

Everyone always assumes that the best time to plot was at night; that shadows cloak the plotters' intentions as they scheme in the dark. This was short-sighted in Tadashi's opinion. Everyone expects a plot at night. It is watched for. If you are out after the hour of the dog and not in public then people have the annoying habit of asking probing questions.

No, the best time to hatch a plot or to scheme is in broad daylight. This makes everyone believe that your plans are perfectly legitimate and above board. People don't question you being out in the day. It isn't strange to meet friends in some tea house somewhere or in a garden. It isn't strange to make new friends.

Although Tadashi ruefully admitted, this was a far cry from a teahouse or garden. The hot midday sun beat down on the sand-covered atoll. He could not help but wish for a better location. It was ideally placed, at least, halfway between the main island and the Jade Isles, as some were starting to call them. The atoll itself had nothing in the way of amenities, rising barely above the tide in the day. Its greatest virtue was that it could be seen from shore and sea.

That meant that if anything happened to him, the Scorpion would know, and if he deigned to do anything to the Mantis, they would also be aware. Not that Tadashi had any intention of stepping out of line. There were times when an unfortunate soul simply had to be removed, but not at the start of negotiations. Not this time. Not with the Mantis.

Tadashi adjusted his parasol and red-coloured kimono as he waited for the Wave's Blade, (*What a pretentious name!*) to arrive and send out its captain.

A ship very unlike the great atakabune of the Scorpion clipped around the corner of the island. The rectangular sails and sleek hull cut through the water, coasting towards the atoll. Unlike some Mantis barks Tadashi had seen on the River of Gold, this ship was well-made and well cared for. Tadashi's eyes weren't what they were, but he didn't see any of the fouling from sea creatures that such ships often had.

Turning, the Yogo checked over the supplies he had brought with him. Two folding stools, a table, and a precious jug of saké. *Should be fine for a Mantis.* Were it a Crane or even a Lion, he'd have had to bring food and some sort of musician, but the Mantis responded best to a direct approach, much like their Crab fathers.

Busying himself, Tadashi settled things just so. He sat down on one stool and poured himself a drink. Carefully, he then took a bit more of the saké and pressed it on his skin. The illusion of a man waiting so long that he had drunk something to entertain himself was invaluable.

*Was it a little much for a simple Mantis?* Probably, but Tadashi hadn't clawed his way out of the backwater by not taking every advantage he could.

A small boat slipped off the Mantis ship and glided towards the atoll, arriving with a smooth thump against the shoreline and giving Tadashi his first view of the man known as Eiso.

Like most Mantis, he was a wiry man built for strength. A lifetime of sailing had set a tan across rough and tumble features. The one affectation the captain seemed to allow himself was an ornate pin keeping his hair pulled up in a bun. The clothes were nothing special, a kimono draped across the shoulders with nothing underneath, and loose hakama.

Norio would have enjoyed the view, but Tadashi's own tastes leaned more urbane. He pushed away the thoughts. He wouldn't think about that, not again. Instead, he stood up and bowed.

"Eiso-san, captain of the Wave's Blade, I presume?" he asked.

The Mantis bowed back. "Hai, my sister says that you're the one to talk to about getting a harbor."

Tadashi spread his arms. "I am indeed charged with such by Soshi-ue's command. Please, sit with me and share a drink. No doubt you are parched after such a swift journey."

Eiso's eyes narrowed momentarily before a ghost of a smile appeared. "I wouldn't say no to a drink."



The two men sat, and Tadashi lowered himself to pour a cup for the Mantis. Both took a long sip of the saké, enjoying the subtle flavorings of the rice liquor before beginning their task in earnest.

It was Eiso who spoke first. "We spotted a good harbor on the north side of this island, but there were samurai there and laborers."

"Hai. While we work to reduce the fortress, we have spread out to where we can to begin our investment in the sea," Tadashi said slowly. "Shosuro Hiruyuki-san and his team have proven most adept at finding little spots for us to set up camp. I take it you would prefer to be there?"

The Mantis scratched his chest. "It's got a good anchorage, safe from storms, and enough room for the rest of the fleet. It wouldn't be bad."

Tadashi allowed one graying eyebrow to quirk up. "Not bad? I had no idea that it was so below Mantis standards. Shosuro-san told me it was a good harbor for us, that we would be able to use it well in the future to get to the other isles."

"Well, after the Isles of Silk and Spice, we Mantis know what a great harbor looks like." Eiso said.

Oh the gall of the man, Tadashi fought off the urge to snort. He really did think his clan should be equal to the Great Clans. Still, that wasn't an unusual thing for Mantis, and useful.

"Unfortunately," Tadashi smiled. "I've never been able to see the fabled isles. Though I imagine they're a bit more cozy than here."

Another sip of saké before Eiso answered. "We've built them up to be the best. We could do the same for your harbor if you wanted."

A low hum from Tadashi. "I don't know about that. It has become a good fishing spot for our clan. If I were to give it up, we would need other sources. I had intended to offer space on the Roku Island about a half day's journey east of here."

Roku Island had more harbors, but none so good as this island (creatively named Ichi Island) had. Worse, none of them would have enough room for the entire Mantis fleet. This meant that Eiso would have to split up his fleet, something he would be reluctant to do. The Mantis had always been strongest when they concentrated their forces into their great Storm Fleets.

There was an art to getting people to do as you wished. First, dangle something they desire in front of them. Then, make them work to get it. They would convince themselves that they had to act, and you are left completely innocent.

Eiso looked like he had tasted a sour fruit, and shook his head. "The northern harbor on this island will do well enough for us. Besides, your harbor is useless to us without laborers to work it. There are laborers here, and I want them."

*Laborers. That is the crux of it. Of course the Mantis brought only armed men. Trying to turn pirates into farmers would make a fine farce.* Making a show of drumming his fingers and looking conflicted, Tadashi finally said. "Laborers, humm? Well, we have plenty for our needs. We could leave the laborers to work for you, I suppose. But they are growing rice for our clan. Or they would be, if our fields were as rich as, say, the Lion's?"

The Mantis glanced westward towards the main island. "The Lion do seem to have plenty." He threw back the small cup of sake and poured himself another. "I imagine that a few warehouses of rice would more than make up for any losses, wouldn't they? Make up for the time of your laborers sitting idle there"

Tadashi masked his smile well. "A sufficient amount of rice, I suppose, just might, but naturally we would never ask how you proved so resourceful in obtaining such a thing."

"Well, let's say a payment of food, a full shipment, once every three months?" Eiso offered.

Tadashi shook his head. "One per month."



"That's just asking for my ships to be ground down." The Mantis almost spat.

Stroking his beard for a moment, Tadashi mused aloud. "Well, every two months then? And perhaps mutual defense if someone comes knocking?"

Now it was Eiso's turn to make a show of thinking about it. Finally, the Mantis nodded. "Very well. We are guests for now, and it's traditional for guests to help if an attack happens."

Tadashi didn't smile. It would be gauche, but the first step had been taken. The Mantis would rely on him, as a benefactor, and in time that relationship could only deepen.

Shosuro Shiori would never countenance overthrowing Soshi Yuka. But Eiso...Eiso might if he thought he would profit.

The Yogo hoped that he would not have to remove the shugenja who led them, but he wasn't going to let the Clan falter here just because of some ancient choices. If Yuka proved incapable, she would be removed.

"I think that will work nicely." Tadashi dug into his kimono and produced a well-tended netsuke. "This was carved from a tree in my hometown, I hope that it finds appreciation in your travels."

Eiso smiled, his teeth white and shining. "Ah, I was just about to offer my own gift. I heard you and your husband were gifted gardeners and wished to offer you these seeds...I found them beneath a most incredible flower."

From his kimono, the Mantis produced a large handful of red orbs that looked like seeds from the Lily of the Valley plant.

Tadashi eyed them curiously, already noting the differences. "I certainly couldn't deny you the chance to grow such a thing yourself..."

The two bantered for a bit as they went through the Game of Refusals. It was almost perfunctory at this point; they had both gotten what they wanted.

As Eiso returned to his boat, Tadashi held up one red seed to his eye.

*What sort of poison will you make?* He wondered.

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