

EMERALD LEGACY



Climbing Silver

Chris Garvey

Otomo Usonohime watched Empress Botan and her Seppun escort ride away on their ponies as Ide Nobutada's retinue thundered in on their horses. They certainly were imposing, but a war horse would not be making its presence known in court. Usonohime had the advantage.

Ide Nobutada wore an amethyst colored silk deel embellished with glass beads that caught the light as he walked. A gold sash was wrapped around his waist. His fingers were adorned with rings. A dark beard tapered to a fine point. He was unquestionably an Unicorn. No other clan in all of Rokugan would look so ridiculous.

"Nobutada-san, welcome to the Imperial palace. I hope your ride here was a pleasant one," Usonohime purred.

"Well enough," Nobutada said, eyeing the large number of Crab samurai intermixed with the Seppun guards.

"Mind if we go somewhere else to discuss this border dispute? I would not care for being interrupted."

Usonohime smiled internally. The tension from Nobutada towards the Crab was palpable. "Of course. I thought we might discuss the border dispute over a game."

"We? I thought I would be speaking with the Empress."

That child is not here. I saw to that. She would have rolled over and divided the land "fairly", but that would have shown weakness. What are we to do? Give in to their every request? The samurai of the Great Clans outnumber the Imperial Families seventy to one. Plus we need them more than they need us. Should they ever realize that and unite under a common banner we would be undone.

"The Empress is... indisposed at the moment. Much is to be done setting up everything in this new land.

"Then perhaps the Coral Champion? Are they not responsible for sanctifying the land?"

"Kakita-sama is away making arrangements for their stay here. In their stead I will be your liaison."

"Very well," Nobutada conceded.

"Please follow me." Usonohime led the Unicorn representative to a room that had been prepared for them. A game board with 40 pentagonal pieces arranged on top. "Are you familiar with shogi?"

"I have a passing familiarity." Nobutada brushed his ring laden fingers through his beard. Was that a tick? Usonohime would have to watch for that again.

The two courtiers knelt on either side of the board and began to play.

"I would like to get this dispute with the Crab settled quickly and to the benefit of both clans," Nobutada admitted.

"The Empress would like this settled as well, but these things take time."

The bamboo pieces slid across the varnished wooden board. Nobutada adjusted the Silver and Gold Generals along with his King. Mino Castle. Usonohime knew it well. Mino Castle was a defensive move, easy for beginners.

"We require land for our horses to graze upon. It is said that an army moves on its stomach. Our entire clan lives atop our horses and their stomachs might as well be our stomachs," Nobutada reasoned.

"Did you not bring hay aboard your ships? The horses can last until you can farm land for them to graze," Usonohime retorted.

"Alas, the hay will only last so long and we ran ashore by a cave system; there is no farmable land in the vicinity. That is precisely why the horses strayed in the first place."

"Then it is simple. Free your ships."

"If only it were that easy. The East Wind is firmly stuck and my sister, Shinjo Takame, has affirmed that this is where our new land is to be. Besides, there is something we have found in the caves that has become very interesting for us."

Usonohime used her fan to slide the Silver General forward. Climbing Silver. She was on the attack. If successful, this would put her in a favorable position on the board and destabilize the Crab and Unicorn, the closest clans to the Imperials by proximity. But whatever this was in the caves could change things. She would also need to figure out what it was and how to bend it to her advantage.

"Oh? And what is it that you found in the caves? Is it something we should worry about?"

"It is," Nobutada paused to think. He couldn't rightly say that they found a shrine to the ninth Kami and beseech the Lords of Death to contain him nor what they found in the iron book, "an internal matter. Nothing that should concern her highness."

He is hiding something. A treasure perhaps, or a weapon? If it were the former it wouldn't affect as much. Treasures can become gifts or collect dust. The latter is more troublesome depending on its strength. If I chase this now I may lose my true goal. Better not to press.

"It is too bad you didn't decide to go south. I hear that there are some fertile lands and vast fields where the Phoenix and Lion have landed." A smile almost came to Usonohime's lips.

"There are things more valuable than fertile lands, Usonohime. We had been so far from the Imperial families for so long that it was high time we helped secure your lands and rebuild our relationship with you. Where better to have a fresh start than on a fresh land?" Nobutada ran his fingers through his beard.

Usonohime and Nobutada exchanged bishops.

"Then I suggest you send some scouts, perhaps those of the Shinjo family, to map out the land. Figure out what you need and bring a formal proposal here."

With any luck those Shinjo scouts will run into Hiruma Hajime and tensions will boil over. Even if they don't, the conflicting maps will bring arguments in the courts.

"Many in the clan have been restless, and this would give them something to do." Nobutada was lost in thought. "Would the Empress approve of such an action?"

Usonohime placed one of her previously taken pieces back on the board. "The Empress is still learning the ways of court. She left this matter in my hands. It will all work out in the way the Kami wish."

"Very well, I shall consult Shinjo Takame and encourage a scouting party to go out and survey the land."

Checkmate.