

When the Wave Strikes the Shore

By Mari Murdock

The wood and paper burst with a *snap* that sounded like bone.

The hole around her fist seemed to grin, and Mirumoto Hitomi struck the *shōji* screen again, a howl escaping her throat. The walls of her bedroom seemed too far away. The dim shadows were too black. The blood pounding in her ears too deafening. She smashed her knuckles through the paper and lattice-wood door a third time before lunging at her *daishō* to chop down the lantern sconces and slash scars into the *tatami*.

But the waves of fury dogging her rampage froze as she touched the silk-wrapped hilts. A truth lay within those swords, though her rage kept it at bay. She was not a mindless tsunami. She was a samurai. Like Agasha Sumiko.

Hitomi's knees buckled and she sank to the floor, her blades clattering on either side of her. She admired Sumiko for her effortless bravery in the face of opposition, her devotion that never consumed her better judgment, her steadfast leadership. And now she was gone, her position abdicated and her wisdom withheld. In decades of loyal service to the Empire, Sumiko had helped shepherd stability amidst persistent tumultuous conflicts between the clans. Without an Emerald or Ruby Champion, and with a treasonous regent upon the throne, who could keep Rokugan safe from the enmities that were surely now rising to the surface?

The scene unfolded in Hitomi's memory: Sumiko's voice had been strong but her face empty, her words a sword at the throat of Bayushi Shoju even as she mourned her role in his coup. At the snapping of her sword—and the clatter of Champion Toturi's as it struck the floor—the court had exploded in chaos and the Regent had retreated. Before Hitomi could even take breath, Sumiko was gone, a shell sucked out to sea before it could be picked up.

That had occurred hours ago, and Hitomi had not stopped moving since. Sumiko had retreated from the world, her shame so absolute that she would not even allow a visit from the *hatamoto* who had so loyally served her. And now Hitomi was alone, left to salvage what peace could be maintained in the capital when the Ruby Champion she so trusted had abandoned her to seek atonement.

Mirumoto Hitomi flung off the gauzy outer layers of her courtly garb and pulled on her armor's protective underclothing. She drew her katana, slashing at a nearby tapestry, ignoring the silk as it fluttered feebly to the ground. She imagined Shoju's face on it. He had orchestrated the coup that had forced Sumiko's hand, and so she would walk the path of vengeance. It was what Sumiko would have wanted, what she had sacrificed everything for. Hitomi would challenge Shoju to a duel and strike him down while the Scorpion took their turn watching,



motionless, as someone they venerated fell. Ignominy and humiliation would rain down on the usurper as she towered above his corpse, judging him alongside Heaven for his foul deeds.

"Katsumichi!" she called. The battered shōji-screen door slid open to reveal a guard-at-arms. His face betrayed no awareness of Hitomi's outburst.

"Yes, Mirumoto-sama?"

"Send a messenger to the lieutenants in the Army of the Rising Wave. Tell them to prepare for battle. We will seize the palace and crush the Emperor's murderer."

Katsumichi bowed, but as the door closed, a firm arm jutted inside to interfere. Kitsuki Yaruma entered, his jaw tight and his eyes flashing.

"I knew you would do something reckless," he said. "Put your sword away."

Hitomi recoiled at his words. She had almost forgotten her katana was still in her hand. She slid it into its sheath, her throat clenching under his critical glare. Turning away from Yaruma, she kicked open an ironbound chest containing her green-lacquered armor. "Do as I say, Katsumichi-san. Go now."

Yaruma frowned as the guard disappeared down the hall.

"Listen to me, Hitomi-sama," the Dragon ambassador said, sliding shut the battered door behind him. "This is no time for violence."

She picked up her first piece of *kusari* mail, not meeting his gaze. "Did you not hear Sumiko's testimony? Shoju murdered the Emperor!"

"I did hear. And in this unprecedented crisis, we cannot afford to act irrationally."

Hitomi shrugged into her armored vest. "I'm not acting irrationally. I'm acting preemptively, as we should have done on the night the Emperor was murdered. The usurper must not flee the capital and hide in some dark corner of the Empire. He will not escape justice."

"You act in anger, not in justice," Yaruma hissed, waving his hand toward the wrecked room. "What are you planning on doing? Taking the palace by force? Killing Shoju?"

"Why not? We must purge the palace of its traitors. We cannot allow a murderer to maintain his bloody grasp on the throne." Somehow, the laces of her cuirass kept slipping past the reach of her fingers.

"Of course we will act. But you do not have the power to make those decisions on your own. We must follow Heaven's will and use the strength of the law against Shoju. Allow the Imperial



Chancellor to challenge the Regent.”

She seized the unruly cords of her *dō* and fastened them tight. “We are no longer distant observers from our mountain peaks, Yaruma. We are in the thick of it. Sumiko did not shy away from what had to be done, and neither will I. I will duel Shoji, and I will kill him.”

“If that were the correct way, then why didn’t Sumiko take that road instead of protesting his presence? Why did she choose to retire instead of dueling him or ordering you to storm the palace with your army? She very easily could have.”

Hitomi paused. Yaruma’s question stung. She stared at the wall where the silken tapestry had hung before she cut it down in her anger. There was a small slash in the wood where her blade tip had glanced it. She snatched her helmet from her trunk. “It...could not be helped. Sumiko was already consumed by Shoji’s treason. Now that his sin is known to all, I will slay him and restore the honor of Rokugan’s throne.”

“This is not just about honor or dishonor, Hitomi. As I said, this is about justice. Justice would not be upheld if Shoji were to die in a duel in the name of revenge. His crimes were not merely against Sumiko or the Dragon, so they are not yours to punish. Your insistence on doing so wanders toward the paths of the three sins. Fear. Desire. Regret. Shoji’s crimes are against Heaven itself, and therefore, he must answer to Heaven’s demand for justice. As Dragon, we must seek to restore this balance.”

“But how can we possibly know how to do that?” Hitomi snapped. She put on her helmet and straightened its nape guard before turning to face Yaruma. “With such profound corruption in the highest offices of the Empire, with both the Emerald and Ruby Champions gone, who can we trust with enforcing Heaven’s laws? We no longer have the assurance of Togashi Mitsu’s spiritual guidance since he’s disappeared.”

The ambassador’s hard face grew grave. Hitomi lifted her chin at his unease. Mitsu’s seemingly impulsive desertion had all the Dragon questioning Heaven’s will. Where had he gone? Had he known something the rest of them did not?

“You should not destroy what balance we still have, Hitomi,” Yaruma insisted. “A violent military coup bent on retribution against the Regent can only introduce more chaos. Let the laws of the Imperial Court—”

“—the cringing bureaucracy of the Imperial Court created this misfortune, Yaruma. I will not allow Shoji to slip from the grasp of indecisive courtiers and their ridiculous formalities,” Hitomi said. Fully adorned in her armor, she muscled by him and flung open the door. “When we are finished, there will be nowhere for the enemy to hide.”

She did not bow as she left him behind, an impudence that she had no time to regret. Her soldiers needed prompt orders if they were to take control of the palace before the false Regent had a chance to slink away. Shoji would die this day, and she would be sure to send him to Emma-Ō herself.





The towering main gate to the Imperial Palace cast long early evening shadows across the Army of the Rising Wave. Hitomi stood stone-faced at the head of her troops, waiting for the doors to open. Her soldiers, already stationed in Otosan Uchi due to Sumiko's unwitting foresight, had flooded the streets and sealed off all entrances to the palace within half an hour, not allowing even a single servant to exit. In one more hour's time, the sun would set on Shoju's corpse. She focused on that thought. That alone was her task. Yet Yaruma's words about

maintaining balance reverberated beneath her concentration. Was this surety of purpose truly a mistake? Was she acting against the justice she sought?

Mirumoto Raitsugu, one of her lieutenants, paced nearby, lost in his thoughts. Hitomi caught a few of his muttered words. "Dragon armies...balance...strength of arms..."

"Silence," Hitomi ordered, his sentiments echoing Yaruma's too closely for her liking.

She squeezed her fists. No. Yaruma was wrong. This restored balance. This achieved justice. The blood of the Regent for the blood of the Emperor. For the blood of every other person Shoju must have silenced to keep his wicked grip on the Emerald Throne. She would sweep through the Forbidden City like a cleansing wave to drown out the corruption lingering within its heart. Such certainty roared in her ears, deafening her to any doubts, even Yaruma's. All wickedness would be snuffed out.

With the creak of ancient wood, the main gates yawned open. Before her stood a Crane courtier. The courtier held a scroll toward her that bore the Imperial Chancellor's seal.

"Mirumoto Hitomi of the Dragon," she said, standing in her way. "The Imperial Chancellor has asked that I admit you and your army into the Imperial Palace. He has prepared a writ of allowance to permit you to legally enter with your army."

Raitsugu bowed in respect for the chancellor's document, but Hitomi did not look at it, instead meeting the Crane's gaze with firmness. She did not need Kakita Yoshi's performative consent to do what must be done. This was merely one more tiny obstacle to crush beneath her heel before the real battle.

"Enough," Hitomi said, her voice unyielding to any deference. "No more delays and posturing formalities."

The Crane's mask of authority dropped and her eyes grew soft. She pressed the scroll into Raitsugu's hands and touched her fingers to her chest.

"Then listen to me, Mirumoto-sama, a fellow daughter of an Empire who has lost its father.



I am just as heartbroken as you, but I beg you not to draw your sword in this palace. Surely, we do not need more death in a place already mourning such tragic loss."

Despite the pressure aching beneath her ribs, Hitomi did not balk at the Crane's appeals to sentiment. Shoji's mastery over such courtly sensibilities had allowed him to deceive everyone, including Sumiko, giving him power to manipulate her, steal her honor, and destroy her.

"I am here to slay a murderer," Hitomi declared, marching through the doorway. "Once he is gone, no more innocent blood will be spilled."

She signaled to her *bushi* inside the palace courtyard.

"Guard every entrance and seize control of every wing!" she commanded. "Take custody of anyone you come across and hold them for questioning. Cut down anyone who prevents you from seizing the Regent's suites. Leave Shoji to me!"

"Please, Hitomi-sama, have mercy," the courtier cried.

But her gentle voice sounded far away, swallowed in the advance of the army. Hitomi rushed up the steps alongside her warriors and into the palace, leaving the courtier and her reproaches behind.

The thundering feet of her soldiers echoed inside the usually still palace as they flooded every corridor. Hitomi marched up the stairs toward the suites of the Regent, sword at the ready. However, she crossed blades with no one.

Every turn of the passageways revealed them to be empty and silent. Though the sharp *clack* of flung-open doors and her troops' shouted orders echoing throughout the building revealed that there were occupants in some of the rooms, no one resisted. Every servant, courtier, and samurai stood aside to watch as Mirumoto Hitomi and the Army of the Rising Wave drifted through the Imperial Palace's silent halls unopposed.

The silence chafed at her. She swallowed as a tremble shuddered in her stomach and her heartbeat grew loud in her ears. Where were the traitors? Where were the servants of corruption that she and her troops would cut down in the name of the Emperor?

"Where are they?" she hissed.

"Perhaps the chancellor has ordered everyone to stand down," Raitsugu replied behind her.

"How are we to know who stands with Shoji?" Hitomi said more to herself. "How dare he interfere with our assault!"

"He may be avoiding unnecessary fighting."

"Unnecessary?" Hitomi paused. Hearing the confusion in her own voice jarred her. Without the outlet of battle to feed it, the churning unease in her stomach intensified and a slight sweat grew dank across her brow. Had Yaruma been right? Had she been guilty of the three sins? Afraid of the finality of Sumiko's abdication? Dogged by her regret at not having had the power to stop any of this? Swept up in her desire for revenge? She let the point of her blade drop. Had she made a mistake?

"Hitomi-sama," Raitsugu said, his words barely registering amid her confusion. "We have



nearly reached the Regent's suites."

She growled at the thought of Shoju. He could not escape. He would pay!

"We come for his head," she cried, waving her bushi forward. "Go!"

She tore down the hall and slammed open the doors to Shoju's rooms. Several dozen Scorpion bushi stood within, their hands at their undrawn swords as if waiting to see what she would do. With a war cry, Hitomi leaped at them, her *wakizashi* slashing down the bodies in the narrow foyer. The Scorpion fell back, some drawing their own weapons just in time to block lethal blows, others falling to the Dragon army's charge. The scent of blood and the sound of bodies smashing against the gilded paper walls filled the room. She drove the guards to the ground with a whirlwind of steel, roaring as she trampled across their bodies to reach the inner chambers.

She crashed through the final door. There, kneeling upon the tatami floor sat Bayushi Shoju, his face-covering mask scattered with shadows from the dark chamber. Beside him sat a child, a boy whose mask mirrored that of his father's. For a sudden, brief, moment, the child looked into Hitomi's eyes and she saw love that was quickly eclipsed by fear. He knew doom had come for his family and he would be powerless to stop it. Just as she had been. When she locked eyes again with Shoju, it was as if her long-dead older brother looked back at her.

The Regent held no weapon. He stood cautiously, betraying no indication of fear, his palms open toward her in peaceable compliance.

"Mirumoto Hitomi-sama," Shoju said, his unmistakable voice as calm as stone. He bowed politely. "You surprise me with your presence. I was expecting the Lion."

"The Lion?" she repeated, confused.

"In retaliation for the Emerald Champion's disgrace," he continued. "Even if they did not love Toturi, I assumed their ferocity would drive them to avenge one of their own. I did not think it would be the Dragon to stage the first military coup in Rokugan's history. But it seems I was mistaken about a great many things.

"You are here for your own revenge."

"I—" She paused.

Yes. She was here to end him. To avenge the Emperor! Her lungs heaved with ragged breath, and her arms strained, longing to plunge both her blades deep into his chest.

But his son was here. Bayushi Dairu was no older than she had been, when her brother Satsu had been so unceremoniously crushed by the Crab heir's *tetsubō*. Despite all the years that had



traversed since that fateful day, she could still smell the wind that had blown over his corpse and the pain in her throat as she screamed after his departure to Meido. Tears suddenly burned in her eyes.

Hitomi loosened her grip on her swords. The rage within her screamed in protest. It bucked and roared like a caged animal and crashed about her spirit like a manic storm. It demanded blood. It shrieked for her to tear down the palace and destroy every corner of Rokugan where Scorpion insurrection and schemes could hide!

Instead, she spoke, her words cutting through the surging waves of her rage as she blinked away her tears.

"I am not. You are under arrest for the murder of the Emperor. The Dragon are here to take custody of you to deliver you to the justice of the Imperial Chancellor."

The Regent stood silently. His eyes strayed to the fallen Scorpion bushi behind her. Then he bowed his head slightly.

"I willingly enter into the Dragon's custody, Mirumoto-sama," he said.

She signaled for her bushi take the Scorpion usurper away. She pressed a sword-burdened fist against the sweltering fury still churning in her heart and swallowed the bile that crept up her throat. Justice, not revenge. Heaven's justice, as Sumiko had called on. Dairu was escorted out along with his father—he would be taken back to the Scorpion to remain in their care. The Hantei's blood was not on his hands.

Raitsugu ensured the Regent was securely guarded before approaching Hitomi.

"I thought you were going to kill him, Hitomi-sama," he said warily.

She turned away, wanting to avoid the obvious question in his statement. Speaking might shatter her composure, and she could not afford to lose face in this moment of Dragon victory.

It had been her intent to cut Shoji down. Had his son not been here when she arrived, it was likely that she would have done so. But what would Dairu's fate have become, had that happened? He would have watched, powerless, as a renowned warrior cut down his father without hesitation or mercy. He would never forget that moment, the sight of green and gold and steel and the pain of his own cries of protestation. It was not a fate she could force upon the child.

Up until she had seen Dairu, Hitomi had given in to the path of least resistance, allowing her rage to sweep downhill like a flood. Relinquishing herself to the temptation of simple, reckless revenge, she had forced her way into history as the only general to have stormed the Imperial Palace. But, when faced with the full consequences of her vengeance, she had faltered.

"Even the sea must bend to the will of Heaven," she answered Raitsugu through clenched teeth.

Rage still boiled inside of her, every muscle aching to cut Shoji down. Was arresting him instead really the right path to tread? She looked at the empty mat once more before escorting him toward the assembly hall, where she knew Yoshi would be waiting for news of her actions.



She grimaced at the thought of the relief she would see on his face, but that sourness was mere pride. In the end, she had made the decision she thought was right. She had pursued justice, as Sumiko had. Justice for Shoji's victims. Justice for the Emperor. Only time would tell if this was the right choice.

