

Curved Blades

By Ree Soesbee

Far to the west, in Unicorn lands...

Courtiers in a rainbow of gleaming, elegant robes bowed gracefully as she passed, like flowers overburdened by dew. She smiled, her thoughts focusing not on the courtiers but instead on the celebration around them and the riders in the field.

Scimitars clashed beneath the bright sun, the finely honed edges of their dancing blades flashing prismatic light about the courtyard. Two samurai dressed in the purple and white of the Unicorn Clan fought on a verdant green swath, their display of swordsmanship drawing the attention of the surrounding courtiers, performers, and children alike. Between the waving fans and soft laughter, jugglers gamed, musicians played, and riders performed feats of athletics on the backs of magnificent, prancing steeds.

It was a special day, a festival day. The palace—with its grey slate and whitewashed lumber, stiff and proud—was bedecked with flowers and colorful emblems of purple and white to celebrate the occasion. A warm wind blew banners like candle flames flickering above the curled awnings.

Shinjo Altansarnai walked down the central pathway of the castle grounds, wearing close-fitting trousers suited for riding along with a purple *keikogi* top folded in elaborate ripples over an underrobe of silver and gold. Whereas others wore their swords through their obi belts, Altansarnai's curved weapon hung in a sheath from a frog by her side, and a knife hilt glittered above the top of her boot.

"Shinjo-sama," a guest spoke, a Crane courtier with an ever-flickering fan. "Congratulations on your upcoming wedding." His soft-blue robes were the color of the summer sky, and his white hair hung down below his waist, braided throughout with gold and silver cords.

She granted the Crane a thin smile of thanks, continuing toward the edge of the riding arena. Before she could answer, a display of magic in the courtyard caught their attention. There, a Unicorn *shugenja* raised her hands, calling on ancient names in the manner of *meishōdō*. She held aloft two small ivory carvings, which were older than living memory. As she called upon the talismans in a gentle, reverent voice, they glowed in reddish tones. Dark tendrils of magic coiled about, illuminated by inner fireworks that shifted and played amid the rippling darkness. Around the edges of the field, Unicorn samurai applauded in appreciation. The rest of the courtiers fell silent, eyes shifting away from the display, their fans rising like a winter breeze.

"Such magic...it is an unusual display. We, of the Empire, are not used to seeing the spirits



treated so,” the courtier said cautiously.

Of course, the strict traditionalists would balk at the Unicorn’s unusual ways. “The name-magic of *meishōdō* is the tradition of our people.” The Crane quailed, but Altansarnai did not pause. “No matter what the Phoenix *shugenja* say, it is ours to master and ours to control.”

“But your clan has been here for more than two hundred years,” the Crane pressed gently. “Surely such dangerous traditions can be left behind?”

The horses rode in circles, pacing their strides in unison as riders stood upon their backs. With a shout, the Unicorn performers leapt from one steed to another, exchanging places to the delight of the audience. Their breeches caught the wind, blowing tightly against their legs as they danced a-horseback. Curved scimitars sliced thrown oranges in two, leaving the fruit neatly severed by the side of the circle track.

“Look there,” she said to the Crane. “Do you see the curved blades our samurai use?” She raised a hand and pointed. “Those blades served their parents, their grandparents, and their ancestors before them. They are as sacred as your katana, and more durable. Yes, we could learn to use a straight blade, but that is not who we are. That is not what we offer to the Emperor. The *Ki-Rin*, our ancestors, were sent to learn about the world outside Rokugan. We were to be an unorthodox surprise against the Empire’s opponents in the Shadowlands. While we were on our travels, we chose to adopt new ways. New traditions. We blended those with the culture we brought from the Empire. Old steel, newly forged.

“Even though we are in Rokugan, many among us still choose to fight with curved swords, because our mastery of them is valuable. We carry our past forward, unifying it with the new. We remember the things we learned on our travels, and those lessons make us valuable to the Emperor.

“The Unicorn don’t leave anything behind, Doji-san. Particularly anything that makes us strong, or has saved our lives as often as *meishōdō*. The Empire will simply have to embrace pragmatism. It will have to accept our curved swords.”

“And will you carry these traditions with you when you marry into the Lion Clan, Shinjo-sama?” the Crane queried.

There was no reason to let his ignorance disrupt the beauty of the day, so Altansarnai merely replied with the sharpest of glares.

Just then, a figure across the paddock strode out of the shadows. A man, his long, dark hair



pulled back into a tight knot of braids, smiled and bowed respectfully. Iuchi Daiyu. As he rose to meet her gaze, the world slowed around them. Altansarnai could not stop a shy smile from lighting her face. Nearly twenty years of companionship, and he could still make her feel like a girl being courted.

“Mother!” A samurai on the field waved, breaking the moment. Altansarnai waved in return. Shinjo Shono, her youngest son, rode his charger, his armor shining, its purple-lacquered slats woven together with silver cord. Shono was a favorite with the courtiers: young, forthright, and eager—but obedient to his mother and faithful to his clan.

“You must be very proud.” The Crane smiled.

“I am proud. My three children have grown strong in Imperial lands. Through a thousand lives, our clan has struggled to find our home—and we have found it here, in Rokugan. My children are a sign of the past and the future combined. Our past, as Ki-Rin, and our future, as Unicorn.”

“True, Lady Shinjo Altansarnai.” The courtier’s voice stammered slightly over the foreign syllables of her name. “And I wish you well as you bow to that future.”

Nodding politely, she turned her shoulder and looked out at the field. Shinjo Shono stood first on one leg and then on the other, his horse cantering gently along below him. Riding in a circle around the enclosure, he lanced hoops with a spear. To the side, her other children—Haruko and Yasamura—cheered on their younger brother with loud cries of joy.

“Altansarnai-sama!” Altansarnai jumped slightly. The voice was loud, brash, and too close for her liking, but then again, no one had ever accused Utaku Kamoko of having much decorum. “Can you come with me?”

Altansarnai turned to regard her friend. “Kamoko-san.” She nodded. Something was wrong. “Of course.”

Back across the field, Iuchi Daiyu placed a foot into his stirrup and lunged onto his steed.

Altansarnai sighed. There would be time for enjoying the day later. She turned away from the festivities and followed the younger samurai into the castle.

The throne room of the Unicorn Clan was small for its type, rarely used and pristinely clean. It held a dais with resplendent purple pillows, a place for the champion’s battle armor, and in an alcove, a stand displaying a variety of cavalry weapons arrayed like flowers. These were old trophies, kept for centuries after their wielders had been defeated. Some were ancient Rokugani weapons; the rest came from foreign lands, from desert sands to towering mountains—all the places her clan had roamed during their time away from the Emerald Empire. The weapons were stories, once told with pride but now vestiges of a wandering freedom that set her people, the children of the wind, apart. Guards in white and purple stiffened in respect as Altansarnai entered the room. Their eyes were downcast, hands ready on their weapons, prepared for any movement from the figure in the center of the room.

There, kneeling on the floor between two guards, was a woman dressed all in funerary white.



Altansarnai walked to the dais and settled herself upon the tatami mat, her legs folding in a gentle movement.

"This is Asako Akari of the Phoenix Clan. She was found in one of the gardens. With these," Kamoko explained, drawing a small white-handled dagger from her belt and tossing it to the floor in front of the woman, along with a length of pure-white cord. The weapon landed with a clatter, steel glinting in the sunlight through the windows.

"A *jigai* blade?" Altansarnai frowned. *Jigai*, a form of *seppuku*, was practiced by non-warriors, those of noble blood but no military training. The rope, too, was part of the ceremony, as were the snow-white robes worn by the person seeking death.

Kamoko was a thundercloud, glowering over the captive. Altansarnai waved her back. "She is no danger, Kamoko-san. Let her speak."

Slowly, haltingly, Asako Akari murmured, "I wish to commit *jigai* in protest of your wedding." She raised her chin, a faint tremble appearing on her soft lips. The woman was only slightly younger than Altansarnai, and lovely in a quiet, composed sort of manner. Next to Kamoko, she seemed like a bird near a tiger, waiting to be eaten alive. "I...have the right to do so."

"Protest." Altansarnai remembered the recent news. "I have heard there are protests in the Lion lands. Even with a dowry of Unicorn battle steeds, the Lion are loath to see one of their respected samurai marry a Shinjo. I expected trouble from them. I did not expect it from the Phoenix."

We, of the Empire, are not used to seeing the spirits treated so. The Phoenix were even more opposed to the Unicorn Clan's magic. Had the Phoenix allowed this *jigai* because they wanted to humiliate the Unicorn? It was possible.

The woman shivered. "I wish only to give my life as my ancestors would will it, sacrificing for that which was taken from me."

"Taken from you?" Altansarnai snapped. "I am the one abdicating my position as champion to join this union. I am the one leaving behind my lands, my family, my..." *Iuchi Daiyu smiling, his long, dark braids spilling delicately over his shoulder.* "I am the one placing everything behind so that there may be peace. But you say we have taken something from you?"

Bowing her head, the Asako responded, "You have, great champion, though you do not know it."

Now, that was curious. Pressing the issue, Altansarnai asked, "Tell me your tale?"



"I was once Ikoma Akari, married to Lord Ikoma Anakazu, *daimyō* of the Ikoma family. For many years, we had been one household. We have a daughter—but now, for his clan and his duty, he has been ordered to put us aside." The Asako's voice gained strength in the telling. "You may believe that I dislike you, my lady. I do not. It is not your foreign ways nor your strange magic that send me to death on this day. It is love. I cannot live without him. Because he has divorced me, I will die in protest."

This woman was brazen, speaking her mind to a champion. "What do I care? Your woes are not mine. Yet, I would not see a life wasted. Can you not continue as you are, without the title? Ours is a political union, not a love match."

"No." Akari shook her head. Her eyes dimmed, and she bowed low to the floor, pressing her head and her hands against the shining floorboards. "Anakazu-sama is a man of great duty and loyalty. He will be faithful to his wife—any wife."

"And does he love you?" Love was not part of the samurai code—only duty. Still, the woman's tale surprised her. How had she not been told of this?

"He does."

A fragile stillness came upon the room.

Was this some devious Scorpion's trick? If the woman committed *jigai*, especially here on Unicorn lands, Altansarnai would be dishonored. The wedding would be considered unlucky in the eyes of the Fortunes. "Now that I know this, I must act. You realized that, of course?"

"This is my fate," the Asako murmured regretfully. "It is the only blow I can strike. For myself. For my daughter. It is to my great shame that I was discovered before I could complete my task."

"I told you this wedding was ill-favored." Kamoko glowered. "Three years we have worked toward a peace with the Lion, only to have them demand an outcome that puts her aside. What has she done wrong? Nothing."

Altansarnai shifted in her seat. The woman's choice of action had been brave, though ill considered. Death would not reunite her with her husband. "Kamoko-san. A wedding with Ikoma Anakazu is the only way to bring peace with the Lion Clan. If the Lion have chosen to end Anakazu's marriage, then that is their champion's choice." It was disturbing to think about, but necessary. Divorces weren't unheard-of, though they inevitably dishonored one party or the other.

"Even if it means her death."

"According to the Rokugani, her death means nothing."

"It means everything. She has committed no crime, performed no dishonor. Yet we rob a wife of her husband, her child of a mother. Were we not taught that family is to be honored? That life is sacred?"

"Here, in Rokugan—"

"In Rokugan, they cling to outdated customs, and they destroy lives." The Utaku shook her



head, long hair shimmering in the sunlight. "This woman is willing to die for her family. Are you not willing to live for yours? Iuchi Daiyu-sama—"

"Enough!" At the very sound of the name, Altansarnai felt heat rise in her cheeks. Her voice was as loud as a clarion call, echoing from the corners of the room. Altansarnai took a moment to compose herself, closing her eyes and rubbing her forehead with one hand. "Enough," she said more gently, meeting Kamoko's eyes. "Daiyu-sama is the father of my heirs and my partner. In loyalty, he supports this union. I have not put him aside."

"He supports you, Altansarnai-sama. Not the wedding." Kamoko said in measured tones.

Altansarnai and Daiyu's relationship was no one's business but their own—it was partly why they had never formally married. That, and the complications of marriage between the clan champion and a family daimyō. Still, was she being unfaithful to Daiyu? Trying to ignore her discomfort, she gazed at the tableau before her with a measuring eye. "Duty, love—they cannot always exist together. We must choose, and for my clan's sake, I must choose peace. The contract is signed. We must keep our end of the deal." She sighed at the end, adding, "What else can we do, Kamoko? We have been through this argument before."

"It is not peace if you are a prisoner! When you agreed, you did not know he would set aside his wife like a coward, and you did not know..."

A silence fell over the room, broken only by Akari's soft tears. Faltering, Kamoko spoke again. "These Lion! For centuries, the Ki-Rin wandered, facing dangers alone. Our clan fought and bled, struggled, and eventually returned home—only to be treated like outsiders! Our sacrifice has not been recognized. Our strength has not been respected. The Lion still refuse to acknowledge our ancestral lands; they try to claim them at every opportunity! They kill our parents, our siblings, over petty concerns of pride.

"On our own, far from home, the Ki-Rin Clan came to respect the sanctity of life. Seppuku was all but unheard-of, and punishments, while cruel, were rarely to the death. We needed every sword we could muster simply to survive.

"Our clan has returned and rediscovered our homeland. As the Unicorn, we protect Rokugan, but to remain here, we are asked to forget what we have learned and become like all the others. That is not who we are. We must not set aside the lessons of the wandering Ki-Rin. Not for the Lion. Not for anyone."

"Great champion," Asako Akari looked up from the floor hesitantly. "It is true: I do not understand your ways. I do not know why I am still alive to speak with you, instead of having



been killed for my boldness. I cannot live without Anakazu-sama.” She breathed deeply. “There is no place for me in this world, without my family. Therefore, I beg you—either kill me, or do not marry Anakazu-sama.” Bushidō should have prevented the Phoenix from asking such a thing. Akari dishonored herself with the words, disobeying her family and betraying her honor. The woman’s statement cost her much to say aloud, but her boldness did not change the facts.

“You have no right to ask that of me.”

“Perhaps she does not.” Kamoko slowly lowered herself to her knees. “But I do.

“The Unicorn Clan respects Bushidō’s tenets, but the long years of travel taught us that practicality means survival. You are bound by your word, by your sense of honor—but you are ignoring what is right.” Kamoko spoke passionately, her dark eyes flashing. “Mighty champion, if I were to ask my daimyō to reconsider her plans of marriage, would she listen to me?”

“Kamoko-san,” Altansarnai shook her head. “The Lion and the Unicorn are already agreed. If I do not marry him, the clan will suffer a great loss of honor. That failure may well lead to war.” Her arms fell to her sides, the purple sleeves of her formal keikogi brushing the first knuckle of her hand. “The Lion offered this marriage as a means of finding peace. We give them a dowry of horses; they remove their claim from our southernmost lands.”

“The Lion tricked us! You did not know the cost. If you marry him, you leave the clan, and we lose a great leader. We agreed to this marriage before we knew you would become his trophy. Before we knew that by Ikoma custom, the wife takes the husband’s name and joins his lands. We did not ask for him to join your house because we did not know we needed to. It is no loss of face to claim the deal has changed, and if that saves this woman’s life, then all the better.”

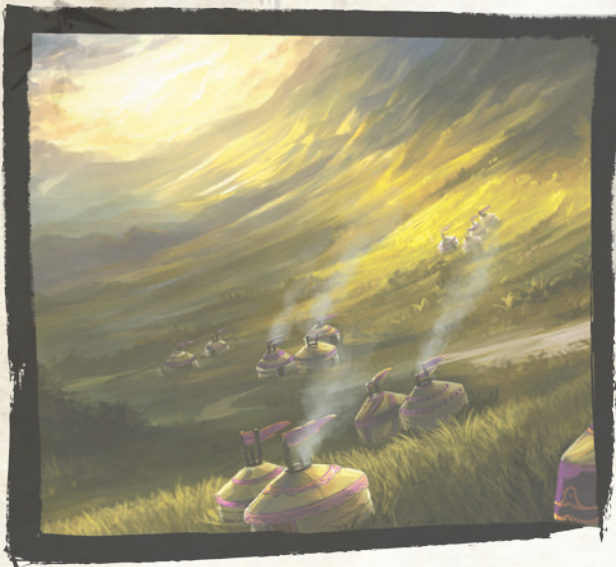
Altansarnai paused. Kamoko’s arguments were sharp, and felt raw on account of her temper, but the woman was not wrong. Still, she was not thinking of duty—only of practicality. What of the possibility of a war with the Lion? Should she not accept the tradition of Rokugan and do her duty? Leave behind the traditions of her people in order to ease the tensions with another clan? To avoid war, she was considering giving up her future.

The Unicorn don’t leave anything behind.

Curved swords. It was a matter of using curved swords—finding a way to incorporate Unicorn practicality into the traditions of the Empire. Sometimes, things needed to be changed in order to become stronger. Hadn’t that been the Ki-Rin’s purpose? To find strength outside the Empire, and bring it home to empower Rokugan? This wedding was based on old traditions: traditions the Unicorn had not known to contradict. Now they were trapped, and the clan would suffer. “The Lion will not see it that way,” she said at last. “They will only see that tradition has not been followed.”

“Then we are as helpless and ill-fated as she. Marry him, and your spirit will die. Do not, and your honor may die instead. Either way, there is blood on your blade. This woman’s *tantō* asks us—which shall we follow: spirit or duty?” said Kamoko. “Our ancestors left the Empire





seeking the answer to that question. We returned with the only answer that makes sense: freedom. The freedom to choose between the two.”

“Do you think I am giving up that freedom?”

“You would not choose this for yourself. You say the clan needs this—we do not need this! Our horses are swift and our swords are true. We could defeat the Lion!” The words echoed in the chamber for a long, crisp moment, tension darkening the sunlit day. Kamoko flushed,

clearly embarrassed by her outburst. “I am sorry, my champion. I should not have...”

Passion was clear on Kamoko’s face—too much passion. But she was right, and Altansarnai couldn’t argue any further. The feeling was like a stone, sinking into her belly. If she made this choice, she opened the Unicorn up to a thousand political games. The image of the needling Crane courtier rose in her mind, and Altansarnai frowned. “You are right. It is a choice. But it is not a choice between spirit and honor. It is a choice between the future and the past. Rokugan must be brought into the future, by whatever means necessary.”

Altansarnai closed her eyes. The wedding was political, meant to bring peace between the clans. Yet it could not come at the cost of all that the Ki-Rin—the *Unicorn*—Clan had learned and become. And the Lion would have to learn to respect the Unicorn ancestral lands, once and for all.

“You are right.” Altansarnai repeated, fingering the hilt of the scimitar at her waist. “The tradition of Rokugan is not the law of Rokugan. I refuse to have my place taken from me over something not in the terms of our arrangement. I agreed to marriage. I did not agree to give up my name and my standing. We must draw attention to the distinction.” Ringing a bell, she summoned a messenger into the room. He paused upon seeing the woman in white on her knees before the champion, but was savvy enough to say nothing and seem utterly undisturbed. Altansarnai said, “Draft a letter to the Ikoma ambassador and the Lion Clan. Tell them that I no longer approve the Lion offer of marriage. I withdraw my hand, and no dowry will be paid.” The messenger bowed and scurried away.

Altansarnai rose, prompting the soldiers in the room to bow in unison. Kamoko leaned forward as well, head gracefully dipping in respect. The Asako bowed lowest of all, face pressed into the floorboards at Altansarnai’s feet.

“Ikoma Akari-san. Rise. Your life is spared. Leave these lands forever. Return to your husband, and give your renewed marriage my blessing. You are free to go.”



Kamoko blinked, her eyes narrowing. Nevertheless, she stepped aside, allowing the Asako to climb gracefully to her feet. Akari, breathless with joy, wasted no time with her dismissal, gathering herself and half-fleeing while tears still stained her cheeks.

“Kamoko-san. Carry word personally to the Emperor. This steed will not be broken to rein and saddle, nor will I compromise my clan in the name of peace. If the Lion truly want war, then they will come for it—and would have, marriage or no marriage. But if they do, they will find that free horses are worth ten times a chained mountain cat.

“Only if the Emperor himself demands it will I change my mind. Let him command me—or let me remain as I am, in his service alone.”

Utaku Kamoko bowed low, her long tail of hair sweeping over her shoulders with the motion. “So shall it be, my champion.”

Altansarnai rose to walk toward the window, looking down at the riders below. She smiled to see them racing upon green grasses as though they hadn’t a care in the world—only joy. As she watched, hooves tore the sod, and manes and tails blew in fierce winds, winds that came from mountains and deserts and lands far away. “Let the past stay the past,” she said. “I will take the shame they offer.

“Despite their adherence to old ways and constraining traditions, we will bring the Empire forward, into the realm of the possible. We will teach its people our strength—and we will show them our duty.” Eyes alight, she walked past Kamoko and the guards, toward the field and the horses beyond.

“We will teach them how to fight with curved blades.”





Shinjo Altansarnai - Trailblazing Champion of the Unicorn Clan

