Yasuki Taka held in a frown as the servants flocked around him like sandpipers, smoothing and tucking and tightening his outfit. One shouldn’t scowl at those simply doing their duty—just as he was—but the heavy silk hoeki no hō was being pulled down atop other layers of formal garb that were already more than enough.

"I thank you for your careful ministration, but this should be sufficient," he said smoothly, giving a polite smile and waving the servants away. "These hands of mine may not be so many as all of yours, but they don’t lack in deftness!" He pretended to busy himself with adjustments to his garments, but took special note of the servants as they departed, noting who seemed to be in the greatest hurry to leave and who lingered overlong. Doubtlessly they were sent by different clans to keep an eye on him; the game was imagining who they worked for.

The first one out the door was new at espionage—foolish move, to make your exit so blatant—and was probably the Emperor’s, chosen for convenience rather than skill. After all, who wouldn’t expect the Imperial gaze upon them, in Otosan Uchi itself?

Those who bowed and left in a cluster were more difficult to place, wiser or more experienced, likely fielded by clans with a middling interest in his affairs. Unicorn, perhaps—and certainly Lion. Phoenix and Dragon would hear about it by gossip, if at all. As for Scorpion...Taka smirked. Most likely they either did not care, or they had someone hidden under his bed.

The last servant’s allegiance was the easiest to guess: all formality, so intent on folding every bit of discarded clothing that departure seemed almost an afterthought. Crane, of course, having both the obsession with form and the keen desire to keep close watch on their former vassals. Even hundreds of years of peace could not repair the damage clone by the first true interclan war: the war that had led the Emperor to forbid direct warfare between the Great Clans.

Never had there been poorer neighbors than the Crab and Crane—unless, of course, one counted the Crab and the Shadowlands.

Taka frowned, showing the emotions he’d tucked away earlier, and glanced at the writing desk set out in the corner of the room. It awaited the outcome of his meeting with the Heavenly Sovereign, Hantei XXXVIII, and all of Taka’s hard work and persistent pleas. Too many letters of grim apology had been written at that desk, telling his people that he had not had a chance to meet with the Emperor yet, that they needed to hold on as best they could, that no aid was coming. His son attempted to hide the casualties of the battles with the
monsters of the Shadowlands from him, but decades of masquerading as a simple peddler had given Yasuki Taka an enviable information network of his own. In the dim lamplight of the room, the numbers of the dead loomed like columns of smoke rising from pyres.

"Dim, indeed," Taka suddenly said to himself in irritation, smoothing down his fine outer garment and the Yasuki family mon, a golden carp surrounding a flower of deep azure, stitched carefully across the chest. He shot a withering glance at the guttering lanterns around the room. "You’d think it were some kind of festival in here, with all these lanterns, but not one does more than waver and look pretty. Why so many foolish faint gleams when one strong light is all one requires?"

It took another few tugs on the hoeki no hō before Taka calmed himself somewhat. His last truly happy moment had been haggling with the merchant for the silk to make that very garment. And it was lovely, indeed—but everything about it felt stifling and irritating. "Still," the older man reasoned to himself, "no better candidate to appeal to the Emperor for aid than the Yasuki family daimyō." The mental image arose of the Crab Clan Champion’s heir, Hida Yakamo, kicking in the door of the throne room, bedecked in war-scarred armor and bellowing for jade. Taka snickered despite himself.

Somewhere outside, a great brass bell tolled the midday hour, and Taka sighed. "Blessed Daikoku, hear me, and let me do my clan honor today. Let my words be heard, and my plea be successful," he whispered, and gave a wry smile.

"The sooner I do this, the-sooner I’m-out of this gaudy-garb, away from these useless lamps, and back on the road."

The courtyards of the Forbidden City seemed oddly empty as Yasuki Taka approached the palace, figures half-discerned conversing in gardens, vaguely screened by vegetation. Weeks had passed since the grandiose funeral memorializing the Emerald Champion, Doji Satsume, and the many visiting dignitaries had paid their respects and returned home already. Yet, the final convening of the Imperial Court before summer was upon them, and the grounds should have been swarming with courtiers and their attendants.

Those few gazes surrounding him seemed to alight on him like insects in a swamp, and Taka soothed his nerves by recalling the time he’d talked his way out of a bandit ambush, one simple peddler against seven cutthroats. His gift had been to draw a commonality between himself as a man just struggling to make a living and the bandits’ own plight—the knaves had been so moved that not only was he sent on his way without a scratch, but with several sales besides. Although seemingly far removed from twisting mountain roads and the affairs of the common people, all the obfuscations of the Imperial Capital could not change the fact that the issue in both cases had been the same: survival. The Crab Clan fought for not only their lives, but the future of Rokugan itself. He needed but make the Emperor realize what was truly at stake, and finally, this audience could grant him the chance.
Trusted servants greeted Taka with deep bows as he entered the palace proper, the Imperial Chrysanthemum picked out on the breast of their livery in jade-colored thread. "Honored representative of the Crab Clan Yasuki-sama," announced the foremost among the servants, a bright stripe of rank along the wide sleeves of his kosode. "You are to be received in His Imperial Majesty’s music room. If you would follow me?"

Obligingly, Taka nodded and trailed after the lead servant, who padded along the smooth floors with a precise and practiced formality—if a bit quickly. A tension rose in the air, like the sensation of a knot tied too tightly, and the Yasuki daimyō finally spoke up. "Apologies, but I am not as young as i once was, and your speed seems a trifle."

Suddenly they stopped, the servant slid open the shōji screen door and bowed in one elegant motion. "The music room of His Heavenly Sovereign, honored daimyō," he intoned. I shall leave you in privacy." Another bow, again just a touch too fast, and the servant was gone.

Through the doorway was a room lined with elegant instruments: biwa made of rare wood and goid-touched strings, stretching bronze trees lined with tiny bells, even a rare shamisen. Strangely, none of the lanterns within the room were lit, but Taka could make out an indistinct figure leaning over a long zither, stroking their fingers over the strings. The Yasuki daimyō bowed deeply at the threshold.
"My most sincere thanks, Heavenly Sovereign, for agreeing to speak with me," he
intoned—but further speech was cut off by a deep, resonant laugh, melodious as one of the
bells on the bronze tree, and just as warm. Taka nearly jerked upright in surprise, but kept
still and smothered the shock on his face.

"The pleasure is mine—although I fear I cannot claim that title. But His Imperial Majesty,
Hantei the Thirty-Eighth, has given the duty of this audience to me." The tone was smooth as
the curve of a peony’s petal—or the arc of a katana’s blade. "You may rise, Yasuki-dono."

Taka straightened, looking into the icy blue eyes of Kakita Yoshi, daimyō of one of the
great families of the Crane Clan, whose smile never rode north of his nose. "Imperial
Chancellor," Taka said, infusing his voice with a casual kindness as warm as Yoshi’s smile
and just as sincere. "I would be pleased to speak with you, about this most pressing matter."

"Of course," Yoshi replied, his voice almost a purr. "I apologize for His Majesty’s absence,
but he had other—sudden-business to attend to, and I did not want you to put on your very
finest for nothing." He unfolded his fan—which, Taka noticed suddenly, was not his usual
accessory of silk and sandalwood, but a tessen made of pure silver—and its angled edges
glittered as the Crane courtier gestured at Taka’s formal outfit. "It is very striking, indeed.
Such fine silk."

Taka inclined his head in thanks. "I am grateful for such praise. Unfortunately it is not as
elegant as the instruments in this room. Why, I could hardly see you behind that Zitheri Do
you play, or just admire?"

"I am afraid I lack the leisure time to do more than appreciate instruments." Yoshi sighed
dramatically. "But perhaps you do? Not the zither, but possibly the mouth harp? It has such
an amusing sound."

"I find the best use of my mouth is to bargain with it." Taka’s laugh was smooth and
hollow as a blown egg. "May we begin?"

The imperial Chancellor assented and the men seated themselves, skirmishing with
gestures as they did so Yoshi fluttered his tessen absently as he gestured delicately With the
other hand. "Now. What can the powers of the Imperial Court do for you?"

"Of course you know of the Crab Clan’s requests, honored chancellor," Taka began. "It is
common knowledge within the court that the situation along the Kaiu Wall is dire. The
attacks from the Shadowlands grow in size, frequency, and ferocity by the day."

"But of course," Yoshi murmured, his deep voice serious. "And the court weeps at your
troubles. But surely you know of the difficulties inherent in fielding troops to support the
Crab?" The fan snapped shut, and Yoshi tapped the air. "First, traveling by sea is not an
option. If the cost of sending so many ships were not already a burden on the Imperial
Treasury, surely the vessels would be a tempting target for the vile pirates that name
themselves the Mantis Clan. Their leader, Yoritomo—may his name be cursed!—has a
vicious streak as deep as the scar on his ugly face. Were but a single Mantis craft to see those
ships, they would be as good as doomed!"
Taka employed a knowing nod. "Of course. The depredations of the Mantis are well known. Perhaps such a force could travel on land instead? The way would be long, but the need of the Crab is quite great."

Again came that smile, accompanied by frozen blue eyes. "Ah, but what peoples would not be upset at the sight of an army marching through their lands? Peasants are so easily frightened. How could I put my people through the anxiety of seeing an army marching south along Crane roads, into Crab territory?"

"Our clans have not warred for hundreds of years, honored Chancellor," Taka pointed out gently. "And Crane roads are not the only path to the south. There exist routes through Lion lands as well."

Yoshi tilted his head sympathetically, his fan tapping his chin. "Forgive my memory, Yasuki-dono, but has the Lion Clan not already offered the Crab their help and been refused?"

Taka eased out a tense breath. "This is so, Chancellor, but the terms the Lion gave were impossible for the Crab. They required full control over where their troops would be placed-all respect to the Lion generals, but combat along the Kaiu Wall and against the horrors of the Shadowlands is something with which they have no experience."

The tessen waved as if brushing away the protests. "And you imply they could not be bothered to learn? Alas, such pickiness makes me wonder if the Crab’s need truly is as great as you say."

The already-dim room seemed to grow incrementally darker, and Taka spread his hands genially, as if to ward against it. "Let us speak of jade and weapons, then, and free ourselves of the idea of hands to wield them. Such a shipment could easily be taken from Otosan Uchi to Kyūden Hida, far more quickly and with less chance of attracting the Mantis."

Yoshi gave a pained sigh. "Alas, but the coasts are largely the province of the Crane and would be the soonest hit if such a plan failed, and such weapons fell into Yoritomo’s hands. The Crab may be short their equipment, but my own people would Find themselves beset by a scourge made even stronger!" The Chancellor’s tone tightened. "Ii must protect them from the Mantis pirates—or anyone else who might come to own such weapons, for that matter."

Taka’s smile grew warmer, as if seeking to melt the opposition. "There is the possibility of the overland route—"

"Do you not recall my opposition to the march of an army?"

"They could walk more casually, if you like."

The moment fell, and Yoshi’s smile flattened humorlessly. "is there anything else, Yasuki-dono?"

Taka clasped his hands and glanced down, as if holding a run of cards. "If weapons are too dangerous, then let us discuss jade. The Crab’s supplies are running perilously low, and without it, our troops are vulnerable to the hideous Taint of the Shadowlands. It is enough of a burden fighting it outside the Kaiu Wall: we would not see it inflict its agony and madness within as well."
"Indeed not!" exclaimed Yoshi, fluttering his tessen to highlight his shock. "But you must understand that as the Chancellor, I must follow the laws as they have been set. The jade that has been mined by each clan is meant for them, first and foremost."

"Surely the need of the Crab-"

"Is pressing, indeed!" Yoshi’s sonorous voice was a practiced display of sympathy. "But does the Crab truly know of the needs of the other clans, needs which I must hear and address? With each tale, my heart cracks—but I must be as stone and remain resolute, firm, and unbreakable."

Taka’s laugh was touched with bitterness. "The Kaiu Wall is made from stone, Chancellor. I wish it were as unbreakable as your will, but it seems we are not so lucky."

Yoshi smirked slightly, resting his fan against his cheek. "I am of the unpopular opinion that there is no such thing as luck, merely the actions of humanity, or the favor of the gods—the intent of one or the other. All else is coincidence, as in nature." He closed his eyes dramatically. "A lone cherry falls, golden koi swim in circles—"

"An ox voids its bowels," Taka finished, and hid his chuckle as Yoshi’s eyes popped open. "Forgive me, Chancellor. As I said, negotiation is my gift, not music or poetry. And though one cannot buy anything while the store is closed, I owed it to my clan to try all the same."

He stood, and bowed low. "With your leave, Kakita-dono, I shall depart."

"How...rustic." Yoshi chuckled airlessly, and waved his tessen at the door. "It was a pleasure, Yasuki-dono. You may go."

The weather had turned by the time Yasuki Taka left the palace, forcing him into an agonizingly slow walk to his apartments as diligent servants held a long bamboo umbrella over his head. The sheeting rain made the long trek all the longer—although no eyes seemed to be watching him this time, they were screened by dripping boughs of maple and rhododendron.

In all of Taka’s negotiations—against daimyō, bandits, nobles and peasants alike—there had been a core conceit, an uncomplicated certainty at the center. Like a ship at sea, or a child in a gloomy house, he sought it: the light of I want to make a deal. Whether a bright brazier or a guttering candle flame, that light made any negotiation possible.

If the Emperor had simply canceled their meeting, Taka would have waited for another chance to find that light in Otosan Uchi. Instead, Chancellor Kakita Yoshi made the Imperial Court not just a darkness, but a void. The flame hadn’t gone out here—it was never going to catch.

The valiant efforts of the servants prevented dampness from settling into Taka’s clothes, but sadly, could do nothing for his socks—his tabi were soaked by the time he made it back to his apartments. Exhausted, and at least a little bit past caring about the specifics of formality at this point, Taka gladly peeled them off his feet as he stepped out of his geta at the entrance and into more comfortable slippers. A servant collected them from him with a bow, and
vanished as expertly as she had earlier that day. Taka frowned after her for a moment, but sighed and continued to his apartments, sliding the door shut after him.

He was more than half way into the room before it hit him, bringing the Yasuki daimyo to a startled stop. In a corner, a small lantern burned brightly, and beside it a bowl of incense sent twin tendrils of smoke spiraling into the air. Taka took a deep breath, and found himself wreathed in the scents of his homeland: cedar and camellia, spicy and warm.

Such relaxation was short-lived, however. Upon opening his eyes, Taka also noticed a hooded figure sitting across the room, and he started despite himself. "F-forgive me," he stuttered, then cleared his throat and returned to a semblance of calm. "I was not expecting any visitors, and my servants did not announce you properly. If this incense is your doing, I thank you kindly for it-and I would know you properly."

The stranger chuckled warmly and stood, revealing himself to be a tall man with an athletic build. "Formality is about as familiar to you as those clothes," he observed, "although to your credit, you wear both well." He pushed back his hood, revealing long black hair, bright green eyes-and a long scar across his face.


The leader of the Mantis Clan grinned. "Unflappable. I admire that. I have been looking forward to meeting you for some time. I have a business proposition that you might find enticing."

Taka nodded and was about to inquire further when a large sackcloth was snapped over his head, and the world was nearly swallowed in darkness. Only the dim light of the lantern was visible through the cloth, receding as he was carried away.