



Foundations of Hope

A.M. Rodriguez

"Preposterous!" Otomo Asuikawa-sama, the Imperial representative, scoffed loudly. Disgusted, the older man, in an overtly anguished display, turned his head and looked away whilst he harshly slapped his knee with his gilded fan.

"This is rather disappointing," Hida Honoka coldly stated, her words echoing the Imperial's dismay. Her passionate eyes would fall upon him, stern and fierce. Her utter disappointment was relentless. Would she contemplate having him commit seppuku right then and there? She could demand him. It was Hida-sama's right as their leader to request it of him. He had embarrassed her. And before an Imperial no less!

Kaiu Mitsurugi lowered his head in shame.

He had failed her.

He had failed her miserably.

"Otomo-sama," Hida-sama began. Her voice trembled with frustrated anger, "You shall have to forgive us, for it seems that we shall have to reconvene. I must consult the subject of building the Imperial residence with Kaiu Nobuko-san. Kaiu Nobuko-san is our newly and just recently appointed Kaiu family head."

What! How! Mitsurugi questioned himself, but he understood. He was relinquished from his position leading the Kaiu family within Sanctuary. Kaiu Nobuko would replace him.

"I have full confidence in Kaiu Nobuko-san," Hida-sama continued. "She is brilliant. Her talents and abilities far surpass those of Kaiu Mi... Mit... Mit-su-ru-gi." She struggled to speak his name. It was as though his name somehow became vile and corrupted. After she recovered from several attempts of gagging Hida-sama continued, "She is far more competent. Also, she is young. A spry creature within the bosom of youth which has more to offer than this wastrel! Indeed, it would be fortunate for us all if this disgusting and obese ne'er-do-well would simply do us all the favor and be rid of himself from us. Yes! Mit..." Honoka-sama stopped herself as she felt herself gag once more. "I... I order you to throw yourself into the cauldron of Masuiensou!" She shouted loudly.

The room fell silent and Mitsurugi could feel nothing but shame. His head fell into his chest, his body went limp and he was broken.

"I doubt the drunken bastard would fit!" The Oni Baba spat, breaking the silence.

Everyone laughed.

And continued to laugh.

The scene was born from his anxieties.

Would that scene actually transpire? No.

But, it could.

No... No, it couldn't.

Why not?

Because that scene would never play out like that, it was too far-fetched.

Yet...

My idea, although sound in principle, was also far-fetched as well.

Perhaps a little too far-fetched.

What was I thinking?

Mitsurugi stroked his unkempt beard which fell unimpeded over his chest. He had been quietly sitting alone within a field which overlooked the shoreline and the surrounding lands. To the west, wherein the ocean lay and beyond a wall of mist, the masts of the Storm Fortress stood defiantly. Pridefully it announced to all that the Crab Clan were present. Indeed, only the towering heights and stark presence of the wrathful Masuiensou dwarfed the Storm Fortress. The volcano tempered—to a certain degree—the hubris of the Crab. Yet, Mitsurugi ignored the

Crab flag ship. His interest lay elsewhere. Within the shadow of the mighty Storm Fortress, a compact, albeit far more opulent, vessel could be found. It was the Memory of Jade. The Imperial vessel which had sailed alongside the Storm Fortress under the protection of the Crab.

It was what was to be done with this ship which brought him discomfort.

Unconsciously, Mitsurugi grabbed at the nearby gourd which lay upon the grass before him. From it he took a generous swig. It was Friendly Traveler's sake. A dry genshu brew, which Mitsurugi had grown fond of over the years.

"Kaiu Nobuko," He uttered the name sheepishly. "NOOOB-ko. Pfft... She doesn't hold a hammer. No! A chisel. No. Wait... What's worse than a chisel?" He asked himself. In quiet contemplation, he sought the answer. Only to find himself being interrupted by a rather audible and disruptive belch which escaped him. Momentarily perplexed by its disruption he shrugged his shoulders and couldn't help but laugh in response. "Nobuko-san. You'll see. Tomorrow. Tomorrow I will make a castle float!" He triumphantly said to no one as he thrust the gourd into the air.

"Interesting..." Otomo Asuikawa-sama softly spoke as he tilted his head slightly. He raised his folded fan, an ornate instrument depicting kabutomushi in aerial acrobatics, and tapped it lightly upon his lips. Mitsurugi considered this to be a positive sign. It would mean that at the very least the old man seemed intrigued with the idea.

Mitsurugi kept a stern and focused demeanor. His posture was rigid, his meaty hands tightly gripped at his waist, whilst his gaze was concentrated upon the floor which lay before Hida Honoka. He continued, "I shall not mince words Hida-sama. Even with the generous manpower granted to us by Hida-ue, this undertaking would exert our forces considerably. Hence my proposal..."

"Can't be done." Yua-san interrupted. Throughout most of the proceedings she had remained silent with folded arms across her chest, yet now she took an annoyed if not frustrated demeanor. "In my experience ships float on water, they don't float on land."

"Yua-san." Hida-sama reprimanded her mother. She shot the old woman with a disapproving glare. "As seasoned as you are Yua-san, are you offering a better solution to this dilemma?" Yua-san took a deep breath. Her nostrils flared. She then unwrapped her thick arms, set them to her side and bowed. "Forgive me Hida-sama, I was merely stating an observation."

An awkwardness lingered over all in attendance at the exchange. One of which Mitsurugi felt his determination begin to waver. He attempted to lift his sights, but quickly reverted to gazing at the floor before Hida-sama once more. He continued "We use the Memory of Jade as the foundation for the new Imperial palace."

As Mitsurugi spoke, he felt the pressure as the gaze of all within the room was now focused squarely upon him.

"The complication which impedes this undertaking is how to relocate the Memory of Jade to the shores of lake Aratana Hajimari. As reported by the Hiruma, the rivers which are fed by the lake travel eastward and are too obstructed to be of assistance. As such, we have to consider other options.

"One could argue for dismantling the ship. The vessel could be torn down piece by piece and carried to the site; rebuilding or repurposing the materials as needed. Yet, aside matters regarding the practical costs of such an endeavor, the main concern would be where to house the young Empress and her retinue in the interim?" Mitsurugi left the question unanswered.

Mitsurugi risked a quick glance towards the Otomo delegate. The older man's practiced stoicism was commendable. He was diligent and attentive to his surroundings, but also emotionless, seamlessly betraying no hint of his thoughts upon the matter. Yet, as Mitsurugi watched, he caught something within the Otomo's gaze. Something which wasn't meant to be revealed but sprung into existence at the mention of further residing among the Crabs: concern.

Otomo Asuikawa-sama raised his fan and gently waved it. The little light which fell upon its embellishments were refracted into a brilliant array of a glittering display. It washed over the room drawing attention to the man.

"The young Empress is most appreciative of the Crab and their generous hospitality. But, as wisdom dictates, 'the thoughtful guest is always wary of never imposing upon the gracious host.' As such, it is the Empress's desire to reciprocate the kindness demonstrated by the Crab by alleviating the concern for her and her retinue as guests." The Otomo said, lowering the fan onto his lap. Within the assembly a few approved of the observation with a mumbled "hai", several others simply nodded in agreement.

"How sincere!" The voice of Kuni Juurou-san echoed within Mitsurugi's thoughts.

What had Juurou-san said about the matter?

"Bah! Mark my words Mitsurugi-san, in the history of the empire, there has never been any Imperial who genuinely enjoyed the 'hospitality' of the Crabs!" Struggling to stand on the deck of the Storm Fortress, Juurou-san lifted himself, the bottle of shochu held tightly in hand. "If there ever has been one -just one! May Osano-Wo no mikoto's fury strike me down; right here, right now!" They waited for something to occur. Nothing happened. After a while Juurou-san took his seat next to Mitsurugi once more. "See, even Osano-Wo no mikoto agrees with me." He said with a devious smile playing across his face. Juurou-san lifted the gourd towards Mitsurugi, offering the kaiu some more drink. The Kuni was nothing if not dramatic and exaggerated.

Mitsurugi allowed a smile to break upon his face.

"Indeed" Mitsurugi responded. He nodded his head in agreement with the Imperial. "Hence," Mitsurugi paused for a moment, allowing himself a breath before he continued, "Hence, I offer that we float the Memory of Jade overland to the shores of Aratana Hajimari." Mitsurugi felt the release from the weight of those words. Now spoken all he could do was witness whether his ideas would be well received or shunned. He felt the cold grip of fear grasp him.

This is madness. I shouldn't have said anything.

"It is a truth that, as was previously mentioned, 'ships don't float on land,' but all ships that have ever sailed were built upon the land." At this Mitsurugi withdrew from inside the worn and faded fabrics of his gray kimono, several rounded sticks and a sheet of carefully folded emerald washi. He carefully set the sticks upon the floor near to him. Then, as an embarrassed child, keen on obstructing the view of any curious onlookers, he bent forward and focused on the sheet of paper.

The Otomo gave the Kaiu a bewildered look. He then turned his attention to the others who had been gathered. Those of his retinue seemed perplexed at the Kaiu's actions echoing, to certain degrees, his own reaction. Yet, as he quietly gazed upon the Crabs he noted that none of them seemed disturbed by the sight. Even Hida-sama sat with one hand clenching her chin, simply keeping an attentive gaze upon Mitsurugi. It was perhaps, to the conclusion of Asuikawa, that this unorthodox behavior was acceptable for the intuitive—albeit perhaps eccentric—Kaiu. The clan simply accepted it as it was.

"In the past," began Mitsurugi, who spoke whilst still in an overturned posture, "prior to the modern shipyards which litter the coastlines of the empire, most shipwrights had to make do with the simple method of rolling their vessels into the water. It was fortuitous if ever the vessel had been crafted upon lands which were relatively higher than that of the shoreline. Due to the difference in elevation, less force was required to be exerted which meant less manpower."

The Kaiu straightened, presenting himself once more to his audience. In his hand, he held a diminutive, but detailed model of the 'Memory of Jade' crafted via origami. Without hesitation, Mitsurugi gathered the sticks which he had set aside and began setting together a demonstration of his concept. The model was set atop the sticks, which acted as rollers and then with a gentle touch pushed it along. Mitsurugi only ever paused whenever the rear rollers were fully exposed, wherein he would simply relocate the roller and move it to the stern of the ship, slipping it underneath. During his presentation, the Memory of Jade floated along seamlessly.

"In my observations, I noted that the lands surrounding the wrathful Masuiensou, perhaps due to the volcano

itself, gather in height over the realms to the east, wherein the waters of the Aratana Hajimari collect. This is fortuitous!" Mitsurugi said. Although he had spoken, his attention was focused upon keeping the miniature ship "sailing."

"Fortuitous." Otomo Asuikawa repeated. Asuikawa tapped the folded fan he kept in hand against his chin. He then lowered it and allowed it to rest atop his lap. "Although, Kaiu-san, what of the untamed wilderness which lays between? Has any consideration been made upon how the vessel shall "float" over naturally occurring obstructions?"

The journey of the miniature Memory of Jade was halted.

Mitsurugi lifted his gaze to look upon the stately Imperial. The Kaiu felt his anxieties swell, yet he didn't succumb to its beckons. Something about the Otomo's invested interest spurred him to engage. Something felt different.

Was the Otomo actually curious? Did his idea resonate with the Imperial? If the Imperial was convinced, would Hida-sama act upon it? HA! Eat your heart out Kaiu Nobuko!

"Otomo-sama, to that, one must praise the skills and attentiveness of the Hiruma. When Storm Fortress dropped anchor within the bay, it was the Hiruma who first waded into the wilderness. Through their efforts, an understanding of the region was realized and even the pristine waters of Aratana Hajimari were discovered. In understanding the land, the Hiruma were able to devise a path of least obstruction to the shores of the lake. All that would be required is a small crew of laborers to remove any reluctant foliage or rocky outcroppings." Mitsurugi responded.

The Otomo slightly nodded in response.

"Kaiu-san?" Hida Honoka called his attention.

At the tone of Hida-sama's voice, Mitsurugi's anxieties resurfaced. Here the thoughts of disappointment and shame were once again realized.

I did something wrong. I said something wrong. I shall have to fling myself into the horrible chasm of Masuiensou!

Mitsurugi turned to Hida-sama and dared not lift his sights higher than the floor at her feet.

"Yes milady?" He responded.

"I am curious, but why exhaust resources to move the Memory of Jade overland? Why not simply build a new castle fit for the Empress upon the shores of the lake?" Honoka asked.

Mitsurugi considered his response. "Hida-sama, as soon as the Memory of Jade set sail, it was no longer simply a ship. It became something more. Blessed by the water dragon, it safely carried our young Empress across the oceans. It guided us to these lands wherein the future of our empire lies. It bestowed hope."

"Hope, I think, Hida-sama, should be the foundation upon which the young Empress's castle is built. The Memory of Jade is that hope."

"Interesting..." Otomo Asuikawa-sama whispered softly. The Imperial was pleased.