

Beneath, Below, Beyond

By Annie VanderMeer Mitsoda

“Prepare yourself, Yasuki-dono. I fear this might be a little bright.”

Yasuki Taka appreciated the warning, but the light that stung his eyes after the sackcloth hood had been removed pained him all the same. He did his best to look composed and unworried even as he blinked and rubbed his sore wrists where his restraints had been. The blur next to him—ah, a man, yes. Long black hair and a scar marked him as Yoritomo, notorious pirate to some, dashing leader to others, and the Champion of the Mantis clan to all. Yoritomo nodded, the apology apparent in his visage even through Taka’s blurred vision.

“Welcome to my second home, respected daimyō—and I do apologize for bringing you here in this particular manner,” he continued, his voice rough from shouting orders on stormy seas. “Even silken ropes can chafe. But I imagined that if we had the ill fortune to be caught, it would be a great deal easier if the representative of the Crab Clan appeared to have been carried off by vile kidnappers, rather than escorted by their rival’s greatest scourge.”

“I can appreciate that,” said Taka, nodding. “Even the wisest plan involves some risk and sacrifice. I’m no blushing young courtesan who despairs at a blemish, after all. Nobody checks my wrists save those who imagine I’m concealing something in my sleeves.”

“Which I imagine you do, on occasion.”

Taka cracked a smile. “You do seem to know me well, so-called Son of Storms. Although I wish I knew your secret tunnels underneath Otosan Uchi even a fraction as well. Passages underneath the Imperial City that even the Scorpion Clan are unaware of?” The older man leaned back on the bench on which he sat and gave a look that was half indulgent smile, half sly smirk. “I’m certain, however, that if you’d hustled me out of there simply with my hands bound, that would have worked just as well. I wonder if putting that hood over my head and bagging me up in that sack were more meant to advance that ‘kidnapping’ fiction...or to protect your own secrets?”

There was a tight pause in the air, and Taka’s gut clenched reflexively, waiting for a negative outcome—but suddenly Yoritomo laughed aloud, white teeth flashing, and the Yasuki family daimyō quietly relaxed. “I had a feeling I would like you,” the Mantis Champion chuckled, his dark eyes intense, “but one can only trust the words of spies so far, especially when it comes to one’s own preferences. I am gratified to learn they were correct.”

Yoritomo rose from his seat and walked across the room, and Taka blinked the last of the blur from his eyes, surveying the room around him. It was elegantly paneled with cedar—the pleasant scent reminded Taka of the tall forests around his home in Yasuki Yashiki—



and adequately lit by flickering lights fixed to the walls in brass and glass sconces. Wooden shutters—not sliding paper screens—covered the windows, their slats pressed shut and secured with metal latches. The furniture was not only raised above the ground, in *gaijin* fashion, but secured in place with brass rivets. Taka's lips twitched, hiding a smile. A random visitor might conclude from the numerous latches, locks, and rivets that the Mantis Champion was paranoid about theft, but anyone as savvy in trade as Taka knew the accumulated cost of such rare materials would make *any* sensible person wary of the same.

Snapping his attention back to his present company, Taka watched patiently as Yoritomo opened a drawer on a large chest and withdrew a package, sliding the drawer shut with the barest squeak of smoothly sanded wood before locking it once more. Smiling, he handed the package to Taka, who took it and tried not to betray a small surprise that it seemed to be a simple bundle of clothing. "This is an awkward thing to ask, Yasuki-dono, but I ask that you change your clothes before we proceed. I would like you show you something outside of my quarters, and your current outfit is quite—distinctive." Yoritomo gave a casual nod. "It could very well attract the wrong type of attention."

Taka glanced down at his finery—silken court garb with the *mon* of the Yasuki family picked out in careful embroidery on the chest, rumpled and a little soiled from the journey but still obviously valuable—and chuckled as he stood. "You could say that, yes." He opened the bundle, and was pleased to see it contained a loose set of *kosode* and *hakama*, in a well-made but plain fabric.

"I know they hardly suit someone of your rank. But subterfuge..." Yoritomo gave a small, knowing smile. "That, I believe, is something you are as familiar with as your own house." Another bow, and the tall man exited the room, barely opening the door wide enough for him to pass before sliding it shut with hardly a sound.

Yasuki Taka unfolded the clothing, taking a moment to run his hands over the material—simple, but more comfortable by far than the burlap he'd been bagged in like a sack of rice. He laid out the clothes and took a moment to examine his own finery; as little as he liked wearing it, it did seem practical to keep an eye on maintaining its quality. It was a small marvel that his clothes had survived the nonsense of being carried through countless tunnels, up and down stairs and rough slopes, all without anything staining or tearing the fine silk or snagging the embroidery. Although it was possibly less of a marvel than one in a series of strange events, compounded by the fact that somewhere in the stretch of time between Taka's abduction and his arrival here was a bit of fogginess, an almost imperceptible break, as if he'd dozed off. He couldn't have been taken *too* far from Otosan Uchi—a prolonged absence from the Forbidden City would be taken with some alarm—but where he could be was a bit of a puzzle. While the interior of Yoritomo's dwelling was certainly distinct, it was difficult to say if that same uniqueness would be reflected on the outside...

Not that I didn't appreciate the offer of a "business proposition" from the head of the Mantis



Clan. Taka sighed, moving to shed his formal clothes. *But if I had known it was going to involve being abducted from my apartments and taken gods-know-where, I might have asked for a moment more to think about it!*

Ah, well. “A predictable life is a dead one,” Taka quoted to himself, and chuckled. *If that’s true, I may be the most alive man in all of Rokugan.* Mirth turned to annoyance as he tugged at the knots of his formal wear—just as he suspected, the servants had tied his *hoeki no hō* too tightly—and with diligent struggle, he managed to extricate himself from the elaborate tunic and remove the rest of his garments, dropping them almost spitefully into a pile on the nearby bench. The peasant garb felt like rounding a mountain pass to see one’s own home again after a long trip, albeit earlier than expected. The inclusion of a money purse—empty though it was—with the outfit made Taka absolutely sure that Yoritomo knew of his secret exploits as a peddler. Taka chuckled to himself as he tied on the belt.

Yoritomo is a true Mantis’s man—any opening to show me up, and he’s already struck. I wonder if I’ve ever sold the man anything before, not knowing who he was, but him knowing me full well? The Yasuki daimyō suddenly hesitated mid-knot, his chuckle a trifle more sour. *If so, I do hope I gave him a good deal.*

Taka smoothed out the small creases in the kosode, smirking to himself at the sight of being back in familiar clothes again—but after a breath his hands stilled, and the smirk faded. The last time he had been in such garb was before his trip to Otosan Uchi, before the urgent mission from his clan champion, before all the letters from his son describing the piled dead of Crab warriors and enemies and the smoke from their pyres.

Taka regarded himself in the burnished silver plate fastened to the wall and took in the specifics of the outfit he wore—blue-grey and brown, the Crab Clan colors. The clothes were a subtle gesture, and as intentional as every single word Yoritomo chose, diligently disguising his regional accent. Despite all of the stories painting the Mantis as brutes, there were obviously many layers to the man, and his willingness to endanger himself by kidnapping Taka directly hinted at a deep importance to whatever this offer might be. And though it seemed impossible that the Mantis were in such a dire position as the Crab, the risks they’d taken just to get him here spoke of something severe.

The older man caught himself rubbing his hands together in anticipation and stilled them quickly, making his face serene and businesslike. “Daikoku-no-Kami, Fortune of Wealth and



Commerce,” Taka whispered, “you certainly seem to be listening, since you’ve displayed such humor in the events of the day so far. You helped me talk my way out of a bandit ambush once. Now, it’s pirates. You and I both know I’m in my element here, but...” He grinned to himself. “A little luck never hurt.”

Taka turned to face the door, and saw it held shut by another brass latch. “A bit of suspicion, imported from a gaijin or two?” he mused aloud, and then grunted with surprise as the door turned out to be surprisingly heavy. “Or is such suspicion grown from home?” With bit of uncharacteristic bluster, Taka huffed and pulled the door open wide—and found himself speechless as he took in the scene beyond.

No city street or mountain holdfast lay before him, nor forest stronghold either. The deck of a ship, impressive in length and breadth—constructed from the same mountain cedar as in the room behind him—stretched out, eerily still atop calm blue waters, a mass of waving marshy reeds beyond. Twin black sails, battened with long horizontal beams of bamboo and emblazoned with the teal-green mon of the Mantis Clan, fluttered idly in the constant breeze. Sailors worked at an unhurried pace, barely glancing at the newcomer in their midst.

A sudden sharp whistle nearly made him jump out of his skin. He wheeled around and looked up to see Yoritomo above him, leaning against a railing on the cabin’s roof and grinning.

“Welcome, my friend, to the *Bitter Wind*, flagship of the First Storm.” The Mantis leader smiled with an almost parental pride as he gestured to one of the steep companionways leading up to the deck upon which he stood. “You and I have much to discuss.”

Yasuki Taka steeled himself with a deep breath and grasped hold of the railing leading up to the topmost deck of the *Bitter Wind*—brass again, another nod to both Yoritomo’s gaijin influences and his wealth—and ascended the steps to where the Mantis Champion awaited him.

Yoritomo gave a small bow as Taka arrived; a subtle show of respect that, with Taka in his merchant’s garb, would have been questionable for any outsider watching too long. The only other person on the upper deck, an older woman in teal-green linen robes, glanced at the pair but did not cease gently waving her hands, as if making shapes within mist.

“A...unique vessel,” Taka said at last, rubbing his chin in reflexive consternation. “I cannot say I’ve seen any like it before.”

“That is because none other exist like it,” said Yoritomo with pride. “*Bitter Wind* is of my



own design, combining the innovations of ships from any and all outsiders with our own Rokugani style. It is the way of the Mantis: to observe, to adapt, to improve. The pride of my clan sits here in the planks below our feet.”

“The *unusually stable* planks, I’ve noticed,” Taka added, crossing his arms as if slightly uneasy. “Part of me wonders if all this is an illusion! I close my eyes and I’m half-convinced I’m still on land.”

Yoritomo gestured to the middle-aged woman nearby, who acknowledged with a simple dip of her head. “Most of that—and the finer points of your travel here—are due to Kudaka.” The Mantis Champion smiled with a fierce, friendly affection. “She is the finest of my *tenkinja*, our priestesses of tempests and tides. None exist in the whole of the Emerald Empire who are as talented as they.” The older woman clucked her tongue and rolled her eyes a bit, a gesture that would have elicited gasps in the Imperial Court.

“Yoritomo here loves to hear ’imself talk, that’s sure,” she sighed, her tone strong with the accent of the Islands of Silk and Spice. “Full of compliments as sails on a blustery day. ’Tis not only I that handles this task, but the twins on the deck there.” She jerked her head at two similarly clad slender figures at midships below, crouching on either side of the boat and waving their hands at the water like children at a fountain. Beneath their fingers, the sea was glassy and still as a mirror. “And it’s tradition, this, just askin’ the kami for their aid. We try not to do it too long—makes ’em antsy. But they know it’s for important company, so they help out.”

Taka laughed a little despite himself. “I thank you for stating it so plainly. Even Crab *shugenja* are somewhat more—opaque—when they describe their gifts.” Kudaka shrugged.

“I’d talk your ear off if you let me, but this still needs my work,” she jerked her head at Yoritomo, who smirked almost like a child caught misbehaving. “Go on, then. You bragged, now about your business and let me work.”

Yoritomo gave a playful half-bow. “Certainly,” and led Taka back down the opposite companionway toward the bow of the ship, as if attempting to outpace the dismissive snort that Kudaka leveled at his retreating back.

The smooth cedar of the *Bitter Wind*’s deck barely creaked beneath the feet of the two men—a shock after the constant clamor of the Imperial Palace’s much-vaunted nightingale floors and their chorus of whistling squeaks. Around them, sailors clad in black with sashes of teal moved with a deliberate, unhurried pace, weaving around them as rocks in a stream, their respectful nods to their captain and daimyō barely perceptible in their efficiency. Yoritomo strode with the purpose of a man totally at ease in his domain, Taka drifting along in his wake.

“The world has divisions,” Yoritomo said suddenly, at once solemn. “The elements, the spirit realms, life and death. They are useful, like roles on a ship. I am captain, and there are those below me who obey, and those who obey them. Hierarchies, lineages, chains of command—I know the Crab can appreciate that one—that ensure that if one were to fall, all would not.

“But there are those who take such divisions too far, who place division where there is none,



who turn petty slights into deep divides.” The daimyō frowned, and Taka quickened his pace to hear him as the tall man’s voice quieted. “This I cannot understand. It is not the Mantis way, even from our very beginning. Once your clan and mine were the same people—and when my ancestor Kaimetsu-Uo was not chosen as the Crab Champion, he left to forge his own path, and there was no bad blood between our people. We became different, not—less.”

“I think I divine your meaning,” Taka said with a wry smirk. “That is not so much how the Crane do things.”

Yoritomo snorted, then sighed. “Truly, I bear the Crane no ill will, but more pity. Once, Mantis and Crane were allies, and they trusted our skills as mercenaries. Our power was respected, and all understood the importance of trade across the waters. Now, Crane eyes do not look over the sea with wonder, to see lands beyond full of riches. They simply see a pretty view to be painted. They have grown self-absorbed, petty—”

“And their labeling of you as pirates doesn’t help much, I imagine,” quipped Taka, eliciting a grim smile from the other man.

“It does not. But to be fair, we have done what needed doing, and where others shied away, we took responsibility. Something that the Crab Clan knows all too well, I imagine.” Taka nodded, and the two men leaned against the bow of the ship—Yoritomo a great deal more casually than Taka—and took in the view beyond. The *Bitter Wind* was moored near a marshy inlet, where sea and land birds alike hunted in the tall grasses as dusk approached. Tallest among them was a grey crane, regal in stature, who cocked its head and gazed into the water closely, tilting its head in minuscule motions as it struggled to track its prey in the murky water.

“I have a great sympathy for your clan, you know.” Taka glanced up at Yoritomo, whose eyes remained fixed on the hunting birds. “The samurai of the Yasuki were given an impossible choice: give up their power within a clan who disregarded them, or leave to join the Crab and risk ruin in their attempt to earn greater respect.

“And starting the first and only inter-clan war as a result,” Taka sighed. “A fact at which the Crane still chafe.”

“A paradox of fools, then, who treat the past as if it were present, and the present as if it were a dream.” Yoritomo’s eyes flicked to the sky, and wordlessly he pointed as a cormorant, feathers slick as oil, dove almost soundlessly into the water. Moments later, the gangly bird hopped out of the water, silvery fish wriggling in its beak. Yoritomo laughed and clapped his hands together in celebration, watching the cormorant gulp down its meal.

“Ah, and look—my favorite bird,” he chuckled. “Inelegant, but adaptable. Changes to fit the situation it finds itself in, air or water, and succeeds.” He smirked at Taka, tilting his head at the bird. “I know well why you were sent to Otosan Uchi, Yasuki-dono, but in its way, your mission was impossible. Crane’s eye was watching you, and the glitter of your scales beneath the waters. But now you are just a drab thing to them, neither fish nor bird, so they disregard you and turn away. And that is why you have *won*.”



Taka chuckled, and threw up his hands. "I fear I may have been out-bargained, and terms haven't even been discussed! The fearsome Yoritomo is a poet sailor and knows I am a peddler lord. Very well, then—the sun is setting, and now is the opportune hour to make a deal. You know my needs"—he fixed the Mantis Clan Champion with a measured stare—"and now I must know your terms."

Yoritomo nodded, and crossed his arms authoritatively across his broad chest. "Smuggling is simply trade by another name. I have many fleets—with ships far less showy than this one—who could bring to you a steady stream of the weapons that the Crab Clan so dearly requires. We lack only the means."

Taka shook his head and grinned. "A simple matter. It is nothing strange to ship barrels to a distillery—such as my Friendly Traveler Sake Works. Weapons lie within the false bottoms, and we send you those same barrels back, replaced with the proper cost in coin." He spread his hands, all canny merchant. "With a little sake in them too, for the health of your troops."

Yoritomo nodded his enthusiastic consent, and Taka carefully folded his arms in his sleeves, his gaze suddenly sharp.

"But Yoritomo-dono, I cannot believe the Mantis are hurting for wealth, or have a particular craving for the koku of the Crab Clan. There is something else that you want, and if you are not plain with it, I am afraid that we cannot truly help one another."

Yoritomo's gaze hardened, and after a moment, the large man nodded. "I spoke earlier of divisions, and how they should not be so common. My clan sees little value between the minor clans and the great ones, of captain and sailor—when the wave breaks upon the deck, it pulls at my feet, same as any commoner's. And my station will not save me if we founder in a storm.

"But I cannot be a leader and not strive for greater for my people. Our founder came from a great clan, and I would see that same greatness for we, his descendants, to prove we are worthy of his blood. But simply saying it does not make it so." His eyes bored into Taka's, dark as an oncoming storm. "The Mantis require a great ally to help us make this claim, to argue for our cause with the Emperor, or my hopes are for nothing."

Yasuki Taka was silent a long moment, one finger idly tapping at his lips. Finally, he spoke in measured tones. "You have my understanding, and my sympathy," he said slowly. "But such an act would require the approval of the Crab Clan Champion, and I am not he."

Yoritomo's gaze did not waver. "Did not Lord Hida Kisada send you to Otosan Uchi to gain what aid the Crab required? Wouldn't that which I offer—not only weapons, but friendship—fit that bill?" A tiny smile tugged the corner of his mouth, the brightness like a flash of lightning in his eyes. "If you did not have his permission to act as you felt you must for the good of the clan, you would never have been sent in the first place."

Taka narrowed his eyes in a glare...which turned into a wry grin, and laughter followed. "I never thought I would be outmaneuvered in a deal twice in one day," he sighed, "or that I would find myself grateful on both occasions. Very well, Yoritomo-dono, Champion of the



Mantis. When you stand and speak for the greatness of your clan, the Crab will stand for you as well.” Another smirk. “And in the meantime, we could use those weapons you offered.”

“A deal!” Yoritomo cried, causing several birds nearby to look up, startled, and take wing. “And there is something else I would speak to you about. Not a new deal, precisely, but an addendum.” Taka raised an eyebrow as a pair of sailors approached, a large chest held between them. At a gesture from Yoritomo, they threw open the lid, revealing the contents within covered by a cloth bearing the Crane mon. Carefully, the sailors stepped aside as Yoritomo reached down and pulled away the cloth—revealing row after row of gleaming jade rods.



Wordlessly, Taka moved forward and picked up one of the slender slips of precious gemstone, turning it over in his hand.

A battle at the Kaiu Wall, and men shrieking as the Taint consumed those unprotected by the power of the pale green material, blisters crawling out of their throats and across their faces.

Courtiers at Otosan Uchi idly fingering bracelets and pendants of carved jade, whose cast-off chips might have been able to save the life of a Crab warrior.

The music room of the palace, Kakita Yoshi's ice-blue stare, and his echoing, cruel farewell as he crushed the hope of Taka's bargain to save his people.

In the growing dusk, the cormorant dove into the water once again, a black shape rippling beneath the waves. With a splash, the cormorant flew to perch atop the trunk, silvery fish in its mouth. With a single gulp, the gangly bird swallowed the succulent fish. Taka looked up at Yoritomo.

The Yasuki daimyō bowed deeply to the Mantis Champion and grinned as he straightened back up. “You’ve got a deal.”

