Views from Deck - Part 1

Chris Garvey and Alex Jacobs

I turned to see a shore unlike anything I had ever known, and a child who beckoned me to come see this new land which opened before me.

Wind carries petals
Spring lotus blossoms alone
On unknown Isles

My teachers are not requiring me to do my studies aboard this ship, but writing these haiku helps me collect my thoughts.

I miss my mother. I didn't know her for long but I still miss her. I don't even know my father and I've heard that I have brothers. I wonder what they are like. I bet they are brave, honest, and would play with me. I've been surrounded by tutors and handmaids all my life. I wonder what it would be like to have a real family.

I saw one of my Seppun guards steal a smile when a messenger arrived at my door. She is really tall and pretty. I think her name is Seppun Ryo. I like her. I wish someone would smile at me like that. So warm and friendly. What is it like to have a real friend? Back on land the courtiers pushed their kids into pretending to be my friends because I am important and now I know how I am important. My mother told me I am to be Empress of this new land. I don't understand why my mother couldn't come with me. The dragon said only one of us could go and she gave me up. I hate my mother. How could she abandon me again?

Ryo told me the seas were going to be rough today because we were going to be passing by a whirlpool. I asked if I could see it, but she told me it was too dangerous. If I'm going to be the Empress, they can't hide things from me forever.

Autumn leaves drift down
They tumble through the gray sky
Swirling in the wind

— From the journal of Hantei Botan
Daughter of Emperor Hantei XXXVIII

"First position! Kyah!" Her long bokken fell in front of her belly, blade pointed forward towards an imaginary opponent's throat, while her shorter one rested easily at her side. Behind her, ten wooden blades copied her stance.

Five students should be a small class, but they took up the entire open deck of the Ox Cart. Well, not the whole deck Rei had to admit. But given how much of the deck was crammed with masts and rigging and ropes and other - what had the sailor called that? Burn it, it didn't matter - things, there wasn't that much space actually open. The swords they were all spinning around tended to take up most of the remaining room.

"Second position! Kyah!" She raised her blade, cutting sideways, pulling with the elbows, never pushing with the arms.

Five students. She'd heard that in Iron Mountain Dojo this wouldn't even qualify as a study group. She'd once heard of a sensei refer to a lesson with two-hundred and thirteen students as a "small class." Well these were all the Dragon could send. What family would risk their precious children on a perilous sea voyage with the promise they would never be seen again?

"Third position! Kyah!" The long sword dropped behind her, against her left leg. When her invisible opponent struck, she raised the blade, seeing their arms falling into its bite as she stepped aside.

Back home this class would have been run by a sensei, or at least a senior student with the sensei's favor. Here there were no senior students so she'd had to step back into that role. Fine, she'd show them she could fill this duty as surely as the other challenges they'd given her.

"Fourth position! Kyah!" As she completed her strike, her long sword came back, but this time to her right leg. She made to repeat the third position strike, but this time took an imaginary head off invisible shoulders, while the short sword cut down the opposing sword.

She'd mastered the positions, hadn't she? The strikes, the kata. They'd thought her doomed to failure, undiscovered by the shugenja until it was too late. The first time she'd picked up a bokken she was already older than the student guiding the exercise, the same one she was leading these children in now. Well it'd worked, hadn't it? After all, here she was.

"Fifth position! Kyah!" The long sword was behind her again, the short sword in front, resting lightly on her belt. She was still. If you perform this correctly, you will never need to move, Hojatsu had written. The opponent will see your stance and he will know that you know the Way. Sometimes victory is won without a single drop of blood.

Behind her someone stumbled. The ship's movement on the waves made holding the position for long nearly impossible. Mirumoto Rei held the stance two heartbeat's longer to make her point. "Soften your ankles, Jiro. Don't bend your knees down; they'll make you heavy. Send your knees forward. Again!" Without turning she began the series over as the five students copied her.

A pair of eyes watched from the foredeck. Kitsuki Masanori smoked a pipe, tapping the ashes over the rail into the waters below as the class drilled the five positions over and over. He knew them of course, but the Mirumoto's sword strikes interested him far less than the hands holding those swords, and in particular the calluses on them. The same he often saw on the farmers outside his home village.

Yes, definitely best to keep an eye on her, thought the old Justicar. He could talk to Hitori about her duties. Seiji reported to him and would need a yojimbo. That would keep her close. Then he could decide what to do about her.

Down on the deck the class began the exercise again.