

ONE

Shima

It was not much of an island. The beach where we had washed ashore was sharp with coarse shell and rock, an afterthought of the retreating sea. The air was quiet now, though the sky still swarmed with clouds in the aftermath of the typhoon. We were bruised, bleeding, but alive.

"We're lost," Takao said.

My younger brother had suffered scratches to both legs and a gash over his right eye. I'd clumsily bandaged the worst cuts with strips torn from my kimono, but he didn't seem in pain as he shuffled down the beach, poking at things in the shallows with a stick and occasionally glancing up, as if expecting rain out of the clearing sky.

"What shall we do now, Anikya?"

I could think of nothing to say. He paused, his driftwood stick held high, frozen in the motion of spearing downward. My head throbbed, and I gingerly lifted one hand, pressed it to the open spot on my temple under the bindings. It seemed to have stopped bleeding.

"Anikya? Are you listening? What are we going to do?"

I flicked dried blood from my arm. "I don't know."

I waited for Takao to throw one of his tantrums - *Why can't we go home? Why don't you know? Why, why, why?* But he shrugged, hefted his spear, and hobbled off down the beach with his tattered kimono flapping around his knees. I peered out at the sea again, hoping to see a boat. Nothing.

What if Denzaemon's boat had been blown off course too? - then another thought, more terrible - what if my brother's boat had also been wrecked?

What if he were dead?

I remembered Mother on the day they'd told us that Father had been lost at sea - remembered her clutching the doorframe as she'd heard the news. She'd haunted our family shrine for days afterward, offering sacrifice after sacrifice, chanting the *nenbutsu* for hours on end. I remembered she did not cry. I had been only eight years old at the time, Denzaemon thirteen, Natsu our sister and Takao barely weaned.

"What's the matter with Mother?" I'd pestered Denzaemon - but he would brush off the questions with a shake of his head. He began to leave home for days at a time fishing down the coast with the large village nets. It confused me at first when he came home in the evenings smelling strongly of raw fish and rice wine, for my earliest childhood memories were of Father entering the house after a long day of work, smelling of the same.

There was one conversation so dream-like that the next morning I was not sure if I had indeed dreamed it. It had been late spring, the spawning season of the katsuo as swarms of fish migrated northward through the warm current off the Tosa coast. We were all used to Denzaemon working long hours during the katsuo season, used to him falling asleep at supper with the rice bowl in his hands. But that night he had stayed awake to sit with Mother around the fire, their heads bent so close I saw only Denzaemon's jaw silhouetted against the smoky light.

"They've raised the taxes again in Tosa City," said Denzaemon. I lay very still so they would think me asleep. "The famine is spreading south from Kyoto, they say. They want half our catch now for payment. Filthy merchants."

Mother said, very steadily, "Is that so?"

"Perhaps it's time we thought about Takao. There are several families with only daughters. They'd be glad of an adopted heir."

I thought Mother would slap him, but she simply sat up very straight so that the firelight seemed to dye her skin and her faded kimono red as dusk light, and she said, "No, I will not think of it."

"We can't feed five mouths with what I'm making for each catch," Denzaemon said. "It's not possible, Mother. Not with the rice shortage. We'll starve."

"Take Shima with you in the boats, then," she said. "But Takao stays."

I watched my youngest brother trudge away, favoring his bandaged leg, and wondered again if he knew how close he had been to leaving our family for good. In the end, it had not been necessary; Denzaemon's luck had turned for the better when I had grown old enough to join his boat crew. "This is a man's world, Shima," he told me during my first seasick day out on rough water. "You'll grow used to it soon enough."

I did not think to complain. None of us had chosen fishing for our livelihoods, but it had chosen us.

Mother's health was never very good after Father died, and it became my job to keep Takao in line, a task that only became harder as the years passed and he too began to go with

us out to deeper water. He might have listened to Father, I thought in despair when his tantrums got the best of me, but he had never even known Father, while I, at eight, had refused to believe that death could be so final. Even as Mother's offerings slowed and at last ceased, I'd waited every morning for a glimpse of our creaky boat sailing toward the beachhead, my father at the sculling oar.

But the years passed and his boat did not come, and finally even I admitted that the fisherman had battled the sea and lost.

What had we done that was so terrible, that the same ill luck would fall twice on one house? It couldn't be - Denzaemon had gotten to safety, was even now bursting onto the pier and demanding aid. "Just wait an hour or two," I said. "Kannon-sama saved us, so she means us to return home safely. Denzo-nii and the others are coming for us."

"We could build a raft," suggested my brother, and I heaved a sigh, pointing to the treeless landscape of rock and sand.

"Do you see any wood?"

His gaze dropped to the makeshift spear he held in his hand, and then offered it to me with a sly grin. I hobbled forward and slapped him on both cheeks with my good hand. His face burned bright red and he glared up at me. I said, "Be still."

For a boy of twelve, he still cried easily, and I waited for the inevitable burst of tears. But instead he turned and hobbled down the beach again, jabbing his spear into the sand vehemently. I watched as he made a wide, uneven circle around the beach, then looped back to where I stood and leaned on his stick and said, "I'm hungry, Anikya."

"Catch a crab, then."

"They're too quick," he said, dancing on the sand with his toes, flinging bandaged arms into the air. I wondered if he even felt the wounds on his legs. He looked like a feral boy with his black hair caked into stiffened points, dried blood running from the cuts on his forehead. "I would catch them with fingers if I dared."

"You don't dare," I said, looking down at my poor kimono, torn several lengths above its original hem with all the bandages I'd created. "I won't have enough bandage for your fingers, and soon I will be forced to go naked."

He hobbled off, laughing, while I sat and watched the sun sink into the sea. We could only guess at how long the typhoon itself had lasted; time meant nothing to the battering of needle-like rain and jagged waves against our boat. How foolish, to have risked one's life for a few extra fish. The katsuo were still plentiful, and it was mid-season for the spawning aji, but yet all that week, the catches had been unusually small.

There was no question that it was bad luck - the real question was *whose* bad luck. It was unusual for one man's ill luck to spread to the fleet instead of being confined to his boat alone. At night, around our fire, Denzaemon worried out loud. *Seven years ago during the famine, we caught someone sneaking rice from the offering bowl, and we had bad catches for six months. We can't afford a bad catch this summer, not during festival season.*

The night before we had gone out for the last time, the master fisherman issued a storm warning. Denzaemon ignored it. As the sickly, pale sun rose and the wind blew sticky and fitful, we were already offshore with our lines in the water.

"It's still some ways off," said Denzaemon worriedly, though it was obvious that the worry was for our small catch and not for the weather. "We shall have the morning, at least."

"He's mad," said Yojiro, our second cousin and the headsman of my boat. "We're the only boats out on the water, and with good reason!"

I said, "He's just hoping to meet quota. We are already behind-"

"Behind, nothing! We're behind quota, the other fleets are behind, everyone is behind. There's no helping it now. I don't care to try our luck against the gods of the deep for a few more measly fish."

I bristled. "They are not measly-" I began, and then the wind shivered around my ears and nearly blew my hat from my head. I clapped one hand to it as the reed mats in the boat's bottom suddenly took flight, swirling up and out of sight. Clouds flickered over the sun.

"Well, what did I tell you?" said Yojiro, lips pinched with growing displeasure. "If that's not the gods telling us to go ashore, I don't know what is." He hailed Denzaemon's boat, growing increasingly impatient when my brother remained crouching with his back to us. After a few unanswered calls, Yojiro grumbled a little under his breath, sucked the air through his teeth, and gave a piercing whistle.

"Oi, Denzo, are you listening? The storm looks bad! Time to head in!"

"With empty lines?" countered my brother, and Yojiro frowned at him, jabbing his hand out at the spitting whitecaps.

"See how the ocean seethes! You think the fish will bite now? Stubborn man!"

The sea was beginning to roil, waves turning to darker masses of white-tongued foam. A day wasted was a day's worth of wages gone, but with the typhoon on the way, the normal merchants would most likely be held back a day or two.

I said as much to Yojiro and he nodded emphatically.

"It might not be a full storm after all," he said, more cheerfully. "Sometimes they come out of the Ryukyu to the south and disappear. We had many of those last summer, remember?"

We hauled in the longlines. Our catch that morning was our worst in weeks: only a few smaller stragglers and some runt crabs. Takao's scrawny arms worked alongside ours, but by the time we had stored the hooks, the waves were washing over the low gunwale, and green, evil-looking clouds raced over the yellowish sky. Takao stood and shook his fist mockingly at them.

I said, "Sit down, Taka, before you tip over the boat!"

"The crabs will save us," he said, staring fixedly at one of the poor creatures peering from the edge of its basket coffin. But he sat, sliding about in the bottom, and kept an eye on the fish while I gamely wrestled with the sculling oar until Yojiro decided that stronger arms were needed and shoved me to bail duty. Denzaemon, now realizing that we should have heeded Yojiro's advice, called out frantic commands at which Yojiro muttered curses and did not follow in the least.

"What's that?" Takao said suddenly. He tugged at my arm. "Anikya. Anikya, look."

I looked up to the east. Darkness rippled across the sky in towering thunderclouds.

Denzaemon cried: "Hang on to the fish!"

Blackness fell over the ocean. The wind died. The clouds curled up at the edges of the far horizon in a great circle, and we rocked there gently, two boats on an empty sea, the starless sky above us a dome encircled by a glowing ring of flame.

"This storm is quick," I whispered to Takao. The sudden silence, the heavy hush of a forbidden sacred place, pressed on my ears. The only sound was the squeaking of Yojiro's sculling oar, back and forth in its socket, thin and shrill.

"It is Ebisu," Takao declared. "The fishing god is angry. See, these few days he has been laughing quietly at our misfortune, and now he shows himself."

"Don't be ridiculous."

He jumped to his feet, rocking the boat on suddenly glassy waves, his voice shrill in the heavy air. "Ebisu-sama! Ebisu-sama! Spare us!"

Yojiro snapped, "Sit down, Taka!" and then the thick bank of clouds parted and sunlight poured down upon us in terrible shafts of radiance, green and sickly. I fell back against the side of the boat, blinded. Yojiro dropped the oar with a sharp intake of breath. I heard Takao's choked scream, a thump as he fell to his knees, and Yojiro breathed, "Kannon-sama, oh, goddess, be merciful!"

I scrambled to the stern and saw Denzaemon's boat, some distance away, sculling frantically not toward us, but away. The other men in my brother's boat were shouting, jabbing at us with outstretched fingers. Fear bubbled up in my throat. "Anikya!" I cried, pounding at the gunwale. "Anikya! Wait!" I scrabbled backward with my hands, pushing madly at Yojiro's shoulders. "They are leaving us," I cried, "and how do we get to shore? Which way?"

"We have angered the gods," Yojiro muttered. His face was pale against the yellow-black sunlight, the sharp rays throwing the hollows of his cheeks and eyes into jagged relief, a living skull. I wrenched my eyes away.

Takao whimpered, "I do not want to die, Anikya."

"No one is dying," I snapped. But Yojiro had fallen to his knees and was mumbling now the ancient *nenbutsu* for the Buddha's mercy to a dying man: *namu amida butsu, namu amida butsu*. "Yojiro-san," I said, frantically tugging at his arm. "Yojiro-san." The whorl of sunlight and cloud above our heads flickered, flared, vanished. Tendrils of wind snaked past my cheek, and our sculling oar creaked unattended in its socket, buoyed up by the wind that drowned out Yojiro's chanting voice.

"Anikya!" Takao said. "Look!"

I looked up to see again my younger brother wobbling in the bow, pointing to the moving horizon, a vast, misty curtain sweeping toward us, a roiling mass of nothingness over the open sea. I sprang to my feet, nearly tipping the boat, and wrapped my arms around the sculling oar, and shrieked, "Hold fast!"

The first downpour was so heavy I staggered and nearly lost my grip on the oar. I opened my mouth to call out, was gifted with a mouthful of salty rainwater. *Ebisu-sama*, I cried silently, clinging to the oar, wondering for a split second if Takao's observations about the fisherman's god had been more than just a child's whim. The waves cascaded over our bow and stern like waterfalls. Through the gray mist, I saw a faint shadow: Yojiro, pulling himself toward me hand-over-hand on the gunwale, reaching out his hand to the oar.

"Denzaemon?" he demanded hoarsely into my ear. I could barely make out his face. The rain drove like stones into my skin. The inside of my mouth was briny with sea-salt, and I was afraid that if I tried to speak, I would be reduced to swallowing more seawater. Instead, I pointed in the general direction of where I thought I'd last seen my brother and his fleeing crew.

Yojiro swung the oar wide. The craft surged up the crest of an enormous wave, crashing down onto the other side like driftwood. I grabbed an empty bucket, trying best as I could to bail at least some of the water before we were swamped and drowned.

"Denzo!" my cousin shouted. I could barely hear him, and I was standing but a footstep away. "Denzo!" The wind shrieked into my ears, and as I turned my head to lessen the pressure, I saw through my narrowed eyes something incredible: Takao, standing upright in the bow, head back and eyes closed, arms upraised through the downpour, as if calling down the sky upon him.

Are you mad? I thought to cry, but the words stuck in my throat as I knelt, watching my brother's thin arms rising up to meet the storm, and then the wind shifted, and I heard a cry over the water.

"Yojiro, is that you?"

"Denzo!" cried Yojiro, and Takao lost his balance and crashed backward.

I peered through stinging curtains of rain. A shadow of a bow, the long dark shape of a sculling oar – Denzaemon's boat appeared out of the spray so suddenly that she almost rammed head-on into our side. Yojiro shouted hoarsely and wrenched the oar back over the stern to starboard. I saw my older brother's frightened eyes, white-rimmed, and then the boats met with a resounding crack, Denzaemon's burrowing at a narrow angle into our starboard bow.

Takao's head smashed into my hip. I cried out, falling forward and reaching out for Yojiro. The boats tottered on the cusp of another great wave, and then there was a blinding roar of water over my head, across my eyes, and when I looked up, Yojiro was gone.

Father's face flashed before my eyes. *I most humbly beg your forgiveness for being the bearer of this sad news*, I heard the village headsman say. Mother's hand on the doorframe was white, fingers like spider webs across the weathered wood.

"Shima!"

I raised my aching head. From Denzaemon's boat, tossing over the waves away from us now, several pairs of strong hands pulled a struggling form aboard. Yojiro. Takao waved wildly. "Take us too! Anikya! Come back! Take us too!"

"Stay in the boat, Shima!" my older brother ordered, and I could see his mouth moving but the words came back only in echoes. The sea roared and split between us. "Whatever you do, don't leave the boat!"

The waves parted, a towering waterfall of ocean cracking our sculling oar in two and flinging the chips into the sea, and my brother's boat vanished.

Stay in the boat, Shima!

Takao was crying. I grabbed a handful of his kimono and hauled him close. He struggled. "They cannot leave us!" he screamed. "They cannot!" I let him flail himself out as the sea buffeted us up and down and sideways and when at last his arms dropped to the bottom of the water-logged boat in exhaustion, I said into his ear, "Taka, will you behave!"

"I don't want to die," he said. His voice cracked. I sloshed my way to the stern to grab one of the remaining longlines, tied it clumsily to the steering oar post and flung the other end over in his direction. He caught it and wrapped it round his waist with trembling hands, and added, "I do not want to die like Father."

I thought of my childhood self shivering on the beach, waiting for the sunrise and knowing that this was the day I would see Father in his battered boat floating in with the morning tide. "Father has been reborn to the Amida's Pure Land," I said, "where there is no death or dying or storms or sickness."

Takao did not answer; he had closed his eyes, clutching the line with white fingers. The lukewarm rain battered us in sideways gusts. I crouched and covered my brother's body with my own, and wondered if it was too late to pray for salvation, if Ebisu, who had watched over other fishermen so many times before in the legends, was even listening.

"*Namu amida butsu,*" I whispered through chattering teeth, fumbling for the bits of abalone strung around my neck, makeshift prayer beads. Everything was black and gray and pale white. Whitecaps reared like water-ghosts, reaching up clawed fingers frozen in sea salt. Bailing was useless. The waves were as high as trees.

I might have slept; there were times when the chill might have eased a little. I started to my knees several times to find the boat half-full of water and Takao using his hands to bail it over the gunwale. Our bucket had washed overboard, as had most of our nets and equipment

and the small catch we had taken before the storm hit. Of the sculling oar, nothing remained. Even if the storm were to cease and the sun to part the clouds, we would drift, helpless.

Cold rain trickled down my neck and back. Silver-gold fish swam before my eyes, scales jingling like the bells on the ends of pilgrims' staffs. I heard laughter, the sound of rippling water, a voice.

"Anikya."

Ebisu-sama? I tried to say, but there was no sound.

"Anikya." Takao, shaking my shoulder. "Anikya, wake up."

The rain had stopped, the world around us a thin, gray mist. "What?" I mumbled irritably, starting out of my doze and glancing groggily aft; perhaps it had been a bad dream and we would be able to make some sort of headway to land. But the oar was still gone; the ocean churned over the sides of the boat. Takao looked very pale.

"Rocks," he said, and pointed.

In one terrified glance I made out the jagged black rocks looming out of the mist, heard booming surf cascading onto solid ground. I cried out, grabbed Takao, and pushed both of us overboard. The water, to my great surprise, was warm. My brother kicked wildly and beat his fists into my face.

"Stop it!" I shrieked at him. "Stop!"

I grasped at any recollection of what Denzaemon had taught me about sea-swimming. The boat flew up onto the rocks and splintered like kindling. "Feet forward!" I bellowed, and pointed the soles of our feet as best as I could towards the rocks as the tide carried us in. Takao wriggled. I wound my arms tightly around his belly, and then we slammed into the rocks at bruising speed.

Pain lanced through my legs, my toes, scraping upward along my thighs and back. Takao was torn from my arms. I gasped for air, pushed myself up and heaved up my empty stomach on the sand, and then my legs would not hold any longer.

The sky drifted before my eyes like fog. I thought I heard music, the beating of drums and the chanting of priests, temple bells, my mother's muttered prayers over the graves of our ancestors, the creaking of a sculling oar. *Stay in the boat, Shima!*

I did not stay in the boat, I thought in despair. I am sorry, Ebisu-sama. I have nothing to offer you now. Please hear my prayers.

A small hand tugged at my shoulder. I groaned.

"I am cold, Anikya," whispered Takao. I closed my eyes.

"I know, Taka," I mumbled. "I know."

I forced myself onto my elbows. Through the mist, there was an outline of a craggy outcropping, some larger rocks looming indistinctly behind. We limped for it, collapsing in the narrow hollows and huddling there as the surf ran in giant swells of black water up and down the beach. Takao was still crying, but there was nothing to do but bandage him as well as I could and wait out the rain.

As the day drew on, the mists gradually lifted, the sky cleared, the clouds rolled away. We saw the cool light of evening and a glimmer of red sun on the edges of the waves, and I limped down to the beach on my torn feet.

The ring of black rocks loomed into the red sunset. I did not see any sign of our boat.

I thought again of Father. Maybe even now, he was making his way home, protected by Kannon-sama's guiding hand. I should make a sacrifice to the gods for sparing us our lives. But all our fish had been lost, and around us there were nothing but rocks.

"I am hungry," Takao said again from behind me, tapping his stick impatiently. "When are Denzo-nii and Yojiro-san coming to take us home?"

I turned from the red horizon, the calming waves, from my thoughts of fate and luck and the whims of gods, and wondered where we were.

"Soon," I said. "We cannot be far from the coast. Any moment now, we'll see their boats heading in for us."