

A Most Suitable Teacher

By Katrina Ostrander

Several weeks later...

Ide Tadaji had expected such a gambit from the Scorpion, but not from the Phoenix. Suddenly, rumors swirled around *meishōdō* at the highest of levels. Some advisors were said to be advocating for the Emperor to outlaw it entirely. There had been scant time to prepare a response, to call in favors among the Emperor's most trusted counselors and ensure that the Unicorn did not suffer a major loss of face in the impending session of court. He had moved as many pieces as he could to gain the advantage, to force the game to unfold as he willed it.

If his opponent had outmaneuvered him, it would fall within Altansarnai's rights to call for his retirement—or seppuku.

"Ambassador Ide Tadaji," came Captain Ishikawa's voice as he rounded a corner and entered the audience chamber. Tadaji knelt deeply on the mat. When he straightened himself, the captain had settled in with the painted green bamboo forest on the screen behind him. Golden chrysanthemum medallions had been inlaid on each screen, lest anyone forget the Seppun's royal lineage.

"Captain Ishikawa. Thank you for inviting me this day," Tadaji offered. The Seppun family was normally reclusive—focused single-mindedly on their task of protecting the Emperor and his immediate family. It was on such business that the Unicorn's representative had been brought into their sanctum.

"No doubt you have heard of the concerns raised over your clan's magical practices," Ishikawa began.

Tadaji nodded. "Yes, Captain." Ishikawa had carefully omitted the Phoenix's ownership over those concerns. Was it due to his sympathies for the clan, or because he was one of the few Imperials who did not see a benefit from increased rivalry among the clans?

A heaviness weighed in the air. The moment of truth. Ishikawa sat before him, but Tadaji could feel him standing behind him as well: his second, ready to finish off the self-inflicted agony.

Had Iuchi doomed the Unicorn by adopting these practices from the *sahir*? When the Fortunes and kami ignored his prayers in the Burning Sands, should he have accepted their refusal?

Shinjo-no-Kami herself had allowed the practice. Do not dishonor her with your doubt, Tadaji.

Although it had only been a moment, Ishikawa finally said, "The Emperor does not believe the magic of the Unicorn need be censured."



The shadow standing over him fell away with the words, but Tadaji did not dare allow himself a sigh of relief. Nothing would be so simple—the terms of the Emperor’s forbearance came next, and the Phoenix would not permit the Unicorn to go on their way completely unscathed. Not if the Elemental Masters had aught to say about it.

“The Unicorn have served the Emperor well in their time venturing in foreign lands as well as during their time here. We do not see cause to prevent them from serving in their fashion. However—”

There it was.

“The Seppun must serve their duty as well, and they cannot protect the Emperor knowing so little of the practice and its nature. We require that one of the Unicorn’s practitioners travel to the capital to teach our guards.”

Alter the bargain! Sweeten the airag for the Unicorn somehow. He made to speak, then stopped himself. What could he say to make the Imperials show greater mercy than they already had?

Ishikawa continued, “We understand that Iuchi Daiyu’s own daughter has recently completed her *gempuku* and is among your most promising *meishōdō* practitioners.”

Ah, yes. Shahai. The perfect candidate for a teacher—and a hostage. Was this Kaede’s doing? A master stroke—if the Unicorn’s magic ceased to be acceptable, the clan would be forced to cease immediately lest anything befall the daughter of the Iuchi *daimyō*.

The shadowy second had withdrawn to stand over her head, sword ready to swing.

"She will be an honored guest in this very palace and afforded all the luxuries of the Forbidden City."

So they would take her away from her people, her father, her home. She was to become a mere cog in the machinations of court and a traitor in the eyes of her people. Even if she had been commanded by the Emperor Himself to do so, she would still be sharing her family's secrets, betraying its tradition to outsiders. She would never truly be welcome among the Iuchi again.

None of that mattered to the Emperor or his family. Why should it? "Of course. I will send word to Lord Iuchi Daiyu upon one of our fastest steeds."

"The Emperor extends his assurances that all his servants are greatly valued for their service."

"We humbly accept—and are most grateful for—the Emperor's faith." The rest of the clan would have to feel the same. They had no other choice.

Yes—the Emperor's wisdom had spared the Unicorn delegation the humiliation of a tremendous blow to their resources at a time when they needed to be strong and attractive allies for the Crane, and make use of the Crane's political acumen, even if Hotaru's coffers couldn't pave the diplomatic road as easily as they once could.

The Lion would be furious, but then again, there was already no love lost between them and the Unicorn. He would deal with Ambassador Ikoma Ujiaki—even if their words might well become blows exchanged on the battlefield soon.

The Phoenix, however—they would not cease casting a suspicious eye at the Clan of the Wind. It would be almost impossible to win their aid, even with the help of the Dragon Clan.

The pieces had shifted on the board in a single stroke, as though someone had picked up the board and slid everything to one side. A few were bound to fall off entirely.

The question was whether the pieces could be brought back to the table once they had been removed from the game. And what Tadaji had to do to make that happen.