

Flying Chariot, Standing

By Gareth-Michael Skarka

A shogi opening move is like choosing a medicine. Pick the right one, and you gain strength. Pick the wrong one, and you die.

– Agasha Seigen, Shogi Master

To be kept waiting was an insult, yet Ide Tadaji endured.

The Unicorn Clan ambassador shook his sleeves, casting off a bit of the rain which had soaked him on his walk to the Miya Palace, and he drew closer to the small brazier of coals which had been lit to counter the damp of early summer. Towns and villages across Rokugan were mired in mud from the torrential rains of the season, and although the Forbidden City was saved from that fate by its cobblestone streets, it was just as wet.

Rain falls upon Emperor and peasant alike, Tadaji mused, recalling the passage from the *Tao of Shinsei*.

It had certainly fallen today. The walk from his permanent residence at the Unicorn Clan Guest House was not terribly far, but the rain had been a constant and unwelcome companion, and made the walk seem even farther for a man with a club foot. By the time Tadaji had reached the palace of the Miya family, it felt as though he had been pushing his way through a waterfall, and his clothes hung from his frame like wet moss from a tree. His foot, which had kept him from riding the horses of his clan his entire life, now ached terribly. He shifted his weight as best he could, leaning heavily upon his cane.

As tradition dictated, Tadaji had walked alone, save for a single bodyguard. Even though this visit was unofficial, no ambassador—much less a family daimyō—could be expected to travel without some protection, even within the safest part of the capital. His bodyguard was a formidable one. Utaku Kamoko had ridden hard all the way to Otosan Uchi, charged with delivering news directly to the Emperor from the Unicorn Clan Champion herself, Shinjo Altansarnai.

She was not at all pleased to discover that a samurai, even the commander of the feared Battle Maidens of the Unicorn, would not be permitted to address the Emperor directly. As



official ambassador to the Imperial Court, the duty fell to Tadaji—but when the time came to choose a bodyguard for this visit, he knew that he could choose none other than the fierce warrior who had ridden the breadth of Rokugan. It was a way to allow her to be present at the delivery of the news, thereby fulfilling her obligation. Kamoko made it very clear that she viewed this as only a marginally acceptable solution, but grudgingly accepted her duty with a minimum of outbursts—a rarity for the fiery battle maiden. Tadaji smiled inwardly as he saw her, glowering like a thundercloud in a corner of the room, away from the heat of the coals.

The unofficial visit allowed Ide Tadaji to deliver bad news privately. Miya Satoshi, the Imperial Herald and daimyō of the Miya family of heralds, would hear the news and pass it along to the Emperor, away from the eyes and ears of the court, so that the Chrysanthemum Throne could have time to formulate a response, rather than having it dropped in its lap during open court. It was a courtesy, albeit an expected one, and despite its unofficial nature it was as clothed in ritual and tradition as any other function of government.

Tradition which, by making Tadaji wait, Miya Satoshi was violating. The Herald was occasionally a brash man—a trait which did not serve a diplomat well, in Tadaji's opinion. The slight insult of the wait was, he was sure, intended to remind the Unicorn Clan where it stood in the overall scheme of things.

That standing would not be improved by the news. Perhaps it would earn the Unicorn some form of Imperial censure, or worse. Tadaji shook his head, dismissing the thought. There was no point in ruminating upon his fears.

What is done is done.

The reception room was largely featureless. Tadaji chose to stand near the brazier in order to dry off a bit, but had not counted on being made to stand for so long. His foot had already been protesting, but now his legs had begun to ache, as much from the long walk and the damp as from the standing. The only places to sit were prepared at a *shogi* board, which was placed prominently in the center of the room.



The rectangular board, with its carved squares, was set for play, the two groups of pieces arrayed at each player's end of the board, facing the opponent. A platform for captured pieces was set to the right of each player's seat. It was a beautiful set, finely crafted from lacquered wood.

"Do you play, Kamoko-san?"

The silence that had filled the room was broken, but if Kamoko was surprised, she did not show it. The response came instantly: "I do not."

Tadaji nodded, regarding the board. "I do not care for the game, myself. I prefer go, in its simplistic purity—black stones and white stones, offering a clarity that shogi does not possess."

The pieces in shogi had no identifying color, their allegiance determined only by the direction they faced—toward their opponent. When a player captured an opposing piece, it was removed from the board, but could be brought back into play, now used by that player among their own original pieces. Each piece had its own unique set of moves, as well—moves which changed and grew more complicated if the piece could be "promoted" by moving it into the opposition's territory. The piece was turned over, revealing a different symbol, signifying its changed status.

Generals said that shogi reflected the truth of war. Diplomats said the game echoed the complexity and maneuvering of the court. Both saw the game as a metaphor for the conflicts of their chosen paths. This was largely why Tadaji preferred other games—he had enough of those conflicts in his day-to-day life; he did not desire to seek them out in metaphor, in his leisure. He far preferred to spend his time playing go with Shosuro Takeru. Their long games, played on one of the islands in the Imperial Water Garden, were a great source of solace to both men.

"The game seems clear enough to me, Tadaji-sama," said Kamoko. "But very much a game of Rokugan. I cannot fathom a war game that features no cavalry."

Tadaji smiled. She was right, of course. The game featured a piece called the Cassia Horse, meant to represent a mounted samurai, but no cavalry in any sense that the Unicorn Clan would understand. The closest equivalent in shogi was the Flying Chariot, able to move the full range of the board forward, backward, or side to side. Along with its companion piece, the Angle Mover, which possessed a similar range, but diagonal, it was one of the most powerful pieces on the board, possessed of the greatest field of motion. That sounded like cavalry to Tadaji, no matter what name they had given it.

"I am sorry to have kept you waiting, Tadaji-sama." A new voice rang out in the confines of the room. Miya Satoshi entered through a sliding screen, which unseen servants in the hallway beyond silently slid closed behind him. The Imperial Herald was dressed in the relatively plain clothes of a lord at home in his palace, rather than his usual courtly finery.

Tadaji bristled slightly. Compounding the insult of being made to wait, Satoshi had referred to him as *-sama*, rather than the *-dono* more appropriate to Tadaji's station as the Ide family daimyō. Satoshi was of high enough status that Tadaji would look foolish in correcting him, but Satoshi had nevertheless afforded the Unicorn daimyō less respect than he deserved. *If Satoshi has heard the news already, through spies or some other means, these provocations may be purposeful, rather than merely the errors of a brash man.*

"I believe you have something you wish for me to pass along to the Emperor?" Satoshi drew his robes around him and sat at one of the player's seats at the shogi board. "Let us pass some time while we speak. Do you play?"

Tadaji crossed the room and took the other seat, searching Satoshi's expression, trying to get



a read on the man. *Does he know?*

“On occasion, Satoshi-san. Only on occasion.”

Satoshi gestured to the board in a broad sweeping move of his hand. He was obviously proud of its beauty, and the status indicated by its presence in his home. “As an honored guest, you may have the first move.”

Tadaji shook his damp sleeves in front of the brazier one final time, and took his seat across from Satoshi. *The first move was made long before I even arrived. All that remains now is to see how the game plays out.*

As the servants held the doors open, Utaku Kamoko fell into step at Ide Tadaji’s left—the traditional place for a bodyguard, covering the undefended side—although Tadaji held a cane in his right hand, making it unlikely he could draw a weapon to cover the defense of his right. Within moments, they had left the Miya Palace and entered the streets of the Forbidden City. Thankfully, the torrential downpour that had accompanied them on their earlier journey had abated somewhat, and they now contended only with a light rain.

Kamoko exhaled. The rain on her face was a cool relief compared to the stale heat of the room. Whether the heat stemmed from the design of the palace itself, or from the tension of the meeting, she did not know. But it reminded her of one surety: she belonged on the plains. Enough of these machinations—she would just as soon ride back to Altansarnai and her fellow Battle Maidens, and leave this place far behind. The complexities of the capital were more foreign to her than the *doumbek* or the *rik* of the Burning Sands.

Ide Tadaji had talked with the Imperial Herald, Miya Satoshi, for over an hour as they played shogi. Their low voices did not carry to where she stood, however, making the conversation as much a mystery as the progress of a game of unnecessary complexity. She’d never given the game a thought before, and yet now it seemed to have so much riding upon it.

It was a perfect metaphor for diplomacy in Rokugan. Rules handed down for generations, barely understood by outsiders, yet fraught with consequences.

For Shinjo Altansarnai to refuse the marriage offer of Ikoma Anakazu of the Lion Clan was a violation of those pointless rules. She had been asked to give up too much: her duty to her clan as the champion; her true love and father of her three children, Iuchi Daiyu; her honor. The cost was too high for peace with a clan that the Unicorn need not be concerned by. Ide Tadaji had been one of the brokers of that peace, however, and now he was tasked with delivering the news of its failure to the Chrysanthemum Throne.

If it means war, then so be it. The treacherous Lion have been a burr beneath our saddle for far too long.

The only question was the Imperial reaction. If the Emperor sided with the Lion, the Unicorn Clan might end up faced with more than just their long-time rival as an enemy. The



Imperial Court could strip them of their lands, their status, making them truly outcast. *They've always treated us as outsiders. Gaijin, they call us. This could be their opportunity to drive us out completely.*

All depended on this meeting. The fate of an entire clan, hanging in the balance of a game played by two men, trading words as they traded captured pieces on the board. Better for such things to be decided in the field, astride a horse with scimitar in hand, rather than constrained by the complexities of tradition and diplomacy.

As they walked, Kamoko dared not say anything to Tadaji. She was not sure she could even trust him, much less predict how he would react.

Tadaji stopped her with a gentle, unexpected hand on her arm, and gestured to a nearby stone bench overlooking one of the Forbidden City's many koi ponds. "Let us take a moment, Kamoko-san."

They sat, watching the fish gliding just beneath the surface of the water, the golds, pinks, reds and whites of their scales the only color on the gray day. The surface of the water was a never-ending dance of circles, crossing over each other, combining, separating, and rebounding, rippling outward from the drops of rain hitting the pond. *Even here, everything is tangled.*

She had to begin untangling it somewhere. "The Herald had someone observe the meeting. Hidden behind a screen."

Tadaji nodded. "I assumed as much. The news will travel fast."

"And how was the news taken? Does the clan face censure?"

"Flying Chariot, Standing," was Tadaji's only reply. Kamoko waited for further explanation. He leaned forward, resting his chin on his hands crossed atop his cane, and watched the fish swim.

"I do not understand, Tadaji-sama."

"Neither did I, at first." Tadaji shook his head, as if to clear it, and turned to face her with kind eyes. "It is part of that game that you don't play. There are a number of traditional strategies for winning the game—and many of them rely upon the piece known as the Flying Chariot, taking advantage of its wide range of movement.

"Satoshi, however, kept his chariots back, and began to move his more valuable pieces to the spaces *behind* them."

"Using them as bodyguards," Kamoko offered, trying on the terminology of the game.

"Not exactly. The strategy was one known as Flying Chariot, Standing—which uses the chariots as a bulwark, as you said, but the primary purpose is to use the opponent's knowledge of the strengths of the chariot against him. To make them worry about why you are not deploying the chariots to their strengths—and this is designed to draw an opponent in: to make your opponent defeat himself, in essence."

"I see..." she lied, although Tadaji probably saw through her lie far more easily than the



hidden observer had seen the meeting through the screen.

Tadaji waved his hand, as if dispelling the lie like shooing away a fly. “It is more complex than that, of course, but that is the heart of it. It made me realize something. I saw that Satoshi viewed any potential clash between Lion and Unicorn as something in the best interests of the Chrysanthemum Throne.”

Kamoko’s eyebrows shot up. “He *wants* us to go to war?”

“Not precisely. It is likely that he doubts it will come to that, and if it does, he and the Emperor stand ready to censure one or both sides. Yet, infighting between the clans has long been the aim of the Imperials, especially the Otomo, although the Miya family was once known as ‘the bridge between clans.’ War would keep us and the Lion occupied with each other, with neither able to grow strong enough to be an unbalancing element. The outsider gaijin with their unparalleled cavalry,” Tadaji struck Kamoko’s armor with a light tap, “making sure the Right Hand of the Emperor, the Lion, does not become *too* strong—and the reverse as well. And if the Lion begin to wear themselves out against us in the northwest, perhaps they will grow more cautious against the Crane Clan in the east.”



As if the Lion could offer any obstruction to the Unicorn at all—

“The Emperor and the court sit behind their bulwark, while we defeat ourselves.”

Kamoko’s eyes widened. She nodded. “Flying Chariot, Standing.”

No matter the intentions of the Throne, however, it freed the Unicorn to demonstrate their strength against the Lion, once and for all, without Imperial interference. The challenge was as achievable as it was long overdue.

After a moment’s silence, broken only by the occasional splash of koi breaking the surface of the pond, Tadaji sighed. “I found myself wondering how much of that was Miya Satoshi’s opinion, and how much was Otomo Sorai’s or the Emperor’s—or if, in the end, there’s any real difference at all. I fear for what lies ahead, Kamoko-san.” He leaned heavily upon his cane as he stood, taking a moment to give one last look at the pond before leaving. Kamoko followed close behind him, then stopped.

Kamoko remembered how the Imperial Herald had stood suddenly, scowling like he had swallowed a frog, and ended the meeting so abruptly that it did not border upon rudeness, but rode directly over it like a cavalry charge through infantry.

Kamoko cleared her throat. “Tadaji-sama—if Satoshi-sama is hoping for the Unicorn and



the Lion to exhaust ourselves, why was he so displeased by the news?"

Tadaji smiled. "Oh, he wasn't displeased by the news. He was angry because once I identified his shogi strategy, I beat him. Rather quickly, in fact."

Kamoko blinked.

"I told you that I do not care for the game, Kamoko-san, not that I'm not good at it."

