

## A STORM WILL FALL, EPJLOGUE

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### *The Shattered Archipelago*

Yoritomo Ichido nearly stumbled over the rail of his broken vessel as it made landfall with a thud that shivered through the entire kobune. In truth, calling it a kobune would be generous. In the aftermath of the battle, there was little enough of his hull left to call it more than a raft, though he and what remained of his crew had supplemented the frame with whatever flotsam they came across. Now, it was only he that was still able to steer, though it was quite a feat with their ruined rudder. The rest of his crew were either dead or lying across the deck with damp cloths over their heads, having succumbed to dehydration and the heat.

They had survived the death of the Mantis, and the reason became apparent when they had looked beneath the deck. At some point before they had launched, one of the crew had replaced several barrels of explosives with similar containers, filled with valuables rather than death. At first, it had seemed that they had been denied their honorable death, and he had furiously interrogated his crew, attempting to find the culprit. After it had been determined that he was among those lost in battle, the barrels proved their salvation. Removing the bands, the planks of the barrels had proven invaluable in repairing the hull as an ill wind carried them farther and farther out to sea.

It had been among the piles of koku and assorted riches that they had found it, the strange scroll. His navigator had been unable to open it, but had deciphered the old calligraphy on the seal before she too passed out from heat exhaustion. "It will call the power of one entity, anywhere, given the proper focus," she had croaked between parched lips. Hardly an attractive prospect, considering that a simple prayer for clean water would have been of more value at the time.

Ichido roused what few of his sailors could still walk, and they carried those that could not ashore. In the same stumbling manner, they set about remaking the sail into a makeshift shelter, to keep some of the unrelenting heat of the Jade Sun off their heads. Once this was complete, he tasked one of his sailors with searching the pitiful spit of broken rock for clean water. *Perhaps we will be lucky once more*, he thought, fighting back fatigue himself as he allowed himself to rest for the first time since the battle. His eyelids drooped, and he fought slumber no more.

"Captain?" He was roused from his rest but a few minutes later, blinking bleary eyes up at the sailor he had sent scouting.

"Water?" Ichido asked, his voice raw.

"No, Yoritomo-sama," his scout said, shaking her head. "But you need to see this."

He rubbed his eyes free of sleep, and tiredly pushed himself into a sitting position. She was holding... something. He blinked a few more times to clear his vision, and as its focus sharpened, the image resolved into a pair of kama. But not just any kama...

He inhaled sharply. "How?" he asked, more dumfounded than he had been when they had not exploded during the combat.

"They were simply lying there, wedged between two bare stones. I dared not believe it... but there was no water to be found, my apologies."

He took the weapons from her hands, and weighed them in his hands. They were priceless, the history of his Clan held in his hands. But they could do nothing to save his crew now. An item that was worth more than all the koku that now weighed down his derelict, and it would not do the slightest to preserve his crew from thirst.

*A proper focus...*

The thought lanced through his fevered brain unbidden, and he began to chuckle. Perhaps they could do something.

“The scroll. From the hold. Bring it to me.”

“Yoritomo-sama?” his scout asked, confused.

“Just do it.”

“Aye, Captain,” she replied uneasily. He looked out on the horizon, the midday sun sending burning lances of light to strike him from the surface of the water.

*I will call the power of Yoritomo. I will unite the Clan. The Mantis will survive, and I will be the one to drag us back to power. After all, what have I got to lose?*

“Here, Captain,” the scout said, setting the scroll on the ground. He forced himself to his feet, accidentally scraping his thumb across the blade of one of the artifacts as he did so. Not bothering to clean his hand, only slightly wincing at the pain, he reached out and touched the seal.

Which fell away. The now-stained scroll floated up to his eye level, beginning to read itself as his scout stumbled back wide-eyed, muttering charms against evil. The words flashed before his eyes, making a horrible sort of sense, though he could not repeat any of them if asked. For a long moment, nothing happened save for the dark whispers of the scroll.

Then, a drop of wetness touched Ichido’s cheek. He looked up, through a hole in their shelter, to see that it had begun to rain. His crew stirred, staring in disbelief at their fortune, and then rejoicing, gathering whatever containers they could to catch the life-giving fluid. Ichido, for his part, could not tear his eyes from the scroll.

As his crew celebrated and drank around him, the sky grew steadily darker, the storm growing. He felt the moisture of the rain on his face mingling with a burning, from his tear ducts, and realized that he was weeping blood. Still, he could not tear his eyes from the scroll, nor make any noise of protest to alert his preoccupied crew. Then, abruptly, the scroll finished, and the spell was broken. He fell to his knees, followed quickly by the scroll clattering to the stone.

Suddenly, without warning, a bolt of lightning lanced from the sky, slicing through their shelter to strike Ichido directly. He screamed, every hair on his body standing on end, and gripped the divine kama with hands tendon-locked by the electricity. The bolt seemed to last an eternity, and all around him, his crew still celebrated unaware. His eyes darted frantically across their joyful faces as they drank the bounty of the sky, oblivious to his pain.

But... it was not just pain. He felt strong. Stronger than he had ever felt. Quick enough to split a falling raindrop. Sharper than a katana’s edge. He understood, and as he embraced the lightning, the pain fell from him. The screams of pain became wild laughter, and all around him, the Mantis danced, praising the Heavens for their gift of water. Their tableau was one of ecstasy surrounding the glowing, crackling figure of their Captain.

As the thunder shook the whole island, another bolt streaked across the sky, headed off into the distant South.

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### *Thunder Dragon Bay*

The two women waited, side-by-side. One was clad in faded purples, long worn by the years of salt water breezes and little enough care. The other was tall and regal, in robes of green and gold that could not fade if they were immersed in the ocean for an aeon. They stood, and watched.

Finally, the bolt struck, lightning darting out of the clear sky from many miles away, to smash into the ground before them. It seemed to carve a perfectly rounded dish in the ground, balling up and disintegrating all it touched, before fading away in an instant. Thunder boomed, and what was left behind was a man of perhaps 30 years, naked and shivering, clutching his shattered left arm to his body. All the hair had been burnt from his body, and the eyes he cast about before fixating on the two women were wild.

“He is here, just as you said he would be,” observed Iuchi Namida. “It should be an honor, but he does not look like he is often described.”

“Yes, my Oracle,” the other woman replied. “He has been through more in the last few moments than any save myself can understand. For you see, I once willingly took such a fall for him.”

“What now?” asked the Oracle of Thunder, removing her outer mantle to cover the shivering form. The garment seemed to conduct as though it were metal, the stray arcs in the dish of glassy sand dancing upon its form as the man reached weakly to accept the cloth.

“Now, it all begins anew.”