



Whisper on the Wind

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The History of Rokugan kept by the Scholars begins with the arrival of the Kami, the past being purposely erased by the Emerald Empire, forgotten by almost all...

Territory of the Crabs, Southwestern slope of Mount Kuramatsu

The slumbering solitary giant recently named Mount Kuramatsu by Empress Botan dominated its surroundings. It was the master of all around. It towered into the clouds, which hung forever on its snow-covered peak, mingling with the near constant plumes of ash and steam that escaped its gaping mouth. Its slopes were a series of valleys and ridges that had been created by ancient mudslides of ice and ash that had accumulated on its peaks, released when weight and temperature sloughed off the buildup. At the beginning of one such valley, a hollow had been created by the remnant of a past avalanche that had stopped still high up the slope, bordered by two steep ridges to each side and backed by the mountain itself. A team of Utaku infantry camped within the hollow. According to their doctrine: they lit no fire and had coated themselves and their equipment with a mix of mud and ash to blend in with the slope's terrain, keeping hidden during the day, spying out the surrounding and only moving at night.

Gunzo Hamaru, leader of the Utaku Special Reconnaissance squad, and his second in command, Nikutai Masato, rested at the crest of the ancient avalanche, keeping watch over the lands beneath them. Lady Sun had set almost an hour ago, yet her light still touched the top of Mount Kuramatsu for a few more seconds. Both men were veterans of the Shadow War, virtually identical in look: average height and scrawny, wiry and tougher than they looked, with sharp eyes and short-cropped hair. Hamaru was Masato's senior by half a decade. He was a grizzled veteran who had earned his scars over the course of a decade's worth of reconnaissance. His squad and the Utaku Shika Yurei, Battle Maiden hunter-scouts composed of Emi, and her sisters had worked together more than once and each had an understanding and appreciation for what the other did. Hamaru passed Masato the spyglass and pointed to the small plume of smoke on the horizon drawing a meandering line against the twilight. Masato was careful not to let his silhouette break the top of the crest as he lifted the spyglass to his eye. Even this high up, with the nearest Crab settlement a hundred li away, they still acted as if they were under constant threat of discovery.

A flickering in the air below their position caught Hamaru's eyes before his other senses. He calmly pulled Masato and the spyglass down below the ridge. Masato didn't question the act. He had also felt the wave of heat roll up from the valley below. Hamaru's brow creased in worry. He didn't know what was about to happen, but instinct assured him that this night's events must be told to Taisa Utaku Umeko, the commander of the Utaku Expeditionary Legion.

"Get Emi up here," Hamaru signed to Masato. Masato nodded and quietly slipped down the embankment, careful not to disturb any rocks. The path had been noted beforehand, and he moved until he crouched before the Battle Maiden Naoko Emi.

"Something is happening over the ridge. Hamaru wants you to see," Masato said in a series of hand signals to the Shika Yurei. Naoko Emi, a short-haired woman dressed in a drab green and brown cotton kimono and little else, looked up from her meal of cold rice. She and her sisters, the dapple-gray mare, Vata Chinatsu and the red, bushy-tailed vixen, Yume, were embedded within the long range patrol. The patrol was composed of a squad of Utaku light infantry and five all-black stallions from the Night Stalkers, specializing in operating unseen in lands outside of the Utaku's borders.

They had been sent deep into the territory of the Crab to gather intelligence. Utaku Keiko, the Utaku courtier advising Shinjo Takame, had sent a report to Taisa Umeko. It had painted a disturbing picture. Both the Unicorn and the Crab had been attacked on the border between the two clans and each blamed the other. Despite Ide Nobutada's best efforts, he could not convince the Crab that the Unicorn had not attacked them. That they had no reason to and the Crab denied that they were responsible for starting the hostilities. Nobutada had returned unable to determine why the Crab would target them so, or to reach a peaceful conclusion. Utaku Keiko saw that something was amiss, that the Imperials were not interceding in this. Why? A battle between the Crab and Unicorn would put the Empress in the middle! Tactically it was insane. Politically it was suicide. It would not take

much before minor skirmishes turned into an open conflict. That battle would ignite the other clans and sides would be drawn. The Empress' dream would die on this land before it could even plant its roots. The young Empress would become nothing more than a pawn for the ambition of humans. The only fruit to be harvested from that crop would be death. Taisa Umeko had conferred with her staff. They all had come to the same conclusion regretfully as it was: There was only one way to resolve this if peace could not be forged with words. If the Utaku had to go to war, to support Shinjo Takame in this, to preserve the light of Shinjo and the Empress, they would have to annihilate the Crab so completely, so quickly, that the other clans would not have time to mobilize before it was over and the Utaku protected the Empress, stabilizing the situation before war consumed the clans, so that *reason* could be restored. To do this, the Utaku would have to surprise the Crab which would not be easy with the Hiruma watching the border between the Crab and Unicorn which meant that the Utaku would have to maneuver around them. A swamp sat to the north of the Utaku far to the east of the Crabs territory... The Legion would just need a few questions answered first and a few blanks filled in on their maps before they finalized their strategy. Commander Umeko sent them out to find the answers before war between the two clans erupted, answers that could only be found passed the borders of the Crab. The children of Vata, as Chinatsu remarked, didn't think much of the lines humans drew in the ground and wondered why so much trouble was being put into guarding something... imaginary. Emi had tried to explain the importance of territory to her sister on several occasions but Chinatsu being a daughter of Epona: the Mother of Unicorns, merely shrugged and called it a primitive affection. Emi suspected Chinatsu did it just to be contrary, to aggravate her.

While nuance was hard to convey in sign, Masato's face, even in the gathering gloom, told Emi that it was serious. Emi quickly shoveled the rest of her rice into her mouth, rapidly chewing and swallowing while she moved carefully up the slope to crouch down beside Gunso Hamaru. Hamaru held his hand low over the ground next to his position. They stayed low, inching forward in the black crusted soil to peek over the ridge line to the valley below. What she saw challenged her reality. Yesterday there had been a valley filled with old mud slides and boulders. Now there was a narrow, impossibly deep, chasm, over a hundred ken long and thirty wide, wreathed in red-black flames the color of dried blood. It looked as if some maho-tsukai had dragged a dull blade across the landscape. From her vantage point she should have been able to see into the fissure but she could not see any sides or bottom, only those blood-colored flames. It was a rip in the very fabric of the world that solidified into a jagged wound, an opening to unknown fiery depths. Waves of heat and violence expanded from the opening. Emi could feel the tendrils of it brush against her mind, though they found no purchase. For the Utaku, war was an *art* tempered with wisdom, not an act of violence motivated by ambition, fear and greed.

Like a torrent of blood spraying from the wound, a horde of tall, blood-drenched warriors began to pour out of the portal. They wore ancient rawhide tankō armor stained, like everything else, in blood. They carried primitive yari consisting of a shaft of wood the length of a man tipped with a hand-sized leaf-shape piece of obsidian bound by blood-dyed hair that ended in a tassel. Others carried simple wooden self-bows and obsidian tipped arrows. All had stone axes tucked into leather straps wound around their waist.

A glimmer of familiarity rose to Emi's mind. Her hand drifted down to her steel axe, similar in length and purpose to the stone ones being carried by the invaders. She remembered the stories of the Others from before the Kami fell. When kingdoms of mortal men fought against each other, it was from one such group, the Slayers of the children of Vata, that the Utaku learned of the chaos of violence and turned it into a discipline of art. They had picked up the axe, the yari and the yumi and had combined that with the last remaining Children of Namaku on the central plains, the Utaku pony, sheltered within the shared territory of the Two Lakes to become something the world had not seen before: cavalry.

There was another story she remembered, told to her by Chinatsu, who shared her interest in history. It had been many years ago as they patrolled the Two Lakes northern border as children. A Namaku story of a terror from the heavens that swept across the Plains of Four Rivers far to the south of the Two Lakes. Rivers that ran with blood. Stories from the Namaku survivors who took shelter within the Lands of the Two Lakes during those days of blood, who were swift enough to escape the massacre as the very land itself turned against the inhabitants. Their oral history spoke of men of the axe and yari, who died without honor or peace, cursing the fallen star that doomed them.

Whether these warriors from the past were the ghosts of the Slayers of the children of Vata or another lost kingdom's souls, it did not matter, only their purpose mattered. Emi put the stories to the side to focus on the now as she watched the host, nearly a legion, exit the chasm and move southwest at a quick march. As they had been trained, Emi and Hamaru counted the number and made note of equipment and organization before they carefully slid behind the slope. She and Hamaru held a quick briefing in sign.

"*The Taisa needs to know of this as soon as possible,*" Hamaru signed. He indicated that Emi and her sisters should go.

Emi shook her head. "*We have the answer now to why the troubles along the border are happening. The very land, I see it now, reeks of this place of violence. These invaders are heading southwest towards the Imperial Palace,*" She returned. "*The Crab keep their eyes on their border and the Unicorn. Not deep within their own territory...as these Reavers intended! There are less than five hundred bushi at Palace Lake. Courtiers outnumber katana. That boat will not last even a day against this. They will have the Empress! Without her, once her light is gone, those flames will fill the darkness of men's hearts and will consume all. There will be no peace except that bought by the uma-yari. She needs to be warned.*"

Hamaru grimaced, it was a tough choice. "*You warn them, The Empress and the Champions. We will return to warn the Taisa. Return with Takame-sama's words. Be careful; neither the Imperials nor the Crab will be pleased to learn that the Utaku are now present on the island and in their territory.*"

"*When has anyone ever been comfortable with our presence?*" Emi grinned, then signed. "*I'll ...omit our strength and purpose. I'll offer to carry a message to Takame-sama. They may wish for the strength of the Unicorn. Let them assume I am part of the Unicorn encampment.*" _Gunso Hamaru returned her grin.

They moved downslope and joined the others. Masato had already started the preparations for breaking camp, preparing for their return to Utaku territory in all haste. Emi made her way over to Chinatsu and Yume, who waited expectantly. Emi signed to her sisters. "*We must race the Winds tonight.*" Emi looked at Yume. "*You must carry our honor alone. We'll meet you back at the Castra. Go with Shinjo.*"

With a nod and a soft huff, Yume stepped back before turning to spring forward, past Masato and the squad of Utaku and Sirocco, to sit on the southern ridge, waiting for them to finish their preparations.

Emi had complete confidence in Yume's abilities, despite Yume's mischievous facade, she had been born and raised in the depths of the Shinomen forest. Yume's skills as a scout and a hunter matched her own. Even Hamaru couldn't find fault with Yume's skill.

The five-man reconnaissance squad, the five Night Stalkers and one vixen slipped out of the hollow and made their way southeast down the slope in the gathering gloom. Before he disappeared over the crest, the black stallion, Nikutai Fravash, nodded to Emi and Chinatsu, wishing them luck. Emi waited several minutes after they had disappeared from sight, listening for any sign of discovery, before she turned southwest on a path parallel to the horde of Reavers. Emi leaned forward and gripped Chinatsu's mane tight. They felt the Blessing of Vata, The Kami of Horses, his heavenly fire flow through them, merge into one inferno. Four legs, four eyes, two arms, two minds...*one heart*. Emi did not ride *as one* with Chinatsu, she *was* Chinatsu and Chinatsu *was* her. They were greater than the sum of their parts. *They Were One*... they became a whisper on the wind...