

EMERALD LEGACY



A Child's Logic

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Otomo Usonohime hadn't believed it when Otomo Asuikawa had told them that the Crab would be moving their ship, Memory of Jade, over land to become the first Imperial palace. Yet here they were at the lake. The so-called Empress Hantei Botan had christened it "Aratana Hajimari" — the new beginning. The *Memory of Jade* at its shore.

The Crab were busy establishing the castle. The Seppun kept guard around the site. The Miya were organizing their cartographers. The Otomo were overseeing it all. And the child Empress... she was kicking a kemari ball in the air.

With Crab! Infant!

Usonohime watched the Empress out of the corner of her eye. The ball would go up in the air, higher and higher sent from one player to another. The mari came down towards the Empress, and she overstretched her foot. The ball hit her toe and went flying out of the circle of courtiers. After ricocheting off the ground it came to rest at the feet of one of the younger Crab. Usonihime had seen this Crab around. She wore modest attire save for an ornate *kanzashi* hair pin which brightened up her short dark hair. She went by the name Kuni Aina.

Aina picked up the mari and walked over to the young Empress.

"I believe this is yours," Aina said, handing over the ball.

"Thank you, would you like to play with us?" Botan asked, her eyes pleading for companionship outside of the Seppun who guarded her and the bureaucrats that taught her.

Such impropriety.

A sneer threatened to come to Usonohime's face but her courtly training had forced that out of her long ago. She was a paradigm of calm. Her green and white kimono flowed with her as she walked over to the children.

"Aina-chan, could you show me to Hiruma Hajime-san or Kaiu Mitsurugi-san?" Usonohime's tone was cloyingly sweet, "I have some business to discuss with each of them."

Aina turned towards the Empress, "I'm sorry, your highness, I am not very skilled at kemari," then to Usonohime, "I believe they are in the pavilion over there."

Curly, Usonohime turned and headed in the direction of the pavilion. Two Hida stood outside the tent flap. They cut imposing figures. Standing more than a head taller than the Imperial courtier, with tetsubos resting in their hands. She didn't pause for a moment as she entered.

Within the pavilion were two groups of Crab. The first were discussing the next stages of setting up Memory of Jade, lead by Kaiu Mitsurugi. The other group was led by Hiruma Hajime.

"But that is exactly the problem. The Unicorn are letting their oversized horses roam our lands...if not the Imperial lands," one of the attendants to Hajime said, "They are overstepping their bounds."

"Could not Yasuki Yoshi, the Pearl Champion, rally to our cause?" Another attendant asked.

Usonohime could see the slightest twinge in Hajime's eye. Nearly imperceptible to anyone not as schooled in reading people as Usonohime was. She could tell that they did not like the attention they were getting and would much rather be doing this on their own.

"That is not in Yasuki Yoshi's purview. Besides, borders have not been firmly set," Hajime said, "With Kaiu Mitsurugi-san's project we haven't been able to set up our own lands in those Ashen Plains. I would like to go out and map the land before anything comes to a head."

Yasuki Yoshi, he was another problem that Usonohime would have to conquer. He had become the Pearl Champion, the military leader of the Imperial forces and enforcer of the Empress's laws, through sheer luck and happenstance. He was truly blessed by the Fortune of Dumb Luck.

A slight cough emanated from Usonohime. "Hajime-san, would you care to go for a walk to discuss your issues in private? Perhaps I can help mediate a resolution."

Hajime nodded in agreement and exited the pavilion with the Otomo.

"We do care about this task of establishing the Imperial palace and we are honored at the request for having the Imperial families sail with us," Hajime said.

"And we have been grateful for your assistance," Usonohime replied, "I understand you have had some issues with the Unicorn as to where the borders lie between your territories. These are new and unprecedented times. We must adapt to our new surroundings."

"Indeed they are. If we concede the land to them we will be without resources."

"The Miya cartographers are preparing to set out to map the island. We should have a better idea of where to set borders when they return." The wooden blocks of her geta snapped a twig. There were many such twigs that littered the ground after the *Memory of Jade* had cleared its path through the woods, scarring the land.

"I fear that we do not have that sort of time. Tensions have been on the rise between the clans. The Unicorn need land for their horses to graze and we need the land for lumber and farming."

A kemari ball landed in their path and a little girl in courtly attire ran up. The child Empress.

"If you both need it, why not share it? There is plenty of land here to go around," Empress Botan stated.

This child, Usonohime inwardly fumed, I will need her out of the way if I am to get any work done here. She causes me more trouble every day.

"Thank you for your input, your Highness," Usonohime said, "It is a little more complicated than that. Let me take care of this situation for you."

"It is possible to share, but I would want to do my own survey of the land first," Hajime added.

A biased one, of course. And if the Empress is playing kemari with Kuni Aina, just a few sweet words will make those maps "official". If the other clans view the Imperials as merely the Crab's puppets then they will stop listening to us entirely. Our "Empress" is going to bring down the empire at this rate. I need to get a hold of the situation.

Usonohime took a deep breath. "The other kemari players are waiting for you, your Highness."

"Okay, bye!" Empress Botan picked up the ball and ran back to where the other players were gathered.

"As I was saying, the situation is complicated," Usonohime turned back towards Hajime, "Feel free to do your survey, it is your prerogative, but the Miya will need to do their own and make their report to the newly named Coral Champion before any official borders may be established. I also understand that there is a representative of the Unicorn coming to talk about the border with you. Please allow me to speak with them on your behalf, as an impartial mediator."

"I guess that would work. And it would free me up to survey the land on my own," Hajime said.

"I shall make all the arrangements."

Including getting rid of that meddlesome child.