An Empress's Legacy

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"My Lady."

The maidservant was kneeling as she slid open the shoji screen just an inch.

"A visitor has come and asks to speak to you immediately." She hesitated, and added, "He was not stopped by the palace guards." Hochiahime could make out the girl's moon-face and wide eyes; she was terrified.

The Empress pulled herself more upright on her futon, drawing her blanket up about her. Such a lack of decorum was completely without precedent, and she toyed with the idea of summoning the guards anyway. But her days of bedrest had grown long and tiresome indeed. Even if her exile was self-imposed, she had longed for weeks for an unexpected event to break the monotony of her days.

"Who is it, Rusa-chan?" she asked, settling the sheets about herself. "My lord husband has not seen fit to visit me for months, and Kakita Ryoku has not informed me that his interest has changed. Everyone else in the capital knows I am not to be disturbed while I am on bed-rest, and I have not been involved with the politics of the clans for many months."

"It is the Champion of the Dragon Clan, my Lady. None of the servants dare oppose him. He is waiting in the entrance room for you."

"Prepare the screen," she told her maidservant, "…and then show him in. But not too quickly." There was still proper Imperial decorum to maintain, and she had reasons not to let just anyone think they could impose upon her presence.

The long rays of afternoon sunlight silhouetted the outline of the huge man as he entered her audience chamber. The lines of his armor cut sharp shadows in the softness of the Empress's palace, an intimidating figure even on the battlefield. *Why has he come? The Dragon never come here*…. Hochiahime took a deep breath to center her fluttering heart.

The silhouette bowed deeply. "Empress Hochiahime-ue." His voice was deep and resonating, and it seemed that the summer cicadas stopped their chirping for a moment to listen.

Hochiahime drew herself proudly. *You are the Empress, not a frightened girl.* "Togashi Yokuni-san. It must be an important matter for you to disturb me like this." She let the slightest hint of accusation linger on the edges of the words. "Please. Sit."

"It is." The shadow of the Champion settled before her, seemingly unencumbered by the heavy armor. "So I have come." The caged cricket that looked over her audience chamber chirped twice. "Are you well?"

Pleasantries? "I am well enough for today. All know my health precludes public appearances, however."

"And the child?"

A nervous chill ran down Hochiahime's spine. "Daisetsu-kun and Sotorii-kun are growing into sturdy boys, under the care of the best tutors."

The shadow of Yokuni shook his head. "Not your sons. Your daughter."

The empress paled, drawing her hand protectively over the swelling curve of her growing belly. "How…how did you know?"

"I know what is given to me to know, to do what must be done." The Dragon Champion's voice was as flat as footsteps through a tomb. "She will be born in three months. Who else have you revealed this to?"

Why did she feel compelled to answer him? "My husband. My servants know. Raising an Imperial child is not like other children. Should the child be lost before birth or in their first few years…" *Or should I die in childbirth*, her anxious mind helpfully inserted, "…It would be a terrible omen for the Empire. The clans would see it as a weakness in the Imperial line. It is tradition to hide such matters before then."

"And your sons?"

"No. They are too young to understand the risks, or to keep such secrets." Hochiahime lowered her head, still cradling herself protectively. "Again, tradition. The fewer who know, the safer it will be for all of us."

"The Steel Chrysanthemum," Yokuni replied, and Hochiahime felt she could detect a hint of sympathy in his voice.

"And others. More than once has an infant carried with them the promise of power, or the threat."

"Especially an infant who is the daughter of an Emperor advanced in years and illness."

The fear that had filled Hochiahime fled at the slightest trace of implication, replaced by a wave of righteous anger. She felt her cheeks grow hot and she lashed at the Dragon Champion sharply. "Is that an accusation? A threat? You may be the heir of Togashi, but you have no right to inquire into these women's matters. Tell me why you have come, or Champion or no, I will order the Seppun to drag you from the city in shame."

The shadow of the man before her bowed deeply from his seated position, pressing his head down to his hands. His voice was the rumble of a rock-slide in a mountain pass. "I apologize," he offered sincerely. "But I come with prophecy and wisdom. I have come to speak with you of Oborozukiyo's Legacy."

The last of the fireworks lit the night sky, sending a cascade of green stars showering their blessings across a joyful Empire. A moment later, the low burst of sound seemed to make the very walls shudder, though that could have been the thunder in Hochiahime's heart.

Empress. I am the Empress now. I have responsibilities. Duties. A thousand years of tradition to live up to. I can't let anyone down. The beautifully ornamented crown, glistening with carnelian and jade threaded along gold wires, weighed heavy on her head as she watched the falling embers in the jewel-bright sky. Below her position on the balcony looking out over the courtyards, the Imperial palace was festooned with decorative red lanterns that lit the columns and reflected off the pools of the lotus ponds. And Lord Moon shone down from above. She hoped he accepted her. She hoped they all would.

"Empress-ue." Otomo Tsuji bowed deeply. Twenty-five years her elder, the matronly woman had served the women of the Imperial Household before her as Minister of the Pearl, as had her mother and grandmother. Such traditions passed like land and swords across the generations, and Hochiahime had had to memorize every one.

"Yes, Tsuji-san?" Hochiahime turned and returned the bow to just the correct depth.

Tsuji straightened, moving back the brightly-colored length of layered sleeves that concealed the object she carried in her hands. "For the history of the Empire, this has been the final gift granted by the Imperial Household to the new spouse of the Emperor. The legacy of the Empress Oborozukiyo, wife of Hantei Genji, the second Emperor." She held up a finely made jade box. It was surprisingly simple in its design, but of purest green stone, etched with a pattern of cranes and cherry blossoms, and sealed with a gold lock.

As she held it out, Tsuji continued, her voice stern, though not unkind. "Though you come to it after the tragic losses of Empress Minahime and Empress Samayo, your duty to your lord husband, and to the Empire, is the same. To wed an Emperor is not only to stand in a position of great joy and great glory, to exemplify honor in all things, and we wish joy, glory, and honor to you always. But, as many have told you, it is also a grave responsibility. You are the keeper of the Empire's future and its legacy."

A blush colored Hochiahime's cheeks as she realized what Tsuji must be speaking of. She lowered her head. "I will pray to the Fortunes each day for strong children that may become wise leaders of the Empire."

Tsuji did not smile, but the expression in her eyes warmed her with compassion. "You hold this duty, not for yourself, not just for them. But for the Empire." She bowed, pressing the box into Hochiahime's hands and not allowing further rejection. "I offer you a gift too heavy to refuse. But for now, I will leave you to this in peace. Rest. Tomorrow and its challenges can wait a little longer."

The fireworks had long passed and the sounds of biwa and shamisen had softened to become the gentle calls of owls before Hochiahime was able to truly be alone and rest as Tsuji had bid. Her voluminous kimonos had been replaced with a simple white juban, and her long black hair had been freed and combed, now brushing the floor as she knelt at the small dressing table that held her makeup, and the jade box the Otomo had presented. Her

hands ran across the delicate carvings, the luminous green, and then, with one finger, she lifted the gold latch.

The contents were surprisingly unremarkable. First she lifted a simple wooden hair comb. Its back etched deeply with a pattern of tiny snowdrops, each carved with exquisite care into brown wood that had been polished black in places due to its age.

The simple motif brought a smile to Hochiahime's lips as she set it aside. And an ancient letter, carefully preserved on its supporting parchment, traced across the page with fine, delicate brush strokes

The seal was the mark of her own family. The mark of Dōji. Such an ancient artifact. Hochiahime took the letter up with shaking hands, daring to pull it open just once.

"To my dear, beloved child…"

Hochiahime paled at Togashi Yokuni's words. "The wife of Genji. From Lady Dōji-no-kami herself. How did you know? I received the gift on my wedding day, but…"

"Did you never open it?" Yokuni's voice was neutral, betraying neither judgment nor sympathy.

"I opened it. I have seen the comb and words of Dōji-no-kami to Oborozukiyo. I reaffirmed the family obligations owed to Empress Kakuhime, Jodan's mother, and those who went before her, as is customary for each new Empress, but I never thought it more than tradition."

"Tradition is the way the past instructs the future. So our traditions in the Dragon advise us also. May I ask of what matter the Legacy teaches?"

Hochiahime closed her eyes, remembering the night the matronly Otomo Tsuji came to her, with the last echoes of the fading fireworks from the wedding celebration, to offer her her final wedding gift. A jade box with a gold clasp. A simple comb. An ancient letter she was afraid to open.

Memory was sufficient to draw the words from her lips. "A time is coming when the Lost Brother shall return, far more terrible than anything the Empire has ever witnessed. It says that we must not live in despair, but in hope. Hope in the face of great risk and great loss. Still, she says, when that day comes, it is the duty of the Empress to lead those who follow them into a new land. There, the spirit of the Empire can survive, even through a thousand years of darkness. The Empress must take their followers and cast this comb into the sea, and they will be brought across the waters to the land Dōji-no-kami has prepared for them."

Togashi Yokuni's shadow nodded. "The time is coming. Our prophecies have foreseen this, and there is no escape. All will be lost. Your husband. Your sons."

The Empress wrapped her arms around her belly protectively. "No! This can't be true. You speak madness."

"It is. But…" Yokuni hesitated, for just a moment. "There is hope. Right now, neither the Empire nor the enemy know of your daughter. And there is still some time. I am sure that within five years, we will know the truth of it, whether evil is truly coming to Rokugan, or whether this moment has passed us by unharmed. I advise this, if you will take it."

The Empress's heart angrily rejected Yokuni's words, but when he offered this test, she listened silently.

"Your daughter seems, for now, to be strong and healthy. Keep her safe, hidden from all but those who already know of her. Until her fifth birthday, follow the traditions that have been handed to you to keep younger children secret. If nothing has happened before that time, then you will know that I have spoken falsely and this moment has passed us by. Oborozukiyo's legacy may pass to the Empress that follows you. But if it begins, then you know my message is true. Have you gathered many obligations?"

Hochiahime shook her head. "Myself? No. But my library has documents of the life-debts of several great family leaders among the seven Great Clans, families who owe past Empresses their existence. The agreements formed with each were that, when an Empress calls them, each family is to travel with them and go where they bid, with their servants and spouses and retainers, even to the ends of the world. Each of us that follow reaffirms those

debts as we claim our place."

His voice was deeper than the rumbling of distant thunder. "Then it must be enough. You will know it is time when the wave strikes the shore, when the throne lies empty, when the Emerald Champion throws down their wakizashi, and when the Wall falls. You must prepare the ships then."

A long and terrifying silence stretched between them, but Hochiahime could think of nothing to say in reply.

Finally, the Dragon Clan Champion stood. "I have no more for you. Believe me or not as you wish. You will know when the time comes. I will not be able to return." He bowed, smoothly. "It is a hard duty, too, granted to those who must watch and wait. You have my respect."

Hochiahime returned the bow with a nod of her head behind the shuji, still not quite believing Togashi Yokuni's words.

"You may go. I will think on your words, and thank you." With a wave of her hand, the Empress gestured, summoning her servant to lead him away.

It can't happen. The wall falls, in five short years? It was most likely Dragon nonsense.

Still, it did not hurt her to continue to keep her daughter's presence to herself, for a few short years before the Palace courtiers took her away from her, anyway. And perhaps she could look into what it would take to create boats.

After all, you are the Empress, Hochiahime. You will not let your duty fail.