



Control

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Gold glittered on each finger in the lamplight as Otomo Tsuji gestured to the deeply bowing courtier, permitting him to enter her presence. The lights were low; the hour had grown late. But the head of the Imperial delegation at Sanctuary would allow no business to end in the Imperial Palace to pass without her review, and if that meant she was the last to go to her chambers at night, so be it. She was old now, she would sleep long enough.

"How went Her Highness's lesson's today, Asuikawa-san?"

The courtier lifted his head, but only enough to shuffle forward and drop to his knees before her chair. "The Empress already earnestly pursues her duty, Lady Tsuji. Her Tutors gave her three days to copy the *Five Hundred Great Families*, and she completed the work in one. Though her calligraphy is still...a work in progress..." Otomo Asuikawa shrugged his shoulders uncomfortably, causing his samo hat to slip. He quickly reached up to adjust it. "...her instructors are pleased with her progress. Tomorrow, she studies kaze-do with an instructor from the Dragon clan."

Tsuji nodded gravely. "And what of our "hosts"? Any more fights before our gates?"

"None today. There seemed to be promise of one with an embassy from the Unicorn, but one of the Yasuki was able to mediate it to a peaceful resolution. They are growing more skilled at diplomacy as they settle into their role."

"Pity." Tsuji's long fingernails tapped the arm of her chair. "There is a certain pleasure that comes from watching an angry Crab bushi drop an over-eager Dōji petitioner into the lake that I shall miss."

Asuikawa hand lifted to his chin, rubbing his neatly-trimmed beard. It was clear he, too, had enjoyed the experience. "Indeed, My Lady."

The regent sighed softly. "Any word on the petitions that will be brought forward tomorrow for the Empress's consideration?"

The lower-ranked Otomo dropped his hand, leaning forward. His dark eyes held a spark of passion Tsuji remembered well from her younger days pulling the strings in the highest courts. "Mostly the usual. The Lion demand redress and apology for the Scorpion theft of rice from their lands. The Scorpion accuse the Lion of hoarding their wealth. Mantis raids go much farther than their original reach in Lion Lands, picking off poorly defended storehouses up and down the coast, and each clan demands the right to build their naval forces to fight them. But there is one that I thought you might find of particular interest."

Tsuji tilted her head. "Oh?"

Asuikawa presented to her the sheet of fine rice paper, the kanji small and crisp. "You feared that the clans were becoming too comfortable with their authority. They put the Empress's power in jeopardy if they ever realize how easily they could ignore us if they wish. We lack the Imperial Legion here, and the other clans will no doubt grow impatient with the Crab soon enough for their brusque behavior."

The glittering fingertips drew together, the only sign of Tsuji's discontent. Asuikawa spoke a truth born in experience and the long wisdom of the Otomo, but it still felt uncouth to say such things out loud. "And there is news on that front?" she asked, her voice betraying no such emotion. She did not take the rice paper.

Asuikawa hesitated awkwardly before drawing his hand back. "The Phoenix fear that the clans' unstructured exploration would lead to imbalances in the natural harmony of the island and conflict between the clans as each clan races to find the best positions, the natural strongholds or loci of spiritual power within the land. They fear that the kami will take great offense, even to the point of withdrawing their blessings."

"It sounds like a lie."

"That is because it is a lie, but I do not dare inquire about the truth."

Tsuji gestured for him to go on.

"They ask that the Empress appoint two champions from amongst the clans to oversee exploration. One, with a

knowledge of arms and the ability to lead in battle should an enemy be unveiled, must serve to ensure that only specifically authorized parties under Imperial Authority have the right of survey, to explore and lay claim to new lands and resources within Sanctuary. And the other, a different champion, skilled with knowledge of ritual and the will of the kami, issues the writ of sanctification, indicating that a new location has been deemed spiritually safe for settlement. By this means, exploration can continue, but in a controlled and safe fashion, without further conflict." He bowed and presented the head of the Otomo the rice paper again.

This time, she accepted it, unfolding the paper with bejeweled fingers. "The clans...competing for the right to settle the lands. A competition under our rules...under our blessing." Gold flashed in the firelight. "An Emerald and Jade Champion, then, to fight, from among the clans. So they do not fight *us*." She nodded.

"So be it. Shiny baubles for the winning." She lifted her hand, admiring the glittering rings on her fingers. One, pearly white, shone with a soft glow.

"The pearl is a symbol of purity and innocence. A Pearl Champion, then, to guard the innocence of this lovely Sanctuary, from overly ambitious wanderers who would exploit her."

She lifted her little finger, and another, a smooth flat oval of ox-blood-red, was as dark as the pearl was bright, though its polished surface reflected the gold setting like a dim mirror. "I gave Hantei Botan-chan a red coral bangle for her fifth nameday. The scholars say it brings vitality and prosperity, especially to children. So, a Coral Champion, to grant blessing to the homes where the next generation of children of the Empire will be raised."

Tsuji lowered her hand. "And we, of course, shall ensure that those who win such a title will see our Child-Empress is placed above all."

"Just as you say," Asuikawa echoed, pressing his forehead to the floor. "So it shall be done."

"Just as it should be."