I waded towards the girl and the land and stumbled when my feet struck a stone. "Clumsy" she laughed as she splashed forward to help.

A beautiful day with no clouds and steady wind is what most sailors always wish for, but Matsu Yona would certainly appreciate a storm to match her mood. Having been on a huge ship like the Pride for more than a dozen days had strained her nerves even more than usual and not even some good rounds of Fortunes and Winds had helped her temper. Especially not after that grimy bastard had tried to cheat her with loaded dice and definitely not after she was called to the Taisa's office. Staring at the spotless wooden door, Yona knocked slightly.

"Please come in." A polite, smooth voice beckoned her inside, belonging to a pretty, matronly woman with sharp eyes and pleasant, rounded, cheerful features. Her long black hair, with some errant gray ones mixed in despite her otherwise somewhat youthful appearance, was tied up in a neat bun. "Ah, thank you for coming, Matsu-san. May I offer you some tea and steamed buns?"

Yona had heard about Lord Yoshitsune's cousin, Akodo Cho, but she certainly did not expect her superior officer to be this warm and elegant woman offering her refreshments during what she thought of as a disciplinary meeting. Bewildered, she took a steamed bun and started nibbling it; despite not being hungry at all.

"Now, I heard of a troubling incident involving you and some of our sailors, dear. Would you care to tell me what it was about?"

"It was just an argument, Akodo-taisa. You know how these things are, during dice games tempers can grow heated and one thing leads to another. I promise you it won't happen again."

Akodo Cho took a sip from her tea and put down her cup. She gave Yona a pointed look, sizing her up, evaluating her. The Matsu woman loathed it when people looked at her judgingly, influenced by the spiteful rumours everyone spread, but this piercing gaze felt like it reached deep into her core. It sent shivers down her spine and suddenly she felt like she had a lioness staring at her. The Taisa's voice now had an edge to it, like a blade caressing her neck.

"I understand that every man and woman in this ship has been subjected to an unfathomable change in their lives. A ship, even one as big as the Pride, can feel stifling to a Lion. I have taken this into account and arranged for certain diversions to be available to everyone who might need them. Sake, physical competitions, storytellers, geisha and yes, even gambling. Still, I also understand that even with these measures, despite our army's discipline, tempers will grow wild and fights will break out. What I do not understand is how three men are having trouble standing straight due to the bruises you gave them and one more has five broken bones!"

"The dishonorable cur was cheating! They thought I would not notice, that I was just a stupid tomcat they could…"

"And you proved them right! They were no match for a trained Matsu warrior and you knew it. Still you showed no restraint and now the ship has four less sailors. This means that others will have to cover their shifts until they heal, but you did not think of that, did you? You care not for the consequences, you let your feelings rule you and only make excuses afterwards. I overlooked your general demeanor and the chip you seem to have on your shoulder, thinking that you would eventually fit in with the rest, but enough is enough. You will spend ten days on lookout duty in one of the side ships. Night shift. During each waking day you will help with the work of the men you injured."

The Taisa's flaming voice slowly gave way to her previous calm demeanor, like a river returning to its normal flow after heavy rain. Yona's right hand had curled into a trembling fist, but she forced it still. The humiliation and indignity clawed at her like a ravenous hawk, but somehow she managed to contain them. She swallowed words she would have surely regretted and nodded instead. "As you say Akodo-taisa."

The small kobune Matsu Yona had been stationed to, flowed along the waves like driftwood. It was supposed to be scouting for dangers to the Lion expedition, but so far it had found only an empty sea. Two sake bottles laid empty beside Yona, but she could not drown her fury. Her only company in this punishment were three other heimin sailors whom she had to help do menial tasks that were beneath her.

Two days had passed since starting her new post and already she could not stand it. First her parents had sent her to this kami forsaken expedition, discarding her like an unwanted sandal. Finally they found a way to get rid of the problem child, the troublemaker. And now she had managed to prove them right to do so, by aggravating her superior officer and being the laughing stock of the whole army. She needed deeply to escape her head, all the doubts and loathing she felt for herself. At least in the past sake could quiet these thoughts, but now it was as useless as she. Darkness began creeping in, threatening to drown the lantern's light along with her in these salty waters.

Suddenly, a slight creaking brought her out of her trance. Looking around she saw what appeared as another, larger ship approaching their own. It had no lanterns and in the dark she could not make out who was on it. She called out, but got no reply, the vessel only getting closer and closer. In an instant, a dark cloaked figure descended upon the ship driving a hooked blade into one of the heimin sailors. Yona immediately drew her katana.

"Who are you and why do you attack us?" she yelled at the top of her lungs. She received no answer, however, except for a blade aimed at her heart. The Matsu warrior felt a familiar rage building inside her, her instincts ready to take over from her treacherous brain. She deflected the blow with the saya and after a brutal swing of her katana she cleaved the attacker's arm in two. He retreated screaming and holding the stump protruding from his shoulder. Yona could see several more dark figures ready to board her boat. They hesitated, obviously not expecting real resistance from this small vessel. Her sensei's words echoed in her mind: "The best defense is a great offense. Always attack first with overwhelming strength and spirit. A dead enemy cannot strike you back."

Matsu Yona let out a fierce roar, unleashing her fury. She grabbed a large plank and used it as cover, leaping and landing on her enemies who tried to get out of the way. She rolled to stand and became as fire, brutally attacking everyone around her. No thoughts, no doubts. She felt only the thrill of combat and the pleasure of straining her whole being to the edge. They tried to surround her, but every cut she received seemed to strengthen her further. At that moment no tactic they employed could bring this beast down. With devastating blow, after devastating blow she lost herself in the battle.

When the thrill passed, she was strangling the neck of the last remaining assailant. He had tanned skin and was obviously a foreigner, but his eyes were bulging as his hands tried to pry hers open. She threw him aside, noting a large cut on his belly. He would die soon anyway. With labored steps she slowly returned to her own vessel, where she found the remaining two heimin sailors retreating from her, terrified. In their eyes she saw herself mirrored, a horrid, bloody beast without reason. Akodo Cho's words about restraint passed through her mind. "Ironic," she thought, as she collapsed from her wounds.