

Legend of the
Five Rings

The Collected Novellas
Volume One

THE GREAT CLANS OF ROKUGAN

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of ROKUGAN

The Legend of the Five Rings
Novellas Vol 1

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ICE AND SNOW

KATRINA OSTRANDER



CHAPTER ONE

“My lady Hotaru.” Doji Inobu greeted her with a bow that was perfectly acceptable to make to a samurai of noble birth, but woefully inadequate to make to the lord of Kyūden Doji.

Which Hotaru was not, strictly speaking. She was only *acting* lord, and the palace’s longtime fixtures such as Inobu were unlikely to let her forget it anytime soon.

Rather than answer with only a curt nod, she gave him a deep bow befitting an experienced orator and courtier. She no longer lived in the Kakita Dueling Academy, where she might draw her blade in a challenge, so she would resort to killing them with kindness instead.

“Your attendance comes as a surprise, my lady. I assure you, you needn’t trouble yourself this morning. This palace’s advisors have everything well in hand. Please, join your family’s guests in the great hall.”

Hotaru closed the sliding door behind her and composed a pleasant smile. “I appreciate your concern, but I shall stay, thank you.” Hotaru took a seat at the low table and drew her

folding fan from her sash. This deep into winter, she wouldn't need it to cool herself, but the cypress wood and silk stitching of the fan was a subtle reminder of her rank. "My family's guests and many relatives won't be offended if I join them in an hour."

"As you say," Inobu replied. He didn't have the status to defy her, who was heir to his liege, but his lack of agreement insinuated his disapproval.

Inobu bowed to the first of the gathered advisors who would provide their reports. Hotaru had made it just in time to be included in the daily briefing despite the "busyness" that had prevented Inobu from properly conveying the time and place to her. "Lord Koji, if you would."

The middle-aged shugenja, clad in formal priest robes and a high cap, cleared his throat. He was one of the few in the clan gifted with the ability to hear the spirits of the land, sky, and sea, called kami. "The currents of air and water are shifting. We foresee snowstorms coming these next few weeks..." he began.

Snow meant more days trapped within the palace's walls, crowded in with her family's guests, none of whom were important enough to attend the official Imperial Winter Court, either.

She'd begged to go this year, to no avail. There, she could have competed for prestige in the many tournaments that served as entertainment for the assembled samurai. She could have begun forging the friendships that she would need one day, when she would finally succeed her father as Crane Clan Champion.

But she was needed here, her father had assured her. The

Winter Court was a den of vipers who would gladly poison a young samurai's reputation for a day of entertaining gossip, and she could still learn much from presiding over her family's court for the season, he had reasoned. It shouldn't have felt like a punishment, but when other clans' heirs were permitted to go...

She stopped herself from turning her fan over in her fingers and listened to the rest of Lord Koji's auguries in respectful silence.

"Lady Sun and Lord Moon will be at their height again soon. We can expect a king tide in a fortnight, Commodore Motoyashi."

The naval officer nodded. "I'll notify our crews."

Lastly, the shugenja reviewed his shrine keepers' preparedness for the Snow Festival. The acting lord would have a ceremonial part to play, but the palace seneschal, the seneschal's deputy, and their ministers clung tightly to the honors and responsibility of actually planning the event.

Inobu followed on with his own summation of the outings and demonstrations he had planned for the court, weather permitting. He would confer with their master steward and the seneschal to take account of the palace's stores and ensure they requested additional supplies from the storehouses if necessary. Again, Hotaru could do nothing but nod along at his reports. He had the matter well enough in hand without her questioning him or interfering. He'd given her no reason to doubt his competence – only his esteem of her.

Finally, Inobu asked Captain Asano of the palace guard and Commander Yukitori of the provincial infantry to report. Asano reviewed the reports from the palace's patrols, while

Yukitori discussed the training efforts at her garrison. “We must begin to consider how many of our forces should be seconded to defend Toshi Ranbo. The Lion Clan’s young lord, Akodo Arasou, will be sure to mount a counterattack to reclaim the castle.”

Hotaru considered Akodo Toturi, Arasou’s brother, a dear friend. Toturi was a thoughtful man, brilliant and slow to anger... but the two brothers were as opposite as fire and water. Arasou was always eager to fight. Even the Emperor’s demand that he exchanged hostages with the Crane could do nothing to satisfy his appetite for war and glory. If only Toturi were the Lion Champion, perhaps their clans would not have shed so much of each other’s blood. But Toturi had forsaken Lion military affairs and traded the Akodo War College for a monastery.

“Hmm,” Inobu pondered.

Hotaru was choosing her words to underline Arasou’s aggression when Inobu declared, “Respectfully, this can wait until our lord returns.”

But her father was wintering with the emperor far away in another clan’s court, attending to the esteemed business of the Emerald Champion. Serving as the emperor’s personal bodyguard, his chief law enforcer, and the commander of the Imperial Legions left little time for the needs of the Crane Clan and the Doji family, but her father had not yet relinquished the major decisions that concerned the clan and family. These advisors did not expect her to have opinions, much less to issue orders.

“Mobilization would not begin until late spring, in any case,” Inobu reassured the commander.

“Very well,” Yukitori said. Her frown was a small thing, but it spoke loudly to Hotaru.

If her father would not permit Hotaru to accompany him at the official Winter Court, then at least these advisors could cede some of the family’s business to her. She couldn’t prove herself if they wouldn’t let her get involved with even the day-to-day affairs of the palace.

And, thanks to her friendship with Toturi, did she not have the best insight into Arasou’s intentions?

She took a deep breath. “Commander Yukitori.” Silence fell over the advisors. Motoyashi and Asano were unable to conceal their surprise that she had spoken up at all. “I was appointed acting lord of Kyūden Doji in my father’s stead. Let me decide the matter of preparing troops from Kazenmuketsu Province.”

Inobu’s lips pressed together, barely concealing his irritation. “As I said, we do not need to make plans for several weeks yet. Commander Yukitori—”

Hotaru snapped her fan shut in warning. “If the commander is ready to begin preparations, wouldn’t the clan benefit by having more time to ready our forces?” she pressed.

The advisors shifted uncomfortably.

Inobu drew himself up, readying to strike with a polite but firm rebuke, when footsteps rushed down the hallway and the sliding door opened with a sudden snap.

“My lady!” A soldier entered and bowed deeply. He was ostensibly addressing Hotaru, but his deference was directed toward the commander.

“What is the meaning of this interruption?” Yukitori demanded.

“I bear grave tidings.” His head still low, the soldier approached and handed several folded papers to the commander before retreating to his original place. “One of the Mantis Clan fleets has overtaken the Keep of White Sails,” he explained, while Yukitori paged through the letters one after another.

It was as though an earthquake had rocked the chamber. The advisors stared at the messenger in silence as they processed the news. Everyone assembled there was used to the frequent border skirmishes with their western neighbors the Lion Clan. They were ready to respond to an assault against one of the villages bordering the Osari Plains or even the castle-city of Toshi Ranbo itself. But for their coast to be under assault this way, and by a mere minor family of traders and smugglers...

“The Keep of White Sails... Lord Sasaki Okimoto commands the garrison there and oversees the signal fire pavilion, yes?” Hotaru asked. If she recalled her tutoring correctly, the Sasaki vassal family was sworn to her father. Their founder was a simple fisher who had rescued one of Hotaru’s ancestors from a terrible storm at sea. As thanks, the fisherman had been elevated to the rank of samurai and granted the title to the Flying Fish Isles, an archipelago off the eastern coast of Oyomesan Province.

“That is correct, my lady,” said Inobu. “But to think that a minor clan would be so brazen as to directly provoke us...”

“They are foolish, or delusional, or both,” Motoyashi declared.

Yukitori finished the reports and handed them to Asano to read next. “It would be easy to push the Mantis from the

keep in summer. Winter is another matter. We can assemble contingents of Doji troops, but ... We might send word to the Daidoji to prepare reinforcements, both in terms of soldiers and ships. We'll need more than just your small fleet docked at Peaceful Village, commodore."

Motoyashi nodded gravely.

"Captain, run and get us maps of this region, will you?"

"Of course." Asano saluted Yukitori with a clenched fist and then departed the chamber.

Inobu rubbed his chin. "Hmm ... Our greatest obstacle is not one of logistics, but of legality. Even if we are reclaiming a castle that is rightfully ours, we risk escalation. We cannot commit more than a scant number of troops against the Mantis Clan, lest we be seen as the aggressor. The emperor has extended his personal protection to all of the minor clans, the Mantis included."

Hotaru did not want to imagine the choices her father might be forced to make if the emperor's legions had to be turned against those of his own clan.

Koji finally spoke, his voice heavy with sorrow. "The laws of mortals are one consideration. The strictures of Heaven are another. War means death, and death is an affront to the kami. There is already enough suffering to be endured by samurai and commoner alike."

Koji was right, but that didn't mean he would be heard. The Asahina were pacifists in a clan in which half of the great families were devoted to the martial arts. How many times had he been overridden in this chamber? And how many more times would he be forced to watch the Crane march to battle?

“We all want peace, but if we don’t deal with this swiftly, our enemies will think they have a chance,” Yukitori warned. “Sometimes, we must fight to maintain the peace.”

“And sometimes wars can be won with words alone,” Inobu countered. “Let us send a delegation first.”

“That may or may not work, depending on the Mantis’s leader. Do we know who led the attack?”

The foot soldier answered, “According to the local fisherfolk, the flagship’s banners were painted black with white lightning strikes.”

“That could be the *Inazuma*. Captain Gendo commands that vessel,” Motoyashi suggested.

“What do we know of him?”

“Not much. We can ask around our captains—”

“I have heard of him before,” Hotaru ventured. Everyone turned. This time, their looks of surprise were tinged with curiosity.

She took a deep breath and drew herself up straighter. It might have been luck – or fate – that she knew the name. This was her chance to prove her usefulness. “When I was still a student, Uncle – I mean, Kakita Toshimoko – and I traveled to Gotei City on the Islands of Silk and Spice. We met some of the sailors from Captain Gendo’s crew. They were bold, even for the Mantis, and they’d just returned from a successful raid against some Pavarron pirates. They shouldn’t be discounted as warriors.”

This was not the place for her to admit that she and her uncle had direct knowledge of their fighting from getting into a bout with some of the *Inazuma*’s sailors after an outrageously lucky roll in a game of Fortunes and Winds, so

she left that particular detail out.

“Hmm. I see,” Inobu said, still stroking his chin.

Asano returned with the maps, and they hurriedly spread them out before them.

“Still, how many ships – and sailors – would they have sent to take the keep and hold it?” Yukitori asked, pointing to the main island.

“That all depends on the conditions during the battle,” Motoyashi admitted. “Was it a night raid, an attack under the cover of fog, or an assault in broad daylight?”

“’Twas an unnatural fog that rolled in with the dusk,” the foot soldier reported. “We still don’t know how many ships have docked in the Bay of White Sails.”

Motoyashi swore. “Lady Doji,” he said, fixing his gaze on Hotaru. “What can you tell us about their raid against the privateers?”

Now her usefulness would be determined. “Well... this was likely a boast on their part, but they claimed to have slaughtered everyone aboard without losing a single sailor.”

“And now they have a walled keep with which to defend themselves,” Asano pointed out. “Do we have any idea how many soldiers remain on the island as captives? And do we suspect they treated the Crane as brutally as they did the foreign sailors?”

“There have been no requests for ransom yet, but I can’t see the Mantis leaving that money on the table, so to speak,” Motoyashi said. “Even if they are bloodthirsty.”

Yukitori butted in. “Then bring the Asahina shugenja to defend our troops.”

Koji’s face drained of color, but he seemed ready to send

the request to his brother, the Asahina daimyō, regardless.

“Again, I say we must consider levying the Daidoji reserves from the surrounding provinces. Overwhelm the Mantis in a decisive assault.”

“For an island raid? No, a few of the navy’s best ships should suffice,” Motoyashi countered.

“Perhaps we can make do with even fewer. Let them try to pit one of their warriors against a *kenshinzen*,” Asano suggested. “Decide the matter in a duel to the death, and spare the forces of both sides.” The *kenshinzen* were the most elite Kakita duelists in the land – and sometime assassins who wore a mantle of courtly etiquette to murder their victims in public. Uncle Toshimoko was probably the most legendary *kenshinzen* alive. Would they send him? More importantly, would he agree to do it? No one could order the Grey Crane around... or tell him to stay behind when he didn’t want to.

“But if the Mantis live up to their infamous reputation, and they refuse to accept the outcome of the duel – or if the Daidoji ships or armies cannot retake the island–” Yukitori raised her voice “–we will look even weaker! We must get the champion’s counsel.”

Hotaru’s heart thundered in her chest. How much longer would she be forced to defer to her father’s counsel? Months? Years? “No!” She stood abruptly. She couldn’t sit by and watch them bicker this way, or let this chance pass her by. She fought to steady her voice. “Lord Doji appointed *me* to serve as acting lord of this palace and this family. In the absence of the champion, and with no time to convene the council, only I can bring this matter to the lords of the Kakita, Daidoji, and Asahina.”

Motoyashi looked as though he were about to challenge Hotaru, but he bit back his words. Yukitori didn't conceal the incredulous look on her face. Hotaru couldn't blame her. Yukitori had decades of experience as a commander, whereas Hotaru had only just graduated from the Kakita Dueling Academy – without earning the prestigious title of Topaz Champion, as her father had done, and his mother had done before him.

Yes, no doubt that was why her father had left her behind, and why the advisors of Kyūden Doji dismissed her authority.

But Hotaru was also sure that she couldn't let them make these decisions without her. They would only have more reason to ignore her in the future, and if anything went wrong, her father would have all the more reason to doubt her abilities – and her status as heir.

She needed to prove herself now, or she would forever be consigned to being left behind and having nothing of credit to her name. “It will take too long for us to hear back from my father, and we've no time to lose. Even if Lord Koji beseeches the air kami immediately, it will still take time for the swiftest of winds to carry the message all the way to Morning Glory Castle. We must decide now.”

The advisors waited, and she quickly formulated a plan. “As my lords have pointed out, we should first seek a diplomatic solution. The Mantis have long been our friends. But in the case that a peace proves impossible...” she swallowed. “Then we must be ready.”

Inobu was right. They could not employ direct military force against a minor clan without breaking Imperial law, even if that minor clan had been the aggressor. Worse, tensions

could escalate, and a dispute involving a single castle could turn into several, or even draw their entire fleet into conflict. The Mantis Clan relied on the Crane Clan's rice to feed their people, and in exchange, they traded raw silk, spices, and exotic woods that could be fashioned into works of art sought after across the empire. It was pointless for the clans to waste their resources fighting, especially when the Crane had the Lion to worry about as well.

"Lord Inobu, request that Captain Gendo receive a delegation from us immediately. Commander, send word to General Daidoji Uji. Tell him to marshal his forces and begin preparations for a siege. Commodore, relay my orders to Admiral Hoshitoki to form a blockade around the island. Permit nothing in, nothing out. Tell them to capture or shoot down any messenger pigeons, if need be. We cannot allow the Mantis to anchor any more of their fleet in the bay."

For a moment, nobody moved or spoke. The acting lord of Kyūden Doji had just called a muster of troops in the dead of winter. There was frostbite to contend with, and considerable risk of troops getting snowbound in a blizzard or ships getting sunk in rough seas. But now that responsibility rested on her shoulders, not theirs.

"It will be done, my lady." Inobu bowed.

Already their scribes were transcribing her orders into official letters. One by one, she sealed them with her personal chop.

She handed them to the advisors, who would dispatch them to couriers who would deliver them as swiftly as their horses could carry them. For all their hurrying, the armies could only assemble so quickly, and if the weather did not

cooperate, despite the prayers and entreaties of Koji and his fellow shugenja...

Any course she chose was a risk. But if she waited to hear from her father to ensure she was making the right decisions, the Mantis would have even more time to solidify their defenses. Any failure would come down on her head, now.

CHAPTER TWO

Six days passed. Togi, the messenger Inobu had dispatched to request an audience with the Mantis Clan captain, had not returned. No one was surprised when the seventh day brought the news they had all feared.

Hotaru awoke before dawn to her handservant informing her that Inobu had requested an audience. She changed out of her sleeping clothes into a white and blue coat and navy-blue *hakama* whose pleats were embroidered with plum blossoms. She pulled her white hair up into the simple ponytail she'd worn in her days at the Kakita Dueling Academy. It hadn't even been a year since she'd graduated, but it also felt like a lifetime ago.

In some respects, she'd been a different person then. She had still been known by her childhood name and was training to win her school's dueling tournament, which attracted contestants from across the Empire. Her father had privately told her how much he was looking forward to seeing her compete, how proud her mother would have been. That was

before Hotaru had left for the front lines to win glory on a battlefield in addition to in the dueling ring. She'd returned home with neither.

But the messenger they had sent to arrange the delegation hadn't returned home at all.

Through the partly shuttered windows overlooking the sea, the horizon began to lighten with the first rays of Lady Sun. The faces of the advisors remained dark when they arrived. Inobu, Koji, Motoyashi, and Yukitori had exchanged their fanciful court robes for simpler garb. The palace servants quickly poured green tea alongside a simple breakfast of white rice, but no one ate.

"My lady, we have received the Mantis's response," Inobu said sadly, pushing a chest in front of her.

A metallic bite hung in the air. Hotaru didn't need to open the box to know that it contained Togi's head.

"You were right to call a muster, milady," Yukitori added.

Hotaru inclined her head. "I wish I had not been." Perhaps she shouldn't have tried to treat with Captain Gendo at all. It was right to try to resolve matters peaceably, but the failure meant one more death weighing on her shoulders.

Surely not everything had failed already. "Commodore Motoyashi – the blockade? Does it still hold?"

"Yes, my lady. Admiral Hoshitoki has the islands completely surrounded."

She didn't doubt that to be true, but it was a poorly kept secret that the Mantis Clan had some of the best smugglers among their crew. With the right ship, rowers, and weather, no blockade was truly impenetrable.

“Commander Yukitori, what of the infantry preparations?”

“The garrison of Kazenmuketsu Province stands ready. Reserve forces from Oyomesan and Gyōsha provinces are marshaling at Cold Wind City to set sail at your command. They will be ready within the week.”

In a week, then, they could attempt a full-blown siege.

Inobu cleared his throat. “We have since received word back from our champion, as well.” He motioned for Koji to speak.

The shugenja bowed deeply. “The champion said that he is prepared to beg the emperor’s permission to leave the court and return to Kyūden Doji should Lady Hotaru’s plan fail.”

For the Emerald Champion to ask to forsake his Imperial duties was unthinkable, even if it was meant as reassurance.

The fan trembled in her fingers. She couldn’t let her father down. She couldn’t let their clan down. She met the eyes of Inobu. “Is it possible that the Mantis would receive the heir to the Crane Clan if they refused a delegation of lower status?”

“My lady, it is far too dangerous to risk sending you as well!”

Hotaru couldn’t let herself sound desperate as she asked, “Other than that, what diplomatic options do we have left?” She’d be to blame for more deaths by the time a siege was over.

“Our most influential diplomats are away at the Imperial Winter Court, unfortunately, and it will take more time to reach out to our representatives on the Islands of Silk and Spice, but if they were to request an audience with Lord Yoritomo himself...” Inobu suggested.

The Crane were a Great Clan. They did not beg the lords of minor clans to call back their raiding parties from Crane

Clan territories. For the Crane to demand a withdrawal would require them to back up their threat with action, rendering the time wasted.

Yet, did the Imperial law forbid the Great Clans from attacking a group of renegade pirates who illegally seized a keep and committed such vicious acts as beheading messengers? It was an argument that the best Crane magistrates could make in the courts across Rokugan – and probably win. The Mantis could save face by agreeing that Captain Gendo had acted independently. The only casualty would be the Crane’s relationship with the Mantis – and all the commerce that went with it.

“Then we have no choice but to strike decisively.” She laid out the possible legal argument to Inobu, who quickly began running the theory through potential challenges and merits. Koji was silent, but his objection to the violence was clear.

Even if she did retake the castle, her father would be disappointed that she’d been forced to deploy their troops. Every Crane Clan casualty was a soldier they couldn’t deploy to the Lion-Crane border. Every favor called in by the clan’s diplomats was one fewer to call in against the Lion. Each a strike against her reputation and her legacy.

Hotaru almost didn’t notice the sailor arrive and whisper something in Motoyashi’s ear. Though the commodore didn’t so much as flinch, the messenger assuredly had brought ill tidings.

“Beg pardon, my lady,” Motoyashi apologized. “I have just received urgent news. One of the admiral’s ships captured an Imperial vessel before it could reach the isles.”

Her heart nearly stopped. Yes, she'd ordered a blockade, but to forbid an Imperial vessel...

Permit nothing in, nothing out. She should have been more specific. She couldn't afford any mistakes, much less a scandal.

"One of its passengers claims to be an emissary of the emperor."

Suddenly, the room was too warm, and the floor beneath her swayed. She'd known that her father would brief the emperor on the situation, but so far this was still a local matter to be settled between the Crane and Mantis alone. Involving the emperor made the Crane look weak, as though they were incapable of resolving their own disputes.

This was not her father's doing, then. But whose?

"Bring the emissary to the great hall immediately. I will receive them in court."

Her advisors practically leapt to their feet, emptying the room in rapid succession to make all the necessary preparations. Doji Inobu lingered behind for a moment before approaching Hotaru with a deep bow. He wanted something.

"My lady, should you see fit, it would be my honor and privilege to negotiate with the emissary on behalf of the Crane Clan." Of course it would be. It would also undercut any authority she'd won from her advisors.

"The Crane Clan appreciates your offer of service, Lord Inobu," Hotaru answered, keeping a level tone. It would be impolite not to acknowledge his dutifulness. His eyes brightened. "You have always been considered a loyal servant of my father."

He bowed, more deeply this time.

She rose and was about to cross the threshold into the

hallway when she added, "Yet it must be me to receive the emissary. I shall see you in court in a few moments." She didn't slam the sliding door behind her, but Inobu winced as though she had.

Hopefully, she had quashed any notion he might have had to interject "on her behalf" during the reception. Now it was all up to her. She had to do this on her own.

The first task before her was to avoid being branded a traitor to the Empire.

"Presenting Her Excellency, the Lady Bayushi Kachiko, wife to the Scorpion Clan Champion and emissary on behalf of His Imperial Majesty Hantei the Thirty-Eighth," proclaimed the herald.

One of the vipers her father had warned her about had appeared at their very door.

All eyes were on Kachiko, but her stare was fixed on Hotaru. The sheer black lace that outlined the newcomer's cheekbones and brows was a mere suggestion of the traditional mask worn by all Scorpion Clan samurai. Four sharp, golden hair pins fanned out on each side of her oiled black hair. The morning light shimmered up and down the silhouette of her long, black and red silk kimono as she gracefully bowed to Hotaru. Her masked Scorpion Clan bodyguard bowed in tandem, like her shadow.

Hotaru's chest tightened, as though she were about to step down into the dueling ring. For a moment, she thought she saw a mischievous smirk play across the woman's lips.

Many a samurai in this court had whispered of Kachiko's treachery, including Hotaru's own uncle. Kachiko was called the most beautiful woman of the age. Samurai had dueled

each other to the death to try to win her hand in marriage, it was said, and others had bankrupted themselves to earn her favor. Where she trod, she left ruined reputations and lives in her wake.

Her coming could be nothing but an ill omen.

“I thank you for your most gracious welcome, Lady Doji,” she said, motioning with her opulent fan to the fully convened court, where samurai from all seven Great Clans, as well as a few minor ones, had gathered to see what Hotaru would do. “I sincerely appreciate the unexpected hospitality of the Crane.”

The word *sincerely* cut like a knife. Hotaru relaxed her mouth and brows to maintain an impassive expression. She'd had only a few flights of stairs to compose an excuse that would save face for her clan and stand up in legal proceedings. Diverting an Imperial emissary on the emperor's business could, at its very worst, be considered treason. That the emissary was also a Scorpion made her even more dangerous, but Hotaru could not show even the slightest hint of fear.

She bowed low before resting her hands on her thighs, fan clutched in her right hand, as though she were the true lord of Kyūden Doji. Perhaps it was even convincing. “On behalf of the Crane Clan, allow me to extend my deepest apologies for any inconvenience, Lady Bayushi. However, your ship was entering dangerous waters, and we could not risk any harm befalling you during your voyage. We are sworn to protect the emperor's servants, after all.”

The court shifted, murmuring, waiting to see if Kachiko would accept that interpretation of events. Should she testify against the Crane in the Imperial capital, who could oppose

her? Her husband was famously the emperor's best friend, and he held considerable sway. Yet Hotaru's uncle Kakita Yoshi was the Imperial chancellor, and the Imperial advisor was Kakita Ryoku. Both of them owed allegiance to the Crane Clan Champion in addition to the emperor.

Hotaru spared a quick glance to Doji Inobu. He waited, watching to see if Hotaru would change her mind and defer to someone more experienced in dealing with Scorpion courtiers.

Finally, Kachiko replied, "Your clan's loyalty and service to the emperor is commendable, Lady Doji." Something twinkled in her eyes. "But may I ask, are the Flying Fish Isles indeed still under the protection of the Crane Clan?"

Her brazen insult was delicately wrapped in an innocuous question. If the emperor – or his emissary – publicly acknowledged that the Mantis now occupied the castle, his word was law, and the Crane's claims to the archipelago would dissolve, no matter how many centuries they'd stewarded them.

Hotaru could not allow that to happen. Without an unassailable response to solidify her clan's claim, she had to turn the questioning around. "What business is so pressing that you risk sailing through waters where there have been sightings of the *Inazuma*, a ship known for its brutal and bloody crew?" If Kachiko acknowledged the threat the Mantis posed, it would justify the Crane captain's actions and defend the Crane's claims to the islands.

"As fate would have it, my husband had delegated some matters to me that required me to stay in the capital for a few more weeks before joining His Imperial Majesty at the

Winter Court,” Kachiko answered, evading the question and the obvious trap. “Yet it seems my delay proved fortuitous.”

Fortuitous was one word for it. Was it really her duties that had made her stay behind, or was this part of some scheme? The samurai of the Doji family knew how easy it was to conceal a half-truth in a single word, allowing the speaker to appear sincere in saying one thing while not precluding another meaning. “Some matters” could be interpreted in a thousand ways, all of which allowed Kachiko to ostensibly tell the truth.

Kachiko continued, “The emperor regrets to hear of the misunderstanding between his servants, and His Majesty has sent me to help resolve any lingering confusion.”

There it was. She claimed to have come to arbitrate the dispute. If true, she had the authority to award the island to one clan or the other. There was no way to confirm whether she was really on the emperor’s business, but it was also impossible to openly question an Imperial order.

Hotaru would have to win Kachiko to her side, then, and ensure her verdict favored the Crane. Bless the captain who had brought Kachiko here. She’d have to speak with Motoyashi to ensure the captain was recognized for their bravery as well as skill.

“It is a sign of His Imperial Majesty’s beneficence and magnanimity that he sent you, Lady Bayushi,” Hotaru played along. If Kachiko was lying – and those lies were ever brought to life – then publicly conflating the emperor’s judgment with Kachiko’s deception would only lead to a swifter and more scandalous downfall for her, as it would show how much she

was willing to profit by the emperor's authority. "Surely, if anyone can find the solution to the Mantis Clan's confusion, it is you."

She could not allow Kachiko to continue on her way to the isles and work out some secret deal with the Mantis on her own. She could not hold the Scorpion woman here in the palace, but neither could Hotaru let her out of sight. The Crane's delegation may have been brutally rejected, but denying an audience with an Imperial emissary could bring the emperor's legions down upon the Mantis. Would they be so foolhardy?

Only one path lay before her, but it was far too reckless to meet with her father's approval. Yet she would be letting him down if she did nothing and let Kachiko go on her own to potentially award the island to the Mantis.

She'd have to tread this path perfectly, without a single misstep.

Hotaru rose and slowly descended the dais to stand before Kachiko. "As I said before, the Crane Clan will not allow any harm to come to you as long as you are in our lands or sailing upon our waters. I will see to this personally." She knelt down on one knee.

If Hotaru had caught Kachiko off guard, the Scorpion woman betrayed no sign, but her bodyguard shifted closer to her. "As you can see, I am already well protected, Lady Doji. I appreciate your offer, but—"

"I insist," Hotaru cut her off. It was a challenge.

Moments passed, and the eyes of those assembled were trained on Hotaru like arrows, waiting for her to falter. At the edge of her vision, her advisors silently conferred. They

might think her reckless or impetuous, but Hotaru had no other recourse.

There was little Kachiko could say to deflect or deny Hotaru's insistence. They were too close in rank, and Hotaru held the power as lord of this palace, acting or otherwise.

"Very well," Kachiko answered. Her bodyguard would have to carry out her wishes with steel.

Hotaru rose to her feet as Kachiko's bodyguard stepped forward. His black mask covered his entire face, and even the whites of his eyes seemed veiled in shadow. Something in the way he lazily shrugged his shoulders made Hotaru think he might even be amused, although she could not see his smirk.

"However, my dear protector, Bayushi Nishiyo, has no doubt taken offense to your insinuation that he cannot properly defend me when we arrive at the Keep of White Sails," Kachiko said. "I'm afraid that you'll have to prove your superior technique with the sword in order to take his place at my side."

Hotaru had expected nothing less. She'd insulted his skills, after all. All she had to do was prove her technique's superiority over an unknown foe with an unknown fighting style and years of additional experience. In so doing, she would prove to Uncle Toshimoko and her father that she could have won the Topaz Championship if she had been there to compete in it. That their efforts to raise her well and pass on their skills had not been wasted. That she was a capable duelist worthy of the lineage of Kakita, the first Emerald Champion. And that in the not-too-distant future, she could defend her claim to the Clan Championship in the investiture tournament and

win the right to wield Shukujo, the ancestral sword of the Crane Clan.

“I will,” Hotaru said simply. But this audience hall wasn’t the place for it. She looked to the castle’s seneschal. “Prepare the gardens for our duel.”

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