After the Storm

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"Hitoshi! Tie that loose sheet! Utari! Take the clew! This storm'll be on us before we know it!"

The Captain's orders roared above the quickening wind, and Hitoshi and his far-shored sister of the sea stepped swiftly to obey. Though the sky above was clear, they could all see the dark clouds swelling on the horizon, and the tiny flashes of Osano Wo's fury that would soon bear down on them.

Hitoshi gripped the free sheet and used it to help him scramble up the mast, his bare feet finding purchase on the varnished cedar. Reaching the head, he looped a leg over the yard that held the great battened sail and reached back towards the loose sheet to make it secure. It was a dangerous position, but well suited for wiry young men fresh from their gempukku like himself. Once everything was tied down tight, Hitoshi took a breath to watch the storm as it roared towards them.

The sea won't have me today. It was not the sea Hitoshi feared anyway. This was his ship, his name…*Six Oceans' Champion*. His home. The Empire could drown in its fancy titles and fancy armors. He'd more eagerly bear the title of Champion of *Six Oceans* as a simple oarsman than all the shiny armor and fancy titles the Empire had to dish out. The Topaz Championship had shown him that.

The storm was on them quickly.

The wind and waves slammed into the side of the boat with the roar of an angry god. Hitoshi could feel the wet obi of his fellow sailor slipping through his grip as he felt the force of the wave drag them both towards the edge of the deck and the hungry waters below. He had grabbed Ikku out of sheer instinct when he saw the waves pluck him from the deck, but it forced him to leave his own bindings, and the sea was tearing at them both. Bitter salt filled his mouth and stung his eyes, but he hung on. With a hungry sigh, however, the wave released its grip, leaving him sputtering and gasping for sweet air, Teiljo vomiting on his hands and knees beside him. The Captain, Gyukudo, did not waver, back leaning into the tiller.

"You take Ikku, Utari!" The third mate leapt at the order, relieving Hitoshi from his grip on the weakened sailor.

"And, you!" Gyukudo pointed at Hitoshi. "Give me a hand, lad!"

Hitoshi scrambled towards him, slipping and stumbling across the wet deck before he climbed the stairs to stand beside his captain.

"Pull!" Gyukudo commanded, heaving on the tiller, and Hitoshi grabbed the wooden beam and hauled side by side with the older man. He could feel the boat buck and heave beneath his feet, and heard the aching timbers as they strained against the rudder's leash, but the tiller held firm, keeping the bow of the ship into the wind, preventing the *Champion* from being tipped and washed over by the waves.

Gyukudo grunted beside him. "That's it….keep into the wind….Better to be off course than flooded…"

Hitoshi could hear the exhaustion in the man's voice, but the storm was beginning to lose its rage, the lightning passing beyond them to the southeast. The fight would be over soon.

The sea had grown still and the winds had died when Hitoshi and his captain settled, side by side, next to the tiller of the *Six Oceans' Champion*, their eyes drifting shut with exhaustion.

"You did well," Gyukudo rumbled. "You may be the bastard son of the West Wind over the sake houses of Kyuden Gotei like they say, but you're my right sort o' bastard. I'm glad to have you on this ship."

A flood of warmth spread across Hitoshi's chest as he flushed with pride. "I'll serve the *Champion* well, Captain, I swear on my honor."

The captain chuckled. "And to think, the mainland almost claimed a good sailor like you. Wouldn't that have been a waste? Maybe you'll take my place at the tiller of the *Six Oceans' Champion* one day. A far more fitting title." Gyukudo sucked in a deep breath, and, leaning his weight on the rudder, hauled himself to his feet. Hitoshi followed suit.

The sun had escaped the storm clouds that had moved on, spilling down in shafts of golden light, and while the sea was gray-green with the memory of the storm, the white caps just licked the sides of the ship playfully. But the *Six Oceans' Champion* was not at its best. Sheets and sheetlets hung loose in the wind, and the mainsail was torn and several of the battens had been broken. It would take time to repair. Hitoshi scanned the horizon, looking for safe harbor. The repairs would be easier at anchor. But the storm had driven them further to sea.

Still…

"Is that land?" The young man shaded his eyes and pointed.

Looking to the south east, it seemed as though the bank of the storm had split in two. One, passing to the south, bore with it the dark rainy thunderhead of the weather that had just passed. But the eastern portion of the horizon, where the clouds had been dragged to the earth by Osano Wo, clung still and calm…silver mists rising from the ocean with a placid and inviting stillness. And above those mists, lit by the occasional shaft of sunlight, Hitoshi could just barely make out a green cone, the crest of a forested mountain peak rising above the mists. A harbor, if they could reach it.

Captain Gyukudo followed his gaze and frowned, silent for a moment before he consulted the sundial and scratched out another line on the bearing rod. "That shouldn't be there…" he muttered, and shook his head.

"We won't be sailing there, lad. Even Lord Yoritomo does not sail those waters. We'll sea-anchor only, and retrieve our course as soon as the sail is mended."

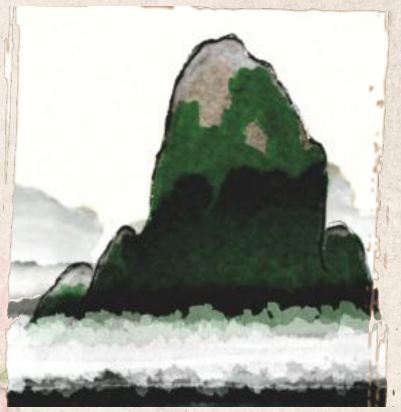
Hitoshi's brow furrowed. "Why?"

The captain began gesturing for his men to make preparations while Hitoshi followed.

"Why? I've heard stories. That island only appears rarely…At times when the world is changing, they say. When you approach those waters, a heavy fog rises at your bow, day or night. On a clear day, you can see green trees and a mountain rising from those mists from afar, but when you set your rudder the course, the fog envelops the ship, and all falls into white stillness and the waves lapping your boat. Set your oars as you will, but you will never reach the shores of that island."

"That's…" Hitoshi frowned. "That's not possible. Why would the kami do that?"

"You may call it a fish tale, and maybe it is so. But my grandfather told me of the time, when he was a boy, when they took on the crew of a Mantis captain who tried to reach it. They were half starved; spent four months rowing in those mists seeking the shore. Captain went overboard, and the crew made their way out. For some say that is a sacred island, at least as the stories go. They say the dragons claim it as their own. The Air Dragon masks it in his mist, after all, and the breath of the Fire Dragon lights the mountain when he rages."

"Perhaps it is sacred to them. Perhaps, as others say, it is a shrine to the first Emperor. Or maybe it is a refuge for beings older than the Empire itself? Who can say? All I know is that there are many stories and no answers for it."

Hitoshi glanced back over his shoulder at the peaceful green spire rising above the puffy white mists. *The world is changing*, he thought. And in his heart, he knew at least that was true.