



The Water Path

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*Once, all I knew was darkness, despair, and death.
Then I heard the sighing song of the sea.*

Hochiahime trembled.

The wind was not cold, but stiff, tugging at her silken sleeves, threatening to pull her black hair free of the combs and pins that held it. It carried a rich salt tang that scratched her throat, along with the distant smell of fish though the docks of Jukami Mura lay well behind. But the wind was not the cause of her trembling.

What if the Legacy is wrong?

She felt a tug at her hip. A young girl was tugging on the outer layer of Hochiahime's elaborate golden outer kimono. The girl was six years old, her face composed, but curious, dark eyes sparkling. "Mother," she asked. "Why are you waiting?"

Hochiahime reached down to gently brush her hand across her daughter's dark, braided hair. "Maybe I don't want to share you with the Empire just yet, Botan-chan. Maybe I want to protect you just a little while longer."

A shy smile stole across Botan's face, and she let her hands fall to fold them properly before her. "I'm not a baby any more," she protested, but there was no strength in it.

"You will always be my own sweet baby," Hochiahime smiled fondly down at her. "But you are right, it is time."

It was.

The tiny bay of Mizumichi Island, just off the coast near Jukami Mura, was packed, now. Seven huge ships, eight decks deep, wallowed in the blue-green sea like lumbering water buffaloes in an untilled rice paddy. The Dragon ship did not even pretend, with the name they had given theirs. Around them, much smaller clan vessels bobbed and swayed in the gentle waves. Every ship's deck was crowded with people, samurai and non-samurai alike, watching her own small delegation expectantly.

On the narrow shoreline of Mizumichi Island, ayubune pilots rested on their oars next to their shallow landing craft, waiting patiently to return the leaders of each vessel—each expedition—back to their respective ships. The expedition leaders around her were watching her expectantly too. So were the members of her own delegation, her brave Seppun guards and wise Otomo advisors, and some members of the Miya, though others were travelling in the great atakebune. *Ready to smooth things over if I was wrong.*

If she was wrong...

It didn't matter. Given the state of the Empire as it was now, the state of the Imperial Family.... At least the next emperor — Daisetsu or Sotorii — would not have to pretend he did not know of her foolishness. And if she was right, this was her duty. The future was in the hands of destiny now.

Hochiahime reached up to take the ancient wooden comb from her hair and tossed it from the cliff's edge into the sea.

At first, nothing happened. The waves offered the rhythmic sighs of its unchanging song as they poured themselves against the white stone and white sands below, and the ships rocked unsteadily. No one spoke. Just before the Empress was about to turn away, however, a dense mist began to roil up from the sea, and the sky overhead suddenly became overcast by gray clouds heavy with droplets of suspended rain. The water turned gray, and boiled at the cliffs below her, and she lost all view of the ships in the bay. Botan grabbed her kimono again.

The waves on the cliffs pounded harder and harder, until she could feel the ground shake beneath her, until her ears rang with their thunder. Isawa Hifumi and Soshi Yuka staggered, while rain drenched the proud horsehair from the helms of Akodo Yoshitsune and Shinjo Takame. Hochiahime cradled Botan's head protectively with one arm, her eyes fixed on the rising seas.

Two glowing golden orbs coalesced out of the rain and dense clouds spit with occasional flashes of brilliant lightning. The coiling mists swirled into a head of green and blue, with long whiskers of white and a mane of gray that merged with the clouds around him. Those orbs — eyes-- looked down on Hochiahime.

I come.

The Empress steeled herself and straightened her shoulders. Not wrong, then. There was nothing left for it.

"Mighty Water Dragon," she shouted, trying to raise her voice over the fading thunder. Perhaps it was an incantation from one of the Hidden Guard, or perhaps a gift of the Water Dragon itself, but her voice carried clearly past the rain and swept across the bay. The rowers below raised their heads to see. "I am the Empress, Hantei Hochiahime, and I come with the Legacy of the Empire. I am told you will lead us to a sanctuary for the days to come."

The water dragon considered her silently for moments that poured by like months. Finally, it spoke, in a voice that sounded like the rain on a tile roof.

A sanctuary. Yes. I remember our agreements, little sister.

The sinuous coils of clouds twisted again, a brief curtain of rain that passed between the cliff and the boat. The eyes disappeared among those coils, only to reappear after the length of time it would take for her to offer Botan's shoulder a reassuring squeeze.

Take nothing that is needed.

Hochiahime felt confusion. The letter mentioned nothing about this. "I don't understand. What do you mean?"

Much will be required in the battles to come. Take nothing that is needed.

Hochiahime frowned. The letter spoke of the upcoming return of the Ninth Kami. Maybe the Water Dragon meant their weapons, or bushi, or supplies? Maybe they would be needed for the fight. But how many? "What must we leave behind for the battle to come, Great Water Dragon? How many samurai? Who?"

Those gold eyes looked at her unblinking.

Just one.

Hochiahime glanced down at the ships below her, the expedition heads and her own Imperial samurai that surrounded her. "Who?" she asked carefully.

he Empire, the Dragon rumbled, requires an Empress.

An Empress? "But I am the Empress," Hochiahime said. "Am I not required to lead them?"

One must go. One must stay. You will decide.

She felt a clutching at her kimono, and followed the dragon's golden-eyed gaze to the daughter at her side. Realization slid into place.

She could lead her people to this new land. And leave the Empire with a child Empress. Leave it with Botan.

Or she could stay to serve the Empire. And send Botan instead to this new land.

Either way, someone will have to wait through the suffering and the death of the dark days to come.

"Mother?" The girl looked up at her with big brown eyes.

No! I can't leave her!

But if she did not leave Botan behind, the Water Dragon would not lead this group of people to sanctuary. She remembered the description left in the Legacy.

Plagues are unleashed and the dead rise. The land suffers and the children of Earth weep that they were born. Men become monsters, and the greatest monster will sit upon the Emerald Throne. And he shall rule for a thousand years, until all our memory is lost.

The Legacy promised hope — a sliver of hope — that this time of trial would not be permanent. But if it were, how would the Empire be restored without the Legacy?

How can I leave my child alone in such a future, though? How can I leave her to that fate?

I can't. I won't.

Slow realization dawned. She could not leave Botan behind. She could not stay with Botan. There was only one choice.

At first, her voice was a whisper. "I will stay."

As the Water Dragon continued watching her, she said louder, so those around her could hear, "I will stay. Let me confer with my advisors." She could not bear to see the tears trickling down from her daughter's eyes, though she felt pride that the girl did not wail.

Those golden eyes blinked slowly and the clouds roiled around the cliff's edge as rain spattered lightly around and Hochiahime's advisors among the Imperials gathered to her side.

Seppun Ishiko's feet began to ache, and she shifted her weight subtly from one to another. They were wet too — the drenching downpour had seen to that. Now, roiling cloud cover and a light smattering of rain promised more if they stayed on this shoreline much longer. A pair of yellow lights shone within that mass of cloud cover she had seen, but veils of gray and white hid them again. Kaifū would be miserable; the falcon hated the rain. Fortunately, he was settled soundly in a large crate, nice and dry and sleeping off a belly full of rabbit.

What is taking so long?

She heard steps coming down from the path to the top of the cliff and turned to look. "Father?" she asked. "What's going on?"

Seppun Kojima was a slender man, with wide streaks of gray at his temples and a handsome and dignified face. He leaned heavily on his cane, in contrast to his athletic build and broad shoulders, but he had done so for many years. Ishiko hurried to his side.

"Ishiko-chan," he said, reaching up to cup her cheek. "There has been a change of plans."

Ishiko shook her head. "A change of plans?"

Kojima nodded. "Empress Hochiahime will not be leaving. She will be staying, with some of her closest bodyguards and advisors."

Ishiko glanced across the sea to the ships gently bobbing in the blue-gray waters. "How can the clans accept that? To be sent to some unknown destination, for some unknown purpose, without it being the Empress's command? What will they do?"

Kojima lowered his hand, resting it atop the other on the handle of his cane. "She is sending her daughter. Hantei Botan, daughter and youngest child of Hantei the thirty-eighth and Son of Heaven, may his name be honored through the generations."

"How many people outside the Imperial families know the Emperor even had a daughter?"

"Not many. It will, it must, be announced today. Ishiko..I want you to go on the ships. As the Empress's secretary, I have read the Legacy. It will be better — safer — for you to be there, wherever it may be, than remain here. And you can protect Botan. I know she will have a small army of our kin with her to look after her, but I will feel better knowing you are there."

"I'm just a falconer, Father. You know that."

Kojima gripped her hand, scarred and rough with caring for her charges. "Still."

They stood that way for a moment, leaving other words unsaid, then the sky above roiled. There was a flash of lightning that drew every eye, with a crash of thunder to follow. The sky above became a clear brilliant blue, bisected with a sinuous wave of gray cloud. Then a mighty voice echoed across the bay, sweeping over the waves to the ships beyond.

"I am Hantei Hochiahime, wife of Hantei Joden, mother of Hantei Daisetsu and Hantei Sotorii, and Empress of Rokugan."

The voice did not sound as if it were shouting, but the spirits of the wind carried it nonetheless. One of the boat pilots was nearby, his jaw dropping.

"Today, in the presence of the Water Dragon and before the eyes of my Ancestors and the kami, I present to the Empire and those assembled my daughter, Botan, daughter of Hantei Joden, sister of Hantei Daisetsu and Hantei Sotorii. In the new land to which you go, in the name of her father, and of his throne, I call on you to recall the oaths and obligations of honor you gave to him and to his line. To serve and to protect, to honor and obey. I call on you to remember it now."

A man's voice followed, reverberating across the bay. **"I am Mirumoto Hitori, leader of the Dragon in this duty. By my honor and the honor of Togashi, the Dragon will serve and obey."** Seppun Ishiko recalled all of the expedition leaders as they pass her on the path up to the cliff's edge. Hitori was not as young as his voice sounded, but still young, with long hair that fell down his back. He had looked like he wanted to run, but his voice was resolute now.

Another voice echoed across the waters, a woman's voice, strong and sure. **"I am Hida Honoka, leader of the Crab in this duty. By my honor and the honor of Hida, the Crab will serve and obey."** The Crab, when Ishiko had seen her, rested on the balls of her feet, even in heavy armor, and threw a glance over her shoulder back to her ship before mounting the path.

A second woman's voice followed her. There was a hint of laughter in her voice. **"I am Shinjo Takame, leader of the Unicorn in this duty. By my honor and the honor of Shinjo, the Unicorn will serve and obey."** There had been two Unicorn who had gone up to the cliff's edge, a woman in armor with long black hair and a man with a sharp beard and a fine purple kimono. It seemed the woman would lead.

"I am Soshi Yuka, leader of the Scorpion in this duty. By my honor and the honor of Bayushi, the Scorpion will serve and obey." The Scorpion did not speak loudly, but the spirits that carried the voices across the bay carried hers just as clearly. Nothing of the Scorpion who had gone up the path had been visible beneath the large basket hat except a blood red kimono that was almost black.

An older man, his voice deep and beginning to claim the roughness of age. **"I am Isawa Hifumi, leader of the Phoenix in this duty. By my honor and the honor of Shiba, the Phoenix will serve and obey."** Seppun Ishiko had remembered with unease Hifumi's sharp eyes, fiercer than any of her hawks, who glared at her from behind that thin wire frame and glass lenses. He had seen, and judged her wanting.

"I am Daidōji Ota, leader of the Crane in this duty." The woman's voice was a commander's battlefield declaration. **"By my honor and the honor of Dōji, the Crane will serve and obey."** Ota had been rock solid confidence, a hard, sturdy woman made of iron and will as she strode up the path in blue lacquered armor.

The final voice was a man's, clear and in command, but, it seemed to Ishiko, tired. **"I am Akodo Yoshitsune, leader of the Lion in this duty. By my honor and the honor of Akodo, the Lion will serve and obey."** The Lion's frame was ramrod straight, at least in his armor, his eyes fixed ahead, his beard masking the slightest twitching of his chin. But still, that weariness in his voice could not be denied.

The pledge was taken up by others up and down the beach. Ishiko joined as her father began the pledge and others of the Seppun and other families, even the boat pilots, took up the same pledge. She added her voice to the others. "By my honor, I serve and obey."

Silence fell finally, and the Empress's voice carried across the bay again.

"My daughter will be your Empress, an Empress until such time as the Water Dragon permits your return, be it in this age, or another. I put her in the hands of Otomo Tsuji, my trusted advisor, to help her make sound decisions until she is of age. And I look to the Crab Clan to protect her on this voyage, for ever have they served as the most stalwart protection of the Empire."

Ishiko knew Tsuji. A formidable woman, wise in all the ways of the court, carrying the burden and glories of many years, having seen the Empire through many changes.

A murmur went up as Hochiahime spoke of the Crab. They were an unfamiliar sight in the Imperial halls. *"Maybe giving them this role is meant to weaken the strength of the more powerful political clans," Ishiko thought. "Keep the clans at each others' throats, and it may buy time to allow a new land to be settled before any one clan takes too solid a position against the Imperial family."* The young woman felt a fresh wave of gratitude that she was merely a falconer and need not worry about such things.

"Go. Follow the Water Dragon with my blessings. Prepare for us a new land, the seeds from which, one day, a new Empire will spring. Have faith in yourselves. In your ancestors. In what can be."

A fresh crack of thunder roared across the sky, and the coil of cloud above twisted. The wisps of mist fell away to reveal a sinuous body of white in brilliant pearlescent scales, sharp twisting claws, and a main of flowing white clouds. The Water Dragon.

It soared up into the sky in a joyful leap and then dived down until it split the ocean's surface, sending great jets of water spraying to either side as it rushed towards the boats and the open sea. The smaller ships rocked in its wake. Then it hovered above the water, patiently, a statue on a horizon, as it waited for the ships to follow.

Ishiko turned back to her father. "This is too sudden! We aren't ready for this!" She fought to keep the worry from her voice, but she knew she had failed when she saw the expression in his gentle eyes.

"Live, Ishiko. Keep memories alive. That's all you need to do."

Storm Fortress, the Crab great ship, towered above the smaller Memory of Jade, its heavy bulk blocking off half the sky. Clouds swirled around the pair of ships, all else hidden in the pale gray mists, but something was severing the mists before them like a knife tearing its way through silk.

The movement of those on the deck was quiet, subdued, all sound washed out by the sound of the cutting oars and the hammering wind in the sail, and the relentless wind and waves. Each samurai or servant kept their heads down, attending to their own tasks, or praying silent prayers for safety on the voyage.

But none looked towards the bow, where the Water Dragon dove and flew in the unfolding waters before them. Courtesy restrained them.

For at the bow, one old woman knelt patiently stroking a little girl's hair. And at the bow, a little girl wept and cried for her mother.

Tomorrow, she would learn to be Empress again.
Not today.

