Tempests and Tides

By Annie VanderMeer Mitsoda

The calm green-blue waves seemed to mock her, and though there was not a cloud in the sky, Asahina Maeko felt a gray cloud hanging over her. The shugenja sighed deeply and looked over the side of the Loyal Duck, meandering its way from Lonely Shore, across the water and back to the City of the Cold Wind. As boring as this trip as been, she reflected, I am not at all eager to get back home. The placid seas and empty skies boded ill for finding the mysterious storms that brought her out here to begin with, and she would return to her lord a failure.

The young woman sighed, whirling a little tempest upon her palm. It was her close connection to the kami of the air that made her immediately suspicious of all the reports claiming ships at sea had been lost to storms. Stories abounded of sudden squalls that rose up like angry demons from the ocean; the lucky crews were those that made it to their lifeboats and washed up on shore with tales to tell, while the unfortunate ones washed up dead among the wreckage or were lost beneath the waves. It seemed too convenient that so many small storms could appear without threatening the shore, but after the disastrous typhoon a few years ago, no Crane official seemed interested in looking into the matter—that or they were too occupied with the conflict against the Lion in the north to care.

Maeko, however, was not so easily put off—especially after her cousin Kenji was named among the missing. She was so relentless in her requests to see ship schedules and shipment information that the daughter of the daimyō intervened on her behalf. Although not highly ranked within the family, Maeko was granted greater respect by the strength of her devotion to, and esteem among, the kami. So Lady Takako granted her wish: a small stipend, a bodyguard, and passage to Lonely Shore City to determine the truth of the rumors.

What she didn’t expect was how boring the trip on the Loyal Duck—named for an insipid children’s tale about a young emperor’s favorite pet—was going to be. The sailors ignored her, and even the yöjimbó ordered to accompany Maeko remained aloof. She had loudly declared that she expected to be attacked all the way to their destination, their craft laden with barrels of pitch, and yet they had arrived at the busy port without incident.

Frustrated at her failure and determined not to be proven wrong, Maeko spent every last koku she’d been given to procure trade goods of her own, to make certain that the Loyal Duck rode low in the water, appearing to be heavily weighed down with supplies. The merchants protested at the addition, and at first refused to take the goods on board finally settling on the compromise of lashing them to the deck under oiiicloths, to be easily kicked overboard if need be. She’d set off from the trade port confident in her plan...only to have that confidence ebb away the closer they grew to home.

shout from the lookout shook her like a thunderclap. ”Storm! Storm sighted!”
Maeko turned toward the captain, who looked stricken. "in this weather? Where?" he called back.

"Southerly. and gaining fast! ...Fortunes save us, very fast! I've never seen its like!"

The captain's face took on an almost theatrical grimace, and he snapped to attention. "All hands! Prepare the lifeboats! if we can't outrun it, we're not ending up a cautionary tale!"

Maeko gasped, shaking her head wildly. "No, no, captain, you must not run! This is what we've been waiting for, the proof I need!" He snorted at her in disdain.

"Proof of what? Piracy? In a gale? No, you do what you want, shugenja. My duty to you ends when my crew is in danger. You and your bodyguard are on your own."

Maeko stood awkwardly to one side as the sailors rushed around her, preparing for the worst, and she watched as the storm moved forward inexorably, dark clouds boiling. The wind tugged at her clothes, and around her the sailors had begun to babble in fear, clustering near the sides of the Loyal Duck and struggling with the lines that held the lifeboats. Maeko tried to shout at them to wait, that she wasn't sure about any of this, but she was hardly audible over the shriek of the wind. Her heart fluttered in her chest as she tried to focus.

What if I'm wrong? She stared at the approaching storm, angry and fearsome, and swallowed hard. But I am so deep in madness already, I might as well follow its path!

Abandoning her protector, Maeko took off in a run aft, pale blue robes flapping around her, and clambered up the railing of the ship's stern. Half-closing her eyes, she reached out an arm and waved her hand as if clearing dew from a leaf. "Kaze-no-Kami, Lord of the Winds, hear my prayer! I shall provide whatever boon you ask of me, if only you help me now!"

A great blast of wind bellowed forth from the young shugenja's gesture, slamming into the oncoming storm. The thunderheads dissipated, and there was a moment of stillness between the fading of the dark clouds and the full understanding of what lay behind it: an approaching ship, rigged with black sails, its bow filled with heavily armed sailors-each of them with a teal sash at their waist.

The breath drained from Maeko's lungs like water from a broken jug. I never thought I would be so mad at myself for being right.

"Mantis!" screamed one of the sailors behind her, shattering the sudden calm. "Pirates! They're going to kill us all!"

Maeko reflexively threw herself to the deck as a hurricane of boarding hooks came barreling toward her, landing with a horrifying chorus of thunks on the deck and an awful harmony of their lines being pulled taut. She stood, shaking, as her guardian pushed past the sailors and ran to the rear of the ship. A hand grabbed her arm, and she looked with sudden shock into the face of the captain, whose expression was a strange combination of respect and irritation.

"You did enough, girl," he harrumphed. "Get back and let the warriors handle this!"

Maeko opened her mouth to form an indignant reply but was cut off by her own yelp of surprise as her guard pushed her roughly backwards, and sailors took her arms and pulled her
toward safety. In shock, she saw the first sets of Mantis pirates heave themselves onto the deck, climbing along the ropes that tethered the ships to one another. One of the Crane warriors raised a bow and fired an arrow true, sending a Mantis sailor into the waves below. Another attempted to pry a boarding hook loose from where it had dug deep into the wood of the railing, and fell over dead with a knife in her throat. Shouts and screams rose as Maeko crouched, pinioned, and she watched Crane after Crane fall.

A rage spilled into Maeko’s heart. I cannot let violence be wrought against the people who sought only to aid me. She stood, her robes rippling around her, and walked forward, the yells of the merchants once again being consumed by wind. I am Asahina Maeko, beloved of the kami, and I will not let these pirates harm anyone!

Maeko, eyes half-closed, made a sudden slashing motion, eliciting a chorus of yells as one of the boarding lines split, sliced cleanly in half. Another motion, and a second line fell away, depositing the advancing Mantis into the froth of the waves below. She broke into a run, pale eyes intense, then spun around, palms open, rippling the air in front of her-and the remaining lines snapped as if caught in a typhoon, throwing their passengers free. A few turns of her hands, and the Mantis pirates standing too close to the railing yelped in surprise as they were yanked overboard. Seeing their chance, the Crane guards hacked apart the other lines, and finished off the remaining Mantis sailors with exhausted efficiency.

Maeko’s eyes fluttered back open to a strange sound, and a slow smile began to cross her face as she realized her shipmates were cheering for her. This might not end up so badly after a-

Cheers suddenly cut off as a figure slammed into the deck, rocking the ship with a massive shockwave. Maeko tried to call the wind to form a barrier to protect them, but it was not enough—the guards at the rear of the ship who had not been blown overboard by the blast had been slammed into the sides of the boat, and lay motionless against the railing.

The figure stood slowly: an older woman, perhaps the age of Maeko’s own mother, dark of skin and eye and clad in teal linen robes. She leisurely rolled her head on her neck a moment before giving Maeko a measuring look that made the young woman feel judged by an instructor—and found wanting.
"Ain’t you a clever little bird," the woman chuckled, her accent thick with the Islands of Silk and Spice. "Fair amount of power in you, too, seems like."

Maeko bristled at the woman’s tone. "I am Asahina Maeko, sworn to the Crane, and this ship is under my protection. Leave now, or suffer the consequences!"

The woman smiled approvingly. "The name’s Kudaka, tenkinja to the Mantis Clan, priestess of tempests and tides, disciple of Suiten. I’ve always wanted to test my powers against your family." Her smile grew predatory. "So-let’s see which of us are more favored by the kami, shall we?"

Maeko nodded, which turned into a surprised yelp as she somersaulted backwards, blown head over heels by a blast of air from Kudaka’s outstretched hands. Growling with embarrassment, the young shugenja righted herself and asked the spirits to mind her descent, settling her to the deck carefully as she planned her next move.

"Quite the roar you made just then," Kudaka observed, clucking her tongue. "I didn’t think birds did that sort of thing."

"And I didn’t think Mantis were so talkative!" Maeko shot back, sweeping her arms up, left and right in succession, sending drafts whipping along the deck and up into the air. Kudaka dodged like a bending reed, leaning at angles that seemed impossible. The gentle bending resolved into a flipping kick, the older woman sending a blade of air screaming back toward Maeko, who raised another shield of turbulence to bat it away. Before Kudaka could attack a second time, Maeko lunged forward and blew out a long breath, sending a blast of air that sent the older woman awkwardly stumbling back a few paces before she caught her balance.

"Good!" crowed Kudaka, clapping in appreciation. "Isawa Asahina should be proud of his descendant. You’re pretty young to have such good control over the kami’s gifts." Her smirk turned dark. "But I’ve got the advantage."

The woman suddenly spun in a circle, and a whirlwind lashed the ship, sending the entire vessel creaking and rocking. Maeko quickly blocked the attack and opened her mouth to unleash a blistering retort-when she looked behind her to see sailors slumped in various positions around the deck, bruised and groaning but alive. She turned toward Kudaka in shock, but the older woman merely nodded.

"Y’see what I mean?" She crossed her arms confidently. Maeko snarled. "You said this was a duel!"

Kudaka shook her head. "Never said that. But more importantly, You gotta learn how a true test of our powers works: whatever we do, however neatly we try to fight-there are consequences to everythin’ around us. My people are all waitin’ for me to finish up here, while yours are out in the open. Even if you beat me, it’s likely they’ll still lose. Now...you wanna surrender? Or do you have a move that’ll actually catch me off guard first?"

Maeko’s mind raced. She glanced at the banged-up sailors behind her; the Mantis ship floating in the near distance, with the sailors she’d knocked into the water already climbing up its sides; at Kudaka, who looked at her evenly; back at the sailors, and the anemic flutter of the
sail in the-

Wait. Of course!

Spinning around, the young shugenja pointed her body toward the sail of the ship, and opened the whole of her being to the spirits around them.

Kami of air, I beg you—listen to my plea now, even if you never do so again, and lend me your strength!

The world seemed to explode into a roar as a massive gust of wind erupted from Maeko’s fingers, snapping the sail of the Loyal Duck so violently that the mast nearly cracked with the force. Sailors howled as they skidded across the deck, and even Kudaka cursed as she was knocked off her feet. The sail billowed as Maeko channeled air into it for what felt like an eternity, until the young woman’s power ebbed and she slumped to the deck, exhausted. She turned to see the Mantis ship in the distance—gaining on them quickly, but still far enough away to have made her gambit worth it.

Kudaka stumbled to her feet, groaning. "Ow. I gotta hand it to you, girl, that was a move I didn’t see comin’. Don’t know what it’ll really get you, since my ship will catch up to us soon enough and loot your supplies, so..."

Kudaka’s words trailed off as Maeko stumbled over and pulled the oilcloth from one of the lumps on the deck—revealing a stack of clay bricks. "This is our cargo," she coughed, shaking her head. "Not jade or gold, just bricks. Something I knew would weigh us down, to catch the eye of anyone looking for a worthwhile bounty.

"So," Maeko tried and failed to hide a wince as she stood. "The question isn’t if you can best me, but how many of us you can take down before your ship reaches you...and if some piles of bricks are worth the effort."
Kudaka’s face was still for a long moment. Then, slowly, the tenkinja began to laugh. “Got it wrong when I said you took after your family’s founder. You’re more like his wife, who beat him in the Victory with No Strike. Never thought I’d have that kind of tactic used on me.” The older woman shrugged, and hopped up onto the ship’s railing. “Good job, Asahina Maeko. Hope we get to fight again.” The smirk returned, a final time. “I’m lookin’ forward to it.” Kudaka leapt over the side, and moments later, Maeko spied a figure borne upon the waves, streaming back toward the Mantis ship and out of sight.

Maeko sighed and her knees buckled—she would have hit the deck hard, but a strong hand caught her and set her down carefully. The captain appeared in her vision, his gaze respectful. “Lady Asahina,” the captain said carefully, “the Loyal Duck is still seaworthy, but in dire need of repair. What are your orders?”

“Unlash all the bricks and shove them overboard—they served their purpose. We must make our way back to City of the Cold Wind as swiftly as possible. I have grave news to deliver.” She winced, and sighed just before passing out. “And sometimes I hate being right...”

The winds whipped around the deck of the Poison Tide as it returned to Kyuden Gotei, sending sailors cursing as they leapt after lashing ropes and struggled to bring down waterlogged sails. Kudaka stood at the helm, eyes dark as she communed with the kami, one hand twitching slightly as if carving patterns in the air. The tenkinja seemed in a different world, her hair and clothes only lightly buffeted by a gentle breeze—although any sailor who
approached her was shoved back as if by a gale.

At last, the ship pulled into the harbor, and she winced as she noticed a trio of familiar figures waiting. Fighting down the urge to spring off the ship and let the spirits of the wind carry her to the dock, she waited patiently to disembark and greet her Champion and protégés.

"The Poison Tide sits high in the water," Yoritomo observed casually. "I take it your strike against the jade shipment from Lonely Shore City did not go as planned?"

Kudaka raised her chin proudly, gave her students—the twins Fuu and Umi—a long instructive look, then bowed low before her daimyō. As she straightened, she saw genuine concern in Yoritomo's vivid green eyes. This was not the casual behavior they usually enjoyed, but circumstances dictated that he know exactly how serious the situation had become.

"Opposite o' that fact, nearly sunk the whole thing," she said evenly. "Was a good thing I was able to escape when I did. But even still, we've plenty of shoals ahead for us."

Yoritomo nodded seriously, and beckoned for Kudaka to speak further. The older woman obliged, taking special care to detail her opponent's inventive thinking—unusual for the stodgy Crane—and the tall man took in every word. Fuu and Umi stayed silent as usual, their bright grey eyes darting back and forth between the two.

After a moment, a wide grin split Yoritomo's face, so ferocious that the twins edged away from him. "So...well done to that Asahina. It seems one bird among that lot is aware enough to watch the tides, instead of just stare into the murky water." He chuckled. "Although it is quite fortunate the Crane has not yet worked out that we supply the Crab with that which we seize from them."

Kudaka raised an eyebrow. "So, what's your plan now? Keep raidin', or change to somethin' new?"

Yoritomo smirked, and he cracked his knuckles. "We've been sending squalls to harry lone targets. That strategy worked to begin our partnership with the Crab, but now with a network established and the Crane enmeshed in conflict with the Lion, we can truly press our claim on the waters."

The big man clenched his fist, and Kudaka saw with a thrill the determination on his face. "Now the Storms come for the Crane. And all of Rokugan will soon recognize the might of the Mantis Clan."