



The Wave's Blade

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Waves lapped against the wooden docks of Jukami Mura, the Port that Never Sleeps. The occasional spray landing upon Tuku. Sea salt drying on their skin. They waited for the tsuchibune boat that would, at long last, take them back to *The Wave's Blade*. Tuku had spent the last several months in Jukami Mura under the employ of Empress Hantei Hochiahime, herself, utilizing their expertise as a shipwright. Tuku worked alongside Tortoise, Otter, and Great Clan shipwrights from around Rokugan for this undertaking.

A cool breeze tousled Tuku's short dark hair. It didn't come from the sea, but the city. A stench assaulted their nose. It was neither the perfumes of the Crane, the sweat of the Crab, nor the wood and brine of their fellow Mantis. It was of dirt, blood, and goats. Ronin. Tuku rested their hand on the handle of their suizen hand saw in their apron and turned around to see three grizzled ronin walking up.

The leader of the trio smirked, his hair disheveled and kimono unkept. "What are you doing out here, little one?"

"That's no one's business but my own," Tuku snapped.

"Aw, don't be like that. We're just some samurai, down on our luck. You got a couple bu to spare?" The second ronin's words were as sticky as resin from green lumber. He was thin and long, like a rope pulled taut.

"You aren't getting a zeni from me," Tuku's hand gripped their suizen tighter, anticipating the ronins next action.

"Very well, we will just take what we want," the third hissed as he took a step forward, his kimono straining to keep shut under his girth.

Tuku tried to pull out the suizen but a strong hand gripped their elbow from behind, forcing the saw to remain in their apron.

"Your suizen is for building up, not tearing down," a familiar voice said. Tuku looked up to see Nāgusuku, the first mate of *The Wave's Blade*. His balding head and sinewy muscles glimmered in the sunlight, "It's time to go. The Captain's waiting"

"We aren't done here. You owe us money and we'll take it," the first ronin barked.

Nāgusuku stepped around Tuku. His hands and feet flew and in a flurry of blows, the ronin were knocked to the ground moaning in pain.

"Come, Tuku, let's go."

The Wave's Blade moved up and down with the flow of water. Its three junk-rigged sails and design made it faster than any of the ships Tuku had constructed for the Empress. It felt good to stand on the deck of a ship again. They eyed the sun-weathered cedar, the dovetailed joints holding firm. Tuku had replaced many of them over the last couple of years. The Captain pushed his ship nearly as much as he pushed his crew. Alongside *The Wave's Blade* floated several smaller junk-rigged ships.

"The captain is waiting for you," Nāgusuku said.

"Is there a repair that needs to be done?" asked Tuku. They hadn't seen anything from the tsuchibune, nor from the deck that had been damaged.

"I don't know. All he said was that you must come to see him right away." Tuku nodded and headed to the stern of the ship, to the captain's cabin. The cabin was filled with treasures from the islands of southern Rokugan: A kabuto helmet from the Isle of Flying Fish, a rib bone from a bakekojira, and a scorched piece of wood supposedly burned by Osano Wo no Mikoto himself.

Behind a table laden with maps knelt Eiso, captain of *The Wave's Blade*. His skin was tanned by the sea and his dark hair was held in place with an ornate pin. An identical pin held his twin sister's hair up in a twisted bun. Yuta, Eiso's sister, had the certain grace of a dancer. Her hands, tattooed with geometric patterns in the kajichi style, rested at her waist. They both wore dark teal, and both had the same intensity to their eyes, though Yuta's held a different sort of warmth to them.

"Welcome back, Tuku," Eiso said.

"How was everything on the mainland?" Yuta asked, a smile coming to her lips. Her gold hairpin glimmered in the evening light.

"It certainly brought me back to my apprenticeship days, working on boats all day and drinking with the other wrights at night," Tuku said, "but doing things the mainlanders' way was about to drive me mad. The wood is green, the joints are weak, and don't even get me started on the formality of meal time. Their ships will never stand up to ours, no matter how large they make them."

Eiso leaned forward, "Tell me about the ships you worked on. What sort were they? How many?"

"I worked on four, alongside some shipwrights from the Tortoise and Otter clans, but there were at least seven ships, all Atakebune fortress ships," Tuku took a moment to think, "Though they weren't armed or reinforced to see battle. They are being fitted with square sails and oarsmen so they'll be slow in the sea but be able to hold more than a mainlander's ego. Oh, and a lot more cabins below deck than would be necessary for a ship like that. The seven I saw all had a clan mon carved into their bow."

"One for each of the Great Clans," Eiso scoffed, "Seems the Empress still only cares about the Kami's lines even after what Yoritomo-ue did at Cherry Blossom Snow."

Eiso rifled through the scrolls on his table before spreading one out. It showed Jukami Mura, the whirlpool of the great sea spider, the Isles of Silk and Spice. Beyond that was an area not filled in with sumi ink. No land. No waves. Just a twisting line surrounding nothing. But Eiso knew that nothing. He had sailed past it many times. Wondered what was hidden within the impenetrable mists. Wondered what treasure he might find. "She must be sailing there. My men have heard things in the saké houses. I had a boy take a look at the charts. The Empress knows a way past the mist and she is taking the Great Clans with her to take whatever treasure is there for themselves."

"Brother," warned Yuta.

Tuku fidgeted uncomfortably. They knew that the Captain could go off on passionate tangents and that only Yuta could rein him in. Tuku wished they had been given leave to exit but Eiso hadn't so much as looked at them since he began his speech.

"Once again they are casting aside the Mantis, just like they always have. Just because we do not trace our lineage back to a Kami does not make us any less." A fire glowed behind Eiso's eyes.

"Brother," Yuta said more firmly.

"We are the masters of the sea, we are the children of Osano Wo no Mikoto. On the sea, we are their betters and they will show us respect."

"Brother!" Yuta snapped and a flurry of wind rushed through the cabin, pushing some of the scrolls to the ground.

"Hmm?" Eiso looked up from the map.

"You are spiraling again," her voice was as calming as a gentle breeze.

The Wave's Blade creaked with the sea.

"Ah, just so. But what I am saying is that we will follow the Empress and her Great Clan fleet to the Isle of Mists and take what treasure is there for ourselves. We don't want them to see us following them until it is too late to turn around. We will sail through the Bay of Dark Water."

Tuku shuddered at the thought of going through those cursed waters. "Sir, whatever is in the Bay of Dark Waters destroys ships. It is a death sentence."

"Don't believe all the stories you've been told," Eiso chided, "No one has sailed that bay in a generation out of fear, but I will not let fear hold me back from my destiny. This ship is one of the fastest in Rokugan. We can outsail whatever there might be in those dark waters."

"But just in case the stories of destructive sea naga are true," Yuta said, "we will bring an offering of rice with us."

"I'll go make sure that there are no repairs that need to be made before we leave," conceded Tuku.

Eiso puffed out his chest and smiled, "We are off to conquer the mist."

The Wave's Blade and its small fleet sat at the edge of The Bay of Dark Waters. A heavy presence hung in the air. Eiso nodded at his sister on her raised dais and she began to dance. Yuta lifted her foot and stepped precisely with the heel of her foot. She pushed and pulled her hands like the moving waves, and the kami of the wind began to fill the junk sails of the Mantis fleet.

"Start spreading the rice," commanded Eiso.

"Sir, we have a problem," Hazama, one of the Mantis sailors, announced.

Eiso walked over and inspected the basket. Instead of elongated grains of brown or white rice, the basket was filled with small yellow balls. "Millet. That Yasuki cheated us with a lesser grain. It will have to do."

"Let's pray to Osano Wo no Mikoto that it will be acceptable if something is down in those depths," Yuta soothed.

For half a day they spread the millet in the water one saké cup at a time. Kyūden Gotei had passed behind the Northern Storm Mountains when the waters began to churn.

"Yuta, it might be good to entreat the kami for more wind," Eiso called. A tentacle shot from the water followed by another and another, the sea spraying across the deck. Arms waved in the air like seaweed in a current. "Right now!"

Yuta clapped the back of her hand and stepped in a circle on her dais. The wind began to pick up.

"Ten men on the rudder, I want to turn on a zeni," Eiso yelled over the howling wind. "The rest of you, mind the rigging and keep those tentacles off of us!"

With every passing second, *The Wave's Blade* picked up speed. White water formed around the bow. The men on the rudder strained as they pushed starboard and port to dodge the menacing tentacles. Some of the other ships in the fleet weren't quick enough, and were pulled below.

"Hard to port," Eiso yelled but it was too late. A tentacle grabbed ahold of the starboard railing, ripping away a section of gunwale. Waves poured over the deck making it slick.

Tuku strained at one of the ropes holding the junk sails as another tentacle plucked them up. Hazama ran over and plunged a kama sickle deep into the creature's flesh. Instantly and unceremoniously Tuku landed back on the deck as the tentacle recoiled in pain. *The Wave's Blade* made a final run for the northern channel of the Isles of Silk and Spice. The tentacles lashed out, grasping for whatever it could reach. More pieces of the ship were rent apart but the tentacles could not find purchase on anything critical before *The Wave's Blade* and its fleet cleared the bay and entered the Northern Channel.

"What was that?" Tuku gasped.

"An Akkorokamui. An octopus god," Nāgusuku sputtered.

"See Eiso, you were right. The stories were wrong," Yuta panted. "That was most definitely not a naga."

Eiso narrowed his eyes at his sister, then looked through his spyglass out to sea, where he could see the white mists to the north and to the west, the Empress's fleet. A clear line began to roil through the clouds, a passage of daylight. "We run silently now, as far behind as we can manage without losing them. Prepare yourselves, we follow them in."

