



Below the Surface

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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.

Eiso stood aboard The Wave's Blade. His sister, Yuta, had made the connection with Yogo Tadashi, of the Scorpion Clan, while he convalesced. The Flower of Contentment still clung to his mind, threads of lassitude drifting gray in his thoughts. Though the blossoms were cut, the roots still remained. He hated having to ask the Great Clans for help, but the mists left the Mantis with few options. They must find a harbor and laborers to work for them, or take to the soil like common peasants. The thought rankled like a canker. These fortune-cursed mists kept them stuck on this island, unable to break free and woefully unprepared.

The ship approached the coral-formed atoll island. There stood a lone courtier. The red kimono and parasol identified him as the Scorpion Eiso was there to see. It was with some trepidation that Eiso agreed to this meeting. The Yogo had a...reputation. They would betray you if they could.

Betray them first, a voice whispered in the back of his mind.

No, that is not a possibility. The Mantis must survive. The Mantis must thrive.

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

"Hai, my sister says that you're the one to talk to about getting a harbor," replied Eiso. It was not a harbor they needed. They had their stronghold deep within the mangrove swamp that Tuku was building. But that place was barren when it came to food stores. It's a miracle that the Mantis had not starved to death. Next to the stronghold was the hidden shrine of Inahou Okami, the "Fortune of Rice". Every night, the Mantis conduct rituals, hoping to stave off their hunger for just a little bit longer. But Inahou Okami's infrequent blessings did not sate the Mantis's bellies. What they truly needed was a stable and renewable source of food.

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

Poison? What would he gain from killing me at this juncture? Nothing. It would be a declaration of war and my Mantis would raze them to the ground. My scout ships have told me of the Scorpion's troubles with their own harborage and the strife with the Lion. The saké is safe.

"I wouldn't say no to a drink." After taking some long sips of the rice wine Eiso spoke again, "We spotted a good harbor on the north side of this island, but there were samurai there, and laborers."

Eiso was not a gambler but knew the strategies. The Scorpion were in a precarious situation and this large ante would unbalance the courtier.

"Hai. While we work to reduce the fortress, we have spread out to where we can to begin our investment in the sea. 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?"

Eiso would prefer to have that harbor to be his. Best not to play the whole hand quite yet.

You would be content there. The voice whispered again.

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

True, not bad, but ideal. The swamp was too shallow for the fleet.

"Not bad?" Eiso seemed to have struck a nerve. "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."

Tadashi wasn't wrong. The only things this harbor didn't have going for it was good land to grow rice and defense from a siege.

I can make the Scorpion content with another harbor. Give me to them. The voice murmured.

Eiso tried to suppress those thoughts while he pressed his advantage.

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

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

Eiso spent most of his time aboard his ship, but Thunder Bay was where he called port. Though the bars and geisha houses were quite nice, they would have to do without that here. For now. "We've built them up to be the best. We could do the same for your harbor if you wanted."

And sow me into their soil. The voice was so faint that Eiso had trouble distinguishing it from a passing thought.

Tadashi's tone dropped. "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 half a day's journey east of here."

They want to offer me an island further away. They would be able to keep an eye on the Mantis. By naming their islands by number, I would guess this is named "Ichi". The sixth island is not ideal. No, it isn't even adequate. The Mantis would be splintered like a ship run upon the rocks. It is this island that I must have.

"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." The Mantis insisted.

What would the Scorpion do now? It was too late to poison the saké and be rid of Eiso.

"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 Well, maybe if I could bring something to Soshi-ue to make up for the loss?" "Tadashi offered

And now the cost. It's not a surprise. They want rice? Raiding the Lion is no easy task, but they have always been shorebound. They've never had to deal with us before.

"The Lion do seem to have plenty." Eiso drained his cup and refilled it. "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" If they couldn't take it from the Lion, there were other clans. His other captains were garnering deals of their own anyway.

"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?"

"One per month."

One a month? That was ridiculous. Raiding anyone not willing to help the Mantis would be good, but once a month? They wouldn't be able to feed themselves. The gall of this Scorpion to ask such a thing.

Give me to them, and they shall be content, the voice insisted.

"That's just asking for my ships to be ground down." Eiso let his emotions get the better of him.

"Every two months then? And perhaps mutual defense if someone comes knocking?"

"Very well," Eiso said after some thinking. "We are guests for now, and it's traditional for guests to help if an attack happens."

"I think that will work nicely." Tadashi reached into his kimono and brought forth a small carved trinket. "This was carved from a tree in my hometown, I hope that it finds appreciation in your travels."

Gift them contentment, once more the voice called, unbidden.

"Ah, I was just about to offer my own gift," Eiso spoke with words not his own. "I heard you and your husband were gifted gardeners and wished to offer you these seeds...I found them beneath a most incredible flower."

Eiso produced a handful of small red seeds. *Had there been this many before?* The pair played the game of refusals,



a trite ritual of the mainland. In the end, Eiso got the netsuke and Tadashi the seeds of the Flower of Contentment.

Returning to his boat Eiso looked back at the lone Scorpion courtier, looking at one of the red seeds. Red like blood. Red like passion. Red like the Scorpion. What terror had Eiso unleashed upon the Scorpion?

Who betrayed whom, Yogo-san?

