

*Author's note: As this scene contained none of the main characters, it was cut from the end of Chapter 6, and the scene with Tsuneo and Shiyun added in its stead. Here, then, is what happened in the Unicorn lands.*

## 6.5

### SHOW ME YOUR STANCE

In The  
Eternal  
Dragon  
Realm

"A troop of riders approaches!" called Shinjo Ikuru. He stood guard high atop a tower in the walls of the City Between the Rivers, which protected Unicorn lands from any water-borne invasion of their territory. Such an attack had been tried a few hundred years earlier, perhaps a generation or two after the Unicorn Clan's return. The Lion had hoped that the speed of their oar-ships could offset the speed of the vaunted Unicorn cavalry. Unfortunately, the City Between the Rivers had an arsenal of war machines of barbarian design, and the ballistas and catapults had wreaked havoc on the Lion ships. The invasion was aborted, and, in fact, war was never declared. No mention of the violation of the Unicorn Clan's border, nor of the Lion Clan's loss of life, was ever made in the Imperial Court.

The guard's attention was turned not toward the river, but rather to the land approach. A column of samurai moved on horseback through the wide, rolling fields,

several hundred in number. There was a thin, low-lying fog this crisp spring morning. It would burn off under the bright sun shortly, but for now it obscured the riders' features and muffled their sounds.

As the column drew closer, the guard reached into his padded tunic and pulled out a scout's glass—one of the many curious artifacts that the clan had brought back with them from their travels abroad. He paused for a moment in amazement, as he always did when he used one. It was amazing that such magical effects could be enjoyed without the intervention of a shugenja. Two carefully ground glass lenses mounted in an ebony tube allowed the Unicorn Clan scouts to see distant objects with ease. The few scouts' glasses the clan owned were jealously guarded, for the advantage they provided was great indeed. The other clans called them "spyglasses," "the eyes of the eagle," or most often "those damned barbarian tubes." It was, perhaps, this last name that caused the Unicorn Clan to guard their prize so carefully.

He put the glass to his eye and scanned the approaching column. Even though the bright sun and the mist turned them into gray silhouettes, he could see that their horses were large—the powerful war-horses of the Western Lands beyond the Empire's reach. That marked the samurai as Unicorn; their horses were guarded more jealously than any treasure the clan owned. While the daimyo might occasionally gift another clan's daimyo with a mighty Unicorn steed, such a gift was always a gelding so that the other clan would be unable to breed the animal.

Ikuru put the glass down and called to the gate guards to open the gate for their kin. Then he relaxed for a few moments, casting his gaze elsewhere and enjoying the morning. Winter had at last ended, and while there had been troubles last summer, they were all on the other side of the Spine of the World Mountains, a long way from here. He was looking forward to a new year of prosperity. Provisions were

somewhat depleted, what with the winter and the rebuilding work they had undertaken for the last several years, and he, for one, was looking forward to going hunting. It was an excellent opportunity to show off one's horsemanship, courage, and daring . . . especially the way the young Unicorn bushi hunted.

He picked up the glass and looked at the column once more. He whistled through his teeth. "It almost looks like a parade of the generations," he muttered, and indeed it was true. He could see legendary tales taking shape as he studied the group of spirit samurai—stocky, swarthy riders, looking like short Crab bushi; taller, paler riders with eyes so wide they looked positively gaijin. Certainly their dress was like a tour of ancient paintings—loose trousers and vests from the Burning Sands, double-quilted fur from the Lands of Ice, curious robes, armor made from steel and bronze and horn and wood and cloth padding. In one sweep of the eye, he felt as if he witnessed the many cultures that had sworn their blood to the Unicorn Clan during their centuries of exploration beyond the Empire's frontiers. It made him proud to be a Unicorn, knowing that their ways drew such a diverse and dedicated group of people, whose only bond was their word. Proud, because for the clan to survive, scattered in small nomadic groups across strange and hostile lands, each Unicorn had had to trust all others implicitly. Such trust was unknown among the other clans, who had spent those same centuries conniving and plotting and scheming instead of exploring.

The spirit samurai approached the city walls, and as they drew closer, at last their golden aura became visible against the sunlit haze. At that time, the city's bell rang the hour, and Ikuru heard the footsteps of the comrade who would take over this post.

"Visitors, Ikuru?" she asked.

"Yes. Our esteemed ancestors, by the look of it." He handed her the scout's glass.

"Aieeee," she said softly, "so I see. They are a rather, ah, disparate group, aren't they?"

Ikuru chuckled. "So is our clan," he said. "A barbecue mash of whatever we found on our wanderings, all served over the rice of our Rokugani heritage."

She dropped the glass and fixed Ikuru with one baleful eye. "That's a pretty ugly analogy, my friend," she said. "You must be hungry. Do me a favor. Go eat."

Ikuru crossed his arms. "A samurai does not let his stomach give orders," he said with comic gruffness.

His friend shook her head and turned back to the glass. "Hey, Ikuru, did you notice that they're all wearing their armor? Is there a war?"

"Nah," he replied dismissively. "The Emperor would never allow it. Besides, if there were a war, they'd be galloping up with the news. Are you sure they're fully armored?" He leaned forward over the battlements for a moment, despite the fact that it didn't really give him any better view of the approaching riders. "Hmph. You're right. Well, remember. Many of these people spent their lives in the saddle exploring hostile territory. I'd bet wearing armor is just an aberration of our older generations. The Lion, no doubt, would call it a barbarian trick!"

"Go," she groused. "Eat."

Ikuru bowed slightly and went to report to the captain of the watch. It was an easy report, with nothing of significance, so he was able to make it to the main gate in time to greet the travelers.

As he walked toward the main gate, he saw that almost all of the new arrivals had dismounted. Some herded the horses to the stables to be groomed, while the rest ambled their way around the city and castle. They were all fully dressed as for a campaign, which made the sight of them all the more interesting and wonderful to the inhabitants. They wore clothes and armor in fashions hundreds of years old, yet the plates shone like new, and among even a small group of these

visitors, one saw the amalgamated influence of a dozen or more cultures from across the world.

Ikuru saw a few friendly-looking newcomers near the gate, so he approached them to talk. He would definitely be interested in hearing what the hunt was like in the distant lands some of these ancestors had doubtless visited. The wild beasts, the strange terrain . . .

Glancing up, he saw a gargantuan raven perched on top of the battlements over the gate, larger even than some of the eagles he had seen in the foothills of the mountains. The golden sun almost seemed to glisten off its shiny feathers. It provided as good an opening line as anything. "Excuse me, honored ancestor," he said, approaching one of the spirit samurai, "I have not seen a bird like that before. Is this something you brought back from Jigoku?"

"Eh?" he answered in a gravelly voice. The samurai glanced up at the bird, giving it no more than passing notice. "Nah nah. I not have that seen before."

"Forgive my impertinence, honored one, but you have an unusual accent that I cannot place. My name is Shinjo Ikuru. Please, I would be honored if you would share your name with me, and where you came from."

"Ah-ah," he said with a touch of pride. "Me name Moto Chuttuk. I be clan in very very far place to be, uh, over the big hill, uh, many year horse the ride." He gestured vaguely toward the northwest. "Maybe that way. Never be Rokugan in. Before."

Ikuru suppressed a smile of amusement at the Moto's fractured language skills. "So, honored one," he said, trying to speak respectfully, yet simply—it was like trying to address an elder and a child with the same words—"now that you are here, what do you want to do? Do you hunt?"

Overhead, the raven took off from its perch with a mighty flutter of wings.

"Hunt? No. Other thing," said Chuttuk. He grasped the wooden saya of his sword just above where it was thrust

through his obi, and twisted it from a nearly horizontal slope to be almost upright. In this way it did not stick out from his body, and would be unlikely to be bumped by another samurai in a crowd. Chuttuk turned around and clapped his hands very loudly. “Ho ho! Moto Chuttuk very big had idea!” he shouted to all the gate personnel. “Chuttuk new this place come, ho ho, have dice got! Ha? Samurai, you want gambling?” He reached into his pocket and pulled out three improbably large dice of different colors. He tossed his dice on the ground, untied a bag from his belt, held it up, and shook it. The jingling sound of gold coins and trinkets sounded across the gate grounds.

“Big very game fun I show now you. Big game fun! Ah ah, you too, Ikuru. You play Chuttuk! You be, uh, buddy for me!” Jovial and boisterous, he grabbed Ikuru by the arms and steered him into place to his left. He gestured other guards toward him, then quickly swept an area of dirt smooth. “Here Ikuru, you hold!” he shouted, and handed the samurai his purse. “You, you, and you,” he continued, handing the three dice to three of the other guards. He grinned broadly and said, “And now the play we game.” He clapped his hands loudly three times, and urged everyone to kneel, boisterously arranging them in a semicircle around him. So infectious was his enthusiasm that shortly the entire gate guard was eagerly anticipating the throw of the dice.

He himself started to kneel, but the tip of his long wooden saya, still vertical in his obi, stuck in the ground and pushed him slightly off balance. “Na, ah ah, eeee,” he hissed. “One very big fix to mistake. Tsk!” He stood again and drew his long katana fully from its sheath.

There was an intake of breath in the semicircle of guards as Chuttuk pushed his empty saya back to its original sloping position.

“Ah, Chuttuk-san,” ventured Ikuru tentatively, for the very thought of chiding one generations older than he all but stole his voice, “one thousand pardons, but it is not proper to

fully bare your steel. Please—”

“*Unh?*” barked Chuttuk. “Not proper? Is katana. Made for baring!” He gripped the sword in both hands, inspected the blade as the morning sun shone on its razor’s edge, then dropped the blade to the side so that it lay cradled in the crook of his left arm.

Ikuru nodded quickly. “Yes, Chuttuk-san, but there is a tradition that to bare one’s steel is a threat. It dates back to the times when our clan was scattered, and we had to know whether strangers were clan kin or enemies. Therefore the law was that if steel were drawn in camp—”

“You were to consider the owner to be a blood enemy,” finished Chuttuk. He took one step forward with his left foot. “Tell me, who do you think started that tradition, pup?”

“You . . . your accent—” protested Ikuru.

“What about it? It served me well. And it proves to me that this generation knows nothing of the traditions that we handed down to you.”

“But . . . that is—”

“You thought I was an ignorant blustering moron, just because I couldn’t speak your courtly Rokugani. I speak it well, and four other languages that I never learned at my mother’s breast. And you, you can’t even complete a full sentence, let alone avoid a simple trap. All because you’d rather believe we have nothing left to teach you. How arrogant, when you don’t even respect the simplest rules about naked steel.”

Ikuru blinked, and saw Chuttuk as though for the first time. He stood in the carefully balanced warrior’s stance. His left foot was forward, but his torso was twisted slightly towards the left. The blade he held horizontally in his hands was cradled across the crook of his left arm, where the elbow could support and guide the blade. It was the perfect position for a circle cut. Should Chuttuk pivot on his feet, turn his torso to the right, and pull the blade across with his well muscled arms, the katana’s razor edge would arc through

nearly a full circle.

Chuttuk had suckered the guards into kneeling around his decoy game. Every neck was on the level with the katana, and the tip of the blade was barely two handspans from Ikuru's jugular.

Without moving his head, Ikuru looked at Chuttuk. His eyes were sightless, unfocused. He was watching nothing, and seeing everything. Ikuru glanced at the other guards. They all saw it too. One flinch, one reason for Chuttuk to release his tightly wound body, and the dozen of them would all be spewing blood from their headless torsos.

And now, of all times, the bottom of Ikuru's nose started itching maddeningly.

Chuttuk and the guards all remained as still as statues, and for several long moments the only sound was the singing of songbirds in the fields beyond the city walls, and the hoarse cry of the raven overhead. Then Ikuru heard some screams and cries echoing through the streets, sounds of shock and fear, children crying, mothers yelling in confusion. Ikuru thanked the fortunes that his trained warrior's ear did not hear the sounds of death and butchery. Yet.

His eyelids began trembling from the painful itch in his nose, a sensation like an acupuncture needle barely missing the mark and skewering a nerve. He tried to glance again at his fellow guards, but his eyes were starting to water, and he could not see them clearly. The screams, the cries, the painful annoying itch, the utter humiliation of being trapped here like a ronin bandit, all twisted Ikuru's world into a living hell. It had to end.

He could not try to escape, for if he did, the other guards would surely die, and he would likely die as well, his throat neatly sliced by the passing blade. The only other option was to sacrifice himself for his fellow guards, and die like a true samurai. So be it. Anything was better than an itch he could not scratch.

He took one deep breath to focus, then he dropped his

head and lunged forward, hoping to place his shoulder and skull into the path of Chuttuk's blade. The ancient Moto reacted blindingly fast, and the antique blade cut cleanly across the top of Ikuru's shoulder and through his jaw and neck.

Ikuru fell forward onto the dirt, reflexively bringing his hand to his chin. For a brief instant he was surprised to find gruff whiskers, skin, and bone, instead of the underside of his tongue, but then he realized that the chin to which he held his hand was no longer attached to his face.

Ikuru's lunge had provided more resistance than Chuttuk had anticipated, throwing off his cut somewhat, as a result of which only half of the guards died by his blade before they got to their feet. The rest stumbled back quickly, drawing their blades. Three Utaku battle maidens charged Chuttuk, who sidestepped one with a spinning move, disemboweled the second as she passed, then stepped forward again and sliced upwards, removing both hands of the third. He finished with a stepping strike to kill one of the guards who had not charged, splitting him shoulder to hip.

There was a pause as the other guards reappraised Chuttuk's skill. Chuttuk stepped back, toward Ikuru, who lay bleeding on the ground, one hand clutching his chin to his face, the other grasping his throat to avoid screaming in pain, and thus dishonoring himself and his family as he died.

"One moment," said Chuttuk firmly. "Allow me the privilege of honoring your brother."

He stepped over Ikuru, who, sensing freedom at hand, pushed himself upright with one hand, the other still holding his jaw.

"For you, Ikuru, there is hope," said Chuttuk, "for you had the courage to act." So saying he swept Ikuru's life away with his honor intact.

"For the rest of you," Chuttuk said, "hope lies beyond the gates of the city, in the wide wild expanses."

The remaining gate guards began to close on Chuttuk,

katanas at the ready.

Chuttuk sighed heavily. “Do you remember nothing of what we taught you? Our clan’s strength is in our horses, and our wisdom is in knowing when to strike . . . and when to wait for a better time. This, my children, is not a better time.”

The first battle maiden, the one Chuttuk had sidestepped as she’d charged, moved silently up behind the Moto spirit. Slowly she raised her katana for a strike, when Chuttuk abruptly stepped backward, elbowed her in the solar plexus to double her over, then swung his katana down sharply, stopping it to rest on the back of the woman’s neck as she gasped for air.

“I spent centuries in Jigoku honing my skills,” said Chuttuk. “The sword of your soul has too much fire and not enough water. Go, all of you! Leave the city and return to the ways of your ancestors.”

The battle maiden stood slowly, eyes burning with hatred from behind her black locks. Furiously she sheathed her katana, bowed deeply but impolitely to Chuttuk, and turned to leave, joining the other Unicorn clanfolk as the spirits forced them into the fields.

Throughout the city, armored samurai ushered the citizens along, weapons drawn and eyes ready. Caught unprepared for an attack from their own clan, the samurai moved rapidly into the fields outside the city with whatever belongings they could grab in the few heartbeats allowed them. Chuttuk stood in the bloody circle and watched as they filed past. They knew that they had been beaten and wisely saved their strength for another day.

He saw the battle maiden pause at the gate and give a short, loud, sharp whistle. A moment later, almost two dozen fine horses stampeded through the street shoulder to shoulder, causing even the spirit samurai to dodge aside as they thundered past. The horses ran through the gate and joined their riders.

Soon the streets were cleared of the mortals. Chuttuk

looked up and saw the giant raven perched on a high rooftop above him. The bird stared back, then jumped from its perch, swooped down, and fluttered for a landing. As it did so, the bird changed shape into a shugenja, her dark purple robes billowing about her like wings. Her black hair floated in an unseen breeze, and her body, like Chuttuk’s, was wreathed with the golden aura of the returned spirits.

“You look troubled, Chuttuk,” she said.

“I am. It pains me to strike down my own clan.”

“It is for their own good,” she answered. “Look at them. You should never have been able to get the better of them like that. No one should. This city is a cage that has smothered their souls. Their life is too easy, and it has softened them. They need to wander again, to have no home but their saddle and no duty but to their clan. They need the forge of hunger and privation, the tests of bravery and daring to rekindle their chi.”

“We banished them with nothing.”

“Yes, we did. And yet look at them leave. Look at their stance. They look defeated. Did we look so, my husband, when the floods washed away our camp and we faced winter on the steppes without shelter? I think not.”

“It will be hard, and more will die. More than died here today.”

“Yes, it is true. The weak will die. It is sad. But those that survive will be stronger for it. We are doing this for their own good, and for the future of our clan—theirs and ours.”

Chuttuk stood and watched for some time as the refugees moved away across the rolling hills. He looked back at the bodies at his feet, and once more at the diminishing group.

“This is but one group,” said Chuttuk’s wife finally. “White Shore Lake and the City of the Rich Frog are also being taken by our people—the spirits, that is.”

“There has been bloodshed,” said Chuttuk bluntly. “The

25

EDWARD BOLME

Emperor will command this to stop.”

“I think not,” said the shugenja. “The Emperor—*the*  
Emperor—suggested it.”