



Stones of White and Black

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River of Gold, Rokugan

Usogawa Jijo, sister of the Otter Clan daimyo, sat in her cabin. She wore a simple cotton dress and sleeveless top, functional for her everyday life aboard a boat ferrying others along the rivers of Rokugan, but they were clothes of a peasant. Her sister and the clan geijōjin, samurai entertainers who specialized in the playing of shamisen and fan dancing, however, wore soft silk kimonos.

Jijo looked down at a go board covered in white stones save for a single black stone placed at the center star point. A stack of communication letters lay beside her. No opponent sat across from her.

Some weeks ago aboard a river ship on their way from City of Honor's Sacrifice to Jukami Mura, The Port That Never Sleeps.

"If she weren't the Empress I would think her mad," said Ikoma Ba with great gesticulation. Ba was a mid-level quartermaster for the Lion Clan. Jijo had ferried many like him before. "Building a secret fleet of seafaring ships is one thing, but where are we going to sail?"

"There must be an island or land somewhere, Ikoma-sama," Jijo replied sweetly, her face a mask of naive interest.

What an absurd notion.

But what if it were true?

"Ikoma-sama, who is going to sail for you?" Jijo plied him with more saké. "The Lion, as great of warriors as you are, have but a handful of sailors in your ranks. The Tortoise are simple smugglers. And the Mantis? The Mantis are just a bunch of rogues who abide only to their own agenda. I would be happy to loan you some of the best sailors the Otter Clan has to offer. We are well known for getting you safely to where you wish to go."

Ba took a big sip from his saké, drops from the ambitious gulp hung on his mustache as if it were the morning dew. "You make a compelling argument. But this is all for a laugh. Some sort of joke by the Empress."

"But what if it isn't? You wouldn't want the Crane or Scorpion to show you up on the waters."

"Very well, just in case, we will take on several Otter per ship to be council and an example."

Several would have to do. If she could seed the other clans with Otter sailors no one would notice how many she could bring with them to this hidden island.

And with enough sailors put together? Power. Prestige. A group of samurai larger than any other minor clan, at the very least. Maybe even more than a major clan.

And she would be in charge of them all.

Jijo removed several white stones from the board and replaced them with black stones, then picked up a letter from the pile.

On the Lake of Sorrows.

Usogawa Ai fixed her glistening hair pin. Just as their clan founder was a geisha, Ai was a geinōjin, a beautiful entertainer. If she used that beauty to sway the hearts of others to help her best friend Usogawa Jijo, who was she to complain? Ai glided over to Ide Gan. Jijo had figured out that he was the one whose job was to plan the manning of the Unicorn boats and arranged for Ai to be aboard his transport.

"Much seems to be on your mind, my lord." Her voice was plum saké, sweet yet intoxicating.

"We are great sailors atop our horses in the grassy sea and the sea of sand, but when it comes to water we are found wanting," Gan sighed.

"Are you setting sail somewhere without me?" she asked, knowing.

"It is nothing, my dear." Gan's face turned red, though whether it was from drink or her proximity, Ai was uncertain

"It isn't 'nothing'" Ai pouted and edged closer to Gan. The fur of his coat sent shivers down her spine. "I know that look on your face. You know something important, and you are keeping it from me when you know I can help."

"I, that is to say, the Unicorn and other Great Clans are setting out on a voyage to explore a new land. As I mentioned before, we are not great seafarers. We are as likely to get where we are going as we are to run ashore before leaving port."

"The Otter live on boats, even an entertainer like me only knows of the way of water. I am good friends with the sister to our daimyo. I could see if we could spare some sailors to assist you. If you are even a tenth the sailors you are the horseman, with us I am sure you may succeed."

"I don't see why one as lovely as you and some of your company cannot join us."

Ai's letter gave the Otter access to the Unicorn ships. Jijo swept away one corner of the white stones like so much rubbish and replaced them with black stones. She picked up another letter to see how Susaki Ren fared with the Crab. The Susaki family of the Otter were their faithful fighters and ferriers, loyal and stalwart. Ren was all that, and cunning as well.

On the river by the Uebi Marshes.

Susaki Ren slammed down the cup.

"Chō!" Exclaimed Yasuki Kenji.

Ren lifted the cup to reveal two dice showing a six and a four. "Chō it is, you win again. You are skilled at this, my lord." Despite being stripped down from the waist up, Ren was a skilled cheater. In this case he was playing the long game and cheating to lose, though he won just enough to not let on that he was cheating. "I guess this is it for gambling, I have nothing else to offer."

"No, surely there must be something? If you don't have a zeni left then you can use other items as your ante." Kenji was desperate. Ren had seen him gamble away everything in an inn before this voyage. He simply wanted the thrill of a game of chance.

"I don't carry belongings with me on the barges."

"Something, anything. The night is still young, we cannot be over yet. I will extend you a line of credit."

"All I have to offer for collateral are my services." Ren held in a smile. He loved to fish and he knew just when to pull on the line to hook the fish.

"Deal! We have a voyage coming up and could use some skilled sailors. Now roll the dice!"

Ren scooped up the dice with his cup giving it a swirl. This was his trick, he knew how to set the dice to one side with a twist of his wrist. He could even stack the dice in a single tower if he had wanted.

Kenji was almost frothing at the mouth when he said "Han."

The cup slammed down. As the cup lifted the dice showed a five and a two.

"I lost, I am at your service. But. Once again, I have nothing to bet. Well that is, except for the service of my clansmen...?"

Jijo smiled. Ren had never let her down. More black stones replaced the white. She had seen his skill with the dice and cup. It would put the greatest yakuza hustlers to shame.

The next letter confounded her. It was not in a handwriting she recognized. The paper was fine, finer than the papers she received from her usual correspondents.

Honorable Samurai of the Otter Clan, deft sailors of the rivers, farriers of men.

We, the Dragon of the mountain and all of Rokugan, set sail for a sanctuary. A preserve for our way of life. Our boats are strong but our skill is weak. We have foreseen you guiding us to our refuge and aiding us in a time of great peril. Send us what you can to Jukami Mura.

-Togashi Akari, scribe to Togashi Yokuni-ue

Jijo had wondered how she would convince the enigmatic Dragon into letting the Otter onto their ships. The Dragon and the Scorpion were a challenge. The former for their hermit-like ways, the latter for their cleverness. She assumed the Scorpion would see through what she was doing and, in the worst case, expose her. Undoing everything she had hoped for. Luckily, the Dragon had solved one of those problems for her.

Looking down at the board, Jijo gave a little shrug and swapped white stones for black before moving on to the next letter.

Along the Drowned Merchant River.

Asako Shun's chop struck the paper approving the transferring of documents to the expedition. The stack of papers for his approval seemed to never go down. Shun felt like a Mazoku ogre with an endless line of souls awaiting approval for reincarnation.

The gentle rocking of the ship not only made it hard to keep the stacks of papers organized but was beginning to lul Shun to sleep. Susaki Kiba kept a close eye, waiting for the moment Shun was asleep.

The chop lazily struck the next paper. Shun's hand went slack and the red ink smeared. A gentle snoring could be heard from his nose.

Kiba slipped into the cabin and slid a single paper into the stack before Taro. The room went silent, save for the rolling waves. Shun had stopped breathing. Kiba knew what this meant and he had moments to get away unseen. Shun gave a loud snort and a gasp, jolting upright. He took a moment to look around the cabin but Kiba had managed to get out in time.

Shun reached out and grabbed the next sheet. An invitation to the Centipede Clan to join the expedition. It had the chop mark of Isawa Hifumi. Shun took his own chop and confirmed the invitation.

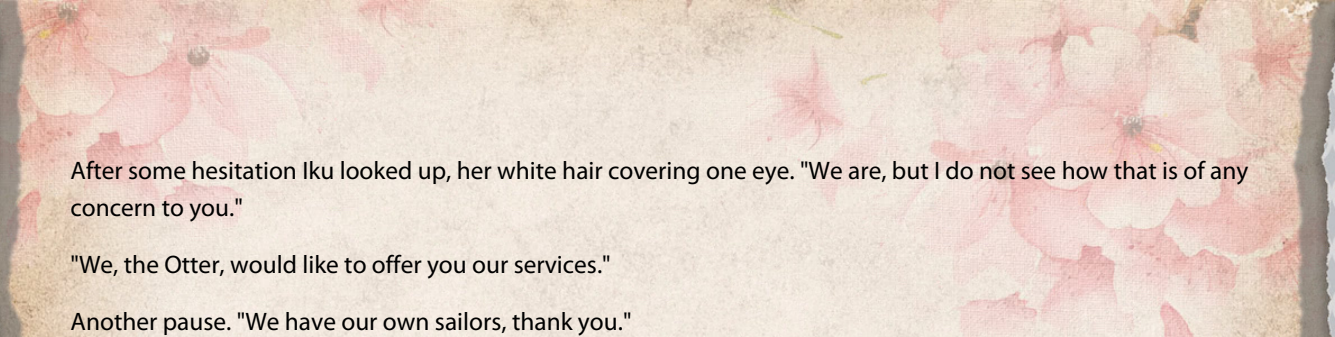
The next sheet was Kiba's. It was a good piece of forgery asking the Otter Clan to assist in the sailing of the Phoenix ships.

"The Otter?" Shun muttered. He inspected the sheet. It had what looked like Hifumi's chop approving it. "Alright then."

Jijo allowed herself a smile reading the request from the Phoenix. The original forgery was a work of art. Once again she swapped white stones with black. She picked up the last letter.

In the common room of an inn in Jukami Mura, The Port That Never Sleeps.

"The Otter have heard that you are about to undergo a momentous voyage, honorable Doji Iku-sama." Usogawa Kite said, approaching the Crane Clan woman.



After some hesitation Iku looked up, her white hair covering one eye. "We are, but I do not see how that is of any concern to you."

"We, the Otter, would like to offer you our services."

Another pause. "We have our own sailors, thank you."

"We understand that, and fine sailors they are. But sometimes there are things you, the Crane, might rather not do."

Iku cocked her eye. "We have our own ways of taking care of ourselves. I do not see a reason to need the assistance of a Minor Clan."

"Yes, but there are even things that even the lowest in your clan wouldn't lower themselves to. Things that would be dishonorable for a Great Clan to handle. Things that we lowly Minor Clan samurai may sully ourselves with and no one would bat an eye."

Iku moved a delicate hand and brushed her hair behind her ear, revealing her other eye.

Before Jijo could put down the letter she heard the clatter of go stones. Looking up, she saw a masked woman. The menpō covering the lower half of the woman's face identified her as a member of the Scorpion Clan.

"We know what you have been doing," she said, her voice a monotone. "We see you."

A lump formed in Jijo's throat. All her plans were about to go right out the window. Was this the price to pay for her ambition?

"It seems you are aware of something we are not," the Scorpion woman continued.

Despite the cool air, sweat formed on Jijo's brow and her heart began to race.

The Scorpion knelt down and opened her hand. Inside she held five black go stones. "You will sail with the Scorpion."

A few weeks later Jijo stood aboard the deck of The Grasping Claws looking at their island sanctuary. Her Clan spread across the fleet, cut off from her sister, the daimyo. Now Jijo would rule the Otter.

