

## **A STORM WILL FALL, PART 2**

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### *The Rokugani Coastline*

"You are certain this will work, Daidoji-san?" Asako Jiroko asked, half-heartedly rolling a set of prayer beads between her hands, attempting to burn off some of the nervous energy that she refused to allow show on her face.

"Not at all, Asahina-san," Daidoji Kurobasa replied, his deadpan face in sharp contrast to the obvious glee in his voice. "Exciting, is it not?"

Jiroko winced at the name. "I do wish that you would not call me that, Daidoji-san. I am not one of the Crane yet, after all."

"Not married, perhaps, but you are one of us all the same," stated the Daidoji tacitly as he went about his business braiding the thin hemp cord.

"But a husband has not even been selected..."

"Ah! But that was not the deal, now was it?" He looked up from his work, shaking a finger at the shugenja. "After all, you are witnessing a Crane secret at work. One we are honor-bound to never reveal to anyone outside the Clan. So, if you are here, it is because you are a Crane. And what have we here? It seems that you are present! Ergo, you have already joined us, Asahina-san." The scout displayed a remarkable and annoying aptitude for masking the sadistic enjoyment he was taking from Jiroko's discomfort.

"...As you say, Daidoji-san."

"No need to be so formal, cousin," Kurobasa said, turning back to his cord.

The clacking of the prayer beads increased, and Jiroko silently wished for the whole thing to be over, so that she could be rid of this revolting man. "If you are not certain of this action, then why are we dedicating so much to attempting it?"

"Don't know. Don't particularly care. This one is but a humble servant, the arm of the Daimyo's will. It is my honor to carry out the will of the Crane," The scout had a peculiar way of making even the most reasonable of statements sound like a massive insult to everything Jiroko stood for. "Besides, this is your command as much as it is mine. It was your former Clan that decided to field the Fire Dragon against the threat from the seas. Just as it was the members of the self-same Clan that decided to ask for our aid in this matter. I would think that you have as many answers as I."

"The Fire Dragon is a Celestial being," Jiroko muttered, her annoyance becoming more obvious. "The properties of which even the Phoenix can only guess at. Easy conjecture would say that it is most likely immune to fire, intense heat included of course, and its hide can reflect most weapons without taking damage."

"Exactly, Asahina-san," Kurobasa said, tapping the cord into the barrel he was working on. "Your summary is much what we expected. However, we do not need to damage such a divine being to set it free. Destroying the collar should be sufficient, ne?"

“Perhaps? I had only the smallest hand in the unholy thing’s creation. I could not tell you what exactly it does, or how to disable it.”

“Let the Mantis worry about that.”

Jiroko stopped clicking her beads and stared in unabashed irritation at the scout. “The Mantis? Should they not also be Crane, if they are taking part in this inane plan of yours?”

“Don’t be foolish, Asahina-san,” the Daidoji chided. “The Crane have no use for fealty from the dead.”

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Isawa Ikariya overlooked the bay, his brow furrowed as he scanned the water. His frown deepened at the sight of the dark tide near the horizon line, the mark of the approaching horrors. Giving only the barest of nods at the approach of the Shiba commander, he turned from the sea, flicking the trailing corners of his kimono as he did.

“The Council has informed me that they have communed with the Fire Dragon. It, as well as several of its servitors, will come and put an end to the monstrous beings that have emerged from the ruins of the Mantis Isles. You are to hold your men back and have your archers pick off any stragglers that make for the land. Any enemies upon the sea are to be left to the ryu and the Isawa.”

“Understood, Isawa-sama,” Shiba Kakei responded with a bow. “However, I bring additional news. The outriders have spotted a small fleet of kobune flying Mantis colors docked not far from here.”

“So?” came the reply. “A few broken ships, sailed by a few broken men. No doubt here to steal whatever glory they can from the Phoenix, or perhaps to attempt some measure of revenge for their home. In either case, they are inconsequential as they have always been.”

Kakei swallowed his opinions, as the Shiba so often must, and bowed once more. “All the same, Isawa-sama, do you not feel that it would be appropriate to know all aspects of the battlefield before combat is joined? It would show our wisdom to...”

A sharp gesture from the shugenja cut him off, a dismissive wave as Ikariya continued to stare into the sea. “As you will, Shiba-san. Send an envoy. But do it quickly, for the time for action is nearly upon us.”

Kakei bowed for a third time, moving to leave the hill. By the time he was halfway down the path, he was already signaling his scouts with his fans. He smiled to himself.

*The Isawa may rule the Phoenix, but they must sometimes be steered in the right direction.*

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Out on the beach, Yoritomo Raiden oversaw the loading of the kobune, critically eyeing each barrel as it was packed into the hold of his ship. To the casual observer, it might seem that the captain of the *Thunder’s Fang* was merely being thorough, and such an observer would be right in thinking so. However, a closer look might reveal that the Mantis’ eyes did not follow his crew, but rather certain individual barrels that were being loaded up. Shaking his head, he climbed up the gangplank, and hollered for his crew to attend him. He smiled in his barbaric, full-toothed manner to see his samurai scramble to drop what they were doing and come listen to their captain.

Although, in this case, “samurai” was perhaps a stretch, he mused silently. His crew had been pirates before they had been samurai, made to choose between fealty or the noose when the Clan had found

their island home. That was why he asked to be given charge of them, for he was a bit of a pirate himself. Always for the good of the Mantis, of course, and he had no problem with his superiors continuing to believe that. The crew had come to know and love him as their captain, the hearty men and women of the sea accepting that he was not only one of them, but that he could bring them wealth and adventure such as they had never dreamed of before. The crew of laughing, cheering sailors that now gathered before him had, under his leadership, been transformed from desperate and destitute reavers into healthy, happy servants of the Mantis.

Which was why it was almost a shame to have to do what he planned.

He raised his fist in the air, and his crew relaxed, though each and every one of them still bore looks of determination and lust for combat. They, as children of Yoritomo, would reap fiery vengeance upon the Shadowlands. Though the Isles had only been their true land for a few short years, they knew that the days of riches were behind them. Nothing remained to their legacy except the glory of their actions.

"Friends! We have come to the end! There is nothing for you, except a glorious death. But what more could you ask for?"

"Gold!" piped up a voice, to smattered laughter.

"A feast fit for a Daimyo!" called another, increasing the laughter.

"Sake enough to drown us all twice over!" chorused a third. Discipline was lost, his crew now hooting and calling out wishes that grew more absurd by the second. It took several seconds before he could get them listening again.

"Alright, alright, you've had your fun. But tell me truly, have I ever lead you wrong?" Raiden smiled, for he knew that any other captain of the fleet might get a response from such a question, politeness be damned. Since taking control of them, however, he had been nothing but generous with his share of the spoils, had lead raids that always generated such wealth, and had drunk every member of his crew under the table more than once during the celebrations. They were his, as much as any could claim ownership over the wild bunch.

"Now then, before we get to our revenge, I have something that I wish to say to you all. Listen closely, for I may or might never get a chance to tell you this again," he said, leaning forward with a conspiratorial grin. His crew likewise quieted down and leaned in, holding on to their captain's every word.

"There has been news. The Emperor's servants play Go upon the Throne. Scandalous."

A wave passed over his sailors, the pirates suddenly straightening as their eyes glazed over, the lids drooping over dilated pupils. As one, they muttered "Scandalous," through numb lips. Raiden, still grinning, snapped his fingers, and the entire crew followed the noise, focusing their attention on him.

"...What?" The confused voice rang out from among the throng. The crew parted, turning to face the befuddled youth that Raiden had hoped to train as his first mate.

Raiden let out a long sigh, and gestured at the young man. Before he could react, he was seized from multiple angles, a hand placed over his mouth and his limbs held tight as a kama was brought to his throat. The crewman holding it looked up at the captain questioningly, and when the nod came, drew the blade across the sailor's neck.

*He would have been a worthy first mate indeed,* mused Raiden as the body was tumbled without ceremony into the hold. *A shame that conditioning is such a delicate art.*

Looking up from his thoughts, he met the clearing eyes of his crew. “Well, you know what to do. Get to it!” He waved them off, and the pirates scattered about the makeshift port, running his special barrels all throughout the ragged fleet. He watched them carry his gifts to every kobune remaining, taking note of which ships received the most of them and which had fewer.

It was in this state of internal concentration that the Phoenix scout found him, the Shiba riding up on a pony. The beast looked tired and salt-scoured, a state matched by the bedraggled scout. She was clearly unused to riding by the seaside, as she guided her mount directly into muddy sands that threatened to hold onto the pony’s hooves with every step.

“Mantis-sama! I bring greetings from the Inferno Legion!”

Raiden snapped his attention away from his calculations, cursing internally over being drawn from his planning. “What do you want, Phoenix? Speak quickly, we make sail soon.”

“My commander requests to know what you are doing in these waters!”

“You can tell your commander that these waters are ours to sail as we wish, Phoenix!” He shouted back from the helm of the kobune.

“Apologies, Mantis-sama, I mean no offense,” the scout responded, attempting to sound reticent, though the sea wind and agitated mount made it difficult. “Please, may I come aboard so that we might speak?”

Raiden sighed again, then gestured his assent. “Quickly then. As I said, we sail soon,” he shouted. As he did so, he moved to obscure the streak of blood where the youth had fallen from the sight of the gangplank. While one hand beckoned the scout aboard, the other drew a long, wicked knife from its concealed sheath. The scout’s commander would have to live with his curiosity unsated.

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“You see?” Daidoji Kurobasa said, gesturing at the boats sailing towards the place where the celestial and infernal forces were about to meet.

“What is there to see?” The reluctant Asahina asked. She was still intensely uncomfortable with the whole business, and even more so with Kurobasa’s presence.

“They know they will not return from this voyage.”

“But surely the plan will work, yes?”

“It is a good enough plan, to be sure,” Kurobasa replied, nodding his head. “The Mantis take the powder and the jade to the fight, and float the barrels into the fray. The explosion kills the Tainted and frees the Dragon, while the Mantis sail away. But they will not. They know they sail to their deaths, but they do it anyway. The barrels may not float far enough, or the explosion will be too large, or perhaps the Dragon itself will kill them once the collar is destroyed. To say nothing of the ocean of horrors they will have to fight through merely to reach the colossal combatants they must detonate. No, Asahina-san, they will not survive this. I expect very few of the Mantis will sail back into our little port.”

“Callous, Daidoji-san.”

“Practical, more like. There is no use pretending, especially in these days. We cannot all afford to sit back and let Celestial slaves do our fighting for us. Some of us have been two steps from the front since the first days.”

“Indeed, the Mantis have. One might even say that they have been on the front itself, what with their fleet watching the Sea of Shadows for so long. And yet they never resorted to forbidden gaijin pepper.”

Kurobasa grinned in his infuriating manner, his lips pulled tight up in a smug smile as he feigned injury. “A most palpable touch, Asahina-san! Yet, you are hardly in a position to discuss dishonorable tactics. We have blasphemed alike, you and I, if not in similar ways.”

Ignoring the jab, Jiroko tossed her head towards the kobune in the dock. “And I imagine it will be all too convenient for the Crane that their longtime rivals will be annihilated once more, so soon after their recent misfortune.”

“Why my dear Asahina-san, you act almost as if the Mantis do not know their own fate.”

“Don’t they?”

“Look at their preparations again.”

Jiroko complied, taking the opportunity to mouth expletives while the scout could not see her face. Her cursory glance over the distant boats revealed little, but something caught her eye as being not quite right. It looked as if a large group of sailors were gathering on the shore, rather than on board. She flicked her gaze to the ships to confirm, and indeed, many of the boats had only the barest minimum of a crew. As she watched, a few of the green-clad samurai filtered out of the group on the beach to fill out some of the less-populated ships. She turned a questioning gaze to the Crane scout, who shrugged.

“Twenty to a ship. I could not say why.”

“What are they doing?”

“Drawing lots. They know the Mantis must survive, so they draw lots to see who gets the chance to avenge the Clan, and who must stay behind. They are a Clan of heroes, and each one of them wishes for their heroic end. In reality, however, the Mantis would not survive if every samurai who wished to join the fray did so.”

“But why twenty? It seems barely enough to sail properly, much less fight.”

“Who can say? They have never exactly abided by convention.”

“It seems oddly specific though. Unless... Voltturnum...”

Kurobasa looked askance at the shugenja for a long moment as she mulled over her thoughts, then suddenly burst out laughing. Choking back the guffaws, he wiped the tears from his eyes, and looked out upon the fleet with the light of comprehension burning in his eyes, as well as a measure of respect. “It is amusing, no? Ever defiant, ever foolishly brave, even in the face of certain death. Here, at the end of their world, every Mantis thinks themselves Yoritomo come again.”

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Isawa Ikariya watched with pleasure as the battle was joined. The initial blast of searing heat from the great Dragon’s breath struck his face though he was a good bit away, and he laughed sadistically

to see the effect it had upon the Shadowlands creatures unfortunate enough to be struck by it directly. He clutched the amulet around his neck, channeling his will through it, observing the effects with pleasure as a group of smaller ryu jerked towards a group of tainted Ningyo at his telepathic order.

The great Oni that had wreaked such havoc upon the Mantis Isles was there, sweeping its enormous claws among the celestial forces. Its talons left hideous wounds upon those it touched, though the screams of the dragon-spirits were drowned out by the constant shriek of the igniting air as the Fire Dragon unleashed its mad fury upon the corrupt denizens of the ocean. Though the two titans would inevitably meet, as they could not possibly reap the chaff of the combat without exposing the other to attack, Ikariya had never been a bastion of patience.

“Fight,” he growled, some of the nearby shugenja looking up from their own amulets to look at him, before deciding that he was speaking to the Ryu rather than his compatriots. “Fight, damn you,” he said, gritting his teeth against the defiant mind of the great Dragon. “I am Isawa. The elements do my bidding. FIGHT, you stupid beast!” At this, the murmured prayers around him died completely, and for a moment, the battle below turned to chaos as the Celestial forces suddenly began to flee, opening themselves to attack by the Tainted horde as they panicked uncontrolled. All around him, the other Phoenix stared in shock at his open blasphemy, while the ones at the edges of the ritual merely strained their ears to try to figure out what was going on.

The fugue was swiftly broken as one of the shugenja on the exterior let out an oath, tearing the suddenly white-hot amulet from his neck. He held it by its cord and watched dumbfounded as the carved stone cracked and melted, falling apart in his grasp. One by one, similar expletives popped up from those around the gathering, as well as at least one scream of pain as someone was not quick enough to tear the amulet away. The Phoenix looked around, their focus lost as they searched for the cause, before someone shouted and pointed at the battle over the bay.

Off to the side of the fighting, a pair of ryu seemed to be in the process of tearing a third apart. The truth of the matter was quickly revealed when yet another amulet burst into flame, and tiny shards of what could only have been the Celestial’s collar fell away into the water. Not waiting to assist its fellows, the spirit flew away, shrieking its joy at being free.

Ikariya rounded on his fellows, not losing his grip on the Fire Dragon itself. “CONTROL THEM! You are Isawa! If we fail here, our lands will perish! For the Clan, for the Empire itself, we must not fail. For the Phoenix!” Rallied, the shugenja turned back to their amulets, wresting control back from the desperate creatures. Those without amulets, save for the burned few being escorted off the field by yojimbo, ran to their leader’s side and laid hands on his amulet as well.

The combined forces of their will, channeled through the strange magic, finally brought the Dragon to heel. With a great roar, it sinuously twisted in the air, turning its full mass to face the Umikaiju. The air ignited once more, and as the great Oni’s hide blackened, it turned with a roar of its own, matching the charge. The thunderous clash of the two titans meeting in battle roared over the water, and the combat consumed the gathered shugenjas’ focus entirely.

It was for this reason, that none commented on the small fleet of kobune rapidly approaching the pitched combat.

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“Hold them back! Just a short while longer,” Yoritomo Raiden barked, his crew fighting off enemies on all sides. One of his pirates was speared through by a Ningyo as it leapt above the waves, only to

fall back into them a charred husk as his navigator ripped it apart with a bolt from the sky. The plan had gone from bad to worse.

Initially, it had looked like it might work, the Mantis simply racing the battle and setting their trap while the forces of Tengoku and Jigoku clashed around them. But something had happened, and the Celestial forces were momentarily scattered, the Tainted gaining the advantage. What that meant for the fleet was that in addition to fighting the wind and current, they were fighting for their lives amidst a fully-formed Skull Tide gaki. To fall in the water was to die. To stay aboard the ship was to die. To complete their task was, most likely, to die.

Raiden loved every second of it.

The Mantis had indeed known that the plan would never work as intended. Such plans always go wrong, and the only way to survive them was to get inordinately lucky. Not one of them, however, had set sail planning to survive. They were the Vengeance of Yoritomo, the sword that would cleave the heart of their enemy, and they would drown in the blood. This was far more than a matter of honor, as the Crane had supposed when they had loaded their ships with forbidden explosives. This was what every Mantis hoped for: A glorious death on the sea itself, doing such deeds that none would ever forget their names.

Save for the name Yoritomo Raiden.

Before leaving, the Mantis had taken down the names of every kobune and every samurai, so that none of the surviving Clan would forget their sacrifice. Of course, it might endanger Raiden's associates to be at all connected with the coming events, so he had quietly stricken his name and the names of his crew from the list. The pirates of the *Salt Talon* would not be remembered as heroes, if indeed they were remembered at all. It was sacrifices like this that made people like him the ones who would save the world.

Ordinarily, Raiden's associates might have been quite pleased with the Phoenix's actions. They would have laughed their silent laughter from halfway across the world, seeing their celebrated hubris spread with no action on their part. But then, the dissidents of the Phoenix came to the Crane with their woes, and a plan was hatched to undo their sin, and free the denizens of Tengoku. The great Dragon would then no doubt wreak fiery revenge over the face of Ningen-do. *As if we didn't have enough problems with Jigoku*, Raiden mused, cutting down some manner of aquatic goblin-creature. He kicked the body overboard to be devoured by the gaki, and watched with disgust as the creature's misshapen skull joined the others in the swirling water.

The boat lurched. Raiden flung out a hand, seizing the rail to steady himself, and glanced up at the cause. While battle had been taking place all over the deck, no one had noticed the helmsman being seized by a horrid worm from the water, and dragged beneath the waves. He rushed to seize the rudder, noting with pride that none of his crew had slipped when the boat had rocked. Throwing all of his weight into the turn, he pointed the ship like a spear, setting their course directly for where the serpentine Dragon was currently attempting to crush the Umikaiju in its coils, receiving horrendous slashes from claw and tentacle in the process.

"Navigator! Give me wind!" Raiden roared over the pitched fighting. To his credit, the shugenja did not hesitate or question his captain, simply throwing his arms in the air and chanting his prayers. The wind rushed into their sails, catapulting them to the fore of the fleet. Seeing the actions of the *Salt Talon*, several other kobune turned and followed suit, a fast-moving wedge that sliced through the hectic combat aiming for its heart.

The plan had been a simple one. A creature of such pure elemental Fire would be unlikely to be hurt by an explosion, regardless of size, and its thick scales would likely repel all but the most jagged of shrapnel. The collar, no doubt made of lesser stuff, would simply shatter under the force of the blast, and it would be free. Meanwhile, packets of Jade dust in the barrels would make even the smallest shard of wood lethal to the colossal Oni, hopefully destroying it in the same blast that freed the Dragon. One of the Crane had even added, hopefully, that the Dragon would perhaps see that the same blast that had freed it had slain the spawn of Jigoku, and it might choose to show mercy.

The Crane was a fool. Ningen-do had asserted authority over Tengoku, an offence that the distant Heavens could not forgive. If the Dragon were freed, no force in existence would be able to stop it from laying the Empire to waste. If the armies of the Clans were not so taxed, or if the Legions remained intact, then perhaps they might be able to stop it, but as it was, the Tainted and pure would burn alike. A situation that Raiden's associates found unacceptable.

As the kobune neared the titans, he glanced up from the course to observe that they had only lost a few ships in their charge. The majority of the fleet, captained and crewed by the most elite sailors in the Empire, were still intact, battered though they were. Save for a few that had been sunk or caught elsewhere in the pitched battle, the Mantis were but a few moments from impacting the clashing monstrosities. Calling over a pirate to take his place at the helm, he jumped down to the lower deck, he lifted the canvas tarp that covered the cache of explosives, and checked that everything was in place.

Sure enough, it was. The conditioning had been successful, and there, lying among the explosive barrels, was another barrel. Unbeknownst to their captains, the other kobune of the fleet had a similar barrel hidden among their payload, their fuses wound together with the Jade-infused barrels. The hidden barrel, however, carried a load of jagged Obsidian shards.

Raiden looked up to see that they were a scant few seconds from ramming, and quickly grabbed for the flint he had stored for the occasion. He snapped it a few times against a steel pin, but before his actions could make fire, the specially treated fuse caught of its own accord, greedily sparking as it sucked in the intense heat radiating from the Fire Dragon.

Raiden turned from the explosives, his fanged grin growing wider as his view was dominated by one giant leg of the embattled Oni. He looked at the determined faces of his crew, and began to laugh, long and wild.

"You thought us dead? Let us show you how a Yoritomo dies!"

His laughter continued right up until the impact, and then the world caught fire.

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Daidoji Kurobasa looked up, blinking the stars out of his vision to observe the aftermath of the blast. The battle had more or less died in that one instant, the devastating chain reaction rendering both sides into tatters. A few ryu, monsters, and tattered Mantis ships limped off in separate directions, but the Skull Tide had been wiped out, and no sign remained of the gigantic creatures at the center of the battle save for the huge indent in the water where the sea was rushing back to seal the area displaced by their fall.

"You see, Jiroko-san?" Kurobasa called, hardly hearing his own voice for the ringing in his ears.

"Now, we shall watch your Fire Dragon rise from the water, free and triumphant! Ah what a glorious sight it will be! ...Any second now."



The scout's exultant smile slowly turned into a frown as he watched the scene. Not only was the Dragon not rising, but the sea was not filling the hole caused by the blast. Rather, the water had begun to spin, the center letting off a hissing steam as the site of the battle boiled.

"Jiroko-san... what is happening?" Had he been less deaf, he might have turned and noticed that the Phoenix shugenja behind him had passed out, her arms clutching her head, and her face a rictus of pain.

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Ikariya came to with a start, his head pounding. He tasted copper, and spit weakly, a dribble of saliva expelling the blood dripping into his mouth from his nose. He struggled to stand, forcing himself to his hands and knees when he failed to do so. Looking about, he saw that all the others had fallen as well, struck unconscious when the explosion had driven a bolt through their brains. The only ones standing were the few hardy enough to merely be retching over the cliff, and some of the fallen were unlikely to rise again. There was someone speaking to him, but the persistent whine that blotted out his hearing concealed who they were and what they wanted.

"The... Mantis..." he croaked weakly. "They... did this... they..."

A hand offered him a cup of water, which he batted aside to fall on the rocks. Feeling some of his strength returning, he licked the lip that had split and bled from the fall, and pressed himself off his hands, eliciting another spike of agony. Looking down, he saw that his hands were scarred, the symbols of the amulet now charred on his flesh where he had been holding it when it exploded. Gaining momentum, he looked up at the blurry figures around him.

"Don't you... understand? They... killed it. They killed it!" He yelled from his raw throat, prayers of flame and death leaping to the forefront of his mind. "They must... die! They must all burn!" His words came forth with wisps of fire, the kami excited around him as they had never been before. The figures around him began to sharpen into armored shapes, and his mind screamed for him to act, to lash out. Fire began to dance around his hands as his ruined throat spat the words to a long-memorized prayer.

There came a thud, and he knew blackness.

Shiba Kakei looked up at the shocked faces of his men, and glanced about, confirming that none of the other shugenja had seen him strike the Isawa. Indeed, they were too preoccupied with their own agony to perceive much at all. He turned a pointed gaze upon his soldiers.

"A shame, that the stress proved too much for Isawa-sama, and he passed out again, ne? We should get him medical attention."

His samurai stared at him for a long second before realization clicked in. They then scattered, calling for ashigaru to bring a litter for the wounded. Kakei sighed, and glanced out at the bay where the boiling maelstrom was forming at the site of the great Dragon's fall.

"Kakei-sama," began the one of his men that had not gone to other duties. A gunso, one of some note, Kakei recalled, though he could not place his name. "All other factors aside, you heard what Isawa-sama said. Should we send scouts to find the survivors?"

"No," Kakei said, drawing his gaze from the whirlpool to face his gunso. "We are done here."

With that, he marched down towards the camp at the base of the hill, not looking back.