Shi-Tien Yen-Weng who had sent him along to correct this weakness in his clan, he was sure, had given him the dreams, leading him to the Iron Book. With such guidance he could take control of these lost, weak souls. He was surrounded by the weak.

"Oh! Oktai! Hey!" A voice in the crowd called out.

Oktai looked about until his eyes rested on that peacock of a man, Ide Nobutada, in his purple and gold deel. The richly dressed man, though Oktai used the word hesitantly, waved to him and walked through the crowd.

"Enjoying the festivities?" Nobutada asked as he stopped in front of the Moto. "I had a wager on the young Koji.

His mount has a good stride. You?", calling to attention the race that just finished.

Every word the brother of Takame uttered was a burden to his ears. "We should be preparing for war with the Crab not… enjoying festivities." Oktai said with barely suppressed scorn.

Rather than be upset by his blunt words, Nobutada nodded. "Wise words, wise words indeed. Which is why I needed to speak with you, or rather Takame Khan wishes to hear your wisdom during the kurultai."

Surprise momentarily shook Oktai out of his dark mood. "Kurultai?!" He stared hard at Nobutada. "A war council?"

"A council. There will be many matters to discuss. Takame Khan has heard the words from the families. She wants to hear your words as well during the kurultai."

"And what shall I be to this council?" Oktai asked warily.

"Jaguns, the members, and their leaders will be decided, among other things. All the oldest members shall be there to reach a consensus." Nobutada smiled. "Or as close to a consensus as a bunch of people can," he laughed.

Oktai didn't join him in the laugh. His patience with the man had worn out. The jagun, the smallest of the groupings of the People of the Wind, excluding raiding parties, was a loose informal extended family group of around one hundred Unicorn. It was led by a respected member of the family, normally an older member, but not always. Instead of one homogeneous group that he could seize power from, it was clear that Takame would divide the Unicorn, weaken them and make his efforts much more difficult.

"When?" He snapped.

"Tomorrow, noon."

"Very well, I'll be there with the wisdom of the Shi-Tien Yen-Weng." Oktai said briskly, He turned and headed off in a random direction, just as long as it was away from the source of his growing headache. He didn't see Nobutada's grin widen.

The next day the selected members of the Unicorn families gathered to the east of the Breeze of Dawn Lodge. As was tradition, they arranged themselves in a large circle with each member of the council sitting crosslegged, facing towards the center. This arrangement was as old as the Ujik-Hai; all voices were equal in the kurultai, everyone's words were heard. By agreement just as old, the Khan sat to the east. While all had a voice, the Khan could either call for a vote or alone decide if no consensus could be reached amongst the assembled. Normally, only if the debate went on for longer than ten days or if matters needed to be decided quickly.

They took most of the first day to arrange the jagun, which families would ride together, several new weddings had occurred during the celebration and arrangements had to be observed. Oktai fretted under the formality.

"Oktai Darga," Takame used the formal title for an appointed leader of a jagun or any small collection of people or troops. Normally such distinctions needn't be used within the council. Other than the Khan, they were all equals and the Unicorn, compared to the rest of Rokugan, chose to treat each other more informally, saving honorifics for more ceremonial times or when one has earned the distinction. "Do you have a preference for your jagun?"

He was confused. "Darga?! I… Nobutada didn't mention… I was to lead a jagun," he growled. A headache started to creep into his vision.

"Huh," Takame said. "I'm sure he mentioned forming jaguns and leadership to you, I was most specific that he mention that to you." Suddenly, there was a knife edge he was balancing on. Oktai wasn't stupid enough to call Takame a liar. She was acknowledged by all as the Khan. Steel would have to be drawn and blood spilt. She was as tall as he was, and he suspected, matched him in skill. Too much to risk for a simple misunderstanding. The fools, they may be, but they outnumbered him.

"Yes, I remember he mentioned selecting leaders and arranging the jaguns… I had much on my mind yesterday, I didn't understand that he meant that I was to be darga as well. My apologies." Even though he tasted blood to do

so, he bowed to the woman.

"These are trying times for all of us, Oktai, I am sure there are many who would join your jagun."

"I have a nephew who is quite taken by your preachings. I am sure he would want to follow your leadership, Oktai," Shinjo Tatsuki, darga of the Golden Eagle jagun, volunteered… on queue. She stood out among the council as the youngest member, having turned twenty during their voyage. Even more prominent was her boyish appearance, short black hair and a slim figure. While riding with Takame's raiders, she had been mistaken for a boy on more than one occasion and had responded with her sharp wit, enhancing her reputation as an untamed mare. The rest of the kurultai's members spoke up recommending various members of their jaguns who could fill Oktai's ranks. Oktai recognised many of the names offered. His headache vanished as inspiration swept his thoughts: the Shi-Tien Yen-Weng had called the faithful to his side! He saw their influence grow with every name spoken. For the first time in weeks he actually smiled as he bowed to the council. "I accept them all."

Lady Sun was nearing the horizon by that time and Takame Khan called for the council to adjourn for the night, setting the next meeting in three days, giving the new darga time to organize their jagun. Oktai wandered back to his yurt in a daze. Every step was watched by the Shi-Tien Yen-Weng, and they paved his road with the souls of the faithful. In time with their guidance he could seize control of the ki'rin-worshipping heretics and show them the true way.

"We should use this time to assemble our warriors and strike at the Crab for their insults!" Oktai proclaimed when it came his turn to speak in the kurultai. All eyes shifted to Takame Khan.

"Sound advice," Takame said solemnly. The fire in Oktai's heart flared bright. Takame scanned the assembly. "Can anyone tell me what lies beyond the forest? What have our scouts reported?"

Her question was met with silence. All knew that the last scouts to enter the forest had not returned. Ten Unicorn had been lost. Eventually their bodies were found with no sign of their horses. Broken equipment: arrows, a yari and the lower part of a katana, tsuka and tsuba, evidence of Crab scattered around the site of the massacre. The Hiruma were quite capable scouts and raiders. Since then Takame had kept the patrols well west of the forest.

With no one volunteering any new information, Takame added, "Ide Nobutada witnessed on his return from Lake Aaratana Hijimari; an army of over a thousand, sitting two li within the forest, on the eastern bank of the empty river bed that marked the supposed border, behind fortifications. So, what does the kurultai say to this?" Takame watched the Moto Death Priest with a well-practiced look of contemplative seriousness.

Moto Genki, the oldest member of the expedition, spoke up. "Only a fool allows the enemy to pick our battlefields. Forest and fortifications play to the Crab's strength, not ours. We would be turning our back on our greatest allies, our open plains, our horses, and the greater range of our arrows. I say: not at this time should we cross steel with the Crab. Let them come to us! Their blood will water *our* fields!" He pounded his fist on his thigh. His wisdom was unquestioned and his experience on display. His fifty years had failed to dull golden-brown eyes that peered out of a face creased with a long life under Lady Sun's merciless gaze and the scars that criss-crossed his arms and bare shoulders told of a lifetime of fighting in the far northern territories within the Burning Sands. While his hair was more gray than black now, he kept his beard neatly trimmed and shoulder-length hair pulled back into a ponytail. He struck a rather attractive-menacing figure and could still attract the attention of women half his age. If Takame had given such advice, some may have doubted her resolve, which is why she gave the task to her ally. She had learned much when she was younger, riding in his band and was honored when he had agreed to join her command. Moto Genki was old enough and wise enough to have earned the respect of all.

The members of the kurultai raised their right hand in agreement as the Khan's eyes passed over them. Takame's eyes settled on Oktai. His hands stayed lowered a moment before he raised his own with clenched teeth. "We shall wait then." Takame said. "While assembling a warband is not for today, we should be ready." She raised her hand and waved over members of her entourage carrying an ox hide stretched out on a portable frame. Sketched out on the leather in charcoal was a crude map of the Unicorns' territory, divided into a rough seven by seven grid. The eastern two columns, next to the forest, were crossed off. "Let's organize where we shall call our

homes…"

The kurultai began selecting where each jagun would graze their herds.

Oktai tried to work up some outrage, yet it felt hollow even to him. Takame and the rest of the kurultai treated him honorably, giving him the respect he was due as a leader of one of thirty-four newly formed jagun. He couldn't even protest that the jaguns were to be scattered across the Obsidian Plains after the celebration. Its purpose was obvious to everyone; so that their livestock could graze without depleting the surrounding sparse grasses.

Oktai had thought to stay near the cliffs to tend to the shrine of the Shi-Tien Yen-Weng and the pact containing the shrine of Akugawa, but his jagun was to be set to wander the far northern fields. To stay near the cliffs would mean he would have to give up command of his jagun of converts to another; Moto Gantulga, more than likely. The younger man had ambition and a desire for power that drew people to the Lords of Death. Oktai would be isolated within the jagun of Takame and under the sharp eye of *that Utaku*. Either way he would suffer a great loss, one he was sure he wouldn't recover from. He was smart enough to recognise that he had been outmaneuvered.

The message was clear: behave yourself, do not cross that line again, or we will take everything.