

Noble Samurai of the Glorious Phoenix Clan,

As I was returning from Otosan Uchi after the beautiful wedding of Akodo Kaede, I came upon a dry riverbed flowing down from the foothills. On our journey south, my companions and I had stopped at that river and left a small offering, allowing the kami of the river to cleanse the weariness from our bodies. To see it so empty was disheartening, and yet more concerning were the fish whose bodies lay clustered at a rocky bend, abandoned by the receding current. Where the kami that dwelt in that river has gone—and what could have caused so sudden an emptiness—has lingered in my thoughts ever since.

The Council of Masters, in their wisdom, have dispatched the Isawa to inquire after the kami who dwell in such places. Yet the Council is incomplete, for our Elemental Master of Earth has traveled south to the lands of the Kuni on a personal quest of his own. As our undivided wisdom is required to safeguard the Empire's spirit, I have sent a clever advisor, wise beyond her years, to find Isawa Tadaka. I have no doubt that Asako Tsuki will be up to the task, but I have additionally instructed her to seek out Hida Kisada on the Carpenter Wall should the trail run cold.

Yet Tsuki's departure from the Imperial Capital leaves us in need of a diplomat whose insight can manage our requests of the Emperor's court. With our friendship with the Unicorn strained and with the Dragon unwilling to root out the heresy that has been burgeoning in their lands, we are now in particular need of Imperial support.

This is why I must humbly ask that you take up Asako Tsuki's duties at Otosan Uchi. The Emperor's Ancestral Sword will soon be placed in the care of one of the Great Clans, and if such a blessing brings with it the confidence of the Crown Prince, then I believe we would benefit to receive it. The Emperor's Advisor and Chancellor each have his ear, but our cause is sacred and just. Neither the Left nor Underhand of the Emperor can claim to match our sincerity.

In the meantime, I must travel from Shiro Gisu to meet with my trusted advisor, Asako Maezawa. The Kaito remain spread across the shrines of our lands and the Isawa busy with the Council's tasks, yet questions still linger in my mind. I intend to task my advisor with his own investigation, one for which his unique talents are invaluable. Yet whether he is most needed in our lands or in Otosan Uchi remains unclear to me. When you arrive at the Imperial Capital, report to me on the atmosphere of the court there. Your advice on this matter may help sway my mind as to where Maezawa-sama's investigation must begin.

I will await your advice by the grace of the kami. Once your retainers are at hand to travel, depart straight for Otosan Uchi. Your most loyal service is always noted and appreciated.

Shiba Tsukune,

The Soul of Shiba, Protector of the Council, Keeper of the Tao,

Daimyō of the Shiba, and Champion of the Phoenix Clan

Wise Servant of the Dragon,

I have long been contemplating our Champion's vision. The wisdom of lord Togashi Yokuni is boundless, yet when one seeks enlightenment one must often walk an untrod path. He speaks of a rising wave that strips the plain bare, that none can hide from the Empire's might. His vision is shared among the daimyō of our clan and, behold, the Army of the Rising Waves descends toward Otosan Uchi. Even now, the honorable Mirumoto Hitomi leads the warriors of the Dragon to the Emperor on behalf of her lord and our Champion. Should the crashing wave that Yokuni-ue has foreseen strike the capital, the Emperor's safety must be preserved.

As I write this letter, the first leaf of autumn falls. While it has unfortunately been some time since I was free to visit the mountains of our home, I am blessed by the peace and beauty of the palace gardens. I have watched the roses this year bloom with a dark hue, more red than pink. They will make a striking image, I think, when their petals flutter to the pond's surface and cover it in a shifting coat of crimson.

When a petal settles upon still water, its ripples may reach a great distance. So too have the events of the court reached far and wide. By tradition, the Ancestral Sword of the Hantei shall be entrusted to one of the Great Clans until the Crown Prince is of age to ascend his father's seat. Despite the best efforts of the esteemed Imperial Chancellor, the Emperor's family retains its close ties to the children of Bayushi. It will take much skill to direct the Son of Heaven's trust away from his close friend and his Advisor, and I am certain the Crane and the Phoenix will seek to do so. I have called upon additional diplomats and investigators of my family to join me in the capital, that they might remind the other clans of our noble heritage. But I wonder if the prestige of this duty is truly a blessing. Though the cricket is small, its song is heard throughout the land. So too, does the word of an advisor carry far and wide. The Ruby Champion and Lady Kachiko have found that their duties sometimes intersect, and I do not believe Shojū-sama has reason to distrust such sage insight as our clan can offer. Perhaps allowing this honor to be bestowed upon the Scorpion, and drawing the eyes of the Empire to the clan of secrets, would not be so dark an outcome.

While many questions remain unanswered, the wisdom of the servants of the Dragon has not diminished. Soon, Togashi Mitsu shall be at my side to provide counsel to those who most need it. Certainly I will be glad to have such a worldly tattooed warrior in my confidence, for the is zumi see ripples in the pond that I cannot. Let this letter be a summons for you to join me in the Imperial Capital as well, that we might uncover the answers our Clan Champion requires of us.

Finding the answer is easy. It is asking the question that is hard.

Kitsuki Yaruma,

Ambassador to the Imperial Court

Honorable Samurai,

I will not waste your time with eloquence, for the sacrifices you continue to make are vital to preserve the future Empire. An opportunity presents itself. Changes in the Imperial Court may provide fresh allies that would be of service in our endless conflict. I have commanded the Yasuki daimyō to meet with Chief Magistrate Bayushi Yojiro of Toshi Ranbo. Even now, he travels north to negotiate for a substantial provision of much-needed jade. After the success of his dealings these past months, I believe he can succeed in this endeavor. We may yet find friends among the Scorpion Clan after all.

The darkness that opposes us remains impenetrable. I have yet to receive any report from the watchtower at Ishigaki Province. I have dispatched Yasuki Oguri to uncover the fate that has befallen the garrison there. He is swift and cunning but will not undertake this task alone. Do not hinder or delay him. The machines of war shall crumble beneath the blows of our eternal enemy unless they operate in tandem. The Empire is not prepared for the worst.

You will go to Otosan Uchi. A frog in a well cannot know the sea, so the Crown Prince remains ignorant of our duty. His family's Ancestral Sword, Kunshu, is in need of a steward. I do not expect His Excellency will grant such an honor to our clan, for he is surrounded by advisors among the Scorpion, Crane, and Phoenix who continue to advocate for their clans' interests. However, the Crown Prince's favor will be invaluable in securing future Imperial support. Do not concern yourself with the whispers of vainglory that swirl around him. Such whispers are no different from the lies others tell of our savagery. Fear not if Kunshu does not fall under our clan's care, so long as it remains out of the hands of the Crane. I have no doubt the capital will forget our duty entirely should the Crane secure the ear of the Crown Prince.

Depart as soon as you are able. I expect your report to be timely, and your return upon the resolution of this matter to be immediate. Our ancient foe grows stronger by the day.

*Lord Hida Kisada,
Defender of the Wall*



Courteous Retainer of the Honorable Crane,

The breeze of the descending autumn carries with it a sharp sting. Its whispers speak of the Crown Prince, observing his behavior and drawing self-serving conclusions. I do not look forward to the coming winter, when the days shall be short and our glorious city closed to the cold winds. After your unparalleled service at the palace of my family, the Imperial Capital would be blessed by your presence.

The Ancestral Sword of the Hantei shall soon be entrusted to one of the Great Clans, though there is little reason for His Excellency to consider the Lion, Unicorn, or Crab. Their duties require a great deal of travel as they safekeep our glorious Empire from threats within and without, and to involve them in the intricacies of the court would only draw them away from such magnanimous tasks. As the Emperor continues to consider our humble proposal of wedding the beautiful and eloquent Doji Chiyoe to the Crown Prince, the caretaking of Kunshu may be bestowed upon the Crane. No other clan would be so equipped to keep perfect such an ancient and exalted talisman. While the artisans of the Kakita maintain its every ornament, the shugenja of the Asahina shall keep its spirit dedicated to peace. Yet words shared in secret weigh more heavily upon the mind. With the Imperial Advisor at His Excellency's ear, and the close friendship of their sons, I fear the sword's destiny may be marred by red hands.

Let this be an invitation for you to join us in Otosan Uchi, your duties having been exceptionally fulfilled. Your sharpened wit would be invaluable to cut through the sea of lies and half-truths of the Emperor's court.

While you are here, you may be honored by the company of the esteemed Doji Kuwanan, recently returned from the fighting on the Osari Plains. With the duties his sister must undertake to keep the Empire safe from Matsu passion, she has been unable to fully attend to the needs of the late Emerald Champion's legacy. Kuwanan-sama remains in the Forbidden City for as long as is needed for him to fulfill that service to his honorable father.

In regards to the city of Toshi Ranbo, held so long by the Crane, the current Emerald Champion's wisdom has been invaluable. The Honest Scorpion will rule the city fairly, and the roar of the offended Lion will fall upon unlistening ears. Daidoji Uji has withdrawn his forces from the city to transfer governance to the Emerald Magistrates, and will soon reunite with his Champion on the field. Further, the new governance of the city has helped us arrange for Kakita Asami's departure from the court of Matsu Seishin. She travels now with Doji Kuzunobu to the court of the Fox to discuss the challenges each of our clans face, and how we can best work together toward freedom and security amid the turbulent waves of our time.

Kakita Yoshi,

*The Voice of Honor, Esteemed Imperial Chancellor,
and Noble Daimyō of the Kakita*

*Ice cuts the still air
Where silent empty words echo
Petals fall away*

Most Honorable Samurai of the Lion Clan,

I write to you on behalf of our Champion, Akodo-ue, whose service to the Emperor continues to require his undivided attention. He attends to his duties as Emerald Champion with the appropriate neutrality, having appointed the Honest Scorpion, Bayushi Yojiro, as Chief Magistrate of Toshi Ranbo and elevating the wise and strong Kitsu Chiemi as the next commander of the Imperial Legions. Few will now doubt the righteous strength of the Emperor's Right Hand, though the Lion Clan's armies will miss Chiemi's tactical brilliance as we stand upon the brink of war.

Despite our Champion's diplomacy, the warmongering of the Unicorn Clan has continued to escalate. Even as they celebrate their conquest of Hisu Mori Mura, their hordes continue to grow. We must keep our armies mustered to oppose them. When the Unicorn ride to battle, and I have no doubt that they will, we shall strike back with a fierce roar and strike fear into the hearts of oathbreakers such as they. Fear not that we should be spread thin by our ongoing conflicts against Doji Hotaru on the Osari Plains: the honorable Matsu Tsuko has gathered her forces and will soon avenge the death of the great Akodo Arasou, striking a blow to the Crane that shall force them to retreat from the field of battle.

Do not hold grievance with Champion Toturi for attending to the needs of the Empire while our clan struggles to uphold the Emperor's peace. He is faced with countless cunning enemies in the Imperial Court, and even his inviolate honor is not enough to draw the Emperor's ear away from the Scorpions who surround His Excellency. As Toturi must fight his battles, so too must we: look now to the command of your generals and your daimyō. We must maintain our pride and unity in these difficult times, for even Heaven could not say when Toturi's duties as Emerald Champion will command less of him.

I have been informed by Seppun Michiko-sama that the Emperor shall soon draw upon tradition and put the Ancestral Sword of the Hantei under the care of one of the clans until the Crown Prince is ready to ascend the throne. Despite our ancestral duty to serve the Emperor as his military Right Hand, I am certain that the whispers of those Scorpion, Crane, and Phoenix who frequent the court have given him reason to consider their clans better suited than our own in this endeavor. If the Son of Heaven sees fit to bestow that honor upon one of those clans, we must ensure that the sword's stewardship goes to our allies among the Phoenix, and not to the scheming Scorpion or Crane. Where you can identify the clefts of their armor, whether in the court or on the field, I call upon you as loyal servants of the Lion to strike out and disable the operations of these two rival clans. By the strength of our honor and the courage of our samurai, the Lion Clan shall guide the Empire towards a righteous future!

Your humble advisor,

Ikoma Ujiaki

Honorable Ambassador to the Imperial Court

Trusted Counselor,

The transformation of the open plains as leaves fall and the northern winds blow has always brought me joy. Even as the land grows harsh, we come together at the fireside and recall our bonds of fellowship, remembering that we are the children of the wind. As the Lion continue to claim grievances against us, Utaku Kamoko leads the riders of the Higashi Kaze Company south along the Three Sides River to keep our aggressive neighbors safely out of our lands. They know they cannot vanquish us while we ride free, and so they attempt to lure us into village squares and walled courtyards. Were it not for our allies the Crane, I suspect the Akodo would gladly send their full might across the river, thinking we could not drive off their full legions. Fortunately, our friendship holds strong, the Crane refuse to yield, and the Lion are restrained.

To safeguard the village that Ikoma Anakazu so brazenly called his own, I have appointed Moto Juro as the steward of Hisu Mori Toride. He is a cunning tactician who will give no quarter in a fight, yet I know that he will be far happier when his duty no longer demands of him such violence. His passion for justice and understanding will without doubt guide the village toward a prosperous future.

Yet I am pained by the news that the courteous Ide Tadaji sends from his station at Otosan Uchi. Even after many months of loyal service, our beloved daughter Iuchi Shahai remains locked away in the Forbidden City beyond the reach of our diplomats and mediators. While she has been granted the honor of educating the greatest of the Emperor's guards, no bird should be kept caged away from the reach of her own family. I entrust to you a letter from her father, that you ride swiftly for the Imperial Capital and find the means by which you can deliver it to her—and to her alone. Her father wants her to know that she has not been abandoned at the capital.

While you traverse the blessed streets that line Seppun Hill, you will also likely encounter the newest passion of the court. His Majesty's Ancestral Sword will soon be given to the clan he trusts most to keep it safe. While I expect that to be the Scorpion, given the confidence that the Hantei shares with the Lord and Lady Bayushi, it would be to our benefit if it was bestowed upon the Crane. Should the subject arise while you are there, do not restrain your praise for the sons and daughters of Doji-no-Kami.

When the followers of Lady Shinjo set out into the unknown, they knew not the obstacles they would face, yet their companionship and their courage saw them through. I know you will be the same, for you too are of the Unicorn.

Shinjo Altansarnai,

Seeker of the Setting Sun, Khan of Khans, Mistress of the Five Winds,

Daimyō of the Shinjo, and Champion of the Unicorn Clan

Most loyal retainer, keep this letter and its contents secret with your life.

Onnotangu looks down upon Ootosan Uchi this night. Our most glorious Emperor, the Son of Heaven, has joined his ancestors in Tengoku. He is at peace now, having grown old despite his years. He may have prepared for his appointed time, but to our sorrow, it arrived quite unforeseen to the rest of us. Yet our duty demands that we now step forward to serve the Crown Prince amid his grief. The responsibility he bears will be a heavy weight upon his young shoulders, so it settles upon his advisors and loyal vassals to provide the counsel and support that he requires.

It is known to many that the Emperor was soon to choose which of the Great Clans would be the caretakers of his Ancestral Sword, Kunshu, until Hantei Sotorii's coronation. Such will still occur, and it is now of the greatest importance that the stewardship falls upon the Scorpion Clan. Sotorii has always had a fondness for kenjutsu. Yet he is still young and fierce, blessed with strength rather than restraint. Should another clan become its steward, they may give him unfettered access to his family's sword without further training and meditation. A wiser course would be to continue the prince's instruction while Kunshu is kept by the Yogo, whose wardmasters can safeguard such a venerable artifact of Heaven.

There will be confusion as news of the Hantei's ascendance to Tengoku makes its way around the Forbidden City. Kakita Yoshi may try to lead the Empire as Chancellor until Hantei Sotorii ascends the throne, perhaps even giving the stewardship of the Ancestral Sword to the Crane on Sotorii's behalf in order to secure his own authority. With Daidoji Uji's armies returning from their former garrison at Toshi Ranbo and the spies that Yoshi-sama has spread throughout this blessed city, the machinations of the Crane cannot be ignored. We must clip their ornamented wings. Watch for them, undermine their every effort, and be ready for an act of desperation once they realize they cannot take what we have worked so hard to obtain.

As I attend to our late Emperor, your service is required. Observe our foes among the Crane and Phoenix, who are most likely to oppose us when the caretaking of the Hantei lineage is decided. Report on their movements and actions. If they send messages, intercept and destroy them. The days to come will be trying for all of us. Keep close those you trust the most and allow only them into your confidence. If you have any doubt, even your personal servants or bodyguards must be left ignorant to the truth. The Scorpion Clan will only succeed if our loyalty stays strong.

Bayushi Kachiko,

Imperial Advisor and Lady of Whispers

