



Trial of the Coral Champion

Jeanne Kalvar

"Of course the Crab had to take the Pearl Championship. They have already deemed themselves our protector. This is too much power for just one clan," lamented Otomo Asuikawa, strutting into Otomo Tsuji's office. The senior courtier was looking over plans for Empress Botan's gempukku.

"We will pray to the Kami that they do not take the Coral Championship as well," Tsuji replied, not looking up from her papers, "then they would have an absolute monopoly and our own power would be at risk."

Asuikawa stroked his beard. "True, very true. But there is little we can do should a powerful shugenja overtake the competition. It isn't like we are Scorpion, flashing the setting sun into the eyes of their enemy."

"Or we could just *not* tell them about it," Tsuji mused. This caused Asuikawa to chuckle.

"We had eight competitors," Asuikawa said.

"Which clan sent two?" Tsuji asked, her hand held a pair of shears which she deftly used to cut the branches of a bonsai.

Asuikawa shifted uncomfortably while stroking his beard. "The Lion and the Crab sent no representatives. Phoenix, Crane, and Dragon each sent two. The Scorpion had a second representative, but they pulled out before the trials."

A tiny branch with two needles was pruned from the miniature tree. "And how are they fairing?"

"The two from the Phoenix were both doing well, the ishiken and the Asako. The Dragon held their own. The Unicorn seems overwhelming with their force, but it is one of the Crane who has prevailed, a courtier who has shown nothing but grace."

"Interesting. A courtier will lead our spiritual matters and sanctification of our lands before habitation. What did the Phoenix think of this? They were the ones who suggested these positions in the first place."

"About that, after the competition the Phoenix approached the Crane trying to garner a deal, it seemed. I was too far away to hear what was said. Oh, and before the final trial the Unicorn met with the Crane. I don't know what the Unicorn said either. They spoke too softly. Whatever was said in these clandestine meetings, the Crane rejected them."

"Hopefully this will balance out the power, and the clans can bicker amongst themselves once more, keeping our own power stable."

"One more thing. Something I found interesting with the Phoenix and the Unicorn. They wore medallions showing a fist made of jade."

"Some new faction we don't know about?"

"Perhaps. I have sent some Miya to investigate this jade fist."