

MOON SAGA

Secrets of Yoshitsune

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Prologue

Clouds, like silk floss soaked in watery ink, slowly drifted to conceal the full moon.

Sitting on the stairs that led to the main hall of the temple and looking up at the night sky, the man watched the moon sadly as it was swallowed by darkness, but then sighed, his breath white in the cold, and slowly closed his eyes.

The moonlight that had lit the temple grounds vanished, and the man's figure was hidden in shadow. But even his silhouette made the muscular shape of his body clear.

The man's name was Minamoto no Yoshinaka.

He had been raised in the Kiso valley of Shinano Province¹, and was also known as Kiso no Yoshinaka.

In the year 1180, the fourth year of the Jishō era, around one month after Minamoto no Yoritomo had raised an army for his "Defeat of the Heike", he had raised his own army so as not to lag behind Yoritomo. At that time, he was twenty-seven years old.

Though he was somewhat rough mannered from his upbringing in the mountain villages of Kiso, Yoshinaka was a great man, and during his advance along the Hokuriku route from Echigo, he had challenged one hundred thousand Hokuriku and Heike troops with a force of fifty thousand and taken victory in the Battle of Kurikara. This occurred in May 1183, the second year of the Juei era.

After that, he pursued the Heike, who were in control of the capital, Kyoto, further west, and in July of that year, his army entered the capital before even that of

1 Now Nagano Prefecture.

Yoritomo, the leader of the main branch of the Genji clan.

But now, Yoshinaka sat alone under the cold winter skies, in the grounds of a decaying temple in Awatsu, Ōmi Province¹.

It was January, 1184, the third year of the Juei era, a mere six months after he had entered Kyoto.

Snow. In the pitch darkness, flakes of white began to flutter down from the sky. The snowflakes wandered in the breeze, before slowly falling to the ground and melting away.

Not a sound was to be heard.

Yoshinaka merely watched the snowflakes on the ground as they vanished. Though the clouds hid the moon, the area was faintly lit. It was a strange night.

1 Now Ōtsu, Shiga Prefecture.

"Though we were not born on the same day, at the same time," Yoshinaka whispered suddenly.

"We pledge an oath of brotherhood to help each other in times of need, to avenge the nation from above and pacify the citizens from below, and rescue those who are suffering... Though we cannot wish to have been born on the same day, of the same month, of the same year-"

In the overwhelming silence, Yoshinaka's voice faded like the snow.

"-we wish to die on the same day, of the same month, of the same year."¹

These were the words he had exchanged in Kamakura with his friends, just before he departed on Yoritomo's orders to defeat the Heike around Hokuriku.

Come to think of it, it was a full moon just like tonight...

Yoshinaka realized suddenly, as his thoughts lingered on it.

1 This is a version of the "Oath of the Peach Garden" from the 14th century Chinese novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.

But now, it was impossible for that wish to come true.

Tomoe, who accompanied me since Shinano and fought by my side, is no longer in the world of the living.

Every single person around me has gone.

When I think about it, my armor, which usually doesn't bother me at all, feels so heavy.

My life has been spent in battle with armor on my body and a sword in my hand- now that I think about it, that short time I spent in Kamakura may have been the one and only time in my life that I was able to spend peacefully...

The face of a man, smiling at him like a boy without a care in the world, welled up in Yoshinaka's mind.

Yoshinaka's lips reflexively curled into a smile.

Suddenly, there was a gust of wind, kicking up snow in every direction. When Yoshinaka looked up, there was the face of the man he had just been thinking of.

Am I hallucinating?

He pondered for a moment, but the man was not smiling. His eyes were shining with a complicated light, a mixture of fury and inexpressible sadness. His features were handsome, but the gleam in his eyes did not suit the youthfulness remaining in them.

"Well. Long time no see, Yoshitsune,"

Yoshinaka said to the man standing before him.

Minamoto no Yoshitsune.

Their fathers were brothers, and therefore Yoshitsune was Yoshinaka's cousin. Yoritomo was Yoshitsune's older half-brother. Yoshinaka already knew that Yoritomo had given the order to Yoshitsune to "Defeat Yoshinaka".

This day was bound to arrive. No matter how much he wished otherwise.

Ever since he had met Yoshitsune in Kamakura, the thought had dwelt in his mind.

Yoshinaka's father, Minamoto no Yoshikata, had lost a territorial struggle within the Genji clan, and been killed by Yoritomo and Yoshitsune's half brother, Minamoto no Yoshihira. Yoshihira himself had been executed after his defeat by the army of Taira no Kiyomori during the Heiji Rebellion.

Yoshinaka understood well that Yoritomo had taken a dim view of him since. It was also probable that Yoshinaka's acceptance of his uncle, Yukiie, who had fled to him after refusing to be subordinate to Yoritomo, had further displeased Yoritomo.

Even among those who shared Genji blood, those who interfered with the ambitions of others would be targeted without hesitation. Father against son, brother against brother.

That was the way of the world, and the art of surviving as a warrior.

Therefore, to express that he held no enmity toward Yoritomo, Yoshinaka had gone to Kamakura to request an audience with him. And it was there that he had met Yoshitsune.

Among the probing intentions of those fascinated by power, who lived under the words "master and servant", only Yoshitsune stood apart. He held respect for of course his brother Yoritomo, but also his vassals Musashibō Benkei, Ise Saburō, and the Satō brothers, Tsugunobu and Tadanobu, and opened his heart earnestly to them. Even when one of his vassals made a sharp-tongued comment, he would shrug it off with a smile and, "Ahaha! Is that so?" treating them as friends and equals. Furthermore, quite apart from the dauntless ones who spoke fiercely of "overthrowing the Heike", he seemed to have little interest even in the revival of the Genji clan. On the contrary, he disliked it when blood was spilled in battle.

Though Yoshinaka was not from the main Genji bloodline, and was sneered at by Yoritomo's vassals as

"the wild monkey from the provinces who doesn't even know the proper way to ride in an ox-cart", Yoshitsune greeted him with an artless smile. As they shared sake and tales of the mountain villages they had been raised in, they developed an immediate rapport, and soon were rarely apart. And when they were together, they were sure to be accompanied by Benkei, Saburō, the Satō brothers, and Yoshinaka's consort, the beautiful female warrior Tomoe Gozen.

Yoshinaka's year and a half stay in Kamakura was spent living among these friends. And those memories had become something that filled his heart with warmth, and were difficult to forget.

Though we cannot wish to be born on the same day, of the same month, of the same year, we wish to die on the same day, of the same month, of the same year.

This was the future that Yoshinaka had wished for with Yoshitsune and the others before he departed to defeat the Heike.

However, their reunion was not to be on the battlefield fighting together against the Heike, but as a rebel and the general ordered to defeat him. It was a cruel thing.

Their wish "to die on the same day" would not be granted.

The only thing that would be granted to them was that one of them would die this day.

"Yoshinaka!...What on earth are you doing?"

Yoshitsune shouted the name of the man he had once adored as though he were forcing it out of himself.

Yoshinaka responded with a question of his own.

"How did you know I was here?"

"...Kage told me."

"I see. And yet it seems Kage has not followed you here... Does that mean he dropped dead along with En?"

"..."

Yoshitsune was biting his lip hard, with a pained expression. Because of his honest personality, he could not lie. Even with the enemy to be defeated in front of his eyes, he had no concept of feeling out his opponent in order to give himself an advantage. That was one of the things that had drawn Yoshinaka to him.

"It's a shame to have lost En, but I'm glad that he took down my most dangerous opponent. Now, all that is left is for you and I to fight... Yoshitsune."

"Why!? We're friends, aren't we? Why did you rebel against my brother? The rumors in the capital are terrible! They say that your army are forcing their way into houses and looting food, clothes and everything in sight-"

Yoshinaka interrupted his words.

"And all of that is because that beloved brother of yours refused to send us provisions! While he was ordering us to defeat the Heike in the Hokuriku area, the harshest of all, he refused me any reinforcements and sent no provisions. Can you imagine the impoverished state of my army when we entered Kyoto? How many of my troops died regrettable deaths, fighting while suffering from starvation, without even the strength to swing their swords!"

"That...had to be... some kind of mistake..."

"A mistake!? No matter how many messengers I sent to Kamakura, I was always told to 'hold out for a little longer'! And at Mizushima, he pretended that he would provide back up, and then betrayed us! Thanks to that..."

Yoshinaka fixed Yoshitsune with a glare like a demon.

"Tomoe was killed."

Yoshitsune's face contorted in pain. It was as if a spear had been thrust into his heart.

"Our army was used as a decoy to lure the Heike, and with no reinforcements, we were pushed back. She... Tomoe took on countless soldiers in an effort to hold them back, so that I could lead the retreat."

In November 1183, the second year of the Juei era, the Heike clan, forced to leave the capital by the fierce attack of Yoshinaka's army, crossed over to Shikoku by boat and set up camp on Yashima Island in Sanuki Province¹.

Ordered to defeat the Heike by the cloistered emperor Go-Shirakawa, Yoshinaka attempted to attack the island of Yashima from Mizushima in Bitchu Province², however, believing that a naval battle would be disadvantageous due to his inexperience with naval warfare, it was decided that the strategy would be to lure the opponent onto land. A small number of Yoshinaka's soldiers would act as a decoy, and pretend that they

1 Now part of Takamatsu City in Kagawa Prefecture.

2 Now Kurashiki City in Okayama Prefecture.

were losing and on the retreat, so that they would be pursued. Then, hidden reinforcements from Kamakura would appear from every direction and surround the enemy.

However, when the battle began, there was no sign of the reinforcements at the promised time. Even though Yoshinaka and his troops were cornered, the army from Kamakura were held back. By the time Yoshinaka realized that he had been tricked, his army had been shattered. His fleeing horsemen were picked off one by one, and scattered in all directions. No matter how many of the enemy he cut down, they continued to press in on him, one after another, and arrows whistled past his ears. Just as Yoshinaka thought it was the end for him, Tomoe Gozen leapt to his side.

"My lord! I will hold them. Please, my lord, you must escape!"

"What are you saying, Tomoe? How can I leave you behind? Don't stop your horse, charge right through!"

Before Yoshinaka could stop her, Tomoe had swung her horse around and charged him forward, plunging into a regiment of thirty or more cavalry.

"Come, if you dare challenge me! I, Tomoe, vassal of Yoshinaka, shall be your opponent!"

"Tomoe! Stop it, TOMOE-!"

Yoshinaka shouted, and tried to turn back, but once again he was surrounded by the enemy. Tomoe was pulling the soldiers who approached her from their horses one after another, and cutting them down while firmly in her own saddle, but she was struck by an arrow that seemed to come from nowhere, and finally fell from her horse.

"Tomoe!"

Fallen to the ground, Tomoe was immediately surrounded by soldiers holding naginata.¹

"NO-!"

1 A Japanese weapon with a curved, single edged blade on the end of a long pole.

Yoshinaka shouted, though he knew it would not be heard. He watched as Tomoe, still dauntlessly fighting back with her sword, slowly collapsed to the ground.

At the very least, I want to die with the image of my lord in my eyes...

Her consciousness fading, Tomoe cast her gaze around weakly, but she was surrounded by enemy soldiers and couldn't see him.

Escape to somewhere. And live-

"My...lord..."

Tomoe called to her love with everything she had.

But the sound of her voice was swept away by Yoshinaka's howl of grief that shook the very sky itself.

When Yoshinaka returned to Kyoto in despair, what awaited him was an even crueler reality.

From the beginning, Yoritomo had been planning to send an envoy to the cloistered emperor Go-Shirakawa, insinuating that the Heike's flight from Kyoto was due to their fear of Yoritomo's power, and the way Yoshinaka conducted himself as if he had achieved greatness on the battlefield was sheer audacity. Yoritomo was the true heir of the main Genji bloodline. The cloistered emperor was completely biased towards Yoritomo, and he sent a messenger to Yoshinaka to reproach him for his army's looting and misconduct in the capital.

Yoshinaka understood everything.

Yoritomo was afraid that Yoshinaka would accumulate military accomplishments and become even more powerful.

“The Genji clan does not need two leaders.”

That was what Yoritomo was thinking. Yoshinaka's fury and resentment of Yoritomo reached its peak.

“Yoritomo, you bastard! We risked our lives fighting to defeat the enemies of the imperial court, and now you frame us as the enemy! Unforgivable!... I won't allow this!”

His enemy was no longer the Heike, but Yoritomo himself.

And if the cloistered emperor was going to join hands with Yoritomo, then it would be the same. Yoshinaka could not allow it.

He would raise an army, capture Go-Shirakawa and imprison him, and burn the imperial palace to the ground. From then on, Yoshinaka himself became an “enemy of the imperial court”.

When Yoritomo received news of this, he immediately sent an army from Kamakura to Kyoto to hunt down Yoshinaka and kill him. Yoshitsune was made the general of this army for the cruel reason that he was the person closest to Yoshinaka.

The army led by Yoshitsune arrived at the Uji River in January 1184, the third year of the Juei era. They defeated Yoshinaka's army on its banks, but Yoshinaka was not among them. From there, they entered the capital, and headed to the emperor to rescue him, but strangely, the soldiers of Yoshinaka who were guarding the emperor yielded with little resistance. When they questioned a captured soldier, he said that these were Yoshinaka's orders.

“Now that we have become enemies of the imperial court, there is no one and nothing who will support us but our own sense of justice. But do not throw your lives away in vain. When the army from Kamakura comes again, you should yield to them. Live, for the sake of your many comrades who perished in battle. Live, and tell the world about our righteousness!”

After telling his soldiers this, Yoshinaka had vanished.

He had slipped away from Kyoto and headed for Ōmi Province. And now, he was facing down Yoshitsune at the decaying temple.

So it is unavoidable. Perhaps this is what they call fate.

He whispered in his heart.

“By the way, Yoshitsune... You were in love with Tomoe, weren’t you?”

Yoshinaka asked, his demonic expression changing to a softly mocking one.

The snowstorm had ebbed, and now glittering snowflakes danced in the breeze. In the sky, the beautiful full moon showed herself once more. In the moonlight, it was clear that Yoshitsune’s face had turned completely red, and before he could help himself, Yoshinaka blurted out,

“You really are an open book. Well, it wasn’t just me, I think Saburō and the others noticed too... Tomoe was such a wonderful woman that even I fell in love with her. It’s no wonder that you were attracted to her.”

“You- You idiot! Now is no time to be talking about things like that! I’ve been ordered to kill you!”

Yoshitsune’s response was vehement. Yoshinaka was unperturbed. Just like the time they had spent together in Kamakura, he was smiling, enjoying Yoshitsune’s reactions.

“I know that. That’s why he sent you. The one I’d most hate to fight. Hmph, it’s just like Yoritomo to do that...”

“It’s true that Yoritomo has ordered me to kill you. But that isn’t my aim. Yoshinaka, I have no intention of killing you... I beg you, come with me to Kamakura without putting up resistance. I’ll talk to my brother. I promise to protect your life.”

“Yoshitsune, this is why you are naive. Do you really think he will agree to that? Yoritomo has the soul of a schemer. You’re safe as long as he can use you as a chess piece, but if your power grows enough to pose a threat to him, he’ll dispose of you just like that. Even if you have no intention of betraying him. That’s the kind of man he is!”

“No! My brother has just misunderstood you, that’s all! So I’ll explain the situation to him, you’ll see!”

Yoshinaka sighed heavily.

“...Honestly. I’m dumbfounded by how stupidly trusting you are. Whatever you do, watch that you don’t make the same mistake that I did. And, I’ll agree to go to Kamakura.”

“R-Really?”

The smile of relief that appeared on Yoshitsune’s face was instantly wiped away by Yoshinaka’s following words.

“But only one of us will walk that road. You, or I. I’ll go to Kamakura and take Yoritomo’s head. Tomoe, and the rest of the soldiers who trusted me were not killed by the Heike. They were killed by Yoritomo!”

“This isn’t what Tomoe would want at all!”

“What Tomoe wants or doesn’t want has ceased to matter. This is my vengeance. There is no turning back.

I made a blood pact with a Mononoke. That I would allow him to consume my life once I had killed Yoritomo... I summoned En. The one who killed the Mononoke haunting you, Kage, was him. Do you understand now? This is the cursed blood of the Genji, our fate as 'Mononofu'... But, enough talk. I don't want Saburō, Benkei and the others to catch up to us. Draw your blade, Yoshitsune!"

Yoshinaka stood slowly, his great sword held effortlessly in his hand. He began to walk towards Yoshitsune.

"I am serious. Any hesitancy in my soul was eaten by En. All that's left is hatred for Yoritomo..."

"No. I won't fight you."

Yoshitsune stared straight at Yoshinaka, not making a move. When Yoshinaka came within two meters of Yoshitsune, he attacked with a sudden movement. Yoshitsune twisted and avoided the blade, but the next attack came swiftly after.

"Gah..."

“If you don’t want to die like a dog, then draw your blade!”

Yoshitsune quickly leapt at Yoshinaka and grabbed at his sword arm. The next instant, Yoshinaka landed a sharp kick to his abdomen, sending him flying backwards. Before he had time to regain his balance, he looked up to see Yoshinaka with his sword raised above his head. Yoshitsune immediately drew the dagger strapped to his lower leg, and stopped the blade just in time. Both of their arms trembled slightly as they pushed against each other.

“Come on and awaken, Yoshitsune. Let’s see that ‘power’ of yours!”

“...!”

The moment Yoshitsune flinched, Yoshinaka pulled his sword back and attacked again. Yoshitsune fell as he tried to dodge to the side, then slowly rose from his knees. Blood poured from his left arm and dripped from his fingertips.

“Yoshinaka... You-!”

“I told you, I am serious. The next blow will be the last... If you don’t use your power, then you are certain to die.”

Yoshinaka steadied his breath, and closed in, raising his sword again.

The sharp sound of the blades clashing echoed across the winter sky. Stubbornly fighting a defensive battle, Yoshitsune was gradually pushed into a corner. And at last, Yoshinaka’s sword caught him, and began to tear through his flesh. But, in that instant, Yoshinaka’s body was thrown forward several meters, and slammed into the ground.

“Aghh...?”

Not understanding what had happened, Yoshinaka desperately tried to stand, groaning from the fierce pain that shot through his entire body.

“Wh...What...?”

In the moonlight, Yoshitsune's face was as pale as snow, and he watched Yoshinaka with a faint smile. His eyes had a strange, red gleam, and there was madness in his gaze.

WHO HAS AWAKENED ME FROM MY LONG SLEEP... YOU?

It was an unearthly voice that made every hair on Yoshinaka's body stand on end.

"...Who the hell are you?"

A DEMON.

THE DEMON THAT DWELLS WITHIN THIS MORTAL...

"A demon... you say?"

Yoshinaka opened his eyes and stared at Yoshitsune. There was something unidentifiable and otherworldly emanating from his body. The space around where he stood appeared distorted, like a mirage.

Somehow it seems I have awakened something beyond belief. Yoshinaka realized. An irresistible excitement began to course through his veins.

“Ha... Hahahaha! So, I, the man who was once known as ‘The Demon Yoshinaka’, am to meet a real demon in the end. Not bad. Not bad at all. Now, will I consume the demon, or will it consume me?”

He said, and slowly stood, using his sword for support. The demon stood perfectly still, watching Yoshinaka with eyes like a snake fixed on its prey.

I CAN SEE YOUR SWORD AS IF IT WERE NOT MOVING AT ALL.

NOW THEN, HOW SHALL I KILL YOU?

OR WILL YOU RUN AWAY WITH YOUR TAIL BETWEEN YOUR LEGS?

“I will not run. This is the path I have chosen... I am grateful to you, monster. Yoshitsune would not have been able to kill me. And I’d find it hard to sleep at night if I killed someone like him. You, on the other hand, are the perfect opponent for me.”

Yoshinaka said to the demon, gritting his teeth against the grinding pain. It seemed like his ribs were broken.

He knew that he only had the strength remaining for one last attack.

“...Now.”

Yoshinaka's lips curled into a slight smile.

He took a breath, and swiftly stepped forward, swinging his sword up with all his strength.

His sword, which should have caught the demon's flesh, instead cut through empty air.

The next instant, a great shock ran through Yoshinaka's body once again.

The world slowly turned upside down. For a moment, his open eyes took in the clear winter sky, but at last, a deep and final darkness slowly overtook his field of vision.

Tomoe, wait for me.

Yoshitsune...

I'm thankful that I met you.

Alone, the full moon sorrowfully bore witness to the scene.

Part One

A Hostile Encounter

1

Since long ago, the Mononoke have existed in this world.

Some of them took forms that were indistinguishable from humans, while others took the form of beasts, and some even took forms that were not visible to human eyes.

The Mononoke, who had supernatural powers that humanity lacked, were feared as a cause of calamities and disasters, held in awe, and eventually came to be worshiped as the incarnations of gods.

In this way, Mononoke and humans coexisted for a long time, and eventually a new existence, neither Mononoke nor human, was born into the world.

Ones who mixed with the Mononoke, and inherited their blood and supernatural powers.

They became known as “Mononofu”, meaning “Those who are not human”.

The Mononofu’s supernatural powers were as numerous as the Mononofu themselves.

There were those with the strength to shatter boulders, and those with the power to heal wounds with a touch.

There were those who could see the future, and those who could read minds.

There were those who could manipulate fire or water as they pleased, and those who could float in midair.

The Mononofu increased in number, and began to rule over humans with their unique powers.

In time, they expanded their influence over the entirety of Japan, and a certain clan flourished as a house of warriors serving the emperor, while others became powerful clans who spread their roots over a vast area.

Time flows on, and it is now the late Heian era.

Two Mononofu clans carry the blood of the royal family- the Heike and the Genji.

They boasted vast power as warrior clans, and their influence eventually extended to even the imperial court.

The inflated power of each house turned to an ambition, “We will be the ones to rule the world,” and developed into conflict between the Mononofu themselves.

In 1156, the first year of the Hōgen era, occurred the Hōgen Rebellion, a struggle between the Heike and the Genji in which alliances were formed and broken. The following Heiji Rebellion in 1159, the first year of the Heiji Era, developed out of the power struggle between Taira no Kiyomori and Minamoto no Yoshitomo, and ended with Kiyomori’s victory and the death of Yoshitomo. After this battle, the Genji lost power, and the Heike’s golden age of glory in Kyoto arrived.

Yoshitomo’s son, Yoritomo, who was fourteen years of age at the time, was meant to be put to death, however, thanks to the pleas of Kiyomori’s stepmother, Ike no

Zenni, he was spared beheading and exiled to Izu Province.

Roughly two decades later, in August 1180, the fourth year of the Jishō era, with the backing of the Hōjō family who held power in Izu Province, Yoritomo finally raised an army to defeat the Heike.

Kiyomori was incensed at this treason by the man he had taken pity on, but the next year, in March 1181, the fifth year of the Jishō era, he was struck by fever and departed the world full of rage.

His dying command was, “Place the head of Yoritomo on my grave as an offering.”

The Heike and the Genji.

In this way, the struggle between the Mononofu was swallowed up by an even fiercer current.

Yoshitsune's manor in Kyoto, two months after his defeat of Yoshinaka.

"Ahh, I'm so bored!"

Musashibō Benkei, who had been sitting cross-legged in the hallway staring out at the garden, announced. He kicked his legs out and flopped backwards forcefully. His head slammed into the floorboards with a loud clunk, but he didn't appear to care at all. Although he was not particularly tall, his muscular arms and legs were the definition of solid, and he had a wide neck like a tree trunk. His skin was tanned and his large, bulging eyes and thick eyebrows occupied the greater part of his

round face. He looked entirely like a *daruma*¹ rocking back and forward on the floor.

“I’m bored to death. The army from Kamakura has gone off to hunt down the Heike, so why is it just us stuck here patrolling Kyoto?” Benkei complained, snorting like a bull.

“There aren’t even any geisha! All I have to feast my eyes on every day are your ugly mugs!”

In the next room, Ise Saburō was inspecting the wounds of a soldier who had been injured in battle. Hearing Benkei’s words, he glanced into the hallway, but then returned his gaze to the soldier’s arm. Benkei’s grumbling continued.

“... Ever since the thing happened with Yoshinaka, Yoshitsune’s like a different person. Guess he can’t control his awakening... Well, nothing he can do about his hair growing out like that. But he’s even lost his feelings somewhere... It’s like looking at a damned Noh

1 A kind of traditional Japanese doll used as a good luck charm, generally round, red and with the face of a bearded man with large eyes and a fierce expression. Many are rounded and weighted at the bottom and right themselves when pushed over, like a roly-poly toy.

mask. He wanders off every damn day and doesn't come back until nightfall, and who knows where the hell he is or what the hell he's doing... Well, we can handle hunting down the last of the Heike in the capital by ourselves, but even those are mostly gone now. In the end, our patrols are just going around saying 'Hi' to the *Kugyō*¹ while they're shaking in their boots, right? Argh, I'm so damn bored, bored, bored-

"Shut it, Benkei. I can't concentrate on my hand, so pipe down!"

Interrupted by Saburō's scolding, Benkei grudgingly fell silent. Laying on the floor, he rolled to one side to watch Saburō. However, Saburō's healing powers were a sight he was used to, and it held no great fascination for him now.

Saburō raised his right hand above his head, and staring into his own palm, he concentrated his awareness there. He gave a small grunt of exertion. In the air around his hand, what appeared to be droplets of light began to shine. The beads of light gradually came together, and the ball of light in Saburō's hand grew. When the light

1 A small and exclusive group of noblemen attached to the Imperial Court during the Heian era.

filled his palm, he slowly lowered it onto the soldier's body. The soldier was so amazed that he forgot to blink, and stared with his mouth hanging open. Then, the ball of light vanished, as if it had been sucked into the wounded arm.

“Whew... How does it feel? Can you move it now?” Saburō asked the soldier. The soldier moved his arm fearfully.

“Aaaah! It moves, I can move it! The pain is completely gone!” he said, cheerfully swinging his arm around.

“Hahaha. I'm glad. You're okay now, so you can go home.”

“Thank you, Saburō-sama! Thank you!” The soldier bowed his head repeatedly, and continued to bow even after standing up.

“That's enough. We are the ones who should be grateful that all of you fought together in that battle with us,” said Saburō with a wry smile.

Saburō was not as handsome as Yoshitsune, but his face radiated sincerity. Benkei often made fun of him, saying, “I feel like I run into you every three steps, that's

how common your face is,” but that aura of immediate familiarity itself was part of Saburō's charm.

Just at that moment, as if they were trading places with the soldier leaving the room, the Satō brothers Tsugunobu and Tadanobu returned. They resembled each other in height and build, but at a glance, Tsugunobu, the elder of the two, looked younger. Apparently bothered by this, he had once attempted to grow a beard, but it had suited him horribly and the others had forced him to abandon the effort.

The soldier bowed deeply towards the brothers.

“Tsugunobu-sama, Tadanobu-sama, thank you for your hard work patrolling the city.”

Benkei called out, “Hey, it’s the peas in a pod!” but both ignored him and began to speak with the soldier.

“Oh, I remember you!”

“You got Saburō to heal you, right? How is it?”

“I’m fine, thanks to all of you! I’m ready to go into battle at any time.”

The soldier flapped his arm around to demonstrate, said his goodbyes, and headed home.

“How was the patrol?” Saburō asked the Satō brothers.

“There don’t seem to be any significant problems. Most of the remaining Heike in the capital have been swept out, and things are gradually calming down. But I heard a rumor that a few Heike from the encampment at Yashima have secretly entered the capital, and are putting feelers out.”

“The Heike are?”

Saburō’s expression became stern. Benkei had also sat down beside him, and was listening with a wise expression, but then groaned,

“We don’t know the people of Kyoto well. It would be easier if they were wearing armor and carrying Heike flags, but if they slip in dressed as courtiers, then even the noblemen here in the capital wouldn’t be able to identify them as Heike.”

“Even if it is only a rumor, we’d better take care with our patrols... Let’s discuss this again when Yoshitsune returns.”

The other three nodded at Saburō’s words, but Benkei then continued, “That’s all well and good... but that

Yoshitsune bastard, do you really think he's alright? He's drifting like a kite that's had its string cut. If this keeps on, Lord Yoritomo is eventually going to hear about it."

"...It can't be helped. Traitor or not, he killed an irreplaceable friend with his own hands. I don't think we've fully accepted it either. To think that Yoshinaka and Tomoe are no longer in this world... How did it end up like this...?"

Saburō asked with a pained expression, but no one could answer.

In the silence, memories welled up of that terrible night under the full moon.

What Saburō and the others had seen when they caught up to Yoshitsune, had been the sight of Yoshitsune sobbing and cradling Yoshinaka's blood-soaked body.

When Yoshitsune noticed the others staring in horror, he began to cry out in a panic, "Saburō! Quick! Hurry up and stop the bleeding! The blood won't stop... Hey, Yoshinaka, it's okay now! Saburō's here! He'll heal you right away..."

He was desperately calling to Yoshinaka, but Yoshinaka's eyes were closed, and he was motionless. Around him, Yoshitsune's arms were drenched in blood.

"Come on, Yoshinaka! Open your eyes... Please... Saburō, what are you doing!? Get over here and heal him!"

"Yoshitsune..."

Saburō couldn't find the words to say to him. He couldn't comprehend what was happening in front of his eyes. They had come to Kyoto with orders to take down Yoshinaka, but he somehow felt that there had to be a mistake. Now, he was forcibly confronted with it like this, his thoughts couldn't keep up with reality.

What had happened? Had Yoshitsune killed him? Really?

The other three were the same. They stared, lost for words. Only Yoshitsune's cries echoed in the darkness.

"Yoshitsune..."

Saburō called again in a hoarse voice. If he let his guard down for even a moment, he would have broken down sobbing like Yoshitsune. He gritted his teeth.

"Yoshinaka is already... dead..."

Forcing just those few words out, he hung his head.

Standing next to him, Benkei was clenching his fists so hard his nails were biting into his palms, and he was visibly shaking.

“YOSHINAKA-!”

As Yoshitsune screamed, Saburō closed his eyes. He couldn’t stand to watch the tragic sight any more.

Snapping back to reality, Saburō realized that he had been reflexively shutting his eyes just like he had at the time. When he looked up, Benkei and the Satō brothers were all wearing solemn expressions. They must have been remembering the same thing.

“...I guess the one who killed Yoshinaka must have been Yoshitsune?”

Tadanobu whispered, and his older brother Tsugunobu answered,

“You saw it too, with your own eyes... Yoshitsune’s daggers were covered in blood. And there aren’t many Mononofu who could take down Yoshinaka.”

“But the old Yoshitsune could never have fought against Yoshinaka, right? Even Tomoe could have beaten him in a fight... I wonder if that was the real power that Yoshitsune has? Wasn't his power sealed by Benkei? I wonder if it finally awakened?”

Tadanobu spoke as if he were letting out all the questions he had been holding back in one breath. Saburō and the brother's gazes settled on Benkei.

“Certainly, I did seal Yoshitsune's power with a technique of my own. He was terrified that his power as a Mononofu would awaken. ‘There's a demon in me...’ he said, ‘If it awakens, I won't be able to control my power, and the demon will consume me. Then I'll hurt everyone’... So he came to me and asked me to seal his power. But honestly, I don't think I could seal a power that great with my technique alone. Perhaps he was partly holding it back subconsciously himself. And for some reason whatever was holding it back broke down on that day. I think the one who killed Yoshinaka wasn't Yoshitsune, but the demon inside him.”

“The demon...” Tsugunobu repeated.

It would have been unimaginable for the usual Yoshitsune, but Saburō remembered feeling a strange presence around him at that time.

After defeating Yoshinaka, Yoshitsune, Saburō and the others had headed west to hunt down the Heike, with no time to sink into sorrow.

The Heike army, who had triumphed against Yoshinaka's army at the Battle of Mizushima, had taken the opportunity to push forward as far as Fukuhara¹. To the west was Ichi-no-Tani, which sat between mountains and steep cliffs to the north, and the sea to the south, and therefore difficult to attack. It was the perfect place for the Heike to set up camp.

But Yoshitsune countered their plans, by making a surprise attack from a cliff to the north of Ichi-no-Tani. He arrived at Hiyodorigoe accompanied by his army, and from the top of the cliffs he observed the position of the Heike encampment far below.

1 Now part of Kobe in Hyōgo Prefecture.

“If you are careful with your horse you will not be injured. Throw away your fears and gallop down! I, Yoshitsune, will show you how it’s done! Follow me!”

He shouted, taking the lead himself, and galloped his horse to the bottom in a single swoop.

The sight of him inspired the others, and they followed after. The sound of their battle cries reverberating from the surrounding mountains made the Heike think that they were being attacked from behind by a great army, and many of the soldiers lost their will to fight and fled to their boats.

Thanks to the surprise attack, the Genji were able to claim victory, but many of their soldiers were injured when they fell from the cliff with their horses. Even Tadanobu had broken an arm, and Saburō was busy for several days from dawn till dusk healing the injured with his powers. Benkei grumbled, “It’s a good thing we’ve got Saburō, but if you’re going to do that every battle, he’s going to need lifetimes to fix it,” but he helped to lead the physical work and carry the injured soldiers.

Saburō did not voice his concerns, but at the time he felt that Yoshitsune's eyes were emotionless, as if he were possessed. There was a temperature emanating from his body, as if there were "something" smoldering deep inside him.

When they returned from Ichi-no-Tani to Kyoto, that something vanished, but in exchange Yoshitsune became a man tormented by guilt and loss towards Yoshinaka and Tomoe. His appearance changed day by day, and in what seemed to be the blink of an eye, his short hair had grown out, and become streaked with silver. In other words, perhaps it was that Yoshitsune's mind and body had returned to their original form.

Maybe that was a sign of the demon.

As Saburō mulled it over, Tsugunobu called out to him,

"Well then, let's start preparing dinner. The group watching the house does the cooking."

"Right. The sun is about to set. We have to go and look for Yoshitsune too," Saburō said as he stood up. He began preparations for cooking in the manor's hearth.

Tsugunobu cast a hand over the firewood in the stove, and in the blink of an eye flames were dancing merrily. Next to him, Tadanobu made the water rise from a bucket like a great serpent, and poured it into a pot.

The powers the Satō brothers possessed were the abilities to manipulate fire and water. Benkei watched them, saying,

“That’s nice, you can make your powers useful in everyday life. I can only wield my super strength in battle,” in a manner that made it difficult to tell if he intended to praise the brothers or himself.

Saburō overheard him, and made a serious face as he disagreed. “That’s not true at all, Benkei! We’d be lost without you!”

“...Eh? R-Really? You’re all relying on me that much?” Benkei asked, not at all dissatisfied.

Saburō clapped both hands on to Benkei’s shoulders.

“Of course we do! Don’t be silly.”

Then, he leaned forward until his face was almost touching Benkei’s, and spoke.

“We don’t have enough firewood... Go to the mountains and get some...”

Benkei’s face flushed red, and at last he looked completely like a *daruma*.

“DON’T YOU MAKE A FOOL OF ME, YOU BASTARDS-”

Benkei’s roar of fury and the laughter of Saburō and the others echoed across the manor.

3

To the south of Kyoto, in a forest even deeper into the mountains than Uji, Yoshitsune sat.

In front of him was a lake that exactly filled his field of vision, and the surface of the water was illuminated by sunlight shining through the gaps in the trees.

Yoshitsune had been sitting on the shore of the lake, staring out over its surface like that for hours. Perhaps because it was fed by spring water welling up from somewhere, the lake was blue and clear, and water grass with long, thin leaves swayed elegantly in the breeze. It was a lovely sight. But Yoshitsune's heart was not soothed by the scenery. Rather, the beautiful colors even seemed repulsive to him.

He spent his days merely staring at the lake with a cold gaze, and waiting for the sun to set. When he slept, he was tormented by nightmares of Yoshinaka and Tomoe, and when he was awake he couldn't stop thinking about them. After the Battle of Ichi-no-Tani, his heart had completely broken.

Splash.

In the center of the lake, small bubbles appeared, and ripples began to spread out. The ripples gradually became bigger, and just when it seemed that the surface of the lake would erupt, a beautiful girl emerged along with a spray of water.

Her waist-length silver hair clung to her wet, pale skin, emphasizing the voluptuous curves of her body. Her generous and perfectly formed breasts were exposed, but she showed no signs of embarrassment, and droplets of water sparkled in her feathery black eyelashes.

The girl who had been bathing in the lake slowly raised her head, and realizing that Yoshitsune was looking in her direction, smiled brightly. It was a smile that under

normal circumstances would have stolen a person's heart in seconds, both pure and bewitching in equal parts. But Yoshitsune did not react at all, and his cold gaze was focused on the lake as always.

The girl understood that there was no place in Yoshitsune's eyes for her, and with a slightly sad expression, she quietly climbed out of the lake. Then, bare-naked, she strode over to Yoshitsune and sat down next to him. Drops of water ran down over her enchanting porcelain skin.

“...”

The girl peered at Yoshitsune's profile with her large, jet black eyes. Perceiving the sorrow that he was desperately trying to bottle up, and his rage that could not be directed at anyone, she wrapped her slender arms around his neck, pressing her body against his, and stroking his hair lovingly.

Without even turning to look at her face, Yoshitsune threw off the girl's embrace.

“Back off, Hiyori... Hurry up and get dressed. You'll catch a cold...”

“ ”
...

Hiyori fixed a sad gaze on Yoshitsune in reply.

Mononoke don't get things like colds...

Hiyori thought, but she didn't have the ability to express that in words.

Hiyori had formerly accompanied Kage, in a way, she had been the adopted pet of her fellow Mononoke. So when Kage had displayed an interest in Yoshitsune's power and began to haunt him, it was natural that Hiyori also stayed by Yoshitsune's side. To Hiyori, those days had been fun. But when Yoshinaka summoned En, and Kage perished in battle with him, Hiyori herself had undergone a great change.

Hiyori's youthful form, which it would have been appropriate to refer to as a child, had suddenly matured, and like a butterfly gaining its wings, she had transformed into a beautiful woman. At the same time, she had lost her voice.

Was it because she had lost the balancing existence of Kage? No one knew. But even though Hiyori had lost her voice, Yoshitsune and the others somehow always

knew what she wanted to say, and no one tried to force her to speak.

In the distance there was the sound of a flock of birds taking flight. A moment later, they were visible in the sky, crying out and wheeling through the air in formation as they headed for their nests.

When the stillness returned, Yoshitsune spoke quietly.

“Hiyori, you go home first. If it gets too late, Saburō and the others will panic.”

Hiyori, who was now wearing her kimono that she had left by the lake, turned her head as if to ask, “And you?”

“I... have something to discuss with Kage... Don’t worry about me. I’ll be heading home soon,” Yoshitsune said, and gave a forced smile. Hiyori nodded silently, and headed alone down the path that led to the foot of the mountain.

Hiyori knew that Yoshitsune was still thinking of the late Tomoe Gozen. She herself had loved Tomoe for both her kindness and the imposing strength that she possessed. That was why Hiyori had wanted to be the

one to soothe Yoshitsune's heart this time, in the place of Tomoe. That strong wish had caused her body to suddenly grow. But to Yoshitsune, no matter what Hiyori looked like, she would always be like a little sister who loved him innocently.

No matter how much I pray for it, I can't replace Tomoe.

Hiyori knew that, and her sorrow and pain at her inability to soothe Yoshitsune's soul felt as if it would tear her chest apart.

The wind blew from nowhere in particular, and it gently swept across the surface of the lake.

"Kage, you are here, aren't you? I want to speak with you," Yoshitsune whispered, staring up at the sky as if he were talking to no one at all.

As if it were a sign, the air above the rippling water began to shimmer along with it like a mirage. Its outline shimmered and shifted constantly, never taking a definite form. It took a human shape, and then changed again the next instant.

Are you still thinking of Yoshinaka?

The words made no sound, but instead entered directly into Yoshitsune's mind.

Why do you suffer? You ate your friend yourself, and yet you miss him?

“...”

Is it the demon within you that you hate? Or do you hate yourself for not being able to contain it?

“...Kage, stop it. This isn't what I want to talk about.”

But the voice paid Yoshitsune no heed and continued speaking.

I will tell you one thing. The one who called forth the demon within you at that time was me.

Yoshitsune looked up despite himself. He glared at the mirage in front of him.

“Why did you do such a thing?”

I understood fully. You could not kill Yoshinaka yourself. I originally intended to take care of Yoshinaka myself before then... but to my surprise, he summoned En. And even for me, sending En to his grave was something that took every bit of strength I had.

“... What was this ‘En’? Something that even a Mononoke like you couldn’t beat?”

My conflict with En was a fate determined long ago. Long before you were born.

Some time previously, Yoshitsune had heard from Kage themselves that they had existed in this world for over one hundred years. It was difficult for Yoshitsune to imagine what sort of time span Kage meant when they said “long ago”.

There was no other way to have you kill Yoshinaka than to awaken the demon within you. Does that lighten the weight on your soul a little?

“... How could it? It doesn’t change the fact that I killed him,” Yoshitsune spat. The mirage shimmered above the water.

What a nuisance you are. You have the power to rule the world, if you so wished, and yet, you fight against it. But that is the difference between you and the rest of the Mononofu... Since I met you at Mount Kurama, I haunted you in the hope of seeing how you would use that power in this era of turmoil, and it is such a pity that I will not...

Yoshitsune's expression became even more gloomy.

Mononoke are not invulnerable. My body perished along with En. What is speaking to you now is my will, perhaps you could call it an ember. But this too will eventually weaken and vanish. I ask that you take care of Hiyori. In a way, she loves you... A Mononoke living alone is a very fragile existence.

"I understand..."

The mirage was fainter than before, and seemed like it could vanish at any moment.

Yoshitsune. Do not fear the demon that lives within you. You have been chosen. Accept your fate, your power, the demon, and live.

"Chosen? What do you mean, 'fate'? Do you know? Then tell me!"

A time shall come when you understand. But there is more than one path. You will be the one to choose. If you are running from yourself, then you will err. Face yourself. That will give you the power to change the world...

Kage's words were gradually becoming weaker. Then, the wind once again swept across the water's surface, and the mirage was snuffed out.

"Wait, Kage! KAGE! Don't you leave me too...!"

Yoshitsune's pained cries went unheard, and he could no longer feel any trace of Kage's presence. There was nothing but a small fish splashing in the lake as if nothing had happened.

My power will change the world...

Yoshitsune had never considered such a thing even once.

The "Defeat of the Heike" and "Revival of the Genji's Power" were the dream of his elder brother, Yoritomo, and Yoshitsune did not strongly embrace it. When Yoritomo was raising an army, Yoshitsune only ran to him out of a simple desire to help and be useful. And when he had met Yoshinaka, a friend with the same aspirations, those feelings had become even stronger.

But he had killed that precious friend with his own hands.

Even though they had both vowed the same promise for the future, he had sacrificed his friend for the sake of that future.

Yoshitsune couldn't help but curse that huge contradiction and ironic fate.

On that night of the full moon, when he had awoken from his demonic state, and seen Yoshinaka fallen and covered in blood before his eyes, he had screamed. All he could do was apologize, sobbing, as Yoshinaka grew cold in his arms.

“Despite that...”

Yoshitsune whispered unconsciously.

After defeating Yoshinaka, he had headed towards the Battle of Ichi-no-Tani in a state of despair. During that battle, he had felt the presence of the demon still smoldering inside him.

Vivid memories of the battle welled up in Yoshitsune's mind.

When he had arrived at Hiyodorigoe, that overlooked Ichi-no-Tani, he had been unable to quell the stirring in his blood at the battle cries that shook the earth, the

sound of the horses and their thundering hooves, and the sight of the battle unfolding below. And in his excitement, he charged down the cliff on horseback.

His wild, silver-streaked hair was tied back, and as he cut down soldier after soldier, he seemed to be a devil.

*Now that I have killed my friend, it is too late to fight it.
The blood of the demon runs within me.*

The reality that he had never wanted to acknowledge had been cruelly thrust upon him.

Therefore, Yoshitsune feared himself in his half-awakened state, and began to suppress all his feelings. Nevertheless, if he remembered Yoshinaka for even a moment, his heart began to pound fiercely and uncontrollably.

“Yoshinaka... I...”

Yoshitsune hung his head, and tears dripped into his lap.

“...will never... ever... become a demon again.”

He lingered over the words as if he were trying to convince himself.

At that moment, there was a rustling from the bushes behind his hunched shoulders.

Startled, he turned to look, and there was a man staring at Yoshitsune with a surprised expression. After a moment's silence, the man spoke.

“Ah, sorry to surprise you. I didn't think there would be anyone here.”

As he said that, the man's face crinkled into a smile. It was a disarming expression.

“Are you fishing or something? Though your expression is a bit grim for that.”

“ ... ”

Despite the fact that Yoshitsune was ignoring him, the man merrily pushed forward and said, “Hey, hey, I don't know what happened to you, but if you keep making that scary face even the fish are gonna be scared off! Hahaha!”

He put a hand on his hip, and squinted into the water.

“Despite the battle raging in Kyoto these last few months, the fish and the birds seem to be having fun. Isn't that grand? Whether its a war or whatever else, the

only ones being twisted around by our desires and emotions are us Mononofu and humans.”

The man kept talking without a care as to whether Yoshitsune wanted to hear it.

“From the looks of things, you’re a Mononofu too, right? If you wander around these parts, the Genji will think you’re from the Heike, and the Heike will think you’re a Genji, and then you’ll end up dead for no good reason. It’s totally ridiculous. But anyway, that’s how it is, so hurry on home.”

“...Ridiculous, you say?”

Yoshitsune said, trying to contain the anger that welled up in him,

“What would YOU know...?”

“Hm?”

“Lecturing in such a grandiose way... My friend, my dear comrade, died in my arms. What could you possibly know about my pain!?”

The man’s smile vanished, and he fixed Yoshitsune with a serious gaze. But then he turned his sight to the shore once again, and said loudly enough for anyone in the

area to hear, “I know absolutely nothing about it! Not how important he was to you, nor why you’re suffering so much. Nothing at all!”

Then he turned to Yoshitsune with a serious expression and said, “How’s that? You satisfied now?”

“...Fuck you!”

Yoshitsune charged at the man and lifted him by his collar. The man was unmoved, and stared down Yoshitsune as he continued.

“But I do know this. No matter how much you suffer and grieve, he’s never coming back. Is what you should be doing now sitting around like a sad sack and crying? Hm?”

“...!”

Yoshitsune regained his composure and let go of the man’s collar, turning his back awkwardly.

“I’m... not crying or anything.”

“Yes you were!”

“I’m not crying!... The wind is just stinging my eyes.”

The man smiled at Yoshitsune, “Well, it doesn’t matter either way, but I think your precious friend would be hoping for you to live life with a smile. If I was that friend, I would think so.”

“ ... ”

“I don’t know what group of Mononofu you’re from, but in Japan these days it’s nothing but war, war, war, wherever you go. There have already been traitors against the emperor and rebels. The next day the two sides could have switched places. Like that, they’re fighting each other for control, hating and killing each other. Just lamenting it won’t end the war.”

“I know that!”

“Pfft, well excuse me then! Bahahahaha!”

Yoshitsune was taken aback. Who was this man who responded so smoothly without a care in the world, no matter what he said, he wondered. Yoshitsune tried to judge from his appearance, but the man held out his right hand and said, “My name’s Dennai. Dennai Noriyoshi. Just a humble Mononofu.”

Yoshitsune hesitantly shook his outstretched hand,
“...I’m... Yoshitsune...”

“...Yoshitsune... is it? Well isn’t that a fine name!”

Dennai laughed, in an exceptionally loud voice. Perhaps in response to that, a voice could be heard calling Dennai’s name. Both Yoshitsune and Dennai immediately turned to look, and saw several men running through the forest. A sharp gleam passed through Yoshitsune’s eyes, and his expression changed.

“Dennai-sama!”

Dennai was as unaffected as ever.

“Hey. What’s up?”

“Don’t you ‘What’s up?’ me, dammit! Why do you always run off to do your own thing!?” the man said, slightly out of breath. The man beside him turned around and yelled, “My lord, my lord! We found Dennai-sama over here!”

Yoshitsune was quietly putting distance between himself and Dennai’s group.

The man that they called “Lord” approached slowly. Even from a distance, it could be seen that he was tall

and slender. When his face finally became clear, Yoshitsune could scarcely believe his eyes. The approaching figure had a beautiful face just like a woman's.

He had such a slender outline that the word "Lord" didn't seem to suit him. He had determined, straight eyebrows, and large, almond eyes. His nose was narrow, and the slightly raised corners of his mouth seemed to have a constantly defiant air about them.

When he recognized Dennai, he suddenly quickened his pace and drew close.

"Listen here, Dennai! I told you not to go so far on your own! Why don't you ever listen to what I say!?"

"Ooh, scary. But I'm not your servant."

"That's not what I'm saying! Where the hell do you think you are? The Genji could attack at any moment in a suspicious place like this! If anything happens to you, my brother will blame me!"

The man said, all in one breath. There was no chance for anyone else to get a word in edgeways. Dennai

waved his hand as if he were shooing away a fly buzzing around his ear.

“Shut up. If you’re there, I can’t lose myself in my own thoughts or sing songs.”

“Do you even sing!?” came the immediate retort.

“Now, now, Noritsune-sama. We’ve managed to find Dennai-sama safely, now let’s return as soon as possible. The sun is about to set,” one of the men next to Noritsune interjected reprovingly.

Noritsune.

Yoshitsune caught the man’s casual mention of the name.

Taira no Noritsune.

Yoshitsune had heard of him almost immediately after arriving in Kyoto, he was so well known as the strongest Mononofu among the Heike.

It was said that in battle he drew the string of his great bow, which seemed that it would normally take two large men to pull, with ease. He had also proved his

strength by surviving despite being on the front line at the fierce battle at Ichi-no-Tani.

Could that great military leader really be this androgynous looking man? Where in those slender arms is he hiding such great strength?

It was difficult for Yoshitsune to believe. He quickly averted his gaze so that it would not be noticed. Behind Noritsune, two creatures that appeared to be Mononoke in human-like forms were hunched over and snickering. They echoed the ends of Noritsune's and Dennai's words, and romped around. Compared to their appearances, their voices were eerily childlike. *Half-human Mononoke?*... Yoshitsune glanced at them out of the corner of his eye. Dennai sighed heavily and walked toward Noritsune.

"Really, you're always screeching at me. Are you my wife?"

At those words, Noritsune's mouth dropped open, but he soon snapped back into action.

"Wh-Wh-WHAT!? Your... Who would... To think I was *worried* about you!"

He ranted in an even higher pitched voice, turning red in the face.

“And this is why I say, you’re always bitching at me like you’re my wife.”

The two Mononoke repeated, “Bitching...” “Yeah, bitching!” while giggling at each other.

“Fine, I get it. I’ll listen to you and go home, okay? So shut up for a bit.”

Dennai clapped Noritsune on the back, and the men turned to head back down the road they had arrived on. Yoshitsune watched them with great caution, heading in the opposite direction to also leave that place.

As he did so, one of the Mononoke looked at him and called out. Its innocent smile from earlier had vanished, and its eyes gleamed like a wild animal.

“Hey. Who are you?... Suspicious person.”

Yoshitsune silently glared back over his shoulder.

“Stop it, Kikuōmaru,” Dennai warned him, but Kikuōmaru's keen senses noticed the sharp gleam in Yoshitsune's eyes, and he drew his dagger.

“Your eyes. Same as enemy... You are bad... I kill you!”

The men who appeared to be retainers drew their swords confusedly and hurriedly surrounded Yoshitsune. Noritsune's expression did not change one bit, he merely crossed his arms and watched silently.

“ ”
...

Moderately fed-up, Yoshitsune slowly raised his gaze to the sky and focused his awareness. He had to control himself while fighting so that the demon would not awaken. So he thought, but when the killing intent rose from his body, it threw the retainers into confusion, and Kikuōmaru displayed even more hostility.

“Wait... I'm sorry, I'm sorry!”

The one who cut through the tense atmosphere was Dennai. With a hearty laugh and a cheerful voice quite inappropriate to the situation, he pushed his way into the circle and put an arm around Yoshitsune's shoulders.

“He's my friend who's staying in the capital. Put those dangerous things away. Someone will get hurt. You guys are always so high-strung.”

“What, this man is your friend, Dennai-sama? Stop causing us so much trouble!”

The retainers looked relieved and put away their swords. Hearing Dennai's words, Noritsune stood in front of Yoshitsune and said, “I apologize for the impoliteness my retainers have committed, please forgive us... Kiku, you apologize too.”

He grabbed Kikuōmaru's head and lowered it towards the ground, bowing himself as he did.

“Apologize. S-Sorry...”

The other half of the Mononoke pair, Ginrōmaru, also lowered his head repeatedly for some reason, as if they were one.

“Sorry...Sorry...”

“Don't worry about it. I'm fine. I'm going home now,”

Yoshitsune replied, showing as little of his face as possible. He was glad that the sun was setting and the place where they stood was hidden in shadow. But Noritsune called out to him as he headed into the woods,

“Hey, it’s dangerous to go alone. There are a lot of Genji wandering around here with a taste for blood. Allow one of my vassals to accompany you home.”

“No... I can go alone.”

“But...”

At Noritsune’s insistence, Dennai butted in once again, “He. Said. He’s. Fine. Have a safe journey home!”

Yoshitsune gave a slight wave over his shoulder in response. Dennai watched his retreating back for a moment, then called out again,

“Hey! Can I see you again sometime soon?”

Yoshitsune stopped.

“...Yeah. Maybe.”

“Again!”

“Again!”

Kikuōmaru and Ginrōmaru repeated. They watched Yoshitsune disappear into the forest, and then began to return the way they came. After a moment, Noritsune turned to Dennai as if he had suddenly remembered something.

“By the way, who on earth was that man?”

“Him? He’s...” Dennai paused there with a sudden grin.

“His name is Yoshitsune. *Minamoto no Yoshitsune*.”

Everyone was lost for words at Dennai’s confession. After a moment’s silence, Noritsune’s scream of, “WHAAAAAAAAAATTTT!?” rang out across the forest.

The retainers stared at him in shock, and only Dennai grinned cheerfully.

After parting with Dennai’s group, Yoshitsune arrived at his manor, and conveniently ran into the Satō brothers just as they were leaving. Tsugunobu spotted Yoshitsune and looked surprised.

“Huh? What happened?”

“What happened?... Well, I live here, so I came home.”

“No, it’s just that you’re early... We thought you were on the mountain as usual, and we were just about to go and call you. Right, Tadanobu?”

Tadanobu nodded beside him. Benkei's voice came from somewhere behind him.

"Well, it's a good thing anyway. Saves us having to go look for you," he said, dropping the firewood he had been carrying from his shoulders into the hearth with a clatter.

Saburō came out from the central living room, and said to Yoshitsune with a look of relief, "Everyone was worried about you. According to some information Tadanobu and the others picked up, some of the Heike who crossed over to Yashima Island have secretly infiltrated Kyoto. There's a chance that their allies who are remaining quietly in the capital will suddenly spring back into action. If you happened to run into them, even you could be in danger."

"...I see. So that's what's been going on."

Yoshitsune murmured as if he agreed. Saburō listened with a dubious expression, then asked, "...That's what's been going on? Did something happen?"

"I met some Heike in the forest. Perhaps the ones Tsugunobu was talking about..."

“What!?”

Everyone immediately surrounded Yoshitsune.

“What happened!?”

“Did you fight them!?”

“You’re not injured, are you!?”

Unable to get a word in edgewise, Yoshitsune was unsure how to respond. In the end, he merely answered with a hint of impatience, “They were interesting people...”

Benkei’s face fell and he groaned, “...This is bad. Yoshitsune has already started to enjoy killing!”

“No I haven’t! ... I think the one I met was Noritsune. Taira no Noritsune. We didn’t even fight, he was very well-mannered. He apologized for the imposition.”

“Isn’t Noritsune one of the Heike’s top generals? That battle at Mizushima that Yoshinaka lost, it was partly because he wasn’t used to naval battles, but I also heard it was because Noritsune was there serving as a general, and his strategy was brilliant. Yoshitsune, you’re lucky it didn’t turn into a duel with him... Didn’t they realize who you were?”

“I’m not sure. But there was another Mononofu there, and it was thanks to him that it didn’t turn into a battle. I’m pretty sure his name was Dennai...”

“D-Dennai!?” Saburō asked, “Wait a minute! It wasn’t... Dennai Noriyoshi, was it!?”

“Yeah, I have a feeling that was his name... Saburō, do you know him?”

It was Yoshitsune’s turn to ask. Benkei’s expression was dubious.

“Why do you know one of the enemy Mononofu?”

Everyone waited for Saburō’s response.

“He... Dennai, Dennai Noriyoshi...”

He took a deep breath, and said with an expression that suggested even he couldn’t believe it, “...was my childhood friend.”

Kamakura- Yoritomo's manor.

Wearing white *suikan* robes and tall, black *eboshi* hats, *shirabyoshi*¹ dancers were performing to a drum beat.

Yoritomo, who had received the news of Yoshinaka's defeat, and also the Battle of Ichi-no-Tani, had finished a conference with his army, and was merrily enjoying a feast.

Next to Yoritomo was the retainer who had captured Shigehira, the fifth son of Taira no Kiyomori, in the Battle of Ichi-no-Tani and brought him back to Kamakura- Kajiwaru Kagetoki.

Yoritomo raised his sake cup energetically,

1 Female court dancers who performed in male clothing.

“Now, this land of Japan is covered in the flags of the Genji, announcing the beginning of the end for the era of the evil Heike. My younger brother, Yoshitsune, who suppressed the rebel leader Yoshinaka, has continued his triumphs in battle! I have heard that at the Battle of Ichi-no-Tani, he charged his horse down a cliff, taking the Heike by surprise and causing them to flee by boat. Ha! Ha! Ha!”

He watched the dancers with an expression of satisfaction. A voice came from behind him.

“My lord!”

The instant he heard that voice, Yoritomo’s face visibly fell, and changed to a dispirited expression.

The owner of the voice was Yoritomo’s wife, Hōjō Masako.

Masako was the eldest daughter of Hōjō Tokimasa, leader of the well-known Hōjō clan from Izu Province. She had fallen in love with the then-exiled Yoritomo, and married him despite her father’s furious opposition. But more than her passion, her strength of will was such that it naturally kept Yoritomo cowed.

“...What is it, Masako?”

“My lord, you spoil Yoshitsune. Everyone else is heading to the west to hunt down the Heike, so why have you allowed Yoshitsune alone to remain in Kyoto!?”

“That’s...well... There are still Heike allies remaining in the capital... and I have left guarding the emperor to him.”

Yoritomo raised his sake cup again as if he were trying to evade the question.

“I hear that Yoshitsune is going fishing every day at a lake. Isn’t that right, Kagetoki?”

“Yes. It is just as Lady Masako says,” Kagetoki jumped to agree.

Kagetoki had been born into a lineage that had served the Genji clan for many years, but since Yoritomo’s father, Yoshitomo, was defeated in the Heiji Rebellion, he had begun to work for the Heike. After that, when Yoritomo raised an army and defeated the Heike army led by Taira no Koremori, Kagetoki surrendered to him. Since then, he served Yoritomo. The truth was that when Yoritomo had suffered a great defeat at the Battle

of Mount Ishibashi¹, and was being pursued by the Heike, his life was saved by Kagetoki choosing to overlook him. Perhaps because of that life debt, Yoritomo did not execute Kagetoki when he surrendered. There was also the fact that he valued Kagetoki's keen sense that enabled him to read the flow of a battle and take the advantage, and his ability to find his way in the world. Now Kagetoki was Yoritomo's vassal, but he also engaged in some splendid maneuvering as something of an assistant to Masako.

"Kagetoki!"

This time, Yoritomo spoke sternly. Kagetoki hurried closer to Yoritomo, rubbing his hands together. He cringed under Yoritomo's piercing glare.

"You're the one who's been filling Masako with all these silly ideas again, aren't you!?"

"No, no, no! It was not me! It's just, many in the capital have heard of Yoshitsune's current state..."

"Enough! It is natural that Yoshitsune should be tired from constant battles. Some things should be overlooked, should they not? Let the man fish!"

1 Now Odawara City.

Yoritomo looked over his vassals, who were sitting in a row.

“You must also enjoy tonight’s feast. When you have fostered your energy to your heart’s content, then prepare yourselves for the next battle!”

“Yes sir!”

They raised their voices in unison, and bowed. The feast continued merrily.

“In any case, why is it that you two hate the very sight of Yoshitsune so much? He deserves sympathy. He heard that I was raising an army, and rushed here from Ōshū.”

“And the one he was depending on in Ōshū was Fujiwara no Hidehira, was it not!? I hear that the Satō brothers who accompany Yoshitsune were retainers to Taira no Shigehira when they set out. If they still have connections to Ōshū, they may be eavesdropping upon our movements!”

Masako had not given up.

The Fujiwara clan, a great house that boasted power centered on the Hiraizumi area in Ōshū, and the warriors from the east led by Yoritomo as the head of

the Genji clan, kept each other in check. As the Fujiwara clan preserved their neutrality, they were not enemies in the same way that the Heike were, but as they were not under Yoritomo's influence and instead built their own power, it was clear that they presented a threat to him. The six years between when Yoshitsune had left Mount Kurama at the age of sixteen, and when he had rushed to Yoritomo's side, was time he had spent under Hidehira, the head of the Fujiwara clan.

“... Furthermore, there is something unknown lurking within Yoshitsune. Something that I cannot discern even with my powers.”

Masako's power was the ability to fathom the powers of other Mononofu. But Yoshitsune was the only one that she could not be sure of, no matter how much she used her power. This uncertainty caused Masako to regard Yoshitsune with fear of the unknown.

“Not this again!”

“My lord, I will say it again and again. What I see in Yoshitsune's heart is darkness. A deep darkness that only spreads further and further. It is as if something terrible is watching me from within that darkness... It

makes me ill at the thought. That thing is sure to bring disaster upon us!”

“I’m tired of hearing about this. I’m going to bed, so I leave the rest to you!” Yoritomo spat, and immediately left his seat. Masako followed him for two or three paces, but quickly gave up, then vented her frustrations on Kagetoki, who was standing vacantly beside her.

“Why does my lord adore Yoshitsune so much!? If this keeps up, not a single word of mine will get through to him!”

“Certainly, if Yoshitsune continues to triumph on the battlefield, Lord Yoritomo is sure to grant him an important position. In that case, then Lady Masako’s status will also change...”

Kagetoki daringly proclaimed.

“What? Are you saying that Yoshitsune and my lord will be able to lead the Genji by themselves?”

Kagetoki cowered like a frog being watched by a snake.

“No, a-a-absolutely not!”

“Ah, for goodness sake, I feel ill! I do not think that a man of Yoshinaka’s greatness could have been defeated

in the first place by Yoshitsune, if he had not even awakened his power. I am certain that something happened. No matter what, I must distance my lord's heart from Yoshitsune now!"

Masako spun around and leaned in close to the kneeling Kagetoki.

"Kagetoki, think of a strategy. At this rate, neither of us will have a place here any more."

"As you wish."

Kagetoki answered, and alone once again, secretly embraced his own ambition.

5

The Genji, excluding Yoshitsune, continued their advance after the Battle of Ichi-no-Tani, but after repeated battles further and further from Kamakura, the soldiers began to show signs of fatigue. The Heike were luring them into further sea battles, however, the Genji were unable to procure their desired amount of ships, and so there was a lull in the war.

On a ship moored on a beach of Yashima Island, the chief retainers of the Heike, led by their commander, Taira no Munemori, were having a military conference.

Munemori was the third son of Kiyomori, but as Kiyomori's first son, Shigemori, and second son,

Motomori, had both already died, after Kiyomori's passing, Munemori had become the new leader of the Heike. But unfortunately for Munemori, he was not gifted with the skill necessary to lead the clan, and his opinions on military strategy went ignored.

Instead of Munemori, the one who held true command was one who had gained the strong trust of not just the chief retainers, but Kiyomori himself, the fourth son, Tomomori. It was not an overstatement to say that it was thanks to Tomomori that the Heike had somehow managed to remain intact even after the loss of Kiyomori's overwhelming presence and being forced out of Kyoto.

Under extreme pressure, and with fatigue showing on his face, Munemori ended the conference with, "Well then, let's leave it there. I've entrusted the rest to Tomomori. I'm counting on you."

Tomomori nodded at him, then called out, "Dennai, Noritsune. I'm sorry, but could you stay behind for a little?"

As the chief retainers left their seats, Noritsune kicked his feet out with a resigned expression, and began to slouch. While Tomomori undoubtedly held the higher rank, to Noritsune he was the beloved cousin that he had often played with when they were young, and who he referred to as “Brother”.

Dennai scratched his head and muttered, “Ahhh, I’m tired. I’m definitely not suited for this kind of thing. We got all these people together and at the end he just says he’s leaving it to Brother.”

Rather than be angered by Dennai and Noritsune’s attitudes, Tomomori smiled. It was precisely because he didn’t get taken in by trivial things, and had the ability to perceive the true nature of everything, that he was so tolerant. Therefore, he was able to charm people like Dennai and Noritsune, who had one or two quirks.

As if to replace the retainers who had just left the room, Kikuōmaru and Ginrōmaru cheerfully rushed in.

“You finished? We waited. We waited properly!”

One of the retainers saw this and hurriedly pulled Kikuōmaru back.

“You! Tomomori-sama and the others are still-”

Before he finished speaking, Kikuōmaru had shaken off his grasp with incredible speed, spun around, and was glaring at the man.

“You... Don’t touch me!”

“Eek...”

The man went pale and froze under the force of his gaze. Ginrōmaru looked back and forth between Kikuōmaru and the retainer, as if he were unsure what to do. Noritsune grinned and said, “Oh no, you can’t just touch Kikuōmaru like that. He bites.”

Tomomori quickly put a stop to it.

“Kiku, stop... I’m sorry, it’s okay. You can go.”

The retainer hurriedly did as he was told. Kikuōmaru glared after him for a moment, but once the man was out of sight, his innocent smile returned, and he rushed over to Noritsune. Ginrōmaru followed.

Kikuōmaru and Ginrōmaru were of mixed blood, in other words, half Mononoke and half human.

While the Mononofu did have Mononoke blood in them, apart from their special powers, they were otherwise human. However, despite their human appearance, Kikuōmaru and Ginrōmaru's Mononoke blood was much stronger. Kikuōmaru in particular, possessed the ferocity of a wild animal, and was quick to display hostility. Because of that, people didn't know what to do with him. They were unable to kill him out of fear of a Mononoke curse, so he was imprisoned along with Ginrōmaru until Noritsune heard their story and claimed them for himself. Although the people around him opposed it, as soon as he came face to face with them, they began to follow him with surprising meekness. Even Kikuōmaru never questioned a word that Noritsune said. It was like the way in which a wolf pack followed the strongest leader in the group. They submitted to the one whose power far outstripped their own.

Kikuōmaru and Ginrōmaru instinctively felt that Noritsune and Tomomori were their “masters”.

The only ones remaining in the room were Tomomori, Dennai, Noritsune, and Kikuōmaru and Ginrōmaru.

Tomomori waited until he sensed that the retainers were out of earshot, and then spoke, "So then, how are things in the capital?"

Tomomori was sending Dennai and Noritsune to infiltrate Kyoto behind the backs of Munemori and the other retainers. His aim was to scope out the happenings in the capital, and bring those who would support the Heike to Yashima.

Dennai made as if to speak in a hushed voice, but Noritsune cut him off.

"Brother, please scold Dennai! He wandered off on his own again! We had to go to so much trouble to find him!"

It was exactly like one child telling on another for being naughty.

"...Hey, you promised you wouldn't tell!"

"I don't recall promising that. And you're the one who always breaks your promises to me and does your own thing, right?"

"Right! Right!"

Kikuōmaru and Ginrōmaru giggled.

“Well, I don’t recall promising-”

“Enough.”

One fed up word from Tomomori, and everyone present shut their mouths.

“You guys do this every time... You can take your time and have a nice long husband and wife quarrel later. Right now I want to know about things in the capital. Dennai, please.”

Hearing the phrase “husband and wife quarrel”, Noritsune made a move as if he wanted to argue, but then he calmed himself. He sat cross legged with an irritated expression, and turned his gaze to Dennai.

“Yes. The Heike remaining in the capital have been almost wiped out by the Genji hunting them down. All that’s left are the *Kugyō* who have betrayed us in favor of the Genji, so we probably can’t expect much from them. They’re trying to save their skins by joining the Genji and the cloistered emperor¹.”

1 A cloistered emperor was one that had officially abdicated his position and joined a monastery, but, in practice, continued to hold power. Go-Shirakawa abdicated in 1158, but continued to rule as cloistered emperor through the reigns of the next five emperors (four of whom were enthroned as children and died

Though, to a certain extent, he had been expecting this, Tomomori's expression was gloomy.

“... It is extremely regrettable that we could not bring the cloistered emperor with us,” he groaned.

When it had been decided that the Heike clan would withdraw from Kyoto, Tomomori and the others had planned to take the cloistered emperor Go-Shirakawa with them. But Go-Shirakawa had guessed their plan of action and escaped alone from Kuramaro to Mount Hiei, leaving the royal family behind. To the Heike, this was a noble cause that justified their position, and losing the cloistered emperor, who was also a hostage in a certain sense, was a great blow.

They had managed to bring Emperor Antoku, who was still six years old, and the Three Treasures that served as proof of his royal status. But after that, the cloistered emperor, ordered his defenders, the Genji, to defeat the Heike, and Tomomori was in an increasingly trapped position.

Now that I think about it, even when Kiyomori, my father, was in good health, his relationship with the cloistered emperor had been crumbling.

It was a belated realization, but Tomomori looked back now.

As the Heike's power grew, despite them being a warrior house, Kiyomori had begun to interfere in the cloistered emperor's rule, which was not looked upon kindly. The cloistered emperor had only kept up appearances simply because the immense power of the Heike made him too frightened to act against them. He had begun to favor Yoritomo, who spoke of overthrowing the Heike. And when Kiyomori passed away, as far as the cloistered emperor was concerned, the Heike were already "enemies of the Imperial Court".

"And, about Shigehira..." Dennai continued with a pained expression, "He has been captured by Kajiwarra Kagetoki and taken to Kamakura..."

A heavy silence fell. Tomomori wanted to somehow help his younger brother who had been captured in the Battle of Ichi-no-Tani, but if he had been taken to Kamakura, it would be unfeasible.

“It would be nice to hear some good news some time soon...” he answered sadly.

Dennai had fallen silent but Noritsune prompted him, trying to lighten the mood.

“Dennai, isn’t there something else you have to report to my brother? That person who was with you in the forest?”

“Oh, you met someone?” Tomomori looked up.

“Er, well... we just happened to run into each other coincidentally, but... he said his name was Yoshitsune.”

“Yoshitsune?”

Tomomori’s expression changed, “Yoshitsune... you don’t mean, THAT Yoshitsune!”

“That’s right, brother. THAT Yoshitsune. Yoritomo’s little brother, the Mononofu who pulled a sneak attack on us at Ichi-no-Tani, Minamoto no Yoshitsune!”

Noritsune took the opportunity to hammer the point home, “But Dennai lied to us and said he was an acquaintance!”

“If I didn’t say that, you would have killed him on the spot!”

“Obviously! As if I’d just let an enemy stroll back home!”

“Kill...enemies!” Kikuōmaru responded. Dennai glared at Kikuōmaru, “No killing!”

Lost for words, Tomomori asked, “...So, what did you talk about with...Yoshitsune...?”

“Oh, we just had a chat. He’s an interesting fellow. I thought he’d have the smell of blood on him, like the man we saw at Ichi-no-Tani, but it seems he’s got his own way of thinking.”

“He was someone who could be talked to?”

“Seems so. There aren’t too many commanders who can win battles and then shed tears for their fallen comrades. It also seems like his reputation in the capital isn’t bad either. Well, he is a son of the Genji clan, after all.”

Dennai recalled the sight of Yoshitsune hanging his head and crying by the lake, and smiled. When he did, his eyes crinkled until they were as narrow as pine needles. Tomomori was deep in thought about

something with a serious expression. Perhaps tired of the situation, Kikuōmaru and Ginrōmaru were twisting their bodies from side to side in a bored manner. The silence continued for a while, then Dennai, curiously trying to sneak a look at Tomomori's face, said playfully, "Um... Tomo-chan?"

At the same moment, Tomomori suddenly stood.

"Dennai!"

In response to Tomomori's strict voice, Dennai hurriedly straightened his posture,

"Sorry! I got carried away!"

"Hm? What?... Dennai, could I ask you to do something for me?"

"Huh?... Do something?"

"Yes. It's no big deal but," Tomomori immediately corrected himself, "No, it may be a big deal..."

Tomomori gave a meaningful smile as he looked down on Dennai and the others' puzzled faces.

6

Like he was being led from sleep by the gentle sound of waves lapping on the shore, Noritsune woke.

It's been a long time since I slept so well. He thought, his mind still hazy.

When he slowly opened his eyes, he saw the peaceful blue spring sky, and the face of Dennai as he gazed at the ocean, arms folded.

Oh, that's right. I was sleeping in Dennai's lap. He remembered.

When Dennai realized that Noritsune was awake, he looked down with a warm gaze.

"So you're finally awake. Did you sleep well?"

“Yeah... Your lap is definitely the best place.”

“Stop that, you’re creeping me out. Come on, get up! My legs are asleep.”

At Dennai’s urging, Noritsune wriggled his body upright. He grunted as he stretched and then moved his head in a circle. Thanks to the deep sleep he had had, his body felt light. He spotted Kikuōmaru and Ginrōmaru playing around some rocks a short distance away. They were peeking into holes in the rocks, finding the small creatures that lived in there and cackling.

Since Noritsune was small, sleep had been nothing but agony to him.

It was because he suffered nightmares whenever he slept. The nightmares were all different, one night he would be trapped and sinking in a bottomless swamp, and the next he would be chased by an unknown monster. Countless nights, he would awaken crying and screaming, and spend the rest of the night shaking inside his futon. When he slept badly, his body could not rest, and so on the days when he had been awoken

by a nightmare, his body felt as heavy as lead and he was plagued by headaches.

At first, he wondered why he only ever had such frightening dreams. But when he eventually realized that his power was prophetic dreams, he cursed it. The nightmares were a side-effect of his power.

Furthermore, not all of his dreams were prophetic. If he dreamed that someone would be injured, he could warn them, but he only had fragmentary images, and there were many dreams that he would only understand the meaning of when they happened in real life. In that case, there was no way to preemptively avoid it. Noritsune felt that the suffering he endured from his nightmares outweighed any benefit he got from his prophetic dreams tens of times over.

The only one who could grant Noritsune sleep untroubled by nightmares was Dennai. Dennai had the power to suppress someone else's power as long as he was touching them. If Dennai was by his side, Noritsune could sleep peacefully. Despite Noritsune's insulting comments, one of the reasons that he cared for Dennai was that Dennai's presence freed him from his physical and emotional pain.

Noritsune looked out over the calm ocean, and spoke to Dennai.

“...So, why did Brother choose the path of seeking peace with the Genji?”

“Who knows? There’s probably a lot of things he’s thinking about.”

“So why do we have to go and meet a Genji then? No matter how much my brother asks me, I don’t want to go. That Yoshitsune, he’s somehow dark.”

The way Noritsune said it sounded like a sulking child, and Dennai laughed with a broad grin.

After the conference, when Tomomori heard that Dennai had met Yoshitsune near Kyoto by chance, he had broached an idea that even Dennai was stunned by. He wanted them to feel out the possibility of negotiating peace via Yoshitsune.

Dennai and Noritsune were both lost for words, so Tomomori spoke to persuade them,

“Alright, no one else is to know about this. There are many in the Heike who think that being killed would be

preferable to bowing to the Genji. If we speak of peace now, it may cause a mutiny. First, the two of you will meet Yoshitsune in secret and make preparations. If we determine that peace is possible, then I'll persuade everyone else."

"Brother! I am opposed to seeking peace!"

Noritsune argued determinedly. Tomomori gave him a reproaching look.

"Nori, I think at this rate, the Heike will fall into ruin sooner or later. Not because of the war... We have been sitting on our laurels on top of the power my father, Kiyomori built. We have forgotten our sympathy for the people, and lost our humility. I think that it's time to regain our proper form as Mononofu. It is the same for the Genji. If we continue to fight like this, we will both walk the road to ruination. Then, isn't this a chance for us to revive together?"

"So, brother, you are telling us to live under the Genji?"

Noritsune continued to object, and Tomomori quietly shook his head.

“Not under the Genji. With them. Peace is not defeat, Nori. Both the Heike and the Genji formerly served the emperor as warrior clans. At some point that turned into squabbling over power. What I am aiming for is a peace where each serves their own purpose, like the two wheels of an ox-cart. One is the Heike and the other is the Genji. Both of them have the same power, and they both move forward in the same direction.”

At this point, Dennai, who had been listening silently, gave an enthusiastic nod and said, “Just like Tomo-chan! He has different ideas than the others!” clapping his hands forcefully on his knees.

Tomomori had lost his eldest son, Tomoakira, at the battle of Ichi-no-Tani. He was only sixteen.

Normally, a parent would be willing to shed tears of blood to avenge their child. No, they'd be already doing it, Dennai thought.

But Tomomori is living his life not as a parent, but as the leader of his clan, and prioritizing the path that leads to their survival.

Dennai was captivated by this, and made up his mind.

“Leave it to me! I, Dennai Noriyoshi will be sure to bring Yoshitsune to you! Right, Nori?”

“What are you on about!? I don’t recall ever agreeing with-”

Tomomori grabbed Noritsune firmly by the shoulders.

“I’m relying on you, Nori! Make sure to protect Dennai for me!”

He said, deliberately emphasizing Dennai’s name. There was nothing Noritsune could say in response, and he could only furrow his brows in silence.

By the seaside, Dennai and Noritsune were gazing at the ocean, as usual.

There are almost certainly a lot of Genji soldiers out for blood just over the sea.

Dennai thought, and it gave him a strange feeling.

“We have your brother’s orders, but the truth is, I simply want to meet Yoshitsune again. I want to meet him and try to talk to him.”

Noritsune could not hide his irritation at those words.

“Why are you so fascinated by Yoshitsune anyway? Do you really think a general who cries like a woman while thinking of his comrades is that beautiful?”

“He’s not strong like you. It’s because of the era we live in that we tend to forget. In a battle, friends die one after another. Before the tears for the last one have even dried. That his heart hurts when he thinks of his friends is proof of his purity.”

At some point, Kikuōmaru and Ginrōmaru had come close. They sat on a boulder, and listened to the conversation with bewildered expressions.

“I... don’t... understand...”

Dennai laughed at Ginrōmaru's words.

“Hmm, I guess not... Well then, Gin, what would you do if Kiku died?”

“Cry!... Ah, got it. I’d cry... Purity!”

He said that, and his face relaxed into a happy expression. Dennai looked at Kikuōmaru.

“How about you, Kiku? What if Gin died?”

“Gin won’t die! Gin won’t die!” Kikuōmaru was already half crying.

“Hahaha, sorry! That’s right, Gin won’t die. It’s alright.”

“Gin won’t die...”

Noritsune, who had been listening to the other three talk, stood and walked toward the shore.

“No one’s going to die. It’s alright. I’ll protect all of you even if it costs me my life. Kiku, Gin... even you, Dennai.”

“The ‘even you’ wasn’t necessary! And don’t say you’ll give up your life so easily. It’s better that we don’t fight at all, so it doesn’t have to come to that.”

Noritsune smiled. His expression betrayed a hint of loneliness.

“It’s not going to be so simple. This war won’t end so easily. And if all you do is cry, you won’t be able to protect what’s important,” he said, and lowered his gaze.

Noritsune’s prophetic dreams were a defensive power, and the source of his strength that led to him being called the “Heike’s Strongest” was something else entirely. It was pure martial arts ability that he had

gained through years of forging his body with hard work every day. He had gained that nickname not through a supernatural power, but through his own strength. Noritsune was proud of that fact, and it was proof of how high his potential combat ability was.

Even with my “power”, even if I can predict it in my dreams, in the end everyone will die and I won’t be able to protect them. My brothers, and my friends. I don’t want to let anyone else die. Or make them cry. If I can’t protect them with my “power”, then I’ll need a strength even greater than that. I’ll become stronger, to protect everything important to me.

A seabird that had been circling overhead suddenly dived into the water. In the blink of an eye, it caught a fish in its beak, and then soared back into the sky.

Watching the seabird, Noritsune’s eyes were seeking a power stronger than anyone else’s.

Part Two

A Moonlit Sake Cup

1

*“Naumaku sanmanda bodanan Enmaya sowaka...
Naumaku sanmanda bodanan Enmaya sowaka...”*¹

It was a pitch dark night, with no trace of the moon.

From deep inside the tatami-floored room came an ominous chanting. The owner of that voice was Masako.

The flame from a tall oil lamp illuminated her body, and a long shadow flickered behind her.

Her shadow looks just like a Mononoke... Kagetoki secretly thought. His head was spinning from the choking sweet scent of the incense Masako was using for the ritual.

1 A chant in the style of esoteric Buddhism: “Homage to all the Buddhas. Enma, king of hell.”

“...Lady Masako, if you continue with this, you will be noticed by Lord Yoritomo!”

“Silence! You will break my focus!”

Masako continued chanting. Kagetoki shrank away to the entrance of the room, and kept watch on the outside. If they were spotted here and Yoritomo heard of it, he would be subject to all sorts of accusations and his life would be in danger.

*“Rin-pyō-tō-sha-kai-jin-retsū-zai-zen...HAAAH!”*¹

Masako stopped chanting, and the room became dead silent.

“Lady Masako?... Um?”

It happened when Kagetoki spoke.

One of the shadows cast across the room began to writhe strangely. It quickly grew swollen, and protruded towards Masako as though it were peeling itself away from the wall.

“Aa- Aaaaaaugh!?”

1 This is another esoteric Buddhist chant. One possible translation: “May all those who preside over warriors be my vanguard”

Kagetoki fell flat on his behind, scared stiff, but Masako gave a fearless smile and rose to her feet, unperturbed.

“So you have arrived, En! I have waited for you!”

The enormous shadow seemed as though it would swallow her up at any moment.

WHO ARE YOU?

“I am the one who called you. The one who summoned you to this place is I, Masako!”

Masako looked at En with pride on her face.

...YOU ARE BOLD, WOMAN... SO THEN, WHAT IS YOUR PURPOSE FOR ME?

“Lend me your power. Is it not true that you were killed by Kage, the Mononoke that haunted Yoshitsune, and have fallen to the depths of hell? If I had not summoned you, then you would be burning in the inferno at this very moment. Show your gratitude.”

IMPUDENCE! DO YOU WISH ME TO TAKE YOU TO SEE THOSE FLAMES FOR YOURSELF?

The great shadow loomed even further toward Masako.

“Ohoho. Will you be satisfied with little old me? Is there not someone else you would like to take there with you?

Kage vanished along with you. But the one they tried to protect- Yoshitsune, lives on. Let me assuage your hatred. Lend me your power!"

WHAT...? AND IN RETURN?

"... I will give you all of Japan."

At this, Kagetoki naturally opened his mouth to scream, but out of terror of En, he hurriedly clamped both hands over his mouth. He stood and stared wide-eyed.

HM. NOT BAD... HOWEVER, I NO LONGER POSSESS MY FORMER STRENGTH

"I understand. However, surely you could manage to slip into someone with a weak heart, and drive them to madness? We will use that person to get close to Yoshitsune."

THIS SOUNDS LIKE FINE ENTERTAINMENT. AND I AM TO FOLLOW ALONG WITH YOUR LITTLE SHOW...?

As En spoke, the inside of the room began to spin. Gusts of wind blew in every direction, and Kagetoki fell to the floor, covering his head with his hands. The wind stopped, and he raised his terrified face.

"...Huh? Where is En?"

The room had fallen silent, as if nothing had happened, and the oil lamp remained lit.

“Hmph, that certainly was exhausting.”

Masako said, lowering herself to the floor shakily.

“That was splendidly done, Lady Masako! Do you think it went well?”

“Only En knows who he will choose to possess. However, if that monster can manipulate them and get close to Yoshitsune, it will surely present us with a favorable opportunity.”

“I see.”

“Kagetoki, you hurry to Kyoto too. You must investigate Yoshitsune’s current circumstances. I will inform Lord Yoritomo of your whereabouts. And I will say this again, do not interfere directly. That will only bring down my lord’s anger upon you. We must make it so that Yoshitsune is the one to betray him.”

“As you wish!”

Kagetoki smoothly and quickly left the room. With an exhausted face, he let out a huge sigh.

“Ugh... that bitch is terrifying...”

“I can hear you, Kagetoki! Would you like to be sent to hell!?”

“Gaah! M-M-My sincerest apologies!!!”

Hearing Masako’s forceful voice, Kagetoki jumped in fright and ran for his life.

2

“I oppose this! I absolutely oppose this!”

Benkei's sharp voice rang out across Yoshitsune's manor.

Yoshitsune, Benkei, Saburō, and the Satō brothers sat in a circle in the room. Each of them were staring at the letter that lay in the center with grave expressions.

Hiyori stood a short distance away, anxiously watching Yoshitsune and the others.

“Calm down, Benkei,” Saburō said quietly, still staring at the letter.

“How the hell can I calm down? Do you seriously intend to believe a letter that might not even be real, and hold peace negotiations with the Heike!? What if it's a trap!?”

That evening, a *kamuro* had visited Yoshitsune's manor. The *kamuro* were young servants with their hair cut short, and Taira no Kiyomori had formerly set many of them loose in the capital as his spies, to gather information. This *kamuro* was one of the ones still remaining in the capital.

The *kamuro* said that he had come to deliver a letter to Yoshitsune. The sender was "Dennai Noriyoshi", but he himself did not know who that was. He had been told, "If you say the name 'Dennai', Yoshitsune will know," and so had reported that to the soldier on guard.

The guard had been unsure what to do, but just at that moment, Saburō had returned from his patrol. He had asked about the situation, and upon hearing the name "Dennai", hurriedly taken the letter into his own hands.

Returning to the manor, Saburō immediately handed the letter to Yoshitsune.

The letter said that Dennai's master, Taira no Tomomori, wished to seek a path to peace, and therefore would first like to meet Yoshitsune in secret, and even specified a time and place for the secret meeting.

Saburō was surprised to learn that his childhood friend, Dennai, was serving such a powerful general. But since

Tomomori was the commander of all the Heike since Kiyomori's death, and spoken well of even among the Genji, he was strangely reassured.

"He... Dennai, isn't the kind of man who would act for personal gain. He's never shown any interest in wealth or fame. If this is an offer from the lord that Dennai has chosen to follow, then I... I want to trust it."

Saburō said this as if he were trying to ascertain his own feelings.

"How can you simply trust him like that!? Okay, so let's assume for argument's sake that Dennai is a good guy. Isn't there a good chance that he's been deceived by Tomomori? The Heike have been driven into a corner, don't you think that they might do anything to win, no matter how cowardly!? They've gotta know Yoshitsune's name from the surprise attack at Ichi-no-Tani. They're deliberately calling for the man who kicked their asses, you'd have to be mad to think this isn't a trap! Right!?"

Usually, Benkei's foul-mouthed ranting would have made him easy to brush off, but it was clear that he was a quick thinker. He was older than Yoshitsune and the others, and so had seen enough of Mononofu and human wickedness to be sick of it. Part of his role was to hold back Yoshitsune and Saburō when they were being naive.

Listening to Benkei and Saburō's exchange, Tadanobu opened his mouth hesitantly.

"That may be why... The fact that the Heike are in a very painful position may be why they want to end the war... Anyway, I think there's no way to know unless we give meeting them a try."

"Yeah, and if you go to meet them and think, 'Yep, it's a trap' then it'll be too fuckin' late! What would we do if something happened to Yoshitsune!?"

"It's our job to protect him with our lives so that nothing can happen!" said Tsugunobu firmly. Tadanobu continued, "Benkei, don't you want to end this war too? If the war continues, many Mononofu will die. And so will many of the humans caught up in it. So, don't you want to use your life to stop the war, rather than continue it?"

"...Tch."

Benkei had no response, and so continued to glare at Tadanobu with a stern expression. There was a moment's silence, and then Yoshitsune, who had been listening silently, spoke.

"I understand everyone's thinking... But the truth is, I made up my mind the moment I read this letter,"

He looked around at everyone's faces.

"I will go to meet Tomomori. I don't care if it's a trap," he said decisively.

Yoshitsune was remembering what Dennai had said to him by the lake.

Just lamenting it won't end the war.

That's what Dennai said to me then.

*But I've had enough of Mononofu and people dying in battle.
Friends killing each other- it must never happen again.*

I want to put an end to this bloodstained chain of events.

*If there's something I can do to stop it, then I don't care how
much danger I have to face.*

I will give my life.

He suddenly recalled Dennai's engaging smile.

"... And, I promised him that I'd see him again..."

Saburō realized that he meant Dennai, and smiled,

"Yeah, I want to have a stupid conversation with him like old times."

Benkei's face showed a mixture of shock and anger.

“Absolutely ridiculous... Do what you like then, I don’t give a shit,” he spat as he stood up, and stomped out of the room. Hiyori was startled by Benkei’s anger, and looked shaken, as if she were about to cry. After a moment’s hesitation, she followed him.

Saburō watched her leave, and gently patted Yoshitsune’s shoulder.

“Don’t worry about it, Yoshitsune. Benkei is just worried about you.”

To lighten up the atmosphere in the room, Tadanobu joked, “That’s right! He rants and raves, but it’s because if Yoshitsune were ever in danger, he’s the type who’d shove past the rest of us to be first in line to shield him.”

Everyone’s faces relaxed, but Saburō then immediately looked serious again, and said to Yoshitsune, “By the way, what are you going to do about Lord Yoritomo? Will you send a messenger to Kamakura to inform him?”

“No. There are still far too many things that we can’t predict. First, we should determine by ourselves whether or not Tomomori really desires peace.”

“I see... I’ll make sure the soldier who the *kamuro* was talking to keeps his mouth shut, then.”

“Thanks, Saburō.”

Those words became a signal to end the meeting.

Yoshitsune made to leave the room. The sun had already set and it was dark outside. Tadanobu opened his mouth to ask where he was going, but Tsugunobu immediately put a hand over his mouth and gave him a look. Tadanobu's expression said that he understood, and he nodded.

Saburō was smiling as he put the letter away. Since the incident with Yoshinaka, it had seemed that Yoshitsune had completely lost himself, but now the light was finally beginning to return to his eyes.

*If that's the case, then all we can do is walk the road
Yoshitsune believes in together.*

Saburō made up his mind.

Having stormed out of the manor, Benkei sat on a large boulder in a bamboo grove behind the building, looking up at the moon. This place led towards the mountains, and its slight elevation gave good views of the surroundings. Benkei often drank sake here while looking at the moon.

Suddenly sensing something, he turned, and saw Hiyori standing alone, a short distance away. Her silver hair

shimmered, and her pale skin stood out against the darkness. She was as beautiful as a white lily in the moonlight.

“Oh, it’s you, Hiyori...”

Hiyori made a face as if to say, “You finally noticed me,” as she approached Benkei and sat herself down beside him. Benkei continued to look up at the moon.

“Sure is a beautiful moon... I wonder how many more times I’ll be able to see such a moon?”

It was a rare moment of sentimentality from him. Hiyori grinned at him in response, and turned to Benkei, mouthing words. Benkei read her lips.

“What?... Huh? Out of character?”

Hiyori nodded in agreement.

“Shut up! Even I know that!”

“...”

With a slightly worried expression, and tilted her head to peer at Benkei.

“...It’s not that I don’t understand. To open a new path, you need to do something unreasonable.”

Hiyori's beautiful and innocent eyes, that seemed deep enough to be swallowed up in, naturally drew out Benkei's true feelings.

"But, I can't shake the feeling that Yoshitsune is heading right for the middle of a massive whirlpool. Ten years ago, when he said he was gonna decline the priesthood and leave Mount Kurama, and then when he decided to leave Ōshū and go to Lord Yoritomo in Kamakura, I had the same feeling. He moves forward on his own and tries to choose the dangerous path. If he keeps on running like this, then one day he's gonna... he's gonna... Shit!"

Benkei's face crumpled, and tears welled up in his eyes. He turned his face away in a desperate attempt to hide this from Hiyori. Hiyori was surprised at his tears, but she gently put her arms around his arm, and lightly rested her head on his shoulder. Benkei was completely flustered.

"Hey...! Oi, stop that! It's embarrassing!"

Benkei tried to shake his arm loose, but Hiyori did not let go. Eventually he gave up and heaved a great sigh.

"... Sorry. I guess I must have worried you. It's okay. I'll protect Yoshitsune. Even if it kills me."

Hiyori raised her head and began to mouth words again.

I-don't-want-you-to-die-ei-ther-Ben-kei

Reading her lips, Benkei looked up to the moon to hold back the tears that were welling up in his eyes again.

“Idiot...! Do you really think I’m going to die so easily!? ... I must be getting old. Somehow I’ve started to get all teary over stuff like this. It’s pathetic...”

Hiyori nodded enthusiastically, still holding on to his arm.

“Shut up and mind your own business! ... But... thanks. I’m okay now. You go back to the house first, Hiyori. I just snapped at them and stormed out, so I’ll go back after I’ve cooled my head a little.”

Hiyori looked at Benkei with a relieved expression, and then stood up energetically and ran back down the path. She was wearing a proud smile, as if she were glad to have soothed Benkei’s suffering. Benkei watched as she ran away, crossing his arms as if to shake off his embarrassment. He sat down cross-legged and called out in disappointment.

“Hey, it’s creepy to spy on people! Why don’t you come out?”

A few meters away from where Benkei was sitting, Yoshitsune slowly emerged from the bamboo, scratching his head in embarrassment.

“I wasn’t spying or anything... I was just... Waiting my turn.”

Yoshitsune smiled as he sat next to Benkei.

“Here, you forgot this,” he said, handing Benkei his favorite sake flask and cup. Benkei accepted them silently.

“I feel sorry, because I’m always causing you trouble, Benkei. But I want to put an end to Mononofu fighting and killing each other. Continuing to fight until one side is destroyed doesn’t have to be the answer, right?”

“Mononofu were born to fight. That’s why we have powers. It makes us different to humans, who can only pray. We have to use our powers to end wars.”

“Is that really so?”

“Mn?”

“And what if the very existence of Mononofu is the cause of all wars?”

“ ... ”

“Kage told me. That eventually I’d understand the reason why the demon chose me.”

Benkei turned to Yoshitsune in surprise.

“I’ve been thinking about that the whole time. Maybe the demon exists to wipe every last Mononofu off the face of the earth...”

“Yoshitsune...”

“That would certainly end the war. But I don’t want to choose that path. I won’t become a demon. I want to act on my own will, not the demon’s, and open up the path I believe in.”

“So that’s what it is. I get it. That’s what we’re here for.”

Benkei filled his sake cup to the brim, and then drank the whole thing in one gulp. Yoshitsune stole the flask from him, and then re-filled his cup.

“Benkei, there’s something I’ve been wanting to ask you... I don’t have any memories from when I was young. But as long as I can remember, you’ve been by my side. But you’re not my father or anything, so that’s kind of strange... Why?”

“Tha-That’s...! B-Because I was asked!”

“By whom?”

“ ”
...

“... Perhaps the truth is, you came to kill me because of the demon inside me?”

Benkei dropped the cup of sake he was drinking.

“Tha...! That’s not it at all! Ah, noooo, my precious sake...!!!”

At Benkei’s flailing, Yoshitsune spat out his own sake laughing. “No, it’s fine. That doesn’t matter anymore... Rather, I’m just truly grateful you’re still here with me.”

“Dammit, between you and Hiyori. I’m done with this sappy bullshit tonight!”

Perhaps to hide his embarrassment, Benkei stole the flask back from Yoshitsune and poured and gulped down his sake cup over and over. Laughing, Yoshitsune stood, and looking up at the slightly less than full moon, spoke quietly.

“Benkei, I have something to ask of you.”

“Whaddya want? I’ve got no money.”

“If I become a demon again, and I can’t change back...”
Yoshitsune slowly turned to look at Benkei.

“Then you kill me.”

Lost for words, Benkei stared back at Yoshitsune. In the moonlight, his silhouette seemed dreamlike, and from his expression Benkei felt a strong will that could not be opposed. Silence passed between the two of them. At last, Benkei settled his resolve and spoke.

“... Understood. If that happens, I'll kill you.”

“... Thank you,” said Yoshitsune.

He looked up at the moon once again and said, “This moon is our witness tonight.”

3

Around three weeks had passed since the letter from Dennai had arrived.

On the shores of the lake where they had encountered Yoshitsune while slipping into Kyoto, Tomomori and the others were waiting for Yoshitsune to appear.

At this time of year, the fresh green of the new leaves was beautiful during the day, but now the sun had set and darkness spread throughout the forest. There were no signs that anyone else would pass by here, and only the cries of insects sounded all around.

Tomomori sat with his back to the lake, and Noritsune and Dennai stood on either side of him. Tomomori and Noritsune were dressed in *kariginu*, the formal costume of nobles.

Even for Tomomori, this secret meeting was a gamble. The letter had been safely handed over to Yoshitsune, and Dennai had confirmed that, as directed, a paper ribbon had been tied to the pine tree as a sign of agreement. However, it would not be surprising if Yoshitsune was thinking that this would be the perfect opportunity to capture the Heike generals. All they could do was trust in Yoshitsune's character.

Noritsune had quickly become irritated, and made no attempt to conceal it.

"Brother, the time of our promised meeting with Yoshitsune is long past. As expected, this was a wild idea. If they come with soldiers in tow and surround us, I might not be able to protect you from all of them."

"Calm down, Nori."

Eyes shut, Tomomori silenced him, but then gave an order to Kikuōmaru and Ginrōmaru, who were behind Nori. "Kiku, Gin, you stay at a distance and be prepared for a surprise attack from the enemy."

Kikuōmaru and Ginrōmaru, who had been looking rather bored, nodded happily.

“Stay back! It is not time to move yet... Understand? We are the ones who called them out here. If we attack first, then there will never again be a path to peace!”

Hearing Tomomori's stern voice, Ginrōmaru asked with a confused face, “...Enemies... Kill? Don't kill?”

Next to him, Kikuōmaru gave him a shove.

“Stupid. Enemies, you kill!”

“No, don't kill them!” said Dennai, in shocked disagreement. Kikuōmaru and Ginrōmaru stared at Noritsune as if they were begging for the correct answer. Noritsune glared into the darkness before him and merely answered, “...Don't move yet.”

In Noritsune's line of vision, he could see the flickering light of a torch approaching from between the trees ahead. Saburō appeared first, holding the torch, followed by Benkei, Yoshitsune, Hiyori, and the Satō brothers. Yoshitsune had tried countless times to persuade Hiyori to wait at the manor, but she stubbornly ignored him and came anyway.

When Saburō spotted Dennai, he said, “Sorry we're late. This path is more difficult to follow at night than I thought. It took a long time.”

He looked at Dennai with a heartfelt expression. “Long time no see, Dennai. You’ve done well for yourself, haven’t you?... Do you remember me?”

Saburō asked this in a joking manner, and Dennai looked at him doubtfully as he spoke, but then recognized his old friend and immediately replied, “Are you... Saburō? Ise Saburō!? What are you doing here!?”

“Yoshitsune, who you met in the forest, is my master. I was so surprised when I heard him mention your name, Dennai.”

“I’m surprised too! I can’t believe I’m meeting you again in a place like this! Gahahaha!”

Noritsune cut straight through Dennai’s cackling. “Sorry to interrupt when you’re having so much fun, but is this just a way to lure us into a trap?”

At those words, Benkei fixed Noritsune with a furious stare. “Hey, hey, hey, what the hell are you on about? You’re the ones who called us out here!”

“So what? ... And what’s with those clothes? We’re going to have an important conversation and you don’t even come in formal wear...? Do the Mononofu from the east have no manners?... Brother, it’s like I said, they are disrespecting the Heike!”

“Noritsune, calm yourself!”

With a stern face, Tomomori scolded Noritsune, but Benkei was provoked by Noritsune’s challenge, and the blood rushed to his head.

“Noritsune... Huh, are you the Noritsune they call the ‘Heike’s Strongest’? And yet, you’ve got such a puny little body. Your face looks like a fuckin’ woman too...”

Noritsune huffed, and stared at Benkei with ice cold eyes. It was as if he were a different person to his daily squabbles with Dennai, his expression was calm and challenging.

“The Genji really must be hard up for soldiers, to bring a wild boar along.”

“Don’t provoke me, asshole... If you really wanna fight, then how about we do it right here? Well, I guess you can’t in your pretty little robes, right?”

“There’s no problem. I can move well enough in these to put down a wild boar. But rather than fight a pig like you, I’m more interested in *him*... Don’t you feel the same, Yoshitsune?”

Tomomori reacted to those words. *So that’s Yoshitsune.*

“What did you say!?”

Losing his temper, Benkei stepped forward, and Kikuōmaru and Ginrōmaru swiftly planted themselves in front of Noritsune. Kikuōmaru was in perfect fighting stance, and slashed at Benkei without a moment's hesitation. Benkei mirrored him, swinging his naginata down.

It all happened in an instant. There was the sound of blades clashing, and Yoshitsune was standing between Kikuōmaru and Benkei, stopping both their blades with a dagger held in each hand. "Oh!" said Noritsune, raising his eyebrows and looking on with deep interest.

"Stop, both of you! Benkei, back off!" Yoshitsune said, and sent Benkei flying with a decisive kick. But Kikuōmaru immediately began his next attack. His blades came at Yoshitsune repeatedly with incredible speed, and barely dodging the attacks, Yoshitsune saw Tsugunobu and Tadanobu preparing to draw their swords.

"Do NOT make a move!" Yoshitsune ordered in a stern voice. Aiming to hit him in that gap, Kikuōmaru flew at Yoshitsune. Yoshitsune swiftly twisted his body, and simultaneously landed a knee in Kikuōmaru's belly.

"Guh..."

Kikuōmaru groaned and curled up. Dennai had been trying to get between them, but he couldn't follow the speed of their movements. Kikuōmaru had finally stopped moving, so Dennai shouted, "Kiku, stop!... Hey, Nori! Make Kiku stop!"

"Does it matter though? If Yoshitsune is going to die from such a simple fight, then killing him is the easiest way to end the war," Noritsune answered, unconcerned. He noticed that even though Yoshitsune was blocking Kikuōmaru's attacks, he made no attempt to attack with his own blades.

What's with him? Is he going easy on Kikuōmaru? As Noritsune thought that, Kikuōmaru launched another attack on Yoshitsune.

"...Tch."

Yoshitsune tutted. He could injure Kikuōmaru and stop him from moving. But the blood spilled would cause the demon blood in him to boil over. Yoshitsune knew that, and so was working hard to keep control of himself as he fought. His dagger found Kikuōmaru's throat, but the blade came to a perfect stop just a hair's breadth from the skin. Kikuōmaru brushed off the attack, but Yoshitsune followed it up by delivering a spinning kick. The force sent Kikuōmaru flying sideways.

“Stop!”

It was Ginrōmaru who shouted. He turned to Yoshitsune and spread out both his hands, using his power as he cried out. Yoshitsune immediately felt his entire body stiffen. He struggled desperately to move, but couldn't even lift a finger. Benkei and the others stood dumbfounded, not understanding what was happening. Ginrōmaru slowly lowered his arms, and as he did, Yoshitsune's body sank to the ground.

“Ugh...!”

Realizing what Ginrōmaru's power was, Tadanobu raised his sword to stop him. Yoshitsune saw him and forced the words from his throat,

“Stop... I said... don't move...!”

As he said that, he focused his awareness on his own body, and with a shout, threw off Ginrōmaru's power.

“Wha-!? My power? Doesn't work. On him?”

Next to the shocked Ginrōmaru, Kikuōmaru glared at Yoshitsune.

“Kill...! You... I definitely kill!!!”

As the tense atmosphere resumed, Tomomori strode firmly in between the two and shouted,

“WILL YOU JUST STOP!?”

There was the sound of a flock of birds taking flight, surprised by his powerful roar. Ginrōmaru recoiled in fright.

Tomomori sighed heavily, and looked across the faces of everyone present.

“Each and every one of you... Are you really thinking about this country!? Do you think we gathered here tonight for a brawl!? Have you forgotten that we arranged this meeting to create a way for both the Heike and the Genji to live without either being destroyed!?”

Without a moment's pause, Tomomori turned to Yoshitsune and bowed.

“... If I have offended you, I bow in apology. So you are Lord Yoshitsune. I am sincerely grateful to you for accepting our offer to meet. I am Taira no Tomomori... First, let us sit and talk.”

Tomomori sat down unguarded as he said this. As Saburō and Benkei stared in surprise, Hiyori arrived carrying a

large flask. It was sake that Tomomori had prepared and brought there by horse.

“Oh, you noticed that? So you’re the only one who understands the purpose of this. I appreciate it.”

He took the flask and placed it in front of everyone with a thud.

“How about it? If you want to compete, then you may do so to your heart’s content! But it will not be a contest of blades, but drinking!”

“Huh? B-Brother!”

Noritsune looked at Tomomori blankly. Tomomori had a mischievous smile on his face.

As the hour grew late, the chirping of insects strengthened into a great chorus. Next to the lake, the Satō brothers, Kikuōmaru and Ginrōmaru were all sprawled on the ground, asleep. Benkei was barely managing to sit upright, but his torso was swaying from side to side in a great arc. It seemed that he himself did not notice this.

“Heeey you, Tomomori. You shuuure can drink, ya bastard... Hic!”

Benkei taunted Tomomori, and Noritsune snapped at him with a slurring tongue, “Hey, you rotten monk! Address him as Tomomori-sama... If you don’t, I’ll... cut you to pieces... and make you into meatballs... wild boar stew...”

He got that far before slumping forward, breathing as if he were asleep. Benkei burst out laughing.

“Bahahaha... How’s that? Have you lost? You’re one hundred years, two months and ten days too early to defeat me, Benkei! Hehehehe...heeh.”

Benkei then also fell backwards with a great crash, and immediately began snoring loudly.

Tomomori smiled and gave a sigh of relief.

“Well, well... the two loud ones have finally passed out...”

Beside him, Dennai and Saburō were barely remaining conscious, but Saburō’s eyes were already rolling back in his head.

“Hey Saburō, don’t pass out yet... You’ve gotta watch over the rest of us.”

“Sorry... I... I’m done...” he said, and collapsed. Dennai shook him by the shoulder and said,

“I’m gonna have one more! Uugh... I gotta piss...”

He staggered off into the forest. Yoshitsune took the flask, and poured sake into Tomomori's cup, saying, "You're quite strong."

"Oh no, Lord Yoshitsune, you are quite a strong drinker yourself."

"...Just call me Yoshitsune. You are older than I am, and that's what my friends call me. I'm more comfortable not using titles."

"Even if you are my enemy, I could never refer to a general so casually... But... yes... If I best you in this drinking contest, then I shall call you brother."

Yoshitsune found it unexpected. To think that such a Mononofu existed among the sons of Kiyomori, the man who had killed his father. And that he and that Mononofu would be pouring sake for each other. Strangely, no hatred welled up in him. And he did not sense that Tomomori held any hatred for him. He had a feeling that the road to peace, which he half believed in and half doubted, may not be a mere dream if he worked with Tomomori. He even felt that it was a shame that he had not met Dennai or Tomomori earlier.

"My brother would surely be surprised to hear of it. That one of the Heike and I refer to each other as brothers."

“Hahaha! People become separated by a thousand miles,
but enjoyment fits inside a sake cup.”¹

“Hm?”

“It’s my favorite poem. Even if people become far apart,
their hearts are both within the sake cup... Don’t you think
so?”

Tomomori raised his sake cup to the moon, and then
drained it in one gulp. Yoshitsune watched him and then
swallowed his own cup of sake in reply. Hiyori carried a
new flask to them.

“Now then, Lord Yoshitsune. Shall we get to the main
topic? As you know, we Heike would like to further
negotiations. Of course, both sides will have conditions.
The cloistered emperor wishes for us to return the emperor
and the three treasures. If it will make peace a reality, then
we are willing to do that. And I also think that it is no
longer an era in which we Mononofu should bare our teeth
at each other. If we both serve the Imperial court, then we
should each assume our own roles... What are your
thoughts, Lord Yoshitsune?”

1 Tomomori is quoting the Chinese poet Li Bai, this poem is
known in Japanese as *Kouka Nite Soushitei Wakaru*
“Farewelling My Brother In Jiangxia”

“I... can’t understand... why Mononofu, why friends must kill each other. If we can end that by creating peace, then I agree.”

The image of Yoshinaka welled up in Yoshitsune’s mind, and his chest ached. Tomomori sensed his feelings.

“I heard from Dennai... It seems that something happened to you that is hard to endure.”

“...”

Yoshitsune fell silent. Tomomori straightened his posture and turned to look directly at him.

“Lord Yoshitsune. I apologize for my rudeness, but may I touch your face? Don’t worry, I’m not going to eat you. My power is looking into people’s hearts... I am curious to look into yours, Lord Yoshitsune.”

Yoshitsune thought for a moment.

“I don’t mind. It won’t hurt, and it’ll be some entertainment to go with the sake,” he laughed, unconcerned.

“Excuse me,” said Tomomori, moving behind Yoshitsune, who closed his eyes. Tomomori quietly placed a hand on either side of Yoshitsune’s head, and focused his mind. Hiyori gazed at the two of them anxiously. Eventually, it seemed that Tomomori sensed something.

“That... Yoshinaka and Tomoe... I see... you lost some dear friends...”

Tomomori's expression suddenly darkened. He furrowed his brows momentarily, and then, in a voice that was barely a voice, gasped, “Wha-”. He reflexively tried to move his hands away but they were frozen. Frightened by the feeling of being pulled in, he forcefully pulled his hands away, and half leapt back, staring at Yoshitsune. His face looked like he had seen something unnatural. Yoshitsune slowly opened his eyes, and smiled sadly.

“... What happened? Did you perhaps see a demon?”

Tomomori was lost for words. Finally he laughed.

We were fighting a war with this monster as our opponent?

“Heh... Hahahaha! How could we win against that! I must thank Dennai. The Heike really were about to walk the road to their own destruction. Thank you, Lord Yoshitsune... no, brother. From now on, I will call you that.”

He held out the flask to Yoshitsune excitedly.

“... Understood, brother.”

“Tonight has been a truly fantastic meeting. Ah, I feel like drinking more. Now, brother, I will enjoy your company a little longer!”

Yoshitsune took the cup of sake silently.

Dennai had returned from the forest at some point, and was quietly watching them while leaning against a large tree.

At last, the eastern sky began to lighten and the cries of insects ceased, replaced by birdsong. The morning sun rose above the boundary between the sky and the mountains.

In the western sky, the moon still faintly remained.

In August 1184, the first year of the Genryaku era, Go-Shirakawa appointed Yoshitsune to the *kebiishi*, the group in charge of preserving peace in the capital, as the secondary captain of the *Saemon*, in charge of protecting the emperor.

Wanting to gain the alliance of the influential families and warrior clans of Kyushu, who had deep ties to the Heike, Yoritomo sent Minamoto no Noriyori to Kyushu. If he could hold down Kyushu, it would isolate the Heike in the Seto Inland Sea. That was his aim.

On the other hand, Yoshitsune continued his underground meetings with Tomomori's group, preparing the conditions for peace and preparations for both sides.

These negotiations proceeded in secret, but Kagetoki, who had entered Kyoto to stealthily investigate Yoshitsune's behavior, had partly caught on to it. He did not have enough information to prove it, but this would be enough to provide an opportunity to create a crack between Yoshitsune and Yoritomo.

In this way, the new year began, and it was January, 1185, the second year of the Genryaku era.

In Yoritomo's manor in Kamakura, that small crack appeared.

Reading the letter from Yoshitsune, Yoritomo was clearly unable to hide the confusion and irritation on his face. Behind him, Masako looked on coldly.

"My lord, what is it that Yoshitsune has said?"

"... He says that as usual, there is no change. I doubt that he is having that much trouble hunting down the remaining Heike in the capital, and I would like him to head off to pursue the Heike army as soon as possible... But instead, he keeps on talking about Kyushu."

“It is because you have been too soft on him from the beginning, my lord. He even accepted a position from the cloistered emperor without permission from you, my lord, the leader of the Genji... This is not something we can permit! We cannot allow the other retainers to see this. Yoshitsune has not made a move because he is busy trying to please the cloistered emperor. What Yoshitsune is doing is not so different from the *kugyō* in the capital, is it not!?” Masako took the opportunity to speak.

“I know! I intend to give him a harsh reprimand for accepting the position soon. But first, we must wipe out the Heike.”

As soon as Yoritomo said that, Kagetoki charged into the room, his face red.

“My lord, I have a matter of grave importance! Allow me to whisper in your ear!”

“... What is it? Say it.”

Kagetoki's insides sank at Yoritomo's brusque attitude, but he glided across the floor and sat next to Yoritomo.

“I have received information that Lord Yoshitsune is secretly communicating with the Heike, and attempting to negotiate peace...” he said, as though it pained him. Yoritomo's voice was naturally furious.

“Wh-What did you say!?”

“... I, Kagetoki, have been to the capital and confirmed it myself.”

“Yoshitsune would never betray me!”

Yoritomo was visibly shaken, and Masako’s cold voice sounded from behind him.

“My lord, open your eyes. Is this not consistent with Yoshitsune’s conduct over the past few months? Ignoring your orders, my lord, and independently deciding to make peace with the Heike amounts to treason. You have received orders from the cloistered emperor to pursue the Heike, and he is making a mockery of you. He may already be an enemy of the Imperial court.”

“...”

“That is not all. Even more frighteningly...” Kagetoki swallowed, “There are signs that he plans to join with the Heike and kill you, my lord.”

“Kill... me...you say?”

Yoritomo’s face flushed crimson with rage. But a small amount of affection towards his younger brother still smouldered in him. That emotion was just enough to calm him.

“... Call Yoshitsune to return here immediately. I will personally determine if he is dealing with the Heike. If that is true then I will arrest him on the spot as a traitor.”

“You cannot!” Masako interrupted forcefully. Kagetoki jumped in fright at her voice.

“What will you do if Yoshitsune becomes defiant and comes to attack us along with the Heike!? We’ll be surrounded by the armies of both enemies!”

“Then what should I do!?”

Yoritomo glared back at Masako. He was like a child throwing a tantrum. Masako suddenly smiled sweetly, and whispered to Yoritomo as she held him close.

“Do not worry. I am with you, my lord. We should allow Yoshitsune to remain as he is in Kyoto for now. Sooner or later, he will slip and show his true nature. If we pretend to be unaware, it will be simple to take his head.”

Yoritomo felt quite dizzy at the sweet perfume Masako exuded.

“I feel unwell... Kagetoki, do not take your eyes off Yoshitsune. If he makes any suspicious moves, inform me immediately...” he said, and staggered out of the room.

Once Yoritomo was out of sight, Masako turned to Kagetoki again with a cold expression.

“... Useless. I was terrified that he was going to see through your clumsy act.”

“Oh no. But nevertheless, do you think that our lord believes us about the treason?”

“He doesn’t have to believe it. It is true that Yoshitsune is secretly working towards peace, is it not? If we just cut that thread of that peace, then En can make his move.”

“Huh?”

Unable to take in the situation, Kagetoki stared with his mouth open. Then, he spoke the doubt that he had been carrying in his mind every day.

“Even so... Is Lord Yoshitsune really that much of a threat?”

As soon as he said it, he cringed, thinking that Masako would turn on him in a fury, but she was unexpectedly calm.

“I am not afraid of Yoshitsune. I am afraid of his power... No, that is not of the sort of thing that would be called a power. It is far more than that, something with a will of its own... a monster. As long as he is hiding that, Yoshitsune

is a threat. We absolutely cannot allow something like that to exist in the eastern country which we, the Hōjō clan, have built.”

Kagetoki understood and agreed.

Long ago, Yoritomo had been defeated by Taira no Kiyomori, and was nothing more than a mere exile in Ise Province. That he had risen to become the leader of the East was in no small part thanks to the power of the great clans in the Kanto area, starting with the Hōjō. What Masako was trying to protect was not the Genji, nor even Yoritomo. It was the Hōjō blood that ran in her veins, and the eastern country.

Kagetoki understood well that he did not have the skill to take over the country. But he was confident that he was better than anyone else at reading the flow of influence and sniffing out the ones who did have the talent to rule the world. And his own power of confusing people's minds was perfectly suited to his talents.

Even if I cannot take over the country myself, I can be the right hand of the one who does, and the one with the most influence.

That was Kagetoki's own ambition.

“As expected of Lady Masako. Your view is so different to our lord’s.”

At Kagetoki’s somewhat cynical words, Masako gave a chilling smile.

“Kagetoki, head to Yashima immediately... leave your orders to me,” she commanded.

February, the Heike encampment on Yashima Island.

The night was so quiet that the crackling of the firewood in the bonfires around the camp could be heard.

When they had first passed over to Yashima, the ships had been their living quarters, but now over a year had passed, and a manor had been prepared as a temporary location for the emperor, and for Noritsune and the others to live in. Despite officially being at war, thanks to the secret agreement between Tomomori and Yoshitsune, there was actually a ceasefire. Even the soldiers, who had at first been frightened even by birds taking flight, thinking it was a surprise attack by the Genji, had regained their composure.

But for Noritsune, whose sleep was agony, there was no such thing as a peaceful night.

Once again, he was wandering lost inside a nightmare.

He was in a world where it seemed like the sky itself was on fire.

Something sludgy like magma, swirling like a whirlpool while belching flames here and there, covered the entire sky. When he looked down, a great black void was opening to swallow him. Where the flames and the darkness mingled, they clashed with each other and glowed deep red. Noritsune was floating in the middle of it.

He was about to scream in terror, but he suddenly noticed that he was holding someone's hand. When he looked, it was Yoshitsune, covered in blood. Noritsune was desperately holding on to him to keep him from falling into the jet black void. Noritsune's hand was also covered in blood.

Enough... Let go of my hand... I'm tired...

What are you saying! Hold on!!!

Their voices echoed.

Eventually Yoshitsune's face became distorted, and the flames and darkness surrounding Noritsune began to spin. From all directions came a deafening sound that made Noritsune want to cover his ears. But he had to keep hold of Yoshitsune's hand. As he held back his fear, the sound abruptly ceased, and something whispered from right behind Noritsune's ear.

DO YOU WISH FOR POWER?

“AAAAAAHHHHHHH!!!”

At last, Noritsune screamed.

The images instantly disappeared, and Noritsune was awake and sitting upright alone in his sleeping quarters, breathing heavily.

“What was that just now...?”

Even though it was winter, he was covered in sweat. His body was suddenly assailed by the cold, and he began to shiver violently.

“Noritsune-sama! Is everything alright?” a soldier who had heard his scream called worriedly from outside the room.

“I’m alright. I just had a nightmare... The same as usual,” he said, sending the soldier away. Groggily, he tried to discern the meaning of the dream he had just experienced.

What was that about? Why me and Yoshitsune?

Aren’t we going to create peace and end the war? Why were we covered in blood?

And where was that? It seemed like something from a completely different world...

“N-Noritsune-sama! Noritsune-sama!”

He heard footsteps approaching rapidly, and the soldier was calling out again. A little irritated, Noritsune replied, “I said I’m fine!”

“This is a serious situation! One of the soldiers on patrol has captured a suspicious person!”

“...What did you say?”

Noritsune stood and slammed open the door to the room. The soldier bowed hurriedly.

“It seems that he was creeping around in the forest right next to the camp, and spying on us... Hey, bring him over here!”

A soldier who had been hanging back stepped forward, dragging a man bound with rope. Noritsune looked at the man's face and appeared surprised for an instant, but immediately returned to his usual defiant expression. He stared down the man with a faint smile on his lips.

"The rest of you may leave."

"Huh? But..."

"I said, back off!"

Noritsune's forcefulness left them unable to say a word, and the soldiers hurriedly scattered. Noritsune watched them leave, then looked down on the man helplessly rolling back and forth on the floor with contempt.

"It has been quite a long time, has it not, Kagetoki? Back then, you spent your time sucking up to the Heike, but I hear that now you work beside Yoritomo as a military adviser. What's a traitor like you doing here on Yashima?"

Kagetoki wriggled his body like a worm, and eventually managed to arrange himself in a sitting position and look up at Noritsune. Surprisingly, he had a smile on his face.

"It has indeed been a long time, Noritsune-sama. How wonderful it is to see that you've become ever so slightly more manly!"

“You...you...! How dare you be so impudent! I’ll kill you right here and now!”

“Eeek! I-It is only natural that you would call me a traitor. But, please listen to my side of the story before you take my head off!”

At Kagetoki’s words, Noritsune stopped.

“Why do you think that I, Kagetoki, who served the Heike for so many years, got close to Yoritomo and pretended to be his retainer? I can only speak of this in whispers, but I was ordered by a certain person to infiltrate the Genji!”

“What...?”

Kagetoki shuffled toward Noritsune on his knees. So that Noritsune would not realize that he was using his power of confusion, he pretended to be naturally making eye contact, while sending his intentions.

“That person was... Lord Shigehira.”

“You lie! Lord Shigehira is Tomomori’s younger brother. And I haven’t heard a word from him about this!”

“Then why do you think that Lord Shigehira, who was captured by the Genji, is still alive?”

“What!? Lord Shigehira is alive...?”

“Exactly. I risked my life appealing directly to Yoritomo to save him.”

It was true that Shigehira, who had been captured during the Battle of Ichi-no-Tani, had been escorted to Kamakura and met with Yoritomo, before being entrusted to the manor of a retainer. But this was not Kagetoki’s doing. It was simply because Yoritomo highly approved of Shigehira’s character.

“Since Yoritomo began raising an army, Lord Shigehira had been suspecting that there was a Genji spy among the Heike. If there were not, then how could the Heike army, with their overwhelmingly larger numbers, lose? When the Heike fled Kyoto, the cloistered emperor’s escape was his doing. Therefore, I entered the service of Yoritomo, in order to find the spy.”

Noritsune leaned against a wall with his arms folded as he listened.

“So then, who was this spy?”

Kagetoki doubled over dramatically and said, “I... cannot tell you! Even if I said his name, there is no way you would believe me, Noritsune-sama.”

Frustrated by Kagetoki's evasive attitude, Noritsune took the sword beside him and drew it from the sheath, then stepped towards Kagetoki, swinging the blade high.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaa! T-Tomomori!” Kagetoki screamed, hunching his neck into his shoulders and curling into a ball like a cat. Noritsune's blade stopped a hair's breadth above his head. The blood drained from Kagetoki's face.

“... Even I, Kagetoki, could not believe it at first. But the peace that Lord Tomomori is pushing, even though it has the continuation of the Heike clan as one of its conditions, that is only for the sake of appearances.”

“Wh- How do you know about that!?”

Kagetoki continued without answering that question.

“In actuality, the Genji house are the servants of the Imperial Court, and the only Heike who have been promised official posts are... a small group of retainers, beginning with Tomomori. That is how the secret agreement goes. Tomomori values himself above the survival of the Heike. That is the truth about these ‘peace negotiations’!”

“I'm not going to believe such a ridiculous story...”

Noritsune said, although he was clearly shaken. Kagetoki

was completely drunk on his own convincing performance.

“Since I don’t know which of the other retainers have joined hands with Tomomori, I rely on you alone, Noritsune-sama. If the peace negotiations continue, then both you and the Heike clan will not be able to escape extinction. I wanted to prevent this at all costs, so I sneaked in here.”

“ ... ”

“I intend to return to the capital, and try to stop this scheme from the Genji side... Well then, excuse me.”

Still bound in rope, Kagetoki tried to leave the room immediately. He thought that if he did not flee before Noritsune got a hold of himself, the holes in his story would appear. But Noritsune’s sharp voice called out from behind him.

“Kagetoki!”

Kagetoki looked back in fear. Noritsune was approaching with his sword and a severe look on his face. *My act has been exposed*, Kagetoki shivered. However, Noritsune used his blade to cut Kagetoki’s ropes, and called to Kikuōmaru, who was outside the room. Kikuōmaru came immediately, but he was rubbing his eyes sleepily.

“Kiku, escort this man to the capital safely. Protect him no matter what.”

“Got it... Protect him? Kill bad guys?”

“That’s right. I’m counting on you.”

“Yeah!”

After Kagetoki and Kikuōmaru left, Noritsune sat down in disbelief. The inside of his head swirled in confusion, and he could not collect his thoughts.

It can't be true. Brother would never do such a thing.

And yet, it was a fact that Kagetoki knew about the peace negotiations. In that case, are Yoshitsune and the others also in on this secret deal?

Immediately after that, an unpleasant thought came to mind.

It can't be... Dennai too?

Is even Dennai trying to abandon me?

On one hand, I can't allow myself to be manipulated by Kagetoki, but somehow I just can't clear my mind of this anxiety. It's not that I don't trust Tomomori and Dennai, it's my fear of being abandoned by them.

The nightmare that Noritsune had that night returned to his mind.

Yoshitsune and I, covered in blood... I didn't want to think that it was a prophetic dream. But now that I've heard Kagetoki's story, I can't spend my time with them laughing.

DO YOU WISH FOR POWER?

Noritsune felt that the voice was once again whispering in his ear, and a chill ran up his spine.

At the same time, pain rushed through his head as though it were being crushed, and he winced. It was the headache that always came after he had a prophetic dream or a nightmare.

“Owww... what the hell... Damn it.”

Although it was not uncommon for Noritsune to have headaches, the pain this time was more unpleasant than anything he'd experienced in his life, and was difficult to bear.

6

His breath white in the cold, Tsugunobu continued to run as fast as he could down the mountain path. He had come part of the way on horseback, but because the path was narrow and dark, he had dismounted and was running. He only had the moonlight shining through the trees to rely on. But he had come this way many times before and so was light on his feet.

He stopped by a large boulder that he used as a landmark, and checked the letter stowed at his chest. Catching his breath, he thought, *If I keep up this pace, I should arrive at the place where I promised to meet Dennai by dawn,* deciding to rest a little against the boulder.

The peace negotiations were primarily carried out during secret meetings, but it was difficult for both sides to meet often without those around them catching on. Therefore, they discussed the details by exchanging letters, Tomomori's messenger was Dennai, and on Yoshitsune's side, Tsugunobu, who was the strongest runner, took on the role.

Dennai and Tsugunobu avoided the Bizen and Fukuhara routes which were occupied by the Genji army. They met at Kino Harbor¹ and exchanged letters.

The letter that Tsugunobu was carrying on this day was from Yoshitsune, and addressed to the commander of the entire Heike clan, Munemori. Along with this letter, Tomomori would open a conversation with the Heike vassals about peace negotiations.

As Tsugunobu looked up at the countless stars twinkling in the clear sky, he remembered Yoshitsune entrusting him with the letter. With a clear and powerful gaze, Yoshitsune had spoken to him.

1 Near modern day Kinokawa-kakou, Wakayama Prefecture.

“In this letter, I have written how necessary peace is for both sides. If Munemori reads this and agrees to peace, then I intend to go to Yashima and meet with him.”

“To Yashima?... Is that safe? Yoritomo still doesn’t know, does he?” Tsugunobu blurted out.

“I will inform my brother after the Heike have agreed to peace. We will not have to lose any more soldiers. Even my brother will be pleased. And so the war will end. The era of Mononofu fighting against each other will end... I’m counting on you, Tsugunobu.”

The era of Mononofu fighting against each other will end.

If he was honest, Tsugunobu didn’t quite believe it. But if that’s what Yoshitsune wished for, then he would follow without question.

Tsugunobu and his younger brother Tadanobu had originally been retainers serving Fujiwara no Hidehira in Ōshū Province. Because of that, when a sixteen year old Yoshitsune had left Mount Kurama ten years ago, and come to Ōshū with Saburō and Benkei in tow, Tsugunobu had not thought well of Yoshitsune. The reason was that if Hidehira harbored an heir of the Genji clan, he would incur the displeasure of the Heike. At the time, the Fujiwara family was holding on to a large, independent

power, but this was certainly cause for concern. But as they lived side by side, Tsugunobu was drawn to the strange charm that Yoshitsune possessed. Even though he was a Genji heir, he was never arrogant, and even got himself covered in mud helping the people with their farm work. Though he valued harmony between people, if he thought something diverged from reason, then no matter who it was, he would unflinchingly insist upon his own opinion. Naturally, Tsugunobu had also argued with Yoshitsune over trivial things. But this never damaged their relationship, but rather, allowing their true feelings to clash created an even stronger bond between them.

Therefore, when Yoshitsune said that he was going to meet Yoritomo in Kamakura, Tsugunobu and Tadanobu both petitioned Hidehira to allow them to follow him.

“Well, I guess I’ll keep going.”

Just as he had caught his breath and decided to continue his journey, he sensed someone walking towards him through the darkness. Tsugunobu immediately hid behind the boulder to let them pass. No matter who it was, he wanted to avoid being seen as much as possible.

In spite of Tsugunobu's nervousness, he heard a song being hummed off key. When he stuck his head out to look, the one humming was Kikuōmaru. He was swinging a stick around as he walked.

“What are you doing here... Hey, Kiku!”

Upon hearing someone call out to him, Kikuōmaru responded by assuming a fighting stance. But when he realized it was Tsugunobu, he tilted his head to one side and said,

“Ah!... Uhm... Um... The Idiot Brother?”

Benkei was in the habit of calling Tsugunobu “The Idiot Brother”, and it seemed that Kikuōmaru had picked up on that at some point.

“I’m not an idiot! I told you my name’s Tsugunobu!... Ugh... Anyway, what’s going on? Are you headed for the capital?”

“I take there! I’ll take there safely!”

Tsugunobu looked and saw a woman in a wide brimmed straw hat standing a short distance behind Kikuōmaru. She was keeping up with Kikuōmaru's fast paced walking, but was gasping for breath and seemed to be struggling. Tsugunobu thought it was strange that a noblewoman

would be walking through the mountains at night without any attendants, but figuring that there had to be some extenuating circumstances, he did not ask about it.

“... I see. Well, take care then. But Kiku, that lady looks pretty tired, so just slow down a bit.”

“Okay. Understood.”

When he said that, Kikuōmaru began to plod forward. The woman hurriedly tried to follow, but her foot caught on a tree root protruding from the ground and she fell over spectacularly.

“Eeek!”

“Hey, are you alright?”

Tsugunobu made a move to help the woman up, but froze in shock. The leg protruding from the disheveled kimono was covered in thick hair and obviously a man's, but more than that, the face looking out from under the crooked straw hat was Kagetoki's.

“K-Kagetoki!... What are you doing here!?”

“Oh, no, my name is not...”

Kagetoki was desperately trying to put on a high pitched voice, but it was completely pointless.

“Why are you here...? And how did you end up with Kiku?”

“Th-th-th-th-th-that’s... because...”

“I’m taking him! Nori said. Protect him!”

“Noritsune did?... Kagetoki met with Noritsune? What’s going on?”

Tsugunobu remembered that Kagetoki had once served the Heike. It would not be surprising if he still had some connection to them now. But if he had secret connections with Noritsune, that could not be overlooked.

Kagetoki gave up on his act, hiked up his kimono, threw away his hat and tried to run. When Tsugunobu instantly grabbed his arm, he let out a pathetic scream. Watching this, Kikuōmaru put himself between the two of them.

“Stop! Don’t hurt him!”

“I’m not hurting him, Kikuōmaru, this guy is...”

“Help meeeeeee! He’s going to kill me!”

Kagetoki put on a dramatic show and hid behind Kikuōmaru. Tsugunobu looked at Kikuōmaru and said,

“Kiku, hand Kagetoki over to me. It’s alright, I’m not going to hurt him. I just want to talk to him a little.”

“...But... Nori said. No matter what. I take him.”

Seeing Kikuōmaru's confusion, Kagetoki put more pressure on him.

“He’s an enemy of the Heike, and a really bad guy! He’ll definitely kill me! Noritsune will be really mad! He might never forgive you!”

“Enemy... bad guy... Nori... get mad...”

A gleam ran through Kikuōmaru's eyes, and his expression changed. To Kikuōmaru, being abandoned by his unquestioned master was a fate worse than death.

“What the hell are you on about? Kiku, don’t let him trick you!... Kagetoki, if that’s how you’re going to be, then I’ll take you with me by force!”

Tsugunobu moved to drag away Kagetoki, who was standing behind Kikuōmaru, but Kikuōmaru rapidly swung his arm. For a moment, Tsugunobu didn’t know what had happened, but then blood began to drip down from his left arm.

Kikuōmaru was holding his unique dagger and glaring at Tsugunobu. Kikuōmaru fought by getting close to his opponent with agile movements and attacking at point

blank range, so a normal dagger would be too long for him.

“Kill... enemies...”

The expression in his eyes was that of a wild animal.

“Kiku, you bastard. If you don’t calm down, then I won’t forgive you...”

Tsugunobu had been left with no choice but to draw his sword, but the instant the blade glinted in the moonlight, Kikuōmaru's fighting instincts ignited. Turning into a predator, he leapt towards Tsugunobu. Although Tsugunobu had never had any intention of killing Kikuōmaru, in reality he was pushed to his limits just trying to block his blade. He was too fast to pin down.

Tsugunobu had been trying to avoid a fight, but now he prepared himself. He pushed Kikuōmaru's blade away and put some distance between them, and then swung his sword up in a great arc.

“Burn!”

As he spoke, flames appeared in his hands.

“HAAAAH!”

He swung his sword around and slammed it into the ground. Flames burst out of the earth, and raced towards Kikuōmaru.

“Go!”

Perhaps hearing Tsugunobu's words, Kikuōmaru reflexively crossed his arms in front of his body in a defensive stance. Immediately after, like a pillar of flame erupting from the ground at Kikuōmaru's feet, there was a loud explosion.

“Did I get him...?”

The forest around them was burning. Kagetoki squinted, and saw a figure slowly walking out of the flames.

“I don't believe it... Is he a monster...?”

The attack which Tsugunobu had launched with all his might had been a direct hit. Even though he had taken such a blow, and smelled all over of burning, Kikuōmaru did not seem to have taken much damage.

Regaining his senses, Tsugunobu raised his sword once again and charged at Kikuōmaru.

“Hiyaaaaaaaah!!!”

But Kikuōmaru did not even try to avoid Tsugunobu's sword, before the attack could connect he had leaped forward into point blank range. Tsugunobu let out a groan, and his body slumped over. Kikuōmaru slowly withdrew, and without support, Tsugunobu fell to the ground. The dagger in Kikuōmaru's hand was slick with Tsugunobu's blood.

"You bastard... that... hurt... Dam...n...it..." Tsugunobu muttered as he listened to Kikuōmaru and Kagetoki's fleeing footsteps. He felt no pain. But he was assaulted by a feeling of vicious cold, and knew that he was bleeding out. In his hazy consciousness, he was bothered that his blood had stained the letter that Yoshitsune had entrusted to him. *If only I can pass this letter to the Heike, peace will become a reality... I have to deliver it*, he thought and tried to stand, but there was no strength in his body.

I want to make Yoshitsune's wish come true.

I want to see the new era that he believes will come...

Filled with frustration and regret, a single tear rolled down his cheek. Suddenly, Yoshitsune's face appeared in his mind. It was Yoshitsune's shy, but also somehow happy

smile that he had seen before departing Ōshū, when Tsugunobu told him that he would follow him to Kamakura.

As if he were returning Yoshitsune's smile, the corners of Tsugunobu's mouth turned up slightly.

And with that smile on his face, he fell into a deep sleep.

Part Three

The Remains of the Dream

1

The hut that stood alone in the forest fell silent, and only Tadanobu's sobbing could be heard. At the sight of Tadanobu clinging to Tsugunobu, laid out on the straw mats, Yoshitsune desperately tried to hold back the sorrow and rage that boiled up in him. Saburō and Benkei were both lost for words, just staring at Tsugunobu. Hiyori was in such shock that she could not even approach the others, and she stood in a corner of the hut with tears running down her face. Though she had no voice, she was soundlessly calling Tsugunobu's name over and over, and the sight was heartbreaking.

“Brother... don't leave me...”

Even his younger brother's cries of grief could no longer reach Tsugunobu. The more Tadanobu called his

brother's name, the more heavily that reality weighed on him.

The first to discover Tsugunobu's body had been Dennai.

He had waited for Tsugunobu to arrive at Kino Harbor, but even as the dawn broke and the sun rose high into the sky there was no sign of his arrival. Dennai had felt that this was unusual, and wondering if something had happened, he traced the path that Tsugunobu might have followed. Somewhere along the mountain path, he came across a strange place surrounded by burning trees.

"What on earth happened...?"

Immediately after he said that, he spotted Tsugunobu, already cold. It was too difficult for Dennai to carry him all the way to the capital alone, so he carried him as best he could into an abandoned hut he found in the mountains, and then with no concern for his own safety, ran to Yoshitsune's mansion. Dennai had immediately headed back to Yashima to inform Tomomori of the situation, and so barely believing what he had said,

Yoshitsune and the others had headed to the abandoned hut, and found Tsugunobu.

By Tsugunobu's side was a bloodstained letter. When Dennai had found him, his hand was stubbornly clutching the letter at his chest.

"Tsugunobu... I'm sorry..." Yoshitsune whispered to him, knowing that he had tried to fulfill his duty until the very end.

I don't want to let anyone else die.

That's why I chose this path, so why has it come to this?

Am I mistaken? If I had never thought of peace, would we have made it through without losing Tsugunobu?

Questions that could never be answered swirled inside Yoshitsune's head. His mind was in chaos, and he was gritting his teeth to keep from crying out in sorrow.

Yoshitsune and the others heard a horse whinny outside the hut.

A short time later, Tomomori and Dennai appeared at the entrance to the hut. Noritsune, Kikuōmaru and Ginrōmaru followed a little later. Tomomori looked at

Yoshitsune's trembling back with a grave expression, then slowly approached him and sat down, silently placing Kikuōmaru's blade on the floor. Everyone immediately looked at the blade.

"This..."

"Is the blade that took Tsugunobu's life... It was in Kikuōmaru's possession."

No one could believe their ears.

"What... did... you... say?" Benkei asked, rising to his feet. His expression looked as if he might attack at any moment. Tadanobu raised his tear-stained face from his brother's body.

"What do you mean?... Are you saying that Kikuōmaru killed my brother...?"

Tomomori could not look Tadanobu in the eye, and hung his head.

"I am sorry. I cannot find the words to express my apologies."

In an instant, Tadanobu stood as if he had been pulled to his feet, and moved to attack Kikuōmaru, who was

standing in the entrance. Saburō frantically held him back.

“Let me go!... That son of a bitch! I’ll kill you! I’ll fucking kill you!”

Yoshitsune stared at Tomomori. He too was struggling to control his emotions.

“Why did he kill Tsugunobu...? What was the reason for this? Tell me, brother...”

“That... We’ve asked him for the reason over and over again, but he just silently shakes his head, and shows no sign of opening up about it.”

In response to Tomomori’s words, Kikuōmaru whispered in a tiny voice.

“Bad guys... Enemies... Kill.”

“MY BROTHER WASN’T A BAD GUY!” Tadanobu immediately screamed. Shaken, Kikuōmaru hid behind Noritsune. Benkei, who had reached the peak of fury, immediately turned to Noritsune.

“Oi, Kiku is your little pet, right!? It couldn’t have been you who ordered him to do it, right!?”

At Benkei's emotional words, Dennai put himself in the middle.

“What are you saying? That would never happen, Benkei. Noritsune would never-”

Noritsune had been watching the exchange with cold eyes, but now he answered without emotion.

“I ordered it...”

Benkei was the first to react to these words, immediately closing in on Noritsune and sending him flying with a punch.

“... And don't think I'm done with you.”

Benkei gritted his teeth, clearly trying to control his emotions so they did not become any more violent.

Noritsune laughed as he wiped away blood from a cut on his lip. Both Tomomori and Dennai were speechless at the sight, and could only stare at Noritsune.

The first to realize that Kikuōmaru was Tsugunobu's killer had been Noritsune. Neither Tomomori nor Dennai knew about the incident with Kagetoki.

Noritsune had not told them that he'd ordered Kikuōmaru to take Kagetoki to the capital, so there was no way anyone would think it was Kikuōmaru's doing. But, since the dagger that Kikuōmaru carried was unique, the wounds it left were also very distinct from those left by a normal sword. Even if he could fool Yoshitsune and the others, Tomomori and Dennai would eventually realize, Noritsune thought. Therefore, he told Kikuōmaru that no matter what happened, not to make a move until he ordered it, and no matter what he was asked, to not say a single word in response. Only after forbidding Kikuōmaru to speak did he confess to Tomomori and Dennai.

Whether I believe in my brother and Dennai or not, it was always fated to come to this...

That feeling, a sort of resignation, dominated Noritsune's mind.

“Nori... Do you understand the meaning of what you're saying...?”

Dennai's voice was shaking, but Noritsune gave a mocking laugh and slowly rose to his feet.

“Of course I do... To put it more simply, peace was impossible from the beginning... Isn't that right, brother?”

Confused as to Noritsune's intentions, Tomomori was unable to speak. Noritsune continued anyway.

“Brother, this is a good chance for you to answer my questions. Assuming we made peace, would we really be able to move forward as equals to the Genji? Can you promise me that the Heike will not bow to the Genji? Can you say that an age will come when neither exercises power over the other, and we walk forward together?”

“This is not something we should be discussing now!”

“I don't care, answer me!!!”

Noritsune's stubborn attitude gave Tomomori no choice but to answer.

“We have gathered in order to make that a reality. But it isn't about whether we bow to the Genji or not. That's not the level we're discussing this on.”

“I see... so you don’t care if the Heike become subordinate to the Genji. If that’s how it is, then how can you face all our comrades who have died so far?”

Sharp as ever, Tomomori sensed something strange about Noritsune.

“Nori, there’s something wrong with you. We’re here to uphold a more noble cause.”

“Is submitting to the Genji a noble cause to you, brother?”

Unable to bear their bickering, Yoshitsune finally raised his voice.

“Stop it, both of you! Don’t talk about this nonsense... in front of a dead friend...”

Regaining his senses, Tomomori apologized and lowered his head, but Noritsune was undaunted.

“Heh... Yoshitsune, isn’t this just like you, always unable to protect your precious friends, just crying and lamenting it?”

“...!”

“In the end, all that matters in the world is power... No one and nothing can protect pretty things.”

DO YOU WISH FOR POWER?

That voice whispered inside Noritsune's head again. He kept talking, trying to drown it out.

“I had a dream. I saw you covered in blood. There's no future where the Heike and the Genji can walk together. All there is, is...”

He trailed off. He remembered himself holding on to Yoshitsune's arm, trying to keep him from falling into the black void. Not knowing that Noritsune's power was prophetic dreams, Benkei ridiculed him.

“Hah! So you had a dream! And then you just took that seriously and killed Tsugunobu!?”

“No matter how I explain it to you, you won't understand. I don't care... Brother, I'm taking my leave of this conversation. I'll protect the Heike in my own way. Kiku, we're leaving.”

“You fucking wait, you bastard!” In a rage, Benkei tried to throw another punch at Noritsune as he left, but this time it was Benkei who was sent flying. He hit the ground hard, then rose to his feet shaking his head.

“I am not so simple as to be hit by the same person twice. Next time, I’ll kill you...”

Benkei’s rage peaked again. “What did you say, you bastard! If you think you can kill me, come and try it!” He launched himself towards Noritsune again, but Dennai cut in front of him.

“I’m sorry, Benkei! Please calm down! Noritsune is confused because he had a nightmare. I’ll talk to him so I can explain properly why this happened... Please just give us a little more time! I beg you!”

With that, he dropped to his knees and bowed so low that his forehead touched the ground. As Dennai kowtowed, Noritsune gave him a sad look for just a moment, that instantly vanished as he quickly left the room, mounted his horse, and raced off.

Left behind, Tomomori tried to peer at Yoshitsune's face. Yoshitsune did not even try to meet his eyes, and merely said quietly, "Sorry, but I ask that you return home for today. It doesn't seem that we'll be able to discuss this calmly."

"Brother..."

Tomomori spoke the word with deep emotion, but it did not resonate with Yoshitsune. Even the fact that they had drunk together as brothers was now painful to him. He would not even be allowed to simply hate the ones who had stolen the life of Tsugunobu, who had trusted and followed him since they left Ōshū.

After a short silence, Tomomori answered, "I understand. Excuse me," bowing deeply again. Ginrōmaru went to follow him out of the hut, but then fearfully crept over to where Tadanobu was hanging his head, and sadly repeated, "I'm sorry... Tadanobu... I'm sorry..." over and over. But Tadanobu did not look up.

After Tomomori and the others left, a gloomy atmosphere pervaded the hut. Everyone was thinking of

Tsugunobu, but only one, Hiyori, seemed a little different.

Her expression made it seem that she was heavily shaken by something other than the death of Tsugunobu, and her eyes were fixed on the entrance to the hut.

After some time, Hiyori sat beside Yoshitsune, and gently tugged on his sleeve. Yoshitsune noticed Hiyori looking at him with a worried expression, and said kindly, “Hiyori, you don’t have to worry about anything... I’m okay,” forcing a smile. But the sorrow and guilt in his eyes was too much for Hiyori to bear.

“ ... ”

Hiyori nodded slightly at Yoshitsune’s words, and let go of his sleeve. Then, as if she had made up her mind about something, she clenched both hands in front of her chest.

2

Having left the hut, Noritsune sat on the shore where the Kino River met the ocean, trying to endure a headache that was getting worse day by day. He'd always been bothered by headaches each time he had a prophetic dream or a nightmare, but they usually went away on their own within a few days. But ever since he'd had that nightmare, his headache had shown no signs of going away, rather, it was getting worse. It stirred up Noritsune's anxieties even more, and was eating away at his reason.

Across the ocean, he could see Awa Province¹. He had come to Kino on the same boat as Tomomori and the others, and so he couldn't leave on his own before them.

1 Now Tokushima Prefecture.

And just imagining being on a boat rocked by the waves of the Kino Channel with this headache gave him chills.

A short distance away, Kikuōmaru was staring at Noritsune with a worried expression. He had obeyed Noritsune's orders and told no one about Kagetoki, but the sight of Noritsune arguing viciously with Tomomori and Dennai filled him with confusion. Noritsune arguing with Dennai was a daily occurrence, but even Kikuōmaru understood that this was a different kind of fight.

"Nori... You okay?... Your head hurts?"

"..."

Noritsune was wholly focused on enduring his headache. Then, approaching footsteps could be heard. Kikuōmaru looked back with a tense expression, but the footsteps belonged to Dennai. Even from a distance, his grave expression was clear.

"...Hey, what the hell was that back there? Have you lost your mind?"

Even though Dennai easily laughed off most things, he was certainly annoyed now.

“Nothing is wrong with me... I said exactly what I feel.”

When Noritsune spoke, the sound sent fierce pain through his entire head. He grimaced.

“We can’t trust them.”

“Why? Give me a reason!”

“ ... ”

Noritsune thought about trying to question Dennai about what he’d heard from Kagetoki. But if what Kagetoki had said was true, and even Dennai was betraying him... More than wanting to know the truth, he was afraid of being confronted by it.

“... I already told you. I saw it in a dream. Peace was impossible from the beginning.”

“Even if that was a prophetic dream, how can you let it sway you so easily!? We’ve spent months trying to do the impossible, to find a path that will put an end to things without fighting! And you... How do you intend to regain Yoshitsune and the others’ trust!? Their friend has just been killed, and they don’t even understand the reason why!... Shit! Why did this have to happen?”

“So, are you saying I should have killed Kiku back there!?”

Kikuōmaru jerked in surprise.

“That’s not what I’m saying!!!”

Dennai was shouting, and Noritsune clutched his head in unbearable pain.

“SHUT UP! DON’T YELL AT ME! MY HEAD HURTS!”

Seeing Noritsune scream hysterically, Dennai calmed down, and sighed heavily.

“Honestly. You’ve got yourself so worked up you can’t control your own power... Let me help.”

He approached Noritsune, and reached out to touch the side of his head. But Noritsune forcefully pushed his hand away.

“DON’T TOUCH ME!”

Dennai stood there with his arm still outstretched, dumbfounded.

“Don’t touch me...”

“Nori... you’re going crazy... What happened?”

I don't want to believe it. But I don't know what to believe.

“I can’t... I can’t trust anyone any more...”

Nori whispered, and Dennai stared at him silently for a while, but then he appeared to have half-given up, and said, “I see then. Nori, you and Kiku take the boat home together first. Brother and I have to think about what we’re going to do now.”

“We only have one boat...”

“I’ll make arrangements for that. The way you are now, we can’t put you on the same boat as Brother. He might throw you overboard... Take some time to cool your head.”

Dennai said no more, and went to leave. Kikuōmaru frantically ran in front of him and blocked his way.

“Kiku, move.”

“Won’t move... Nori’s head hurts... Dennai, fix him?”

“He said himself that he didn’t want me to touch him, so what can I do? And right now, I can’t be worrying about

Noritsune. At this rate, the war between us and the Genji will start up again. Lots of soldiers are going to die.”

“Then... I kill Genji. All of them.”

“No! That’s the way of thinking that causes war!... Just get out of the way!”

“No! Don’t go... Gin, me, Dennai. All Noritsune’s family...”

“Tell that to Nori, not me!...He’s the one who’s forgotten.”

Dennai forcefully shook off Kikuōmaru, who was desperately clinging to him, and left the beach.

Left alone on the shore, Noritsune walked with an unsteady gait towards where the boat was moored.

DO YOU WISH FOR POWER?

His headache came in fierce waves, and along with it, the voice that echoed from nowhere.

“Shut up... What the hell are you...?”

SHALL I GIVE IT TO YOU? ENOUGH POWER TO
ELIMINATE YOUR WEAK HEART...?

“I’m not weak... I was called the Heike’s Strongest,
there’s no way I can be...”

THEN ACCEPT IT. ALL OF YOUR PAIN WILL
DISAPPEAR.

“Accept... power?”

Noritsune paid no attention to Kikuōmaru watching
over him anxiously, and continued to mutter to himself.

One night, around two weeks after Tsugunobu’s death, it
happened.

Noritsune was at the mansion on Yashima Island,
having yet another nightmare.

He was in a place of such pitch darkness that he could
not tell where the sky or ground was. In terror of being
crushed by the overwhelming darkness, Noritsune was
desperately trying to escape.

DO YOU WISH FOR POWER?

The ominous voice spoke again.

“Shut up! Just go away!”

Noritsune shouted into the darkness.

My head feels like it's splitting in half. Dennai... I have to call Dennai...

In between the dream and reality, Noritsune sought Dennai's help. En jeered at him.

MUAHAHA... DENNAI HAS FORSAKEN YOU LONG AGO. IT IS INDEED PATHETIC THAT HE WAS STOLEN AWAY FROM YOU BY YOSHITSUNE, OF ALL PEOPLE, ISN'T IT NORITSUNE?... MAKE A VOW TO ME. I WILL EASILY ERASE YOUR SUFFERING

“ ”

NOW, SAY “GIVE ME POWER”. THAT IS WHAT YOU DESIRE MORE THAN ANYTHING ELSE. I WILL GRANT IT TO YOU

Unable to tell up from down, Noritsune's headache increased in intensity to the point where he felt he would throw up. There was no way he could endure any more of this.

“Damn it... Then give me power, quickly!”

IT IS DONE

The moment he heard that voice, Noritsune awakened. Sweat was pouring from all over his body. He slowly raised himself into a sitting position, stared vaguely at his hands and whispered.

**THAT'S RIGHT... POWER. THAT'S WHAT I
DESIRE...**

Deep inside Noritsune's empty eyes, En's shadow flickered and writhed.

Around the same time, Tomomori had gathered the supreme general, Munemori, and the retainers, and was finally broaching the topic of peace with them.

Their relationship with Yoshitsune and the others was not something that could be easily repaired, and Dennai had been visiting day after day, doing his best to regain Yoshitsune's trust. But, under Yoritomo's orders, the Genji armies led by Noriyori and Kagetoki were heading for Bizen, and Yoshitsune himself was not able to hold them back. Of course, Yoshitsune had also been ordered to hunt down the Heike a third time. Yoritomo would try to discern whether Kagetoki was telling the

truth or not based on Yoshitsune's actions. There was not a moment to lose.

At this point, it was close to a gamble, but even so Tomomori decided to choose the path toward peace. He thought, whether or not Yoshitsune agrees to be the intermediary for peace negotiations again, this is the only way for the Heike to survive.

Munemori listened to Tomomori's impassioned speech about peace seriously, but when pressed for a decision, his expression was one of confusion.

"I understand what you are saying... but can we really make peace? Even if he is Yoritomo's younger brother, will Yoshitsune guarantee our safety...?"

If it had been only a short while ago, Tomomori would have been able to answer that question with confidence. But now, he had no choice but to entrust his hopes to Dennai's persuasion and Yoshitsune's character.

"I don't know. But Yoshitsune is not a man who enjoys battle. As long as we do not appear to be taking an

aggressive stance, I believe he will definitely act on our behalf.”

“Hmm... hmm...hmm...”

Tomomori began to feel a sense of irritation with Munemori, who had neither the backbone to retain his honor as a Mononofu prepared to face death, nor the decisiveness to nod his head at a plan for peace.

Reading the atmosphere in the room, Taira no Kiyomori’s younger brothers Tsunemori and Norimori threw him a lifeline.

“... If the war continues much longer, we will probably be too old for it...”

Norimori laughed and nodded at Tsunemori’s words, “Haha! Certainly. War would certainly take a toll on this old body.”

Tomomori looked slightly relieved, and turned to Norimori.

“What are you saying, dear uncle? That isn’t so. For the revival of the Heike, we need you to live another fifty years.”

“What!”

Norimori made a show of pretending to fall backwards. Everyone laughed, and the atmosphere in the room instantly softened. Tomomori once again turned to Munemori.

“Brother, when the new era of peace dawns...”

“When what dawns?”

The voice that interrupted Tomomori was Noritsune’s.

He was swaying on his feet as if he were drunk. Leaning against the doorway, he looked down at everyone with a smirk. Norimori, who was Noritsune’s father, was angered by his appearance.

“Noritsune! I have not seen you for days, and now you show up in this state!”

Noritsune ignored his father’s words, and looked to Tomomori.

“Brother, this certainly looks like a fun evening... Let me join in.”

“Nori, you are disrespecting your father,” replied Tomomori firmly, not responding to Noritsune’s attempts to provoke.

“Oh, I am sorry for that. It’s because you’re all sneaking around behind my back.”

“We’re not hiding from you. I set this meeting up to explain the reasons for peace to my brother and uncle.”

“Then why did you not call me? Is there something I’m not supposed to hear about?”

“No. Nori, your mind is unstable, and you’re thinking in extremes. If a warmonger like you is here, we won’t be able to settle the conversation.”

To Noritsune, Tomomori’s cool manner, as if he were not even worth dealing with, was humiliating. The sorrow of being rejected by someone he had formerly admired turned into fierce flames of hatred, and burned up Noritsune’s heart.

OBEY THE POWER. ACCEPT IT...

En spoke from within Noritsune.

“Muahaha... I’m a warmonger? No, it’s just that the rest of you are cowards!”

Everyone present was dumbfounded by Noritsune’s explosion of anger. Norimori regained his senses and stormed towards Noritsune.

“Will you stop it, Noritsune!? What are you doing... Tomomori is your leader! Your disrespectful conduct is embarrassing to me as your father!”

He grabbed at Noritsune, but Noritsune dodged with a simple twist of his body. At the same moment, he smoothly drew his favorite special dagger, and buried it deep in Norimori's chest.

“Guh...”

“My head hurts. Don't raise your voice...” Noritsune said, staring at Norimori's crumpled form with cold eyes.

“Have you lost your mind Noritsune!? How could you kill your own father!?”

“Then you follow him and apologize for me.”

Seeing Noritsune's murderous intent, Munemori frantically grabbed the sword near his side and swung at him but missed dismally. Noritsune swiftly grabbed his arm.

“What was that cowardly swing? So slow it's pointless... Say hello to my father.”

Noritsune grinned, and stabbed Munemori. The flecks of blood that splattered on his face made a sickening contrast to his pallid skin.

“S-Someone help! Traitor! Fight him! Fight him-!!!”

Retainers and soldiers who heard the cries charged into the room. Kikuōmaru and Ginrōmaru flew in to see what was happening, but the sight that greeted them was the corpses of Munemori and the head retainers, and Noritsune standing in a sea of blood.

“Wh...”

Everyone was lost for words at the nightmarish scene. Noritsune alone stood with an expression of rapture on his face, muttering something.

“How strange... The pain in my head is so much better I can't believe it... I see now, you were the cause of my headache. Mononofu who don't fight or seek power don't deserve to live... That's right...power... That's what you need to rule the world.”

“Noritsune.”

Noritsune's smile disappeared when Tomomori spoke.

“Nori, put down your blade. Let’s stop this... You’re not well...”

“Shut up! It was you and the others who made me like this!”

Noritsune lunged towards Tomomori and swung his blade down. Quickly raising his sword, Tomomori barely managed to block the first blow, but the second sliced into his shoulder, and he fell to his knees.

“If you’re going to show such hesitation, you’ll be killed by me, Brother.”

Noritsune’s blade sliced through the air as though he were dancing, and Tomomori desperately tried to dodge. With each attack, new wounds appeared on Tomomori’s body, and Noritsune seemed to be enjoying toying with him like a cat with a mouse. Tomomori was cornered against the wall, and Noritsune smiled.

“Brother, it’s time for me to put you out of your misery.”

Noritsune raised his blade to deliver the final blow, when suddenly his body froze up.

“...Guh!?”

Ginrōmaru was using his power to prevent Noritsune from moving. In that moment, Tomomori dragged his body away from the wall he had been pinned to. Noritsune moved only his eyes to glare at Ginrōmaru, then looked at Kikuōmaru and forced out his voice.

“Kiku... kill him... Kill Gin...”

Kikuōmaru shook his head over and over.

“Don’t, Kiku! Don’t listen to what Nori says!”

Tomomori’s words threw Kikuōmaru into further confusion.

“Don’t understand... I don’t understand...”

“Kiku, help me...! I’m about to die. If you don’t kill Gin, I’ll die. Please...”

Noritsune smiled as he pleaded, trying to persuade Kikuōmaru.

“Uuh...uuh...”

“Kiku, help...”

Tomomori was behind the paralyzed Noritsune, and he swung his blade.

“HAAAAAAAAAAAA-”

“Waaaaaaahhhh!!!”

Tomomori's scream overlapped with Kikuōmaru's, and Kikuōmaru's blade pierced Ginrōmaru's body. Not understanding what had happened, Ginrōmaru slumped over, staring at Kikuōmaru.

“Kiku... why...? It hurts...”

“Whew, that was close. You saved me, Kiku. Thanks.”

As Noritsune gently spoke to Kikuōmaru, Tomomori groaned behind him. Noritsune's blade had been thrust deep into his abdomen. Noritsune pulled the blade out, and turned to face Tomomori. Holding up Tomomori, who was about to collapse, he spoke with detachment.

“Sorry, brother. For the sake of the Heike's survival, I'll take over from here.”

Tomomori reflexively put his hands around Noritsune's head to look into his heart. His agonized expression changed to one of shock.

“Wh-Who the hell are YOU?... Where have you taken Noritsune...!?”

HMM, WHERE COULD HE BE?... GOODBYE

Noritsune grinned, releasing his hands and allowing Tomomori to slump to the floor.

The soldiers who had run into the room were so terrified that they had not moved an inch. Noritsune looked across their faces with satisfaction, and shouted in a crazed voice.

“Listen up, all of you! I, Noritsune, have punished the ones who lost us so much ground in the war! Now we will leave Yashima, and head west! We will aim for Hikishima Island!¹ There, we will rebuild our army, and challenge the hateful Genji clan to battle. Anyone who wishes to oppose me, step forward now! I’ll take your heads off, like these traitors here!”

No one was able to object, and when he ordered, “If you understand, then prepare the boats immediately!” they scattered in every direction as if they were fleeing.

“Gin... Gin... Wake up... I’m sorry...”

Kikuōmaru was by Ginrōmaru’s side, desperately calling to him. Noritsune glanced at him.

1 Now Hikoshima in Shimonoseki, Yamaguchi Prefecture

“Forget about the traitor, Kiku. You get ready as well. When everything is organized, we depart.”

With those few words, he left the room.

Now the headache that tortured me so much is gone, I feel like I've been completely reborn.

As Noritsune walked down the hallway, he sensed a presence behind him. When he turned, right before his eyes, thin, pale arms were reaching for him. He swiftly grabbed the arms, and threw their owner to the ground.

“...!”

The figure that let out a soundless scream as it fell was Hiyori's.

“Hm? Aren't you the Mononoke that was with Yoshitsune...?”

“...”

Hiyori made no attempt to fix her disheveled kimono, and glared up at Noritsune from the floor.

When Noritsune had appeared at the hut where Tsugunobu's body had been taken, Hiyori had been shocked to sense the strange presence possessing him,

for it was a Mononoke like her, and furthermore, one she had felt the presence of before. It had become much weaker than before, but it was the Mononoke that should have inescapably perished along with Kage, En.

Why has En been summoned again, and to possess Noritsune?

Hiyori couldn't understand no matter how hard she tried, but she realized that, without a doubt, Noritsune's soul would eventually be taken over by him. She had tried to tell Yoshitsune then, but when she saw the heartbreaking sight of him bottling up his sadness so as not to worry her, she had been unable to do anything but nod.

I don't want to let Yoshitsune feel any more sadness. This time, I'll protect him. Like Kage did before me.

Hiyori had made up her mind then. And so she had slipped into the Heike mansion to somehow stop the possession of Noritsune.

“... What? Were you trying to assassinate me?”

Noritsune looked down at Hiyori with a mocking expression.

In that gap, Hiyori moved swiftly and grabbed Noritsune's arms hard with both hands. As soon as she did, Noritsune was attacked by another violent headache.

"Owww..."

He could feel the power quickly draining from his body.

"S...STOP IT!"

Noritsune knocked Hiyori to the floor once again. Pain shot through her entire body, and unable to breathe, she curled up into a ball.

"What the hell was that just now... You tried to drain my power...? Don't think that my power can be stolen by a Mononoke like you...!"

Noritsune glared at Hiyori. But then he had a sudden idea.

"Hmm... alright then. It would be a waste to kill you now. Since you came all the way here, I'll let you help me."

As he said that, he turned to Hiyori with a cruel expression.

3

March 1185, the second year of the Genryaku era.

In addition to the previous decree from the cloistered emperor to hunt down the Heike, Yoshitsune had also received orders from Yoritomo and could no longer remain in the capital, so he lead his army and set up camp at Bizen.

He still did not know the reason that Tsugunobu had been killed, and so had some hesitation in proceeding with the peace negotiations, but Dennai said that Tomomori's intentions had not changed, and that he was ready to persuade Munemori and the retainers.

And on that day, Dennai visited Yoshitsune's camp once again.

“Dennai, I get what you’re trying to say, but if you keep coming every day it’s gonna cause trouble for us. We’re not the only Genji army. Even if we don’t make a move, the other generals are aiming for Yashima. Yoshitsune was intending to deliver the plan for peace to Lord Yoritomo in Kamakura before that happened. But that chance was ruined... because of you guys, right?” Benkei said with a troubled expression.

“I know that... But the battle hasn’t started yet. My brother can’t give up on peace. So I want to gamble on that too. I want you to trust my brother.”

Yoshitsune felt the same. *No matter how precious a friend he was to me, if I cause a war over my own pain, then that’s the same as sacrificing many innocent lives for the sake of revenge. Such a thing is not noble. I understood that, but-*

“Dennai, there’s something that I have to ask you. Why did Noritsune make Kikuōmaru kill Tadanobu? Isn’t explaining the reason for that first the main thing?”

When Yoshitsune asked that, Dennai lowered his gaze with a pained expression.

“We’ve... I’ve asked that over and over, but he just gets worked up and keeps giving answers that make no sense. He’s always had some psychological instability because of his power of prophetic dreams, but recently it’s been particularly bad. He keeps muttering to himself, or screaming for no reason... it’s like he’s a completely different person. He didn’t have much enthusiasm for peace, so perhaps that’s why he did such a stupid thing...”

“Like a different person?”

Something troubled Yoshitsune in the back of his mind. But he didn’t know what it was, and he had no time to worry about it. He had to decide.

“... I see. In that case, one more thing. You come here every day to meet us, Dennai, but this is a Genji camp. What if I said that the next time you come here, I’ll take you prisoner...?”

Dennai was surprised by this question, but after a moment he grinned.

“Gahaha! Of course I’d come, no question about it... We took Tsugunobu’s life. If I can repay that with my own, then let me do so. But that would be the end of taking

revenge against each other. In exchange for my head, I want you to continue the peace negotiations no matter what!”

He looked directly at Yoshitsune as he said that.

Yoshitsune remembered the first time that he met Dennai in the forest. He didn’t want to admit it, but he’d been taken in by that carefree smile, and regained his own ability to smile in an instant. *Dennai had said then, “I think your precious friend would be hoping for you to live life with a smile.” Dennai has probably lost a lot of friends in the war too. Perhaps that’s why he’s always smiling.*

Yoshitsune had made up his mind.

“I see. But if you died, Dennai, then we’d be in trouble without anyone to serve as a bridge to Lord Tomomori. Tell Lord Tomomori, no, *Brother* quickly. I’ll do everything I can to establish peace.”

“R-Really?”

“Of course.” Yoshitsune nodded forcefully.

“You got me. If my general says so, then I don’t have a choice... We’ll do our damndest then!” Benkei said, slapping his knees.

“Benkei!”

Dennai took Benkei’s hand. Watching them, Yoshitsune said words of apology to Tsugunobu inside his heart.

Tsugunobu, I’m sorry. It doesn’t seem like I’ll be able to avenge you. But your death will not be in vain. Peace itself lies down that road. When I join you, I’ll apologize however many times you want. So please watch over me now.

“Well, I’ll return to Yashima right away. Yoshitsune, I’m very grateful!”

The instant Dennai turned to leave merrily, Tadanobu entered the room. He was carrying someone.

“Yoshitsune, this is terrible! Please lend me a hand!” he said, lowering the person to the floor. Yoshitsune, Benkei and Dennai rushed over and looked. It was Ginrōmaru.

“A soldier on patrol found him lying on the beach next to the camp!” Tadanobu explained, and Dennai called out in shock.

“Gin! Hey Gin, are you okay?”

Hearing Dennai’s voice, Ginrōmaru opened his eyes slightly. Benkei was ordering the nearest soldier to call Saburō urgently.

“Den...nai...? Heh... Finally found you... Everyone’s... dead.”

“What...? Did something happen on Yashima!? Is Brother safe!?”

Ginrōmaru tried to speak, but instead coughed and spat up blood. There was a large wound on his abdomen, and even his breathing looked painful.

“Nori... killed... Tomo... Couldn’t stop him... Dennai, I’m sorry... Help... Help Kiku...”

He tried to reach out to Dennai. But his hand wandered through the air, and then fell like a puppet whose strings had been cut.

“GIN!... Hey Gin! Don’t die!... Damn it!”

As Dennai cradled Ginrōmaru, Tadanobu stared on in horror.

“What is this... What the hell is going on?”

At that moment, Saburō rushed over to them. He immediately pressed his hand against Ginrōmaru’s wound, but he was not breathing, and Saburō shook his head in quiet regret. His powers could not be used on those who were already gone. From behind Dennai’s slumped shoulders, Yoshitsune spoke.

“Dennai, you should return to Yashima immediately... Something has happened to Noritsune.”

Yes, something has happened to him.

Yoshitsune was sure of it. Noritsune had always taken a defiant attitude, but that was only ever with regards to the Genji. His attitude towards Tomomori, his relative, may have been rude, but he was a loyal retainer through and through. Or rather, it seemed to be an even stronger attachment. If he had raised a hand against Tomomori, then it was not the will of Noritsune, but rather, the actions of something else.

Yoshitsune, who was himself fighting the demon within him, understood this.

“Yoshitsune-sama! Yoshitsune-sama!” A soldier rushed in yelling. He lowered himself onto one knee and through panting breaths he reported, “The Heike ships in the sea near Yashima have all begun to sail west!” Dennai looked up in surprise. The soldier continued.

“In order to pursue them, Noriyori and Kagetoki’s armies have also begun to move across land.”

“Damn it! One thing after another...”

Yoshitsune clenched his fists in frustration. The moment he had thought that a path to peace had opened, the situation worsened again. It was as if things were being manipulated by an evil force.

“Our army must also move immediately! Do not fall behind the other Genji armies! Whatever happens, we must reach the Heike first!”

“Yes sir!”

Arriving on the battlefield first was such an achievement among Mononofu that even allies would

compete among themselves over the honor. The soldiers thought that he was aiming to beat the others there, as a Mononofu would, but Yoshitsune had a different idea.

He looked across the faces of Saburō, Benkei and Tadanobu and spoke sternly.

“Unfortunately, we can no longer avoid battle. The orders I have received from my brother are to exterminate the Heike. Kagetoki and the others will spare them no mercy. But if what Ginrōmaru has said is true, then we can stop the war merely by putting an end to Noritsune’s rampage. We must stop Noritsune. That’s the only way to minimize the number of casualties...”

Everyone present nodded forcefully. Dennai stepped forward.

“In that case, Yoshitsune, there is something I can do to help. I have connections to the naval forces in the Seto Inland Sea. If we go by boat, we should certainly arrive faster than those traveling by land. I can only provide a limited number of boats, so let’s split the army in two, and we’ll pursue Noritsune by boat.”

This time it was Yoshitsune’s turn to nod.

“We Mononofu possess too much power, and so we have paid dearly for it... Enough is enough. We’ll put an end to this war here...”

“Yes!”

In that moment, the thread that had been stretched to breaking point by the trials of fate once again formed a strong connection.

The Heike army that had departed Yashima on Noritsune's orders headed west across the Seto Inland Sea towards Hikishima Island in Dan-no-Ura.

However, the morale of the soldiers had clearly fallen due to the loss of Tomomori, who had kept the Heike clan together in Munemori's place after their retreat from the capital. Furthermore, since Noritsune had slaughtered Munemori and the chief retainers who were the clan's support, and was trying to rule the Heike through power and fear, the number of people willing to pledge servitude to him was exactly zero. One after another, soldiers fled to Sanuki Province while pretending to prepare the boats, or sought refuge among the powerful clans who supported the Genji, or

purposefully allowed their ships to fall behind the others and deserted the army. When the thousand ships that had left Yashima arrived at Hikishima, their number had fallen to a mere five hundred.

On the other hand, Yoshitsune's army, using the two hundred boats that had been provided by Dennai, arrived at Hikishima five days earlier than the Kamakura armies belonging to Kagetoki and the others.

March 24th, 1185, the second year of the Genryaku era.

The rising sun reflected off the waves, and the surface of the water shimmered with golden light.

Yoshitsune stood at the bow of the ship, squinting in the sunlight to see what was happening on Hikishima in the distance.

He was able to determine that the Heike ships were lined up along the coast of the island. The number of ships put them at an overwhelming disadvantage. But on those ships were also the royal family, including Emperor Antoku, the wives of the Heike clan, elderly soldiers and many others. Yoshitsune estimated that

their actual strength in battle might not be so much greater than that of his own army.

“It’s finally happening.”

When he turned around, Saburō was standing there.

“Yes. Today we’ll be able to put an end to everything... I wanted Yoshinaka and Tomoe, and Tsugunobu to be able to see this. It is happening in a very different way to how we hoped, but I wanted them to be standing here with me.”

Saburō said in a purposefully bright and joking manner, “You know them, they’re probably drinking sake and watching us, right? ‘Hey Yoshitsune, act more like a general!’ They’d be teasing you like that.”

Yoshitsune gave a wry smile. He felt that they really would say things like that to him, if they were alive.

In a military conference the previous night, Yoshitsune had communicated his orders to the soldiers on each ship. They were to protect Emperor Antoku and as many members of the royal family as possible, to not raise a hand against a woman or child, and to not kill

any soldiers who were not resisting them. And at the end of the conference, he had added one thing.

“Now, the Heike are in a fragile state due to internal conflict, and even a breeze could cause them to scatter. There is no longer any need for unnecessary killing. We aim for one thing only- the head of Taira no Noritsune!”

Benkei and the others were inwardly surprised at this. They weren't sure how seriously Yoshitsune meant it, but it was the first time he had ever spoken of taking someone's head. *But Yoshitsune surely has his own ideas*, everyone thought, and remained silent.

The morning sun rose into the sky, and the time for battle arrived.

At Yoshitsune's signal, a war-cry rose from here and there on the ships, and they all began to row toward Hikishima. Aboard Yoshitsune's ship were Benkei, Saburō, Tadanobu, Dennai, and the captain and sailors only. They were the elite unit, but even so, they were few in number. This was Yoshitsune's strategy, and when the battle began, he immediately ordered the captain, “Do

not engage with the ships around us! Avoid them as much as possible and head west!”

Swinging his naginata around to knock the incoming arrows from the sky, Benkei yelled, “Hey, what the hell is this!? Yoshitsune!”

Yoshitsune looked straight ahead as he answered.

“Noritsune is not on any of these boats. He’s further west.”

“What!? H-How the hell do you know that? You can’t possibly have looked in every one of these boats!”

“I’m not sure why... but I know. He’s calling to me... Noritsune is.” He smiled fearlessly.

“He’s calling you...?”

That was why Yoshitsune had been able to tell the other soldiers to take Noritsune’s head. No matter how much they wanted that achievement, or how desperately they searched for him, they would never make it to Noritsune’s location. He had said that because he was certain.

The boat carrying Yoshitsune and the others rowed forward through the hail of arrows. When the rocks of

Hikishima finally came into clear view, they saw a sailing ship that was noticeably bigger than the others. In front of that ship, countless other boats were tied together with rope, forming a gigantic raft.

Yoshitsune pointed to the sailing ship and shouted, “Head straight for that ship!”

Yoshitsune leapt from his boat, jumping across the surrounding boats towards the sailing ship. Benkei and the others followed him. The soldiers who had noticed Yoshitsune turned their boats towards him and tried to attack, but most of them were thrown into the ocean by Benkei and Dennai before they could reach the raft of tied up boats.

Yoshitsune charged over the boats towards the sailing ship without hesitation, as if he knew Noritsune was aboard. Just when Benkei and the others following him were beginning to run out of breath, they saw a black shadow flying towards them. An immediate anxiety ran through them.

“Kiku...”

Dennai whispered, gasping for breath. Kikuōmaru's gaze was downcast, focused on his feet, and it was impossible to see his expression.

“So he finally makes an appearance...” Benkei prepared his naginata. From beside him, Dennai stepped forward.

“Kiku! Is it true that... Noritsune killed Brother?”

“Uuuh...”

“You, why didn't you stop him!? Even you should have noticed that Noritsune is acting strangely! Think about the difference between right and wrong at least that much!”

Dennai was shaking with rage. More than anger at Kikuōmaru, it was anger at Noritsune who had used Kikuōmaru's submissive nature to his own ends.

“Kiku, Gin... is dead...”

Kikuōmaru's body jerked.

“He was worrying about you until the very end. He told us to save you with his last breath.”

“Uuuh... Gin... Nori... Dennai... Me... All family,” Kikuōmaru said in a moan, slowly raising his head. He

glared at Yoshitsune with eyes swirling with hatred and murderous desire.

“We were happy... But then... We met you... You destroyed everything...! I’ll kill you... Definitely kill you!!!”

“I’ll listen to your nonsense later. Where is Noritsune?”

Yoshitsune began walking without waiting for an answer. Kikuōmaru was struggling to resist the urge to attack Yoshitsune as he approached.

“... Nori... Is waiting... Go...!”

It seemed Noritsune had ordered him not to touch Yoshitsune. He spoke to Yoshitsune with eyes like a beast hunting prey. Yoshitsune continued to move forward, and walked right past Kikuōmaru. Benkei followed him and also tried to walk past, but that instant, Kikuōmaru's fist flew at his face with blinding speed. Benkei had no time to dodge, and was thrown against the side of the boat.

“You bastard! What the hell was that all of a sudden!?”

“Nori waits... For Yoshitsune only... Everyone else... I kill!” Kikuōmaru said, and cut the boat free from the

ropes that bound it to the others. The boat that Kikuōmaru, Benkei and the others were on rocked in the waves, and slowly drifted away from the sailing ship.

“Coulda fuckin’ mentioned that!” Benkei stood up, rubbing the side of his face. Yoshitsune, who was already jumping across the boats ahead, turned back and yelled, “Take care of him for me!” before hurrying on.

As well as Noritsune’s presence, which was rapidly growing stronger, Yoshitsune could also sense En. As if it were responding to that energy, the restraints on his awakened form that Yoshitsune was suppressing began to snap one by one. His blood seethed, and his eyes became a deep red in color.

In front of Yoshitsune, a group of soldiers stood bracing themselves. Yoshitsune shouted, “If you wish to keep your lives, leave here now!”

Rather than stop, he took a run up and leapt through the air, far over the heads of the soldiers. He covered enough distance to leap over eight of the boats forming the raft that led to the sailing ship.

“Wh-What!? Is he a monster!?”

The soldiers were too dumbfounded to make a move. Some of them fled at the sight. He was not someone a normal soldier could oppose.

Wait for me Nori. No, his possessor, En.

Inside Yoshitsune, another restraint snapped.

“I kill...”

Kikuōmaru stood in a fighting stance in the center of the boat, still glaring at Dennai and the others. Saburō drew his sword, and tried to persuade him one last time.

“Kiku, I’m sorry but we don’t have time to be careful. If you won’t get out of the way, then we really will kill you... Okay?”

“Won’t forgive traitors... All of you... I kill!”

Kikuōmaru was muttering over and over as if he were in a delirium, in his agitated state it was impossible to talk to him calmly. Saburō prepared himself, and swung his sword at Kikuōmaru. The sound of their blades clashing echoed, and Kikuōmaru sent Saburō flying with a

punch from his other hand. His strength was unimaginably monstrous.

“Grrr....graaar”

Dennai noticed something unusual about Kikuōmaru.

“This is bad... Kiku, stop! If you awaken any further, you won’t be able to change back!!!”

“What do you mean ‘awaken’!?” Tadanobu asked, approaching cautiously.

“Kiku has a lot of beast type Mononoke blood in him... If that awakens completely, no one will be able to stop him!”

“Then what do we do?” Tadanobu asked in a panic.

“We gotta finish him before then!!!”

Everyone took Benkei’s words as a signal to attack.

“GRAAAAAAAAAAGH!”

Kikuōmaru was like an animal that had lost its self-awareness. His fighting ability was extraordinary, and he swiftly clashed blades with all four of them at once, and then threw further attacks. Even Benkei, who was proud of his superhuman strength, was outmatched. Though

everyone attacked with all their strength, the next instant everyone had been thrown to the floor of the boat.

“Huuuurrrrrgh....Grrrrrrrrr....”

Awakened, Kikuōmaru's body was covered in steel-like hairs, and the nails on each of his hands had lengthened into deadly talons. He no longer resembled Kikuōmaru, but a werewolf.

“What the hell is he? He's too strong!... Shit!”

Benkei swung at Kikuōmaru again, but he twisted to dodge, and at the same moment landed a kick to Saburō, and slashed at Dennai with his claws. Dennai was using all his strength to block him, and was unable to counterattack. In that moment, Tadanobu slashed at Kikuōmaru from behind, but his sword bounced off his body.

“What the hell is this!?!... I can't cut through!”

“Gaaah!”

Dennai was knocked to the floor by an attack that tore open his shoulder. Saburō quickly pulled him to his feet, but there was no time to heal the wound.

“Because he’s awakened, his body has hardened. Now that he’s like this, he can never change back.” Dennai whispered regretfully, and immediately after, Kikuōmaru groaned and began to spin his entire body around.

“Grrrrrrrrrrrr!”

For a moment it seemed that he had curled his body up to spin faster, and that instant, a deafening screech split the air, and sharp streaks of light shot from his body.

“Watch out!” Dennai quickly yelled, and everyone barely dodged the beams of light. Benkei’s naginata, which had touched the light, was sliced cleanly in half.

“What the hell!? How many damn powers does he have!?” Benkei shouted, throwing away the remaining handle of his naginata. Dennai swiftly wrapped the wound on his shoulder with cloth to stop the bleeding, and then continued speaking, staring coolly at Kikuōmaru.

“I have an idea... But you’d damn well better not hesitate, Tadanobu... Alright?”

“Huh? What are you talking about?” Tadanobu asked with a puzzled expression, and Dennai grinned back at him. Then he returned his gaze to Kikuōmaru and yelled, “Right, everyone attack at once again!”

“Right!”

Benkei, Saburō and Tadanobu headed for Kikuōmaru one after another. Confronted with the rampaging beast, they tried to somehow stop him, but they were unable to land a single blow. With Kikuōmaru's attention divided between the four of them, Dennai circled around behind him, and slashed at him as he attacked Tadanobu. Kikuōmaru immediately noticed and sent Dennai flying with a kick, then leapt at him with tremendous speed and made a great swipe at the upper half of his body. His sharp claws dug deep into Dennai's back.

“Gah!” Dennai let out a short groan, and then for some reason, a smile appeared on his face. He threw both arms around Kikuōmaru's back, pulling him close face to face and under-hooking his arms.

“Now! Tadanobu, kill him!”

“Wha-!?”

“Stab through both of us! Now’s... your chance!”

Dennai’s power was the ability to suppress his opponent’s powers by touching them. There was no way that he could return the awakened Kikuōmaru to his normal form, but he had enough power to neutralize his armor. That was why he had deliberately allowed Kikuōmaru to attack him at close range.

Kikuōmaru tried to escape from Dennai, and dug his claws into Dennai’s back over and over again. When that didn’t work, he bit into Dennai’s throat with sharp fangs.

“Agh! Hurry!... I can’t... hold him...”

“No way! I can’t do that!” Tadanobu shouted in horror, holding onto his sword. Dennai looked as if he were about to collapse, but smiled at Tadanobu.

“Take revenge for Tsugunobu... Please... Put Kiku... and I... out of our misery...”

“Aa... AAAAAHHHHHHHHH!!!”

Crying, Tadanobu prepared his sword, charged at Kikuōmaru, and stabbed through his back.

“GYAAAAAAAARGH!!!” Kikuōmaru screamed.

Dennai continued to smile until the end.

“Well done... Tadanobu... thanks... Kiku, I’ll stay with you, so... give me a break...”

Tadanobu withdrew his sword, and Kikuōmaru crumpled to the ground. Dennai slumped to his knees and then fell over, lifeless.

In a state of numbness, Tadanobu sank to the ground, still crying. Saburō and Benkei were covered in wounds. All that could be heard was their gasping breaths.

“Uuh...”

Tadanobu regained his senses, and opened his eyes wide in an expression of disbelief. Next to Dennai’s lifeless body, Kikuōmaru was crawling, trying to rise to his feet.

“Nori... I can... Keep going... Won’t forgive people... Who hurt Nori...”

Dennai had said that once Kikuōmaru had awoken, he could never return to his normal state, but Kikuōmaru had definitely regained consciousness. But his fighting instinct still remained, and he turned to Tadanobu and raised his hand.

“Tadanobu, watch out!”

“Aaaaaaahhhhh!”

Tadanobu screamed and stabbed Kikuōmaru again. Kikuōmaru lunged forward in an attack, and reached out his hand with empty eyes, as if he were trying to touch something.

“Nori... We were... All... Family...” he whispered and collapsed. Tadanobu reflexively held on to him, and embracing his body, broke down crying again.

“Why... are we fighting...?” Tadanobu sobbed, and a heavy silence fell. Benkei sat cross-legged on the floor, and muttered as though he were spitting out his pent-up regret and anger.

“This... is war.”

Rather than an answer to Tadanobu’s lament, it seemed that he was desperately trying to convince himself.

“It’s war!”

Sitting on the bow of the vast sailing ship, Noritsune gazed at the ocean spreading out in front of him. The gentle spring breeze brushed his cheek, along with the smell of salt water. Noritsune closed his eyes as if he were savoring it.

“How nice the ocean is. It brings the winds from all directions. The breeze today is quite refreshing... Is it not, Yoshitsune?”

Noritsune spoke with his eyes closed. Behind him, Yoshitsune stood.

“Those words don’t suit you. All you smell of now is blood...”

“Hahaha! Don’t say that, Yoshitsune. You are not so different from me. You killed your dear friend with your own hands,” Noritsune said, rising to his feet and grinning as he slowly turned to face Yoshitsune.

“I’m not like you! I... wanted to help Yoshinaka. But I couldn’t save him. So to make up for Yoshinaka and all my friends who have died, I’ve decided to create a world without conflict.”

“... This again.”

Noritsune always felt an inexpressible irritation around Yoshitsune. He was seized by a strong impulse to make this Mononofu, whose values differed from his in every way possible, submit to his power.

“Don’t speak of such hypocrisy! You can’t even accept your own power, so what have you been able to achieve? Who were you able to protect? Because of your weakness, many people became embroiled in this war, and died cursing you! In the end, you’re just a beast starving for blood. Every time you refuse to acknowledge that, and start talking about idealistic things, it makes me want to vomit.”

Yoshitsune tried to control the turmoil in his mind. Were the things Noritsune was saying a battle tactic? Or was this what he really believed? There was also the possibility that En was making him say it. *No matter which it is, I can't let him disturb my mind, or I'll lose myself.*

“...If that were to be true, then the world doesn't need demons like us starving for blood, right?”

“Oh, very good! You finally feel like fighting me? How exciting. But there's one thing you're wrong about. I'm not a demon. I came from Hell to destroy the demon... I am Enma!”¹

“So En really has been summoned. Why? He should have perished with Kage.”

“What's that? I don't know anything about it. I have been chosen. Because I was stronger than anyone else, I was worthy of receiving a special power. Power is everything you need to finish battles in this world, Yoshitsune... I'm different to weak people like you. Let me teach you!”

1 Enma is the ruler of the underworld and judge of the dead in Japanese mythology. En's name is written with the first character of “Enma”.

As he said those words, Noritsune vanished from the bow of the ship. In the time it took Yoshitsune to notice, Noritsune was right before his eyes, slashing at him with his blades. Like Yoshitsune, Noritsune wielded two daggers. But his speed completely exceeded Yoshitsune's. Yoshitsune was just barely blocking his blades. They continued to exchange blows. Already, their blades were moving too fast to be seen, and only the sound of them clashing over and over rang out. Yoshitsune's face showed that he was desperately focused on the battle, but Noritsune was gleeful.

"Ahahahaha! What's this? Isn't my power overwhelming!"

He pulled back, and in the blink of an eye, landed a vicious spinning kick to Yoshitsune's abdomen. Yoshitsune groaned and stumbled backwards.

"How is it? This is the power of the chosen one."

"You're out of your mind..."

"I'll take that as a compliment. But weren't you the one they called the Genji's demon? Fight more seriously! You're making a fool of me for putting so much effort in. Let's go!"

Noritsune's attacks resumed. Now that En was possessing the man once known as the Heike's strongest, his power was a threat that exceeded even the supernatural powers of the Mononofu. And while Yoshitsune was fighting a defensive battle, he also possessed an unfathomable power. Despite that, he was quickly beginning to show signs of fatigue.

Noritsune suddenly stopped, hand on hip, looked at Yoshitsune with a bemused expression.

"You know, Yoshitsune, you're not making this interesting for me at all..."

"Shut up..."

"What's with that attitude? If you've got time to be so stubborn, then use your power and turn into a demon! The one I want to fight is the demon within you!"

"I'm not a demon!"

"... Ridiculous. It's just as Brother said. If you don't lose someone important to you, the demon won't come out? Well then, I'll just have to draw it out."

Noritsune walked over to the main mast of the ship, and cut the ropes that were tied there. A figure emerged from the shadow of the thick mast. It was Hiyori.

“Hiyori!? Why... But I left you in Kyoto!?”

Noritsune returned carrying Hiyori, who had her hands tied behind her back. She gazed at Yoshitsune with eyes filled with a mixture of terror, and relief at seeing Yoshitsune again.

“It’s quite admirable. I don’t know when she realized, but I caught her sneaking on to Yashima to steal the power I’d received.”

“Stop it... Hiyori has nothing to do with this!”

Noritsune screwed up his face at the pain in his head. After leaving Yashima, he had been freed from his headaches for a while, but the moment he had touched Hiyori, that power had been shaken.

“Owww... Ahh, it hurts... ‘She’s got nothing to do with this,’ do you really expect that to work? I don’t show mercy, even to women. Oh, and I just remembered. I heard that you were in love with that female warrior, Tomoe, who was killed in the Battle of Mizushima? This

is a good chance for me to tell you something. As a matter of fact, I'm the one who killed her."

"... What... did you say?"

Yoshitsune's heart began to race, and he felt his body becoming hot with rage.

"I actually intended to kill Yoshinaka, but he escaped. She was right there nearby, and she made a really good target for my arrow. When I aimed at her, I hit her with a perfect shot and knocked her off her horse, AHAHAHA!"

Tomoe's smiling face rose up in Yoshitsune's mind, and a fierce murderous desire rose up inside him. Sensing that, Noritsune looked pleased. His headache was rapidly worsening, but he was smiling even with his face contorted from the pain splitting his head. His smile was the definition of madness.

"Muahaha! Alright, Yoshitsune, hate me enough to kill. Hate me, and turn into the demon. Come on out! Come out and play, demon inside Yoshitsune!!!"

Then he put his blade against Hiyori's throat in front of Yoshitsune's eyes. In that instant, Hiyori, who had lost

her voice, shouted. It was a last message to Yoshitsune that she staked her life on.

“Yoshitsune... protect everyone!”

“STOOOOOOOOOOPPPPP!!!”

Listening to Yoshitsune's scream, Noritsune slit Hiyori's throat. Blood poured from her mouth and down her slender throat. In the blink of an eye, her silver hair was stained blood red.

“Ahaha. How pretty. Even though she's a Mononoke, her blood is as red as the rest of us.”

With an expression of rapture, he kissed Hiyori, then casually threw her body overboard into the sea.

At this nightmarish scene, the last restraint inside Yoshitsune snapped.

Yoshitsune's second scream echoed across the surroundings. It was no longer a voice, but a tremendous quaking of the earth itself that shook Noritsune.

Noritsune couldn't restrain his excitement.

“I waited for this... I did all of this so I could meet you.”

The demon Yoshitsune quietly glared at Noritsune.

DO YOU WISH TO DIE?

“I have no intention of dying. Just killing you and gaining an even greater power!”

The moment he said that, Noritsune slashed at Yoshitsune. Yoshitsune swiftly took his daggers in each hand, and with the greatest of ease blocked his attacks and struck back. The next instant, blood flowed from Noritsune’s arm and leg, and he staggered off balance.

“Hahaha! Not bad, Demon Yoshitsune! That’s what I wanted to see.”

Noritsune had lost his sense of self, and Demon Yoshitsune tilted his head at the sight.

YOU HAVE A FAMILIAR SCENT. COULD IT BE THAT EN STILL PERSISTS? THAT MEANS THAT YOU... YOUR HEART HAS BEEN COMPLETELY CONSUMED BY EN?

“Shut up! My heart has not been consumed! I gained this power because I was chosen!”

Noritsune grasped his blade with his uninjured arm, and came at Yoshitsune again. This time, he matched

Yoshitsune for speed. He skillfully kept his distance from Yoshitsune's blades, and they fought on, evenly matched.

I've got him. Sure of that, Noritsune thrust his blade forward. But Yoshitsune vanished from in front of his eyes, and at the same time, he felt a hand grab his head from behind, and a mighty kick to his back sent him flying. Staggering, Noritsune tried to turn around.

But before he could, both of Yoshitsune's blades tore through his flesh.

"Gaaaaaaah!"

Noritsune fell to his knees, vomiting copious amounts of blood. He caught the blood pouring from his mouth in his hands, staring at it, and then turned to glare at Yoshitsune with bulging eyes.

OHOHOHO... AS EXPECTED OF A DEMON! YOU INTEND TO ENJOY THIS FIGHT UNTIL THIS CORPSE ROTS AWAY... HM?

With an ominous smile, he returned his eerie gaze to Yoshitsune. Though he was covered from head to toe in bloody wounds, he showed no sign of being in pain.

Yoshitsune tilted his head again and spoke coldly.

SO YOU HAVE FINALLY SHOWN YOURSELF... EN. YOUR STENCH PERMEATES THIS PLACE...

His soul completely taken over by En, Noritsune approached Yoshitsune step by step, grinning.

I RETURNED FROM THE DEPTHS OF HELL... TO KILL YOU, DID I NOT? WHETHER IT IS KAGE... OR YOU... I WILL NOT ALLOW YOU TO DISRESPECT ME! THIS TIME I WILL TAKE YOUR LIFE.

En spoke as if he had known the demon within Yoshitsune for a long time. He took the body that should have been Noritsune's, and began to float in the air.

HM...

Yoshitsune was unmoved, and slowly floated into the air to follow him. Noritsune's face spasmed, and he continued to grin eerily, the expressions on their faces were complete opposites.

FOR OUR BATTLE... THIS WORLD IS NOT QUITE SUITED... ALLOW ME TO GUIDE YOU TO THE GATES OF HELL... HA!

As En spoke, dark clouds began to swirl around them, and the color drained from the blue sky and sea. A grimy blackness overtook the surrounding area, and the

sailing ship was swallowed by darkness. In the blink of an eye, the world became pitch black, and the two of them floated in the darkness. On the ground far below, countless blue flames writhed fiercely like a hydra. Every now and then, something like lightning flashed toward them. The strange scene completely lacked gravity, and could not possibly have existed in reality.

HERE... I HAVE THE ADVANTAGE... OHOHOHO

En twisted his body and flew at Yoshitsune. His arm that had been immobilized until that point now moved freely. Furthermore, his joints could now bend backwards in an instant. Even despite the fact that Noritsune was known as the Heike's Strongest, those movements were clearly unnatural.

HUOH!

En let out an eerie shout, and attacked over and over. Yoshitsune blocked Noritsune's blade within a hair's breadth as it sped towards his throat. Noritsune jeered and ran his wet tongue across Yoshitsune's face. Yoshitsune's expression did not change at all, and he immediately twisted his body and unleashed a spinning back kick, but Noritsune bent backwards and leapt out of the way.

OH OH OH OH... SLOW. MEANINGLESS..

An obscene smile was on Noritsune's face, and drool ran from his mouth. He folded both arms tightly in front of his chest, curled his body and let out a moan.

GHHH!

The flashes of lightning suddenly sped towards Noritsune as if in answer to his cry. It was as though a cable connected to a high voltage current had shorted out, sending its power to Noritsune.

HOW FUN THIS IS

Laughing, En vanished from Yoshitsune's field of vision. At that instant, a blade sliced through his back. When Yoshitsune turned, En had already vanished, and appeared behind him again, this time landing two great slashes.

YOU...

Yoshitsune groaned in a low voice. Noritsune increased the speed of his attacks even further. Attacked from behind over and over again, Yoshitsune's arms hung by his side uselessly. That instant, Noritsune reappeared in front of Yoshitsune's eyes, and thrust his blades into Yoshitsune's shoulders.

GOT YOU

En's ominous roar echoed through the void. His blades pierced through Yoshitsune's shoulders down into his heart. Yoshitsune looked at the blades piercing his chest, and collapsed to his knees as they were pulled out, falling towards the depths of Hell where the blue flames swirled.

A thunderclap echoed as if to announce the victory, and the flashes of lightning lit up Noritsune's grin of satisfaction over and over again.

I SHALL CLOSE THE GATES OF HELL... IF I DO NOT SOON RETURN TO THE OTHER WORLD, I TOO WILL BE SUCKED IN...

En whispered with satisfaction. He closed his eyes and concentrated in order to return to the earthly realm. Then, from the depths where Yoshitsune had fallen, there was a distant sound that shook the air.

HM...?

En slowly lowered his gaze, and saw a light coming straight at him from the darkness.

WHAT? IS THAT-

Before he could finish speaking, a fierce blow struck Noritsune's head, and he was knocked backward with a dull sound. When he looked up in surprise, Yoshitsune was floating in front of him. His red eyes had changed to gold, and red light was emanating from his body as if he were wearing a cloak of flames.

LET'S FINISH THIS...

Yoshitsune turned the daggers he held in each hand to point upward. In a panic, En reached out his arms to stop him.

WAIT, WAIT! DO NOT BE SO HASTY! SHALL WE PLAY A LITTLE MO-

Yoshitsune did not wait for him to finish speaking, but circled behind him and cut his Achilles tendon in the blink of an eye. It was Yoshitsune's turn to toy with En. With a booming sound that shook the air, he appeared and disappeared, slicing up Noritsune's body. His movements were so blindingly fast they left afterimages, as if an army of Yoshitsunes were surrounding Noritsune. There was nothing En could do, and he groaned.

UUUHH, NOT... AGAIN...

Kkssshh...

There was the sound of bones grating.

GA...AHH..

Two daggers protruded from Noritsune's back. They looked like bones remaining from wings that had been torn off.

Yoshitsune held Noritsune's suddenly limp body in his arms, and disappeared into a point of light in the darkness.

6

The distortion of space that had been created from the clash between the demon and En still enveloped Yoshitsune and Noritsune. However, both the demon and En had vanished, and the darkness that had blotted out the sky until just a moment before was clearly shrinking in on itself. The gigantic flames that could be seen far away in the depths of the darkness were roaring, and threatening to swallow the two of them up as they floated in the air.

Yoshitsune was struggling desperately to resist that power. He was holding on tightly to the unconscious Noritsune's arm, but his face was contorted with agony and effort.

Noritsune's face and body was covered with wounds, and he merely swayed back and forth as he floated in the darkness. It was certain that if Yoshitsune let go of his hand, he would immediately fall and be swallowed up by the flames.

Yoshitsune cried out to Noritsune over and over again.

“Hey...! Nori... Noritsune! Wake up!!!”

In a daze, and somewhat irritated by the noise, Noritsune opened his eyes. Yoshitsune's face was relieved for a moment, but then returned to a stern expression.

“Nori, wake up! You'll fall into the flames!”

“Enough... Let go of my hand. I'm tired...”

“What are you saying! Hold on!!! Nori!!!”

It's just like my dream.

Noritsune remembered. But he immediately realized that their positions were the opposite. And it wasn't just that. The bright red magma had become blue flames, and the darkness was above him, rather than below.

I see...

Noritsune somehow approved. It wasn't something he could explain in words, rather it was a feeling. But somewhere in his heart, he was relieved by this ending.

At some point in time, his body had stopped listening to him. He had been constantly seeking help for his never-ending headache and terror, but his voice never reached anyone. *Dennai and Brother weren't looking at me, they were looking at Yoshitsune. No... maybe I was the one turning my back on them.*

“...I was always... jealous of you...”

Taking painful breaths, Noritsune gave a weak smile.

“I'll listen to whatever you have to say about that later! For now, concentrate on getting out of here!!!”

“... No, listen to me... Yoshitsune... My prophetic dreams... have never been wrong before... In the dream I had, you were the one falling... But in reality, it's the opposite.”

“Then we can have a rematch whenever you like. If you're frustrated that you lost, then live!”

Yoshitsune's arm that was holding on to Noritsune was trembling. A vast, invisible force was drawing Noritsune toward the flames, and it took all his strength to resist.

"No, that's not it... It's too late now... but I realized... Fate... you can change fate with your own will... I always... hated my power... It felt like the future was set... and you couldn't change it..."

Noritsune had begun to cry before even he realized it. It was strange, as he did not feel sad, but it was not a bad feeling either.

"At this point in time... I've lost... To you... and to myself..."

As Noritsune whispered that, he looked towards his own feet. The dancing flames were stretching up toward his feet like hands reaching out for him. But he felt no heat, nor fear of them. What went through his mind was, *When I go to the next world, I have to apologize to Brother and Tsugunobu and everyone. But I doubt they'll forgive me.*

"Noritsune, I'm begging you, don't give up! Hold on!!!"

Great tears were overflowing from Yoshitsune's eyes. Noritsune stared at him with a look of surprise, then suddenly smiled at him. It was the first time he had smiled at him as a friend.

"Yoshitsune... I would have liked to meet you... a little differently..."

"Hey, what are you saying...? Nori, stop it!"

"Thank you..." Noritsune said, and shook his arm free of Yoshitsune's. With a beautiful smile on his face, he was pulled into the flames.

Yoshitsune was unable to make a sound, and just stared at him wide-eyed. The flames leapt up from the darkness, and spread out like wings as they swallowed Noritsune, then shrank away. The darkness vanished like a dream, and around Yoshitsune there was nothing but the beautiful sky and sea.

"NORITSUNE-!!!"

Yoshitsune broke down in tears as he screamed, and then lapsed into unconsciousness.

The setting sun colored the foggy sky a watery red.

On the boats floating here and there on the sea, the Genji soldiers that Yoshitsune led were raising cries of victory. Their voices echoed into the heavens.

In this way, the battle between the Genji and the Heike concluded at Dan-no-Ura.

Yoshitsune, who had collapsed on the sailing ship, was saved by Saburō and the others, and returned to Kyoto by boat. When Yoshitsune regained consciousness, twenty days had passed since the battle.

Kagetoki and Noriyori, who arrived at Hikishima too late, were astounded that the battle was already over. However, they took advantage of Yoshitsune's unconscious state, and wrote in their report to Yoritomo that they too had triumphed in the battle.

As for Noritsune's body, no matter how much they searched the ship, or the sea and islands nearby, they could not find it. He had vanished along with Hiyori, who was also said to have been thrown into the ocean. When Yoshitsune was informed of this in his mansion

by Saburō, he merely said, “I see...” with a hint of loneliness, and nothing more.

Like Yoshitsune, the pain of losing so many friends weighed heavily on Benkei, Saburō and the others’ hearts. But they had no choice but to go on living. That was the mission of the survivors, and they all struggled in their sorrow to accept it.

It had been eleven months since the younger generations of the Genji and Heike had met and reached out to each other, a fleeting tale. That was secretly engraved in their hearts as a precious memory.

Kamakura, Yoritomo's mansion.

It was a pleasant night with a spring breeze.

Next to Yoritomo, who was asleep in the bedroom, Masako sat, looking down on his sleeping face. But there was not the slightest trace of wifely affection in her gaze.

A lukewarm breeze blew from nowhere in particular, and the oil lamp flickered.

"...En?" Masako said without raising her head.

CORRECT. SHALL I TAKE WHAT I WAS PROMISED?

"Hmph. You've got nerve asking that after you failed."

THE PROMISE I MADE WITH YOU WAS TO
POSSESS SOMEONE WITH A WEAK HEART AND
LEAD THEM ASTRAY. I SAID NOTHING ABOUT
WHETHER YOSHITSUNE WOULD LIVE OR DIE

“... Well, never mind. My promise was that I would give
you all of Japan. Do not be hasty, En. You will have it
soon enough, so until then...”

She gestured to the sleeping Yoritomo with the palm of
her hand, and grinned.

MUAHAHA...! YOU ARE A FRIGHTENING WOMAN
INDEED! IT IS A SHAME THAT YOU ARE MERELY
A MONONOFU... VERY WELL I WILL ENJOY
TAKING OVER JAPAN

En transformed himself into a black mist, and slid into
Yoritomo's open mouth as he slept. The moment he did,
Yoritomo made an anguished face, and moaned.

“Uuh... Ugggh... Help me...!”

Masako watched his agony with cold eyes, and then
softly whispered in his ear.

“My lord... If you are weak-hearted, you will be
possessed by Enma...”

Not yet...

Masako stood, her face as expressionless as a Noh mask.

Yoshitsune, your Hell begins here.

She glanced at Yoritomo, who was moaning in his sleep, then spun around and slowly stepped into the darkness, leaving the bedroom.

8

The trees were shining with the green of new leaves, and the water that flowed from the mountains breathed new life into the creatures that lived in the lake.

At the edge of the lake where Yoshitsune was sitting, about a dozen fishes were gathered, nibbling at the aquatic plants as if they were playing.

One month had passed since the battle of Dan-no-Ura.

One year had passed since he first met Dennai and the others.

We met here, spoke here, drank together here, and vowed to create a new future together.

There was a hollow in Yoshitsune's heart that he could not fill, but this time, he did not lose himself like before.

"I think your precious friends would be hoping for you to live life with a smile."

He reflected on Dennai's words once again.

If he lost his focus for even a moment, tears would begin to well up in his eyes, but he held them back with effort. He had a feeling that if he cried, Noritsune would scold him with a, "You're crying again."

Yoshitsune recalled a conversation he had had with Noritsune long ago. When they were having secret meetings by the lake for the peace negotiations, sometimes the two of them would be left alone together.

"I'm... scared, to be honest. Of my friends dying in battle, or of dying myself."

Staring at the beautiful moon reflected on the surface of the lake, Noritsune had suddenly opened up. He was probably fairly drunk. Perhaps the alcohol had

influenced him to speak his true feelings. Yoshitsune was inwardly surprised at Noritsune's behavior, but answered, "... I'm afraid of that too." Noritsune gave a mocking laugh.

"No. You're not afraid. You'll throw your life away for someone else at any moment... But the people around you are also willing to throw their lives away for you.

Yoshitsune guess he was talking about Benkei and the others, and smiled.

"They're just good warriors."

"Ha! Well, maybe that's true of Benkei... Because prophetic dreams are my power, I've always been afraid of dreaming that someone would die. But even so, when I dream that someone other than me dies, part of me is relieved. Like, 'Ah, this time it wasn't me'."

The hint of self-deprecation in Noritsune's smile deepened.

"Nori..."

"But, there was something I thought for the first time when I met you. If I died fighting this guy, well, maybe I could accept that-"

“Don’t be so ridiculous! I’m not going to fight you.”
Yoshitsune cut him off sharply. But Noritsune didn’t seem to mind, and gulping down his cup of sake, continued cheerfully.

“If I get a warning of my own death, I can’t just go along with it and die. I want to die fighting with my own strength until the very end. That’s the reason I’ve been able to keep myself together until now.”

“ ... ”

Yoshitsune was speechless, and Noritsune added with an unconcerned expression, “Well, when the time comes, no matter who wins or loses, let’s not have any hard feelings about it!”

“In the next world, in the next world we will meet again, above the clouds dyed in purple...”¹

Yoshitsune had recited, looking up at the moon.
Noritsune had laughed at him and said, “What a terrible

1 This is a quote from the Gikeiki, a 15th century retelling of Minamoto no Yoshitsune’s life. In that version of the story, the poem is a response from Yoshitsune to Benkei.

poem,” but now the feelings he put into that poem became even stronger.

No matter how many times we are reborn, we will meet again like this, and go to the next world together.

The faces of the friends that had passed on before Yoshitsune appeared in his mind one after another.

“We will surely meet again. Definitely,” he said to each of them in turn.

Suddenly, ripples spread across the surface of the lake, though there was no wind. Yoshitsune sensed a faint presence, and looked up. Before his eyes, a mirage was shimmering. It was Kage.

It has been a long time, Yoshitsune.

“Kage, I’m sorry about Hiyori. I couldn’t...”

Hiyori is here. Do not worry. Yoshitsune, my spirit is becoming weaker. Listen closely... Your brother, Yoritomo has been possessed by En. Sooner or later, he will aim to take your life.

Yoshitsune was unable to speak. *En, who has stolen so many people who were dear to me one after another, is trying to take another one from me? Why does he haunt me so persistently?*

His entire body was shaking with fierce anger.

“How can I... save my brother?”

Do not think of saving your brother. The weak-hearted are already the avatars of En. If you do not kill Yoritomo, then you will be killed. And turmoil will visit the world once again.

Yoshitsune was not swayed by Kage's words.

“Kage, I've come to understand something. What you need to win a battle is not strength or supernatural powers, it's will. The strength to proceed without hesitation. So I will never give up. I'll save my brother, and send En to his grave forever, so that he can never rise again.”

Hm... It seems that you have changed somewhat, Yoshitsune. But do not forget. Eventually assassins will be sent to Kyoto to collect your head. Your brother, or the

country. It all depends on your decision. Don't... forget... that...

At that point, Kage's voice vanished.

Yoshitsune sat there in thought for a while, then stood up forcefully, as if he had let go of something, and looked up at the blue and distant sky.

A sharp flash of golden light ran through his eyes.

I'll do it.

I'll struggle until the very end, until there is no more war in this world.

I will create the era that so many of my friends dreamed of and staked their lives on.

As if it was watching over Yoshitsune as he slowly left the forest, a small fish from the lake leapt high into the air. Its beautiful scales reflected the sunlight, and glimmered with great strength.

