

# Pau Tai Part 1 - Kyorous Coat

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## 1 Late Realization

In bewilderment, Ichiro gazed at the monk Pau. He couldn't believe what he had just heard. *'He betrayed us!'* the rabbit thought numbly. *'He betrayed all of us! From the beginning!'* Helplessly, he had to watch the young Lord Fukute, with a face of stone, walk over to the stairs which lead into the palace of Lord Tanehisa.

His look went over to his deadly enemy, Lord Tanehisa, who awaited him with a smile in his face.

Ichiro's whole world collapsed. *'How could I be so blind!'* he thought, furious with himself. *'It was so obvious! I trusted him! More than I trusted anybody else before! I gave my very soul into his hands. I would have killed and be killed for him!'*

With difficulty, he got a grip on his raging emotions, again. Slowly, he got off his riding saurian. After having seen the fight between Lord Tanehisa and the monk Pau Tai, he estimated his chances lower than a man to extinguish a raging forest fire with his urine after going three days without water.

*'The whole training from Pau was only meant to make it more exciting for Tanehisa to kill me!'* he realized in despair. *'Why do I fall for such lies again and again?'*

The samurai in the entourage of Lord Fukute, 120 well trained men after all, were of no use. He was still the only one able to move more than his eyelids. Again, Pau showed his unbelievable Power with a smile.

It felt hard to concentrate for Ichiro while he was on his way to his position in this uneven duel. He avoided to look at Fukute's samurai, afraid of what he might find. The legendary sword shone in the claws of Tanehisa. *'Kusanagi'*, Ichiro thought bitterly. *'Why do you serve such a man?'*

The fact that he wouldn't have to experience the now unavoidable war, the death of thousands of samurai and millions of peasants, couldn't improve his mood. *'I loaded so much bad karma on myself, I'll probably be reborn as an eta<sup>1</sup> or even as a lizard.'*

Calmy, Lord Tanehisa waited for him. Ichiro knew that nothing could stop the triumph of his deadly enemy anymore.

*'Everything started so harmlessly'*, the rabbit remembered. *'Just three months ago!'* It seems impossible that so much had happened in so little time. *'Gakuro ...'*

<sup>1</sup>Lowest caste in Japan which removes corpses and excrements and tans animal skins.

## 2 Hanesato-sensei

„I'll get you, you brat!“ gasped the man. Angrily, he stroke after the young rabbit. He had pursued him for quite a while through the brush-wood of the forest. But again and again, the dodgy lad had managed to escape him at the last moment. Slowly but surely, the dog was losing his temper.

The young rabbit himself saved his breath to dash away. Determined, he sprang through the brush-wood, keeping trees and bushes between him and his pursuer. His breath was heavy, he knew, he wouldn't be able to take this much longer. But until now, none of his tricks had managed to lose the man.

Suddenly, the border of the forest appeared before him. His glances went around but the thicket seemed to be impenetrable wherever he looked. But on open ground, he was sure, the man would get him in no time. The way back was also blocked by the dog who was only a few steps behind him. He had no choice but to run on in the hope that there would be a chance to return into the safety of the shadows of the forest.

With his right hand, he traced the rough bark of a tree while running as close around it as he could. With full speed, he jumped over a little bush onto the street which hugged the edge of the wood.

„Hey!“ yelled the Samurai on the other side upset when he almost stumbled into him. His companion laughed, when he grabbed the boy and shouted: „You little brat! Watch it!“

„Let me go!“ screamed the young rabbit and struggled in vain in the strong grip of the bear with the dark brown fur.

„Hold him!“ gasped the pursuer when he heard the yells.

The laughing of the second samurai stopped when he saw the drawn blade. Casually, he put his hand on the handle of his own katana and stepped to the side as if to get out of the way of the pursuer. But in fact, he gave room to his companion who couldn't move between him and the edge of the forest.

Neither of the samurai liked the grin of the man. „Ha! Gotcha! Thanks a lot that you caught this dangerous thief, samurai-san<sup>1</sup>“, he exclaimed.

„What?“ The young rabbit was furious. „Me, a thief? You robbed us in our sleep! What did you do to Hanesato-sensei?“

His pursuer laughed nastily: „Don't listen to his lies! He just wants to wriggle himself out of it! Just give him over, so I can bring him to my friends and we'll get our things back.“

But the paw of the bear didn't open.

„What did he take?“ asked his companion, a middle-sized rabbit, politely. Casually, he scratched his chin. Most of his fur was light-gray except for the black patches over his eyes and the completely black ears which had earned him the nick-name Panda.

The man obviously hadn't expected the question. After a noticeable pause, he claimed: „I'm not sure. We'll have to search him to see what he stole.“

<sup>1</sup>Mr. Samurai, a respectful address in Japanese.

„I didn't!“ the boy defended himself outraged. „Hanesato-sensei and I are peaceful wanderers! We camped in this forest for the night and you assaulted us!“

Thoughtfully, the rabbit rubbed his chin. The dark face of the other samurai, bulky like all bears, grew even darker: He could guess what was on the mind of the rabbit and he didn't like it one bit. It would just buy them more trouble - as always.

## 3 Power!

With a deep bow, the ninja presented the sword respectfully before his Lord. The gracile, scaled fingers of the dragon did shake the tiniest bit when he pushed back the rough cloth in which it had been hidden.

„Kusanagi-no-tsurugi“, he whispered and the tips of his fingers ran over the smooth, cool metal which didn't show any sign of the millenia it had existed. Even the long time in which it had been lost in the sea<sup>2</sup> had left no traces on it.

„Nobody must know“, he hissed silently.

„Ha!<sup>3</sup>“ called the ninja and bowed again. With a smooth movement, he drew a dagger and killed himself.

Already forgetting about his dying servant, the splendid dragon reached for the sword, picked it up and held it to the light.

„At last!“ he thought triumphantly. „At last you're mine! Together, we'll change the world!“

„Yes, My Lord“, replied thoughts that were not his own.

The shock made him almost drop it.

„It's true!“ the lord thought numbly. „The old scrolls said the truth!“

The sword remained silent.

„Show me!“ Lord Tanehisa demanded. „Show my future.“

And Kusanagi obeyed.

„Power!“ Tanehisa realized while he began to shape his fate with the help of the sword. „A weapon of the gods! This exceeds even my wildest dreams! Nothing can stop me now! This pompous Shogun! I'll wipe him away like a typhoon an ant! All will bow to me, even those high-nosed lords of the south! And the Tenno<sup>4</sup>, too! At last, the gods have turned away from this weakling! Yes, that must be it! Now, I'm the favorite of the gods, chosen to rule Japan! I knew! I'm chosen! Japan? Ha! How pathetic! Korea! China! And soon ... the land of the barbarians! All will have to bow their heads before me! My name will still be spoken with the greatest respect in thousand generations from now!“

His scales shone while he indulged in his dreams.

<sup>2</sup>Battle of Dan-no-ura 1185, 465 years ago

<sup>3</sup>Yes, agreement, acknowledgement

<sup>4</sup>Emperor

## 4 The Shogun

The astronomers of the Shogun<sup>1</sup> had asked for this audience because of the unsettling signs they had read in the stars. It had taken them a long discussion to agree on what to present to their Lord. Therefore, the speaker was a little nervous when he bowed before him: „Shogun, the signs have been ... extraordinary difficult to read this time.“

The plain, white kimono contrasted beautifully with the red-golden scales of the shogun. The dragon was sitting at a carefully chose spot which made sure that all the lamps in the room made his skin glow and shine. Without moving a muscle in his face, he gestured the old panda to carry on with a controlled wink of his hand.

„Because of this we couldn't agree on a ... shared view“, the astronomer continued. „We all agree, that interesting times are ahead which will require great courage and ability. Unfortunately, the signs, which we tried to interpret, are not clear, so we are unable to specify when this time will begin.“

He took a deep breath and said: „Nonetheless, we are sure that there will be two forces, one out of the north and one out of the south, who might tear the empire apart. One of them is driven by greed, the other by ignorance. Strangely enough, none of them seems to go directly against you. Instead, we have come to believe that we will be the witnesses of a fight for power between two forces. But still, the results could be disastrous.“

„Is that all?“ the shogun asked unperturbed when the man stopped.

„No, My Lord“, the man to the left of the speaker dared.

Outraged, the speaker shot him an angry look but the other panda couldn't be stopped to say: „I agree with my colleagues that we don't completely understand what the signs say but in my opinion, there will be a clear, highly visible sign in the heavens what it begins. I even dare to say that it will Amaterasu<sup>2</sup> herself, who will give us this sign!“

Disgusted, his colleagues gasped for breath because they had agreed before the audience not to bother the shogun with this nonsense.

„I see“, the shogun just said. His face didn't give away what he thought but he closely observed the reactions of his astronomers.

With a nod, he released them. Unmoving, he sat for a while, the lids of his slitted, green eyes half closed, and pondered about what he had just learned. He was absolutely determined to do whatever lay in his powers to protect the empire against this threat.

*„The power from the south ... is it this young and inexperienced Lord from the south who I summoned, I wonder?“, he thought. „Well, he should arrive in about two weeks. I'll have a close look at him, then. It would be a shame to loose him but if the peace of the empire is at stake ...“*

He didn't have to think twice about the power from the

north, he knew exactly who was meant. The fact that the unsettling news of his spies in the north had suddenly stopped told him that something was afoot. He just didn't know what it was. *„Is it possible that he has the sword?“* he wondered. *„That would be disastrous! His only ambition is power! And his appetite is without limit! Oh, dear gods, do you mock me? Give me something, anything, to stop this bastard!“*

Carefully filed claws closed in powerless rage.

## 5 Decampment

Lord Fukute of the Geioka-clan was even more nervous than usual. The invitation to the court of the shogun had come more than unexpected and even though the words sounded politely, there could be no doubt that it was an order. Nervously, the little panda, not yet 15 years old, picked at his kimono until he noticed the frown on Otomori's face. Embarrassed, he let his arms drop but now, he didn't know what to do with his hands. Even his ever-smiling panda face was distorted by the worries.

Otomori, a cat who serves his Lord loyally for more than eight years as retainer and bodyguard, sighed and put a hand on the shoulder of the young man to calm him; a familiarity he only dared because they were alone in the private rooms of the Lord. „Don't worry“, he rumbled with his coarse voice, „it's a great honor that the Shogun want to see you so soon.“

The Lord didn't feel reassured at all: „But if I had made some mistake? If he just summoned me to have my life?“

„In this case, the Shogun wouldn't summon you“, Otomori answered confidently. „The bakufu<sup>3</sup> would send a Kaishakunin<sup>4</sup>“

„Maybe“, the young panda just couldn't calm down. Desperately, he ran around in the room. „Maybe the quality of whale meat was disappointing? Or it was not enough? Maybe it was even foul! And what, if I make a mistake during the audience? A loss of face ... the consequences would be devastating!“

The door opened and Lord Tanaka entered the room. He was one of the few persons besides Otomori, who had free access to the rooms of Lord Fukute. His province flanked the one of the Geioka-clan in the north-east. Since the tragic death of Fukute's parents, he had become like a father for the young, inexperienced Lord.

„As I see“, his deep and rich voice boomed, „you're spending your time with worries - again.“

„Lord Tanaka!“ Fukute cried happily and run to him. „Oh, I'm so happy that you've finally arrived!“ Humbly, he bowed

<sup>3</sup>Literally: Tent government. Allusion to the fact that the Shogun was originally a captain to fight the invasion of the barbarians from the south. And a captain commands from a tent. Originally, the shogun was appointed by the Tenno (emperor) but the bakufu was able to deprive the ruler from his power and has seized the control over the empire which it rules with an iron fist.

<sup>4</sup>Second during the ritual of seppuku (ritual self sacrifice). Some Lords were appoints as Kaishakunin by the Shogunate. They would punish crimes committed by high ranking officials.

<sup>1</sup>Originally, a captain to fight the invasion of the barbarians from the south. Now, a military dictator

<sup>2</sup>Sun goddess

and went on: „Did you hear the news? The Shogun want to see me at once! But I'm so inexperienced! I'm so sure, I'll make some horrible mistake and ...“

„There, there“, the older Lord, a panda like Fukute, laughed good natured. „The Shogun is a wise and fair man. Surely, he will be lenient towards you, you're still young and he knows that! Furthermore, it will be at least one month before we reach Edo. That leaves us plenty of time to practice the correct behavior at court.“

The calm words and the steadfast self esteem of the experienced Lord blew the worries of the young panda away like a warm summer wind rainclouds. „Oh, Lord Tanaka“, Fukute sighed and smiled bashfully. „What would I do without you, my best friend and ally? If you hadn't been there by my side after the death of my parents, I would have surely died. How can I ever repay you for what you do for me?“

„Nonsense!“ Tanaka waved the idea aside. „The Geioka and the Kuwatsuri are allies since the dawn of time, how could I not support you all out?“

## 6 Besides Reality

With silent rush, the waves of the great sea licked against the gently inclined, white beach. Nothing, not even marks, algae or small stones interrupted the perfect view. A yellow sun laughed from a light-blue sky without any clouds. Near the horizon, impressive Mountains with icy caps, a thick forest before that and a completely flat plain.

Absolutely nothing could be heard besides the gentle swoosh of the waves. No seabirds called and everywhere, an unnatural, dead silence hung above the land. The air was still as in an airtight room.

An unmeasurable amount of time passed without anything changing. Even the sun didn't move and inch as if it had nailed down in its spot. There were no trees or rocks on the beach which could have casted a shadow but even if they had, it hadn't moved either.

Without warning, a giant stood suddenly on the sand. He was over three meters tall and crude as if he came directly from the beginning of evolution when nature had made its first, craven attempts at life or if a mad scientist had created a monster out of balls and cylinders.

The ball-head was bald and of a unhealthy, gray color. Scars told of old injuries. Large, faceted eyes swung around it, took the view in. The ears were folded rags of flesh and there were no lips. In fact, the whole head didn't seem to have any openings. Where a human would have her mouth, the newcomer had a funnel like a loudspeaker.

No muscle moved in the face while it stood on the beach. It was impossible to tell if it was surprised or felt anything at all. Still, there was a stark contrast to his surroundings despite the fact that the creature didn't move. Now, the environment looked even more dead than before.

Slowly, the giant lowered himself on his four arms which ended in four stubby claws which were spread evenly around his palm. On all six's, it started to move and soon ended in

an paced canter which moved it quickly over the surface of this strange place.

Despite the fact that the creature looked quite heavy, it didn't leave any traces in the sand. His powerful claws had a good grip on the ground but they couldn't even sink one millimeter in the fine-grained beach. The giant didn't seem to worry or wonder about that, at least his face was still completely unmoved.

When it made its first steps, another, unexpected property of this place showed itself: The surroundings melted, turned into smears, as if the thing would travel at an incredible speed, turned solid again. With every step, it covered a great distance but it was impossible to tell if this phenomenon came from it or from the place.

A short time later, it had reached the forest which had seemed to be far away from the beach. Without slowing down, it entered it. It didn't seem to worry about a collision and strangely enough, even if the forest looked solid, the plants seemed to avoid it.

Without incident, it came out the other side into a new landscape which was made up from low hills and small groups of trees. It seemed to know the place because it never hesitated or corrected its direction. The mountains, just barely visible near the horizon a moment before, now dominated the sky but it didn't seem to pay any attention.

In a small valley, it started to slow down until it finally stopped and rose on its two feet next to a circle of low stones which barely stood out of the grass. There were no inscriptions or signs on the white, bare, even stones. Nonetheless, anyone who saw them for the first time, had the impression of incredible age. Whatever the circle meant, it existed since the dawn of time.

Without hesitation, the giant stepped in the circle and stopped in its middle.

An instant later, a blinding light filled it and hid the creature completely.

A dialog began between two beings which were completely alien. If a human had tried to follow this dialog, if it could still be called that, he would have went insane in an instant.

Knowledge and informations were exchanged, thoughts for which whole civilisations needed years to even formulate them.

When the light vanished, the creature knew what had to be done.

It didn't feel happiness or anger.

It simply didn't feel anything.

It knew about feelings, what emotions were and understood them. But it wasn't bound by them since such a long time that the memories of them were almost a legend to it.

For its purpose, emotions were neither necessary or useful.

It turned around and cantered back to the beach, under a sun that never moved.

Only the waves swooshed silently on the gentle inclination of the perfect beach.

## 7 A Lonely Boy

„What is it?“ asked the man with growing impatience. „Will you hand over the thief or not?“

„Somehow“, the rabbit said slowly, „I have my doubts about your version of the story.“

„What?“ yelled the man angrily. „Are you saying I'm lying?“

„I would never even dare to think such a ridiculous thing“, the rabbit immediately yielded. The young rabbit, still dangling in the steady grip of the bear, just snorted.

The rabbit bowed down to him: „Please give me everything in your pockets.“

„What?“ the little rabbit was aghast. „But ... I'm no thief! He is the thief!“ Accusingly, he pointed with his free hand against his pursuer.

„If you are no thief“, the older rabbit promised, „then there is nothing to fear. I'll give you everything back.“

Angrily, the young rabbit emptied his pockets after the bear had let go and offered the contents to the samurai: Some string, a knife with bamboo handle and scabbard, a piece of kindling, a couple of pieces of carved bamboo and a small bag of dried mushrooms.

With quick movements, the rabbit felt him.

The small rabbit was about to protest when two things seemed to happen at once.

*„Now, he's distracted!“* the man thought and stabbed the older rabbit with his sword.

The rabbit suddenly had his sword in his hand, the arm stretched out behind himself at an impossible angle.

Without turning, he lowered the arm again, felt unhurriedly inside one of the pockets of his kimono and took a couple of washi<sup>1</sup> out to clean the blood from the edge of his sword.

After he was satisfied, he sheathed the blade again. Only then, the man dropped dead.

The protest was forgotten. With an open mouth, the boy stared at him. „Boah! You're so fast!“

„Thanks“, said the rabbit and inclined his head slightly. „My name is Akato Ichiro<sup>2</sup> and this is“, he pointed at the bear, „is Sakekawa Kumaichiro<sup>3</sup>. What's your name?“

„I'm called Januki Gakuro<sup>4</sup>“, the boy replied eagerly, the things in his hands were completely forgotten. „Please, Akato-sama<sup>5</sup>, my sensei<sup>6</sup> is still alone in that forest and fights with the bandits! Please, you must help him!“

„Must?“ the bear growled and stared down on the young Gakuro. „What makes you believe we must anything?“

<sup>1</sup>Paper to clean the blade of a sword

<sup>2</sup>The kanji for Akato mean "light, effortless" and "door". Ichiro means "enjoy, rejoice", "knowledge, wisdom" and "clear, happily" - someone, who enjoys wisdom and knowledge.

<sup>3</sup>Sakekawa: "rice-wine" and "river", Kumaichiro: "bear", "one", "son"

<sup>4</sup>Januki: "snake, drinker" and "take out, leave out, quote", Gakuro: "study" and "son"

<sup>5</sup>-sama: proper address for a higher-ranking person

<sup>6</sup>teacher

„Kuma“, Ichiro said with the slightest hint of reprimand. „We can't leave this boy all alone, can we?“

„So?“ the bear rumbled. „And why not? What are his problems to us?“

The boy was about to plead to them to help him but Ichiro already had made up his mind: „Please, lead the way“, he asked Gakuro instead of continuing this fruitless discussion.

Quickly, the child put away his things and ran into the forest, waving for them: „This way, samurai-sama!“

Shaking his head and grumbling into his fur, the bear followed his companion, if at a distance. Something about the boy bothered him but he couldn't quite put his finger on it.

A distance in the forest, the boy would have almost run into two other bandits which were coming to see what had happened to their comrade. They pushed the boy roughly unto the ground when they saw Ichiro but the skilled fighter killed them like a flash.

„You are incredible!“ Gakuro cried enthusiastically. „You must meet Hanesato-sensei! He will be incredibly pleased to meet someone of your skill!“

For an answer, Ichiro just nodded politely and flung the blood off his blade. When it came to Hanesato, he had his doubts about a possible meeting but he didn't want to upset the boy unnecessarily.

„Go on“, he ordered the boy. „But more careful! More bandits could hide in the shadows!“

„How many are there anyway?“ Kuma droned.

„I saw ten of them, Sakekawa-sama“, Gakuro replied. „But now, three are already dead! And my sensei will have killed the others!“

Ichiro shot Kuma a warning glance to keep his cynic mouth shut. Sighing, the bear looked away as if all this didn't relate to him at all and said nothing.

They followed the boy on though the forest. He had left a wide track during his flight which they would have been able to follow blinded but Ichiro felt uneasy about leaving the boy alone. „No point in giving them a hostage“, he thought grimly.

Finally, they arrived at the clearing. Everything seemed quiet and peaceful except for the motionless body lying next to the fireplace. Gakuro was about to run to his teacher but Ichiro had him by the neck before he could stand up.

„But ...!“ the boy started to protest.

„Might be a trap“, Ichiro interrupted him quietly. „Sometimes, bandits leave injured behind to lure careless wanderers to help them which then become the next victims.“

Kuma just snorted scornfully but didn't say anything. It wasn't clear if he meant the behavior of the bandits or of Gakuro. The boy took it personally and made a dark face what didn't bother Kuma at all.

Angrily, the boy looked at the edge of the forest around the clearing. „I cannot see anything!“ he meant. „Surely, the bandits have flown long ago! My teacher is an incredible fighter! Surely, he defeated them!“



From what he saw, Ichiro came to a different conclusion but said nothing. He shot Kuma a questioning look who just shrugged his broad shoulders.

With the boy between them, they stepped out in the open.

They had almost reached the motionless body of master Hanesato when suddenly, eight shady figures appeared out of the wood. At once, Kuma and Ichiro stopped but Gakuro wanted to see what had happened to his teacher. Ichiro had to hold him back.

„Now, what have we here?“ mocked a goat, obviously the leader.

„We are but simply wanderers“, Ichiro answered politely. „We would be very thankful if you could tell us the direction of the next village.“

A bleating laugh answered him: „And then, you’ll just mind your business?“

„Certainly“, Ichiro promised. Utterly disappointed, Gakuro looked up to his new idol. He wanted to say something but Ichiro pressed his shoulder and concentrated again on the newcomers.

„Well, just give us all your money and we’ll just mind our business!“ the goat called and his men joined his laughter.

„Laugh as you want!“ yelled Gakuro. „Your friends were dead before they even knew that Akato-san had drawn his sword! He will kill you all, you filthy thieves!“

The laughter was cut short by a cry of rage. Eager for revenge, the bandits closed the distance.

„Gakuro?“ Kuma growled slowly, while he clumsily drew his sword.

„Yes, Sakekawa-sama?“ the boy replied, taken by surprise what effect his rash words had had.

„Should we survive this“, the bear went on, „then I’ll turn your behind in a bloody mess on which you’ll never be able to sit again.“

The fur of the young rabbit paled. „But ...“, he stuttered.

„Stay between us“, Ichiro commanded while he readied himself for the battle. „I don’t want something to happen to you.“

Fearfully, Gakuro complied.

„Kuma would be really upset if the bandits would kill you before him“, the rabbit added, then he focused all his concentration on the enemy. The horrified expression on the face of the boy didn’t make it into his consciousness anymore.

As usual, Ichiro ignored completely what went on behind his back. Kuma was always disgruntled about something but it wasn’t the first time they were in such a situation and he knew that he could rely on the bear. The boy worried him more. Better swordsmen had died because of stupid mishaps and Ichiro could only pray that the boy wouldn’t make things even worse.

Professionally, the bandits spread. Their movements told Ichiro that they were no peasants, driven into this life by dire need but trained fighters. „Probably *ronin*<sup>1</sup> like us“, he gues-

sed while looking for weaknesses in their enemies with a practised eye.

Despite their anger about the deaths of their comrades, they attacked carefully and determinedly. First, they circled Ichiro and his companions, then someone attacked from the front to bind his attention. But Ichiro already expected an attack from the side and let the katana<sup>2</sup> of his opponent slide along his own blade to bring it up again. While the man jumped back to escape a half-hearted but nonetheless deadly attack, Ichiro’s sword suddenly flashed to the left. Gurgling, a dog collapsed, desperately clutching at his gaping wound.

The next attacked died in mid-jump. He had been too sure that Ichiro would never be able to turn back in time.

Behind Ichiro, Kuma had thrown one of his opponents on another. Even before they could start to untangle themselves, a devastating blow against the head of the third man followed. The force was so great that it didn’t only throw him back but he also almost somersaulted before he lay very still.

The fourth bandit, who had hoped to find an easy victim in the slow bear, almost had no time to realize his mistake when Kuma’s sword almost knocked his own out of his hands. His defense was only open for a blink of an eye but enough time for Kuma to snap his neck with a quick kick against his chin.

The time had been almost enough for the bandits on the ground to sort out their limbs but before they could raise, Kuma cut off their heads.

Another opponent of Ichiro fell when a stone suddenly hit his head while his sword danced a complicated pattern against the one of the rabbit. Ichiro had no time to find out where the projectile had come from because the goat suddenly realized that their victims were much more dangerous than he had thought. In panic, he turned and made a dash for it.

With a quick glance behind, Ichiro reassured himself that Kuma would be able to handle whatever was left and sprang after the man. The mortal agony gave the man an incredible speed. Ichiro, not a slow one himself, had to give everything to close the distance. He had almost reached the goat at the edge of the forest but the man had no intention to continue a fight he would probably lose.

Ichiro didn’t waste his breath on a curse and threw his katana. The goat cried out when the sword severed him from behind. In vain, his hands tried to pull it out, then he collapsed with a gurgle.

With an angry movement, Ichiro yanked his sword free and killed him. After he had reassured himself that the goat was in fact dead and not only pretending, he pulled him beneath a tree and returned to Kuma. In the meantime, the bear had started to kill the injured bandits which had survived so far. Aghast, Gakuro watched the horrible spectacle but didn’t dare to protest.

Since Kuma didn’t need any help, Ichiro had a look at the motionless body of master Hanesato. The old tiger must have been dead for a while. His belongings were spread carelessly in the grass. Unhappy, the rabbit started to collect and put

<sup>1</sup>Masterless samurai

<sup>2</sup>Long sword of a samurai

them down next to the corpse.

When Gakuro anxiously asked if something was wrong with his teacher, Ichiro just shook his head.

The boy didn't want to believe it. With a cry full of anguish, he sprang to his teacher: „Hanesato-sensei! Please! Stand up! Sensei! Please! You can't leave me here, all alone! Sensei! Please!“ The rest was drowned in tears and sobs.

Unsatisfied, Ichiro turned away and went to Kuma to help him to pile the corpses of the bandits near the edge of the forest. They cut off the head of the leader and took it with them, there might be a bounty on it.

„What about him?“ Kuma waved his head at the boy who sat numbly next to his sensei in the grass.

Undecidedly, Ichiro scratched his head.

„You're not going to take the brat along?“ Kuma growled. „He's nothing but trouble!“

„We'll have to take him to the next village, at least“, protested Ichiro. „We can't simply leave him behind.“

Kuma's eyes were slits: „You will handle him. Let me out of it!“

„What is it with him?“ Ichiro wondered and nodded.

The eyes of the boy were pits of sorrow when he crouched next to him.

„He's dead“, the body murmured weakly. „What happens with me, now?“

„These eyes“, Ichiro thought. Old, eagerly forgotten memories came out of the depths of his self. Memories of a dark, rainy night. Cries of the dying, rains of arrows, flashing thunder on the sky. Death, longed for, passed him. A flight, full of hatred and fear. A friendly voice. Green eyes, just like those of the boy, in which he had lost himself.

„You can come with us to the next village“, he heard himself say, while he fought the tormenting pictures.

„Yes“, the boy murmured. „Thank you, Akato-sama.“

„It cannot be ...“, Ichiro said to himself but he had to be sure. „Where are you from, anyway?“

„[XXX Name of the village]“, the boy replied weakly. He was too occupied with himself to notice the strong reaction Ichiro showed when he heard the name.

„Who ... who are your parents?“ Ichiro's voice was hoarse.

„My father is Magistrate Januki Masato and my mother's name is Shiwako“, the boy answered automatically.

„Shiwako! He is it“, Ichiro was thunderstruck. „Her son!“ The name of the father told him nothing, she must have married after he had left for Edo.

When Gakuro looked up again, he saw that Ichiro had made a decision. „I'll bring you home“, the ronin promised.

The words failed the boy, then, uneasy, he asked: „Really?“

„Yes“, Ichiro replied determinedly.

„Oh, thank you!“ Gakuro cried and sprang up. He was about to hug Ichiro out of thankfulness but remembered his manners soon enough. Embarrassed, he looked down, then

bowed: „domo arigato<sup>1</sup>, Akato-sama. I ... I promise that I won't be burden for you!“

„My pleasure“, Ichiro smiled. „An old debt that I can pay back, at last“, he thought for himself.

Kuma, who had watched them out of the corner of his eyes, added one and one. „He's coming with us, now?“ he growled when the two came over.

That moment, Gakuro remembered the promise the Kuma had given him and stopped. Fearful eyes watched the bulky samurai uneasily.

„Yes“, Ichiro replied unintimidated. „I'm bringing him home.“

„Hmpf“, snorted the bear and bowed down to the boy who couldn't help shaking when the head of the giant filled the sky: „One more time trouble ...“, he threatened.

„Promise! No trouble, Sakekawa-sama!“ Gakuro said hastily.

Shaking his head, the bear straightened and trudged away.

Trembling, Gakuro gasped for air and swallowed hard. Quickly, he ran after Ichiro when the rabbit followed Kuma but he made sure that the rabbit was always between him and the bear. He never saw the wry grin on Kuma's face.

But Ichiro soon noticed that Gakuro looked at him again and again but never came up with the courage to put his question. „Yes?“ he encouraged the boy.

„Uh“, Gakuro hesitated. „Akato-sama, I don't want to appear disrespectful but there is something I would really like to know.“

„And that would be?“ Ichiro smiled friendly while Kuma next to him pricked up his ears.

„The goat ... which you pursued ... I mean ...“ Uneasily, Gakuro trailed off.

„You would like to know why I never gave the man a chance“, Ichiro suspected. „Why I killed him cowardly from behind instead of challenging him to battle and saving my honor.“

The boy looked at the ground and didn't dare to nod.

„And probably also why I didn't kill the man who attacked me from the left“, Ichiro went on in a good mood.

Baffled, the boy stared at him. Amused, Ichiro looked back. He remembered only too well how impressed he had been himself every time when his sensei had seemingly read his mind.

„How did you know that?“ The boy was openly amazed.

Ichiro laughed and clapped the boy on the shoulder: „What else could have been on your mind? Well, let's see. The man on the left. Yes, I could have killed him. But then, I would have had no cover from left.“

„As long he's lying on the ground, writhing in agony, nobody can safely stand there“, the boy realized.

„Very good“, Ichiro praised him. „And his comrades try to avoid to torture him more, so they avoid climbing over him. This way, he's a pretty good cover.“

<sup>1</sup>Thank you very much

„I see“, the boy nodded with fresh enthusiasm. „But what about the leader?“

„If you had escaped without our help“, Ichiro asked instead of an answer, „what would you have done?“

Confusedly, Gakuro looked at him. „I don't know ...“, he scratched his head and pursed his lips, „I think, I would have hidden somewhere and then, after a few hours, I would have sneaked back.“

„You would have found your dead sensei“, Ichiro continued. „And then?“

„I would have followed those bastards!“ Gakuro's voice was full of hatred. „One after the other, I would have waylaid and killed them! I would have made sure that they would sleep with open eyes until they are all dead!“

„Yes“, Ichiro nodded full of sympathy. „Well, I think, if the leader would have escaped, he would have done exactly the same thing.“

„Oh“, was all that Gakuro said.

„And Gakuro?“ Ichiro asked.

„Yes, Akato-sama?“

„When the opposition has four times the greater strength“, Ichiro warned him, „you don't provoke them, no matter how superior your skills are.“

„Yes, Akato-sama“, Gakuro replied glumly.

To cheer him up, Ichiro put his hand on the boy's shoulder, who gave a start. „Still, a good throw“, he commented. „It's quite hard to hit someone with a stone who is engaged in a fight.“

„At home“, Gakuro reported proudly, „I was collecting eggs of seagulls. That's where I learned to throw!“

„*Quick recovery*“, Ichiro thought amusedly and began to look forward to the voyage before him while Gakuro began to tell him all the adventures which he had already experienced in his short life.

## 8 Bounty

Later that day, they reached a small city. The reception at the local police station was cool. First, Ichiro assumed that the civil servants were unhappy about the late disturbance. But neither his polite conduct did help to improve the situation nor his report about the attack of the bandits. He accepted the head without more than a slight nod. It seemed that he couldn't stand ronin and was impolite enough to let that attitude show.

Kuma endured it with a stone face but Ichiro congratulates himself to let Gakuro wait outside. The boy was definitely smart but rash. A dangerous mix as Ichiro knew only too well from his own experience.

„For these bandits, the bakufu has chosen to put a reward of 200 ryo<sup>1</sup> for these bandits“, the man finally proclaimed.

<sup>1</sup> 1 ryo is about 17g gold or one years supply of rice. Today, the bounty would be about \$30'000.

„I will have the money sent here. You can collect it in four weeks.“

That was a lot of time, Ichiro found, but he swallowed the insult without moving a muscle much to the displeasure of the servant who only seemed to wait for them to make a mistake. „Takahato-san will hand you your papers. You can go now.“

„Thank you very much“, Ichiro bowed.

„Papers“, Kuma growled sullenly when they stepped outside. „What do they think? I can't buy anything with that! I have to eat and drink! Why do these fools put a bounty when they can't pay it?“

Gakuro was expecting them eagerly but chose to hide behind Ichiro again when he noticed the mood of the large bear. Ichiro didn't pay much attention to the ramblings of the Kuma because he said that every time. Instead, he turned to a passer-by: „Excuse me, where can I find a money-changer?“

„Well, Samurai-san“, the peasant thought for a moment. „You could try your luck with Morikato but he's quick with the weights, one must be careful. Or you could go down the inn at the end of the street, Tachikami is the owner. He's running the inn but he also lends money.“

„Thank you very much, we will try that“, Ichiro replied politely.

The inn made a very good impression on him. Not quite the place which the two ronin usually could afford, though.

They had not yet reached the house, then a maid with an expensive kimono stepped on the street. „Irasshaimase<sup>2</sup>“, she cried and bowed deeply. „The house of Tachikami-san is deeply honored by your visit.“

„Domo arigato<sup>3</sup>“, Ichiro replies as politely. The behavior of the woman let him long with wistfulness for the past when times had been better.

They took off their dusty sandals and stepped into the noble interior of the house. The maid ran to kneel in front of the next door and opened for the ronin. Behind it, another woman with a perfect hairstyle and a gorgeous kimono was already waiting for them. Two girls came out of nowhere and served without any clatter a little dish with sour radish and cups for tea. Another maid arrived and poured the tea into them with a perfect gesture. With a sound, she closed the door behind herself.

„Irasshaimase!“ the receptionist repeated and bowed deeply. „The house of Tachikami-san is deeply honored by your visit!“ Her face and voice underlined the words. „How can we be of service?“

„I would like to have word with Tachikami-san on the matter of a financial transaction“, Ichiro said. Before had finished, Gakuro had already gobbled down his treat and was eyeing Ichiro's portion hungrily.

The smile the face of the receptionist didn't change. „Of course, the house of Tachikami is at your service. Please be so kind as to follow me.“

<sup>2</sup> Welcome, welcome!

<sup>3</sup> Thank you very much



Smoothly, she rose and did glide towards a door which lead further into the house. They lead the guests into a small inner court and into another building in a small garden. „Please accept my deepest apologies“, she said when they arrived, „that Tachikami-sama is not available, yet. It wouldn't be too much trouble for you, then you can explain the issue to me so I can inform Tachikami-sama in advance.“

„Certainly“, Ichiro accepted, since it was obvious for him that an important person like Tachikami would like to know if it was worth to bother himself with them personally. Still, he was impressed by the behavior of the receptionist; he would never had expected someone with her education in a small city like this. „The police chief gave us this document and I would like to know if you were interested in buying it.“

The woman studied the document carefully. When she looked back at him, here features showed no sign what she thought about bounty hunters. „Our house would be honored to offer you 150 ryo for this.“

Kuma couldn't believe his ears but before he could start yelling, Ichiro replied: „We are also in need of an accommodation. Lets say, three nights?“

After she thought a moment about this, she offered: „It would be a great honor for us to offer you our services. Would you like to receive 120 ryo in three days?“

That wasn't at all bad, Ichiro found but Kuma wasn't happy, yet: „We'll need some right now, we ...“

„I almost forgot“, Ichiro intervened. „Of course, we would like to spend some time in this beautiful city tonight.“

„May I have 20 ryo brought to your rooms?“ the lady offered.

Ichiro, who had an idea what Kuma was planning, agreed on 40 with her. He wasn't at all happy but he know from past experience that it was futile to discuss this with Kuma.

But now, he didn't want to think about this at all. His fur itched unbearable and each fibre cried to have the dust of the street washed off. He sighed happily when he sunk himself into the hot water of the bath house a little later.

„Akato-sama?“ Gakuro was again curious, when he saw the black pattern of Ichiro's fur which ran along his spine. „If your arms and legs were black, too, you would just have to bind back your long ears and everyone would take you for a panda!“

The rabbit just smiled. Only the growing impatience of Kuma irritated him in his relaxation. The bear couldn't wait to have his cleaned clothes back so he could leave. When they finally arrived, he went without another word. Ichiro didn't comment but enjoyed the silence.

„Where's he going?“ Gakuro asked.

„Gaming“, Ichiro replied lazily.

„Games? What kind of games?“ the boy wondered.

„Games of chance“, Ichiro sighed. 40 ryo were a lot of money and tomorrow, nothing would be left of it. „Be quiet tomorrow when you wake up. It would be best if you didn't even talk to Kuma.“

„Yes, Akato-sama“, Gakuro promised, who was obviously confused why Ichiro asked this.

Since Kuma was having fun with part of their money, Ichiro saw no reason to stay alone tonight and ordered a splendid dinner for them and a geisha to entertain them. The fragile cat was more than worth the money. Ichiro enjoyed himself like he hadn't in a long time and even asked for a woman for tonight.

It felt good to live once again like a human and not like a lizard on the street.

In the middle of the night, a totally drunk Kuma swayed back into the room, crashed on his bed and started to snore almost immediately.

Since it was impossible to sleep with this noise, Ichiro turned to the woman under his cover.

The next morning, he woke up a little tired but satisfied. Kuma didn't move but his gurgling breath indicated that he was still alive. Quietly, the three of them left the room, to wash themselves. After breakfast, the woman left because Ichiro couldn't afford her anymore if the money was to last a little bit longer.

It was noon when Kuma started to stir. With bloodshot eyes, he stumbled to the bathhouse, splashed himself and ate something. Then, he retired again. The bear looked so horrible that Gakuro didn't dare to talk to him.

The next day, Ichiro enjoyed their accommodation to the full, the bear was starting to recover but his mood was even worse than usual and the maids, popping up in an instant when Ichiro needed anything, were openly afraid of him.

When they finally left the inn, Ichiro had the impression that the receptionist was relieved even though her behavior was as perfect as always. The ronin thanked then she handed him the bag with the rest of the money.

On the street, Kuma wanted to know: „How much left?“

„50 ryo“, Ichiro replied.

„How much?“ Kuma yelled angrily. „There must be more! I ...“

„I treated me something“, Ichiro said coolly. „If you object, well, I'm not keeping you.“

Furiously, Kuma ground his teeth. Gakuro took a few steps back but Ichiro returned the stare of the much larger bear calmly. He had expected such an outbreak and was not surprised in the least. Even though the bear was so unpredictable, he could forecast his reactions in his dreams, now.

With a last, outraged snort, Kuma turned away and trampled ahead.

## 9 Bungee Without Rope

Roughly two months later, a young human carefully cleaned all stubble from the edge of a steep cliff. Then, he checked conscientious that the edge was safe and sound before he stood backwards on it, with only the tips of his feed on the solid rock and the deep, breathtaking abyss behind himself.

His look went through the little scrub up here into an invisible distance, as he spread his arms slowly. The bright light of the wonderful afternoon spread reflections in his dark hair

and turned his simple, beige-colored clothes almost white. If there had been an observer, he would have probably wondered about the face without a trace of fur and the naked hands. Someone born on this world would have seen immediately that this person was a stranger. But nobody saw him.

At least not up here.

Then he tilted slowly backwards, a wide grin on his face.

With a little bit of anticipation for the looks on the faces of the people deep below him which he would see very soon.

His grin seemed to widen when the wind started to pull at him, the rocky surface of the cliff started to race past him so it began to look like a gray-brown blur.

The ground, still far below him, only slowly revealed any details.

The eyes of the man were wide open, sucked the details in while he fell ever faster.

And he thought: „759 meters above ground. Contact in approximately 9556 milliseconds.“

## 10 Two Days Before

Ichiro enjoyed watching Gakuro going through his exercises. The boy was swift and nimble, as the ronin had expected him to be. The young rabbit sill grabbed the bokken<sup>1</sup> too fiercely and therefore tiered quickly but he already managed to deflect all attacks from Kuma.

Of course, Kuma didn't pull all his tricks; the boy would have been astonished what the large bear was capable of. It seemed that Kuma also had his fun training with the child.

*„A good time for Kuma to be the father he never could be“,* Ichiro mused lost in thought while Kuma led the boy through a complicated form.

The quiet evening air was disturbed by the heavy breathing of the two fighters, their battle cries and the dry cracks when the bokken met.

Absentmindedly, Ichiro tugged at his left ear. *„I just wished it would always be as peaceful“,* he thought and sighed under his breath.

On the improvised training ground, Gakuro had actually managed to drive Kuma into a corner. The massive bear stood much too close near the border they had scraped into the soil to be able to defend against Gakuros next attack.

A strange view: The giant who almost had to crouch to parry the attacks of the little rabbit.

The outcome was obvious: Gakuro, completely certain that victory was his, advanced further onto Kuma.

Ichiro with his larger experience saw the slight movement of Kumas shoulder. Now would be a perfect time to care about his own cover but Gakuro was already occupied with the celebration of his success.

With an agility which seemed impossible for the corpulent body, Kuma turned to the side, his bokken suddenly stopped resisting the one of Gakuro and the boy stumbled helplessly

into the space where Kuma had been moments before. As if that hadn't been enough, Kuma gave Gakuros backside a good kick just the moment when the boy had caught himself. Ichiro knew the bear had used little force but Gakuro still almost somersaulted.

„OUCH!“ he cried furiously. „Damn, Sakekawa-sama, what was that for?“

Ichiro sighed again. Gakuro seemed impossible to understand that Kuma was absolutely unwilling to lose a fight. And to make things worse, Kuma wasn't very picky about the means to win.

„Show some effort“, Kuma grinned and leaned provokingly on his bokken, „if you don't want someone kick your butt around.“

„That was rude!“ Gakuro complained. „You didn't obey the rules!“

„Oh, really?“ Kuma showed mock surprise. „How rude! Of course, any *real* enemy you might encounter in your short life won't *ever* think of such a thing!“

He grinned at the fuming Gakuro: „Because it will end with the first one who doesn't.“

Outraged to be betrayed of his victory, Gakuro threw his bokken to the ground and ran away.

Ichiro was very surprised how much this reaction hurt the giant who enjoyed playing distant and uncaring so much. The patronizing grin vanished in an instant from his face. Instead, Ichiro could see a deep pain which surprised him.

Then Kuma smoothed his expression again. Ichiro pretended not having noticed anything when Kuma sighed, picked up the bokken and then came over to him with the usual, swaying walk of the bears. The evening sun made the outline of his hairs stand out against the light and for a moment, it looked as if his ears where on fire when a beam of light hit him through the leaves of the bamboo.

„Today's youth, eh?“ he growled dismissively but the usual, cynic undertone of his voice was missing. „No patience. As the first tiny setback comes up, they run crying for their mom.“

Ichiro just grumbled ambiguously. Gakuros reaction had failed to surprise him. The boy had some skill but he has rash and headstrong. If something didn't go his way, he often exploded in anger.

Furthermore, Kuma knew Gakuro for some time, now, and he had seen several fits of rage from the boy. Still, it seemed as if he was provoking the young rabbit on purpose. That made Ichiro wonder even more about Kumas reaction to the recent outburst of fury.

„Let's hope he comes back before dark“, Kuma growled.

„Since when do you care?“ Ichiro was surprised.

„I just want to avoid your whining if something happens to him“, Kuma instantly shot back,

Since his friend didn't seem to be in the mood to talk about what moved him, Ichiro rose and stretched: „I'll go and have a look.“

„Hmm“, was the only reply from Kuma.

<sup>1</sup>Wooden sword

It was simple enough to follow the trail of shredded plants. Ichiro found him on the edge of a small river nearby. Angrily, the boy threw stones into the water as if he wanted to kill the stream.

When Ichiro came closer, he suddenly said: „How can you stand this ruffian?“

Ichiro smiled, Gakuro's instincts were already keen enough to notice when someone crept up on him. *„Surely, he knew me by the sounds of my steps“*, he thought suddenly proud. *„Of course, not a big deal to tell me and the trampling of Kuma apart“*, he grinned amusedly.

He sat down next to Gakuro and offered him another stone. Gakuro ripped it angrily out of his hand and threw it with such force that the splash of the water reached them.

„The harder you throw, the more wet you get“, Ichiro said silently.

Gakuro, already with the next stone in his hand, stopped and looked at him from the side. „So what?“ he snapped and hurled the projectile as strong as he could so they both got really wet.

„Now, Kuma will have the time of his life when we get back“, Ichiro said unimpressed.

Gakuro's rage left him as fast as it had come: „Why does he do that?“ he said unhappily. „Why can't he let me win just once? Does he always have to use his dirty tricks?“

Ichiro shrugged and threw a pebble unto the stream which vanished with a tiny gurgle. „Kuma is Kuma, he was always this way and will ever be. You will have to learn to expect things like that from him.“

The young rabbit hung his head and Ichiro tapped him encouragingly on the shoulder: „Take it as a lesson: If you run into an enemy which is stronger, faster and more skilled than you are, there is just one thing you can do.“

„And what would that be, Akato-sama?“ the boy asked curiously.

„You must be more clever“, Ichiro replied. „And now into the water with you, so I can help you rub the dirt out of your fur. Exercising with Kuma doesn't mean you have to smell like him.“

Gakuro giggled and rose to strip out of his wet hakama<sup>1</sup>. „He really should clean himself more often!“

While Gakuro climbed into the cold stream, Ichiro looked for a good spot where he could leave his daisho<sup>2</sup> so it wouldn't get wet but still within reach if he needed them. Then he stripped as well and followed the boy into the silently gurgling water.

„Akato-sama?“ Gakuro asked suddenly while Ichiro rubbed his back.

„Hm?“ Ichiro encouraged him.

„What will you do if your enemy is also more smart than you are?“ Gakuro wanted to know.

Ichiro laughed: „That's simple! Then I can surely come to an agreement with him!“

<sup>1</sup>Wide, black trousers

<sup>2</sup>Matching pair of swords

## 11 Raid!

Not far away, something much more unpleasant happened.

A peasant, his wife and daughter crouched in a corner of their house while the bandits ripped it apart looking for valuables. They winced every time when something was smashed and the child couldn't stop crying.

At last, the bandits left with loud hooting. Cynically, the leader, a skinny dog with a dirty-grey fur, bowed and thanked them for their hospitality: „You have no idea how hard it is to feed all these hungry mouths! But I must say that I'm a little displeased about what we found here. Peasants ought to be more hard-working! Your property is really ... pathetic. It will scarcely feed us for two days.“

The family crawled even deeper into the corner.

„It's all we have!“ the father affirmed in panic. „Please, we have nothing else!“

„Of course, of course“, the leader nodded patronizingly. „Kyorou, are you coming?“

„Soon“, the guard said. He was a cat with a fur so dark brown, it seemed almost black.

The father had already noticed the hungry look which the cat had shot his daughter but he was a mere farmer, no fighter.

There was nothing he could do.

With a strange smile on his lips, Kyorou tied them together.

First, they hoped that he was just making sure they wouldn't follow them or alarm the authorities too soon.

But then, he drew an oddly shaped knife.

It took the better part of an hour before the horrible screams died and Kyorou left the house, satisfied. Behind him, greedy flames started to lick at the roof and began to erase the traces of the horror which had just happened.

With a happy smile, he examined the strips of wonderfully soft fur with which he could now repair his coat. His yellow teeth flashed in the light of the moon as he set out laughing back to their hideout.

## 12 Horror for Breakfast

„At last“, Ichiro scowled when they stepped out of the forest onto a recently harvested field.

Instead of going back to the street, Kuma has proposed to take a shortcut through the wood to the next city. As was to be expected, they had lost their direction in the thick forest. If Gakuro hadn't climbed trees to find out where the sun was standing, they had never found out again.

„Maybe we can ask the peasants here for directions“, Gakuro proposed.

„Doesn't look occupied to me“, Kuma meant.

The hut at the other end of the field was just a smoking ruin.

Instinctively, Ichiro loosened his sword but didn't draw just yet. „You wait here“, he ordered Gakuro, then he followed the border of the forest to the left towards the house.

Without a word, Kuma did the same on the other side.

Carefully, they approached the hut. The ground showed a wide trail from the former entrance to the forest.

With a drawn sword, Ichiro threw a quick glance inside while Kuma kept an eye on the wood.

All that was left from the unhappy inhabitants was charred corpses in a corner which seemed strange to Ichiro. *„The hut was small and even if the fire surprised them in the sleep“, he wondered suspiciously, „all it would have taken was a tiny step to safety.“*

And the trail told another story.

Ichiro looked around and when he didn't notice anything, he sheathed his sword. Carefully, he stepped through the fluffy ash to have a closer look at the victims.

*„Rope“, he thought angrily when he saw it. „Those bastards didn't only raid there poor people but also tied them and then burned their house over their heads!“*

Then his gaze fell on the ground where the wind had already blown away a good part of the ashes. Only below the corpses was a large stain where the ashes stubbornly stuck.

*„Blood“, Ichiro realized and wondered what could have happened.*

Behind him were suddenly retching noises.

He didn't have to turn around to know that the curiosity had again driven Gakuro too far.

He said nothing. The nightmares which the boy would have in the next days would be enough punishment.

„There is nothing we can do here. Let's inform the authorities in the next town when we arrive“, he told Kuma.

The bear lifted an eyebrow: „Why? Who cares about some peasants?“

„Kuma!“ Ichiro called disapprovingly.

„I'm just realistic!“ Kuma defended himself. „That were more than 20 men. You really think they were be still alive if the magistrate cared?“

Gakuro, who had just washed the taste out of his mouth in small irrigation duct, sprang up: „You ... you ... heartless ...“, he cried, shaking from fury.

„What is it now?“ Kuma yelled back. „Is it my fault that the world is bad? It is my fault that the life of a peasant is worth less than the mud in which he stands?“

Ichiro sighed when Gakuro ran past them with tears in his eyes. „Kuma, you really shouldn't rough up the boy so much“, he said shaking his head.

„Bah“, the bear spat. „The sooner he learns that life is hard and unjust, the better.“

Ichiro wondered if it would change anything when he told Kuma that it might only be so hard an unjust because of his behavior but decided against it. Silent, they followed the path down to the road. Ahead of them, Gakuro wrecked havoc among the weeds along the sides with his bokken.

## 13 Magistrate Shinohero

The city was small but clean. Still, the experienced eyes of Ichiro could not fail to see the fear of the people who lived here. *„I just hope that Kuma isn't right“, he thought uneasily. „It wouldn't be the first time that a magistrate gets paid from his lord and a successful group of bandits.“*

Since they were running out of money, Kuma wanted to look for an opportunity to earn some while Ichiro wanted to report to the authorities, first.

„But ...“, Ichiro protested when Kuma simply refused to accompany him.

Kuma sighed deeply: „Just do what you must but don't come complaining later, yes?“

After that, he turned on his heels and went into the next tavern.

Shaking his head, Ichiro asked his way to the office of the magistrate. After he reported his business to the guards, he was called very quickly.

It was just before noon when he could already report to an civil servant. He told the man in detail what he had found despite the fact that Gakuro got sick again when he remembered and he also didn't forget to mention the strange pool of blood in the hut.

„Was the stain exceptionally large?“ the clerk asked.

„Yes“, Ichiro confirmed. „Does that mean something?“

„I think the magistrate himself will like to hear that“, the clerk decided. „Please follow me.“

On the way, Gakuro was openly satisfied with himself: „That means that the magistrate takes this seriously despite what Kuma said!“

„Gakuro!“ Ichiro was horrified while the clerk stopped dead when he heard this incredible insult.

„Of course the magistrate takes this seriously!“ the ronin added hastily before the clerk could say something. „But that doesn't mean that he can attend to it personally! After all, you must not forget that he can't spend all his time hunting bandits. There are other, important things which the government of such a large and substantial city require! So it wouldn't be unusual if he had appointed a capable person to do it in his place!“

After a warning glance, the clerk just nodded and walked on.

Relieved, Ichiro took a breath while Gakuro wondered what all the excitement was about.

Luckily, the man let them alone for a moment and Ichiro used the opportunity to have a word with the boy: „Gakuro! What did you think when you said the magistrate doesn't care about his subjects!“

„I didn't“, Gakuro defended himself. „Kuma said that!“

„Oh, and you think that the magistrate would let us walk away if he arrests Kuma because if this insult?“ Ichiro hissed.

„He has to! We didn't do anything wrong“ replied Gakuro stubbornly.



„He should“, Ichiro corrected sternly. „But that doesn't mean he will. We are strangers here, he doesn't know anything about us and ronin like us have a dubious reputation at best! It's already a miracle that he is willing to see us! At the slightest misbehavior, we spend the next week in a dark, hot, stinking cell waiting for our execution!“

„Kuma would come and rescue us!“ Gakuro was sure.

That got him a pitiful look from Ichiro.

„He would, wouldn't he?“ Gakuro asked not quite so sure as before.

„Kuma prefers to avoid troubles“, Ichiro replied diplomatically.

A few moments later, they were admitted.

Magistrate Shinohero seemed to have finished his lunch just moments before because servants were leaving the room with the dishes when they entered. Longingly, Gakuro followed them with his eyes but Ichiro had other things on his mind than his empty stomach. He found it interesting that they had been admitted them as soon as possible instead of letting them wait until all traces of the meal had been removed.

The magistrate himself was a chubby, unhurried panda. Next to him sat his wife with a stern face, a panda like him. The writer and the advisers were pandas as well. Ichiro had always found it difficult to tell them apart even though he had seen female pandas noticing relationships just by looking at the fur patterns. The fact that pandas just loved to be among themselves didn't help at all.

After they had bowed and been introduced by the clerk, the magistrate asked: „What have you seen, Akato-san?“

„Magistrate Shinohero, I found it most important to report immediately before the bandits can wipe out all traces behind them“, Ichiro replied politely.

The panda smiled the slightest bit, only his eyes lost some of their hardness. „A most commendable thought“, he praised him. „What can you report?“

„Maybe you would like to not burden your wife with this?“ Ichiro suggested carefully.

A shadow fell over the face of the panda and Ichiro hoped that he hadn't made some unforgivable mistake but the magistrate just said: „My wife knows exactly why she is present.“

„Of course, Magistrate Shinohero“, Ichiro agreed hastily. „We spend the night in the bamboo forest and in the morning, to our embarrassment, we lost our sense of direction in the thick undergrowth. When we finally managed to reach the edge of the wood, we found ourselves on a field about an hour away from the city ...“

In a few words, he reported again how he had examined the corpses and found the stain.

„Because of the many footprints, I'm guessing that the inhabitants of the hut were raided by bandits during the night and the bandits had put fire to the building to wipe out any traces.“

Magistrate Shinohero nodded. „There is just one more question but I fear you won't be able to answer it.“

„Yes, Magistrate Shinohero?“ Ichiro replied.

„Could you see if their fur was undisturbed before they had been burned?“ the panda wanted to know.

Shocked, Ichiro's mouth fell open. „If they ...?“ he stammered. „If someone did ...“

Ichiro had seen his share of horrible things but there were things that still unnerved him.

He looked at the ground, tried to concentrate but his memory wouldn't give more details.

The rabbit swallowed hard: „Please forgive me“, his voice was hoarse, „I don't know ... can't remember ... it ... it might be possible ... it would ... it might explain the amount of blood ... but ... no ... no, I'm not sure.“

He looked up again just to notice Gakuro shaking from horror.

„Forgive me“, Magistrate Shinohero said with a carefully controlled voice, „but we must know.“

„Why ... why is that important?“ Ichiro asked while he thought how he could comfort Gakuro without insulting the magistrate.

„You may leave“, the panda terminated the audience.

Ichiro bowed deeply: „I do thank you for receiving my, Magistrate Shinohero.“

„I think that you will certainly find a meal in the kitchen“, the wife of the magistrate said suddenly.

Ichiro, who was about to rise, bowed again: „That is most generous of you. I do thank you.“

When they had left, she turned to her husband: „What do you think? Is he the right man?“

„If he is, he solves the problem. And if he isn't“, Magistrate Shinohero just shrugged, „it's just one ronin less.“

## 14 The Mission

Lost in thought, Ichiro ate his meal while Gakuro was again making a pleading face towards the female cook because his third bowl was again starting to empty.

„Gakuro!“ Ichiro reproved him sternly.

„Oh, don't mind the boy, Samurai-san“, the cook laughed and gave the boy another refill. „He must eat to become big and strong!“

Gakuro frowned but decided not to spoil his chances on a fifth refill by complaining about the hint he was small and weak.

„Some more, Samurai-san?“ the cook asked after Ichiro had finished his dish.

„Well, ...“ Ichiro hesitated despite his hunger not yet been satisfied but he wanted to avoid the suspicion that he took advantage of the generous offer by the magistrate.

His thoughts were interrupted when another clerk of the magistrate sat down next to another table. Immediately, the cook hurried to him to take his order with many bows. Ichiro found it strange that such a high-ranking member of this house would eat down here.

He started to realize what this meant when the clerk asked him to keep company with him. His former lord had called this tone of voice "unrefusable-offer".

In order not to be impolite, Ichiro left Gakuro and sat down next to the other table. Instantly a new, clean rice-bowl appeared in front of him along with fresh chop-sticks. The clerk took a little bit from the vegetables and a piece of fish and put both into his bowl.

Ichiro followed his example.

Of course, the clerk didn't eat anything because this was just a pretense to have a word with him in private.

„Did you know that there is a reward of 1000 ryo for the heads of the bandits whose horrible traces you found this morning?“ the clerk said in a casual way and put a few rice grains in his mouth to give the impression of eating.

„That seems to be an enormous bounty for a few bandits“, Ichiro replied politely.

„The leader of the bandits is a man called Hokito Tagamura“, the clerk went on. „An incredibly sharp who stops at nothing.“

Ichiro took a bite which allowed him to remain silent.

„It's said that he rounded a group of about 20 men around him, absolutely determined men it seems, and he chooses to raid farms far away from the city“, the clerk told him. „It is also assumed that several traders were separated from their property which they had earned in this beautiful city by working hard and honestly. The magistrate is very anxious that the efforts of the past which have resulted in the very positive reputation will suffer from these horribly unpleasant incidents.“

„That is understandable“, Ichiro nodded politely. „I must say that I fail to understand how a bandit can withstand for so long against a man as determined as Magistrate Shinohero.“

Instead of an answer, the clerk looked over to Gakuro as if my chance. The boy had already arrived at his sixth bowl.

Ichiro followed the gaze when the clerk said: „Can you imagine to wake up in one of the amazingly hospitable inns in our town to find a trail of blood instead of your pupil?“

Ichiro felt his mouth dry up. „That ... The truth be told, I find that hard to imagine.“

The clerk spread the fingers of his left hand and looked intensively at them. „What I say now are just rumours, I hope this is understood.“

*„In other words, should I tell someone you told me, you would deny any such thing and I would be in a lot of trouble“,* Ichiro translated for himself.

„It is said that in Tagamuras group, there is a man with the name of Kyorou“, the clerk went on deliberately.

„Just Kyorou? Nothing else?“ Ichiro asked, forgetting for a moment to show the proper amount of respect but the clerk chose not to notice.

„He is easy to spot“, he explained and his eyes searched those of Ichiro. „He has a coat that goes from his shoulders to the ground.“

The rabbit chocked and hastily sipped on his tea.

„Am I right to assume that it's not from lizard hide or something like that?“ he meant appalled.

„It is also said that in that coat, you will find white fur just like the one you will find on a panda“, the clerk went on mercilessly. „We have also heard that some parents are missing their children. Just rumours, you understand.“

„Yes“, Ichiro rasped, „just rumours.“

„Did you know“, the clerk suddenly said, „that the daughter of the magistrate has been sick for some time, unable to leave her room?“

All Ichiro could do was to look horrified.

„It would be most ... impolite“, the clerk suggested, „to mention this in front of the magistrate or his wife because they love their daughter more than anything else in the world.“

„I ... see“, Ichiro managed to bring out.

„My family is also missing a child for a couple of days“, the clerk went on. „We assume that it tried to help an injured animal because a trail of blood leads from the house to the wood. In the wood, we found the horribly mutilated body of an ... animal which had been tied to a branch and then had been ... skinned quite unprofessionally, I might add. Blood was sprayed over many ken<sup>1</sup> in all directions. The unfortunate creature must have suffered immensely. To see this must have put the child in a state of panic so that it ran further into the forest where it had got lost because it hadn't returned, yet.“

The voice of the clerk was professionally polite but his gaze promised death to anyone who might have been involved in the incident.

To get a grip on himself, Ichiro closed his eyes but images of a child, dangling helplessly from a tree, danced in his mind.

„As you can see, the magistrate takes these incidents extremely seriously but he is unable to give them the attention which they deserve for reasons which I'm unable to explain here“, the clerk finished. „For this reason, we would be grateful for any help.“

It took Ichiro some time to calm down again. The clerk waited patiently.

„I ...“, Ichiro began but his voice failed him. He cleared his throat, took another sip and tried again: „I ... It would be an honor for me to support the magistrate in any way I can even if I'm unsure how my minor skills could help but I'm willing to do anything which might help.“

„We would be grateful“, the clerk accepted politely.

„I would be very grateful if you could help me with the question of favorable lodging“, Ichiro spread his hands regretfully, „because at the moment, I'm short of funds and I can see that this will take more than one day.“

„It is said that the inn "Jumping Salmon" offers lodging at reasonable rates“, the clerk proposed.

„Would it be possible to acquire the support of a group of experiences samurai in this city?“ Ichiro asked.

<sup>1</sup> 1 ken is roughly 1.5m

„Unfortunately, many men have vanished in this forest without a trace“, the clerk replied politely. „This has led to a very shallow enthusiasm for the area. I don't want to discourage you, by all means, but I fear that you might not find anyone who matches your requirements.“

„I see“, said Ichiro slowly. „Just in case I could locate the whereabouts of the bandits, would it be possible to be supported by the samurai of the magistrate?“

„If you could show some proof of your success, then this would indeed be possible“, the clerk said carefully. „But I have to add that there already was someone who lead us to the camp of the bandits. On this day, a lot of good men have died. Of course, I would never dream to cast any doubts on your words but you must understand that the shortage of samurai forces the magistrate to set priorities. I'm sure you understand.“

„Of course“, Ichiro nodded.

„Then I would like to thank you again for reporting so quickly to us“, the clerk bowed his head slightly. For a moment, he looked over Ichiro with a piercing glance, then he took a small bag out of his sleeve: „For this reason, the magistrate has decided to offer you a small reward.“

He put the bag down in front of Ichiro. „Akato-san, it was most satisfying to talk to you. I sure hope to see you again, soon.“

Ichiro bowed: „I do thank you for the time which you invested in me.“

The man nodded and left the kitchen.

## 15 Bounty Hunters

It took some time to locate Kuma in the city. The large bear was sitting in a cheap tavern, drinking mediocre sake<sup>1</sup> and his mood was even worse than usual.

„Nothing!“ he cursed when Ichiro sat down. „No work for a samurai in this rotten city! It's crazy! Everyone's in panic because of the bandits but no one is willing to engage a bodyguard.“

„So what“, Ichiro meant easily and Kuma shot him a suspicious glance out of half closed eyes. „There is a bounty on the bandits. If we manage to claim it, there will be plenty of money for us for a long time.“

„Oh, really?“ Kuma wasn't at all convinced. „How much is it?“

„A lot“, Ichiro replied and gave the landlord a sign to bring some sake for him as well.

„How much?“ Kuma insisted.

„Kuma, ...“, Ichiro tried to avoid a direct answer.

„So what's the catch?“ Kuma snorted. „Out with it. What's wrong with it?“

„Nothing!“ Ichiro protested.

„Is that so?“ Kuma growled. „Then I'll enlighten you: It's 1000 ryo. 1000! Any idea what that means? It means they are

dangerous. I've heard that the magistrate has lost some 50 men during the last attack. And you are trying to sell me we can just walk in there and convince them to turn themselves in?“

Unimpressed, Ichiro poured himself some sake and took a sip. He made a face, the quality was even worse than he had expected in such a place.

„I have a plan“, he went on confidently.

„Urgh“, Kuma moaned, „not again!“

„Oh, just you have fun!“ Ichiro snapped.

„Now, let's hear your *great* plan before the curiosity kills me“, Kuma taunted him and then sighed: „Are we really sunk so deep that we must sell ourselves as bounty hunters?“

„We go back to the farmhouse“, Ichiro started ignoring Kuma's mockery. „There, we follow the traces to the camp of the bandits. We take a good look, find weak spots, return and report to the magistrate. He will start an attack, we join the ranks and help to get rid of the bandits. That means, we won't get the whole bounty, of course, but a substantial amount.“

Kuma wasn't going to give in that easily: „What if the bandits spot us?“

„Oh, come on“, Ichiro shook his head. „We've got to be careful! There's always a risk but there is also a big reward.“

„Hm“, Kuma rumbled while he tried to find another weak spot in the plan. „What happened to Gakuro?“ he asked all of a sudden.

Some of Ichiro's sake went the wrong way. Coughing, he looked around but Gakuro was nowhere to be seen.

Cursing, he sprang up, almost tipped the table over and ran to the door. Two steps outside of the door, he stopped, his eyes going everywhere but Gakuro had vanished.

„**Gakuro!**“ Ichiro yelled at the top of his lungs. „**Gakuro!**“

Nothing.

Instead, the landlord came after him: „Samurai-san! You forgot ...!“

Without thinking, Ichiro just took out the bag which he had got from the clerk and threw it over. Cold panic was gripping his heart. „*Did he see something? Did the over-curious brat, careless as usual, run into the wood?*“ His mind raced.

He didn't dare to believe Gakuro might have fallen into the hands of Kyorou.

„What's the matter?“ Kuma wondered.

„When did you see Gakuro last?“ Ichiro almost yelled. „**Gakuro!**“

„He must have left sometime after you sat down“, Kuma replied quickly.

„Samurai-san, are you looking for the boy which came with you?“ the landlord interrupted.

„Yes!“ Ichiro cried. „Where is he?“

„When I saw him last, he was in the backyard“, the landlord reported. „I was already wondering that ...“

<sup>1</sup>Rice wine

The rest of the words didn't reach Ichiro anymore who was racing through the tavern as if an army of demons was at his heels.

In the door to the backyard he ran into the boy who just came back. Ichiro felt sick from relief.

„What's the matter?“ Gakuro wondered. „I was just bored and wanted to find some other children who could show me the city. But it's as if I'm the only child in the whole city!“

Ichiro grabbed him by the shoulders: „Gakuro, you have to swear to stay close to me while we are in this city! Swear it!“

„But ...“, the boy protested unhappily.

„**Gakuro!**“ Ichiro yelled. „I'm dead serious!“

„Alright, alright“, Gakuro gave in surprised by the out-break. „I swear. But why can't I have some fun, too? Always, I have to stay with you. I would also like to spend some time with other boys and not always with you!“

„I'm terribly sorry, Gakuro“, Ichiro regretted, „but it's of utmost importance that I always know where you are.“

„Oh, great“, Gakuro moaned angrily. „I said loud and clear that I'll have a look around. But you two were so occupied arguing that you probably didn't even notice! And now, it me who has to suffer it again!“

Ichiro couldn't bring himself to tell him that a maniac was roaming the area whose idea of fun was to sneak into the city, abduct children and then torture them to death.

„Gakuro, children are missing“, he said instead. „That's why you didn't see anyone.“

„I'm no peasant!“ Gakuro protested. „I'm a samurai! I can defend myself!“

Ichiro's sensei had told him that a good training helps to build self-confidence but again Ichiro wished for an idea how to reduce the incredible amount which Gakuro was blessed with.

„Gakuro, Kuma and I plan to pay the farm another visit to see if we can learn anything else“, Ichiro explained. „We'll be back before sunset. Please promise me to stay out of trouble, will you?“

„Yes, Akato-sama“, Gakuro swore with his head down.

„Thank you, Gakuro, it's really important for me to know you safe and sound“, Ichiro thanked him.

„Can we eat something before we go?“ Kuma threw in. „I'm pretty hungry.“

## 16 Back at the Site of the Crime

„What are you looking for?“ Kuma asked while Ichiro bent over the corpses once more.

„Cuts“, Ichiro replied curtly.

„A little more detail, please?“ Kuma snapped who was still mad to have had to pay for his foul meal while Ichiro has stuffed himself with a delicious lunch at the expenses of the magistrate. Ichiro's hint that he had not eaten a lot of it hadn't really managed to satisfy the bear.

In short words, Ichiro told Kuma about Kyorou.

Now, since he knew what to look for, he saw a lot of long cuts on the burned bodies. And near the loins, where the fur was softest, long strips were missing.

Revulsion shook him but he forced his feelings down. „*Hate will only make me weak*“, he told himself.

But it took a lot of effort not to scream in fury.

„A coat out of the fur of the abducted children?“ Kuma hissed.

„Yes“, Ichiro confirmed grimly.

„That's ...“, Kuma was unable to go on.

„Now, you know what I was so upset when Gakuro had vanished all of a sudden“, Ichiro said while he had a closer look at the traces on the ground outside of the hut.

„This ... damned ... dirty ... rotten ...“, Kuma was shaking from anger. „If I ever lay my hand on this bastard, he'll regret having been born!“

„If you're upset like that when we run into him“, Ichiro replied coolly, „we'll end up as patches for his coat, too.“

With his paws, Kuma ripped a bamboo out of the ground and shredded it. The slow, lumbering walk which Kuma usually showed belied the enormous strength in his body.

When the bamboo was only a couple of strands, Kuma's rage had burned down. It was replaced by a cold fury. Ichiro hoped that this would also die until they had found the camp of the bandits. „*Not that Kuma loses control when Kyorou is there and tried to jump him*“, he worried.

But it also took him some effort to loosen his hand from the hilt of his sword which he suddenly realized he was grabbing like it was the throat of the man.

Suddenly, his head jerked up and suspicious eyes scanned the edge of the wood.

The katana of Kuma joined his when it sprang out of the scabbard as if on its own and both took a step apart to gain full elbow-room but still could had their backs covered. Since their calls to whoever was there went unreplied, they started for the dark wood.

Kuma's questioning look showed Ichiro that only he had noticed whoever was hiding there but the big bear was undoubtedly as ready to fight as he was.

But the forest stayed calm. Distrustingly, Ichiro looked around and took a few steps into the scrub without finding anyone.

Unsatisfied, he sheathed his sword again because he had learned to trust his instincts.

Without losing another word about this incident, they examined the traces on the ground for some time but every now and then, one of them would shot a glance at the forest as if by accident. However, nothing in it moved.

Finally, Ichiro started to believe he had been wrong. He gave Kuma a nod with his head and together, they followed the trail of the bandits.



## 17 Deep in the Wood

„They separated“, Kuma whispered.

Ichiro was always astonished how silently the giant could speak. Also when they sneaked through the forest, he had to look back to see where he was because his slow steps were swallowed completely by the rustling leaves above.

The traces had become ever thinner until in the end, it had been a single, deep trail. Ichiro assumed that the bandits had started to walk one after another even if he couldn't say why.

Now, the trail split again into three distinct paths on the ground. Ichiro shrugged to show Kuma that he thought it probably made no difference which they followed. All of them seemed fresh and without following them, he was unable to say which were wrong tracks.

Without discussion, they followed the middle trail. After a while, it led to a clearing where someone had covered the ground with stones. Distrustingly, Ichiro and Kuma stayed in the shadows of the wood.

The trail was clear to be seen on the first stones next to the edge of the clearing but it quickly vanished. The high grass and bushes which grew between the stones made it even harder to overlook the situation.

Carefully, Ichiro stepped closer to the edge while Kuma stayed behind.

It reeked so much of trap that Ichiro had to force himself out in the open.

Nothing happened.

Without haste, Ichiro moved around in the clearing, tried to follow the trail.

Still, everything stayed quiet.

On the opposite side, the traces began again and led back into the forest. The bandits hadn't even made an effort to make it hard to follow their traces which were weak but obvious to the eyes of Ichiro. He looked around but nothing moved. Far away, he could see a couple of high, steep columns of rock as if a god had stuck giant chopsticks into the ground. There seemed to be a movement near the top of one of them but when he tried to find it again, it was gone.

Also, on the other side was no death-trap to be found so he waved Kuma who shot over the open area.

In the forest, Ichiro looked back once more and wondered why the trail went over that clearing. Since he simply couldn't make a guess, he shrugged and followed Kuma who slowly made his way ever deeper in to the wood.

## 18 Just Before Impact

If someone had been able to read the mind of the young man who was now flying towards the ground at neck-breaking speed, he would have probably been quite astonished.

„Contact in 473 milliseconds“, one part of him thought.

„Impact can be taken by the joints“, another part thought.

„Still, I recommend powering the structural boosters because of the high probability of an ensuing fight.“

„Battle programs are ready“, another part reported. „Sensors could locate 25 persons, 2 immobile. Tracking has started. Probability for an attack which might pass the automatic defenses: low. No high-tech weapons in sensor-range, no activity in the psi-band.“

„Ground-contact in 450 milliseconds. Point of contact is uneven. Should we change our flightpath?“

„Yes“, a different part decided. On their mental picture of the surroundings, a large boulder was marked. „For the psychological impact, land here. Load enough energy into the telekinetic projectors of the legs to crush it. Fire on contact.“

„Analysis“, the next part reported. „Situation below is getting out of control. One of the targets is in danger. Move landing point directly on person 7. Person 17 must be thrown away by the impact, preferably unconscious.“

„Telekinetic projectors in the arms are being loaded“, another part reported. „Projectors in the legs are partly unloaded. Fly engines are powering up to take most of the impact.“

„Ground contact in 430 milliseconds. Height 53.87 meters. Velocity 125 meters per second“, someone reported.

„Probability of an injury of person 16 by the impact over 25%. Reduce speed below 80 meters per second to reduce it below 3%.“

„Fly engines are starting. Impact will take place at less than 80 meters per second.“

Discriminators started to highlight the persons below on the mental display. Weapons were pointed out.

„No discovery so far“, someone reported.

„Ground contact in 427 milliseconds. Height 43.55 meters. Velocity 102 meters per second“, someone reported.

„Subprograms to handle enemy contact are being started.“

„Right after landing, no other persons will be in short battle range“, subprogram 17 signalled. „The first attack will be 5970 milliseconds after impact, probably with a katana.“

„Person 17 has started an attempt to break free. He will have a different position at the time of impact, now.“

„Adjusted flight path. New point of impact farther away from person 17.“

„Final speed reduced to 70 meters per second.“

„New objective: Person 17 must not be put at risk.“

„Objective can't be met when final speed is more than 7 meters per second.“

„Ground contact in 180 milliseconds. Height 12.96 meters.“

„Powering up flight engines. Final speed will be reduced to 5 meters per second.“

„To meet the psychological objective, smash person 7 with the telekinetic projectors and hit person 17 with the left arm, throwing him out of the immediate danger area. Head of person 17 must not be damaged.“

„Energy cells are filled enough for the battle, no need to reload.“

„Ground contact in 110 milliseconds. Height 3.3 meters. We have probably been spotted, first reaction in roughly 800

*milliseconds.*<sup>4</sup>

*„Structural boosters are being loaded, force fields for surface protection are active.“*

*„Reserve energy cells are ready.“*

*„Ground contact. Person 7 is deadly injured, psychological objective has probably been met. Person 17 was stunned by a blow to the neck and removed out of the short battle range.“*

*„No movements until more enemies are in range.“*

*„Persons 2, 3, 9, 11, 13 and 21 have noticed us. First attack in 4700 milliseconds at the earliest, in 5100 milliseconds at the latest“, the subprograms reported.*

## 19 To Catch a Cat, You Throw a Mouse

„Now what?“ Kuma asked.

Ichiro looked up and down the street. „The trail leads north“, he said. „But it might get difficult to follow it when we get to a fork.“

The bear just gave a grunt but still followed Ichiro when the rabbit moved on.

Ichiro had to admit that the leader of the bandits knew his business. The idea to lead his men a distance over a common street was ingenious. No one would take notice if a group of samurai would come out of the wood and set out on the street. And on the street, their footsteps were lost below the one of all the other people.

If was pure chance that he didn't miss the spot where they had apparently jumped off the street because here, they had taken some pains to loose pursuers.

Their trail lead deeper and deeper in to the wood.

The little clearing looked so innocent that Ichiro and Kuma were completely surprised by the bandits who suddenly sprouted from the ground on all sides.

Ichiro cursed his carelessness because the long and dull following of the path had successfully managed to lull his alertness.

Strangely enough, the bandits didn't advance but stayed on the edge of the clearing.

„Now, who do we have here?“ a mocking voice asked.

Ichiro's mind raced: „Just two harmless wanderers who got lost in the wood.“

Kuma growled affirmatively.

„Oh?“ the bandit made. „Again? Why didn't you stay on the street?“

„The clearing“, Ichiro realized.

„Clever, eh?“ the bandit taunted him. „Easy to see if someone follows us or not. If he stays on the street later, good for him. And if nit ...“, he shrugged.

Ichiro didn't believe in waiting for someone to come to an end with his explanation. With a loud battle cry, he jumped the bandit who just grinned.

Kuma was right next to the rabbit when the bandit lazily put his hand into a bundle of bamboo plants next to him.

Ropes hissed through the air and the whole ground of the clearing turned into a large net in which they got entangled in an instant. Immediately, Ichiro let go of his long katana to draw the short wakizashi. But before he could reach it, the bandits had closed the distance. With long clubs, they beat the two unconscious.

## 20 The Bandit-Camp

It took Ichiro some effort to open his eyes. Dull pain cursed through his body. Instinctively, he tried to curl up but couldn't. A wave of panic washed away the numbness. We was captured!

Naked and helpless, he had been tied to a robust frame made of bamboo. Kuma shared the same fate. The bear was already awake and growled angrily when Ichiro looked over: „A nice mess in which you've gotten us again. An easy reward, huh? Ha! One day, I'd really like to hear where you get the idea you are so much better than anybody else! 50 samurai were not enough to wipe them out. But you ... you are always so damn clever. Something like that can't happen to you! You ...“

He stopped when someone came.

„Ah, you're awake“, a cat purred. Ichiro usually wasn't a man of prejudices. Many people believed that cats were cruel. But each hair on his fur stood on end when the male cat looked over him. A horrible thought crossed his mind.

Without warning, he punched Ichiro in the middle. His grin got wider when Ichiro took the blow unmoved and added a strike against in the face of the rabbit. Ichiro's head crashed in the bamboo behind him and stars danced in front of his eyes.

Coldly, Ichiro stared at his torturer for this lack of honor before he licked the blood from his lips and spat it out.

The cat just grinned and laughed: „Ah, hard man, eh? Takes blows like petting, huh? But to be captured, this dishonor ... how does that feel? Being still alive? Without having been able to harm a hair on one of our heads.“

He brought his face very close to Ichiro's ears: „Now, usagi-chan<sup>1</sup>? How does it feel? Such a proud samurai and now completely helpless ...“

Ichiro could help that his face showed his fury. The words hurt him deeply. To live on with this shame was almost unthinkable. The only reason which kept him alive right now was to keep his promise to Gakuro.

Grinning, the cat walked away but Ichiro would have bet that he would be back in no time.

He would have regretted to win this one.

When he saw the male cat again, the blood froze in his veins because in the merciless grip of the cat dangled nobody

<sup>1</sup>Usagi: rabbit or hare, -chan: Usually used to address ones own girlfriend.

else but Gakuro. Limply, the boy hung there but he didn't seem injured.

*„He must have followed us‘, he realized horrified. „I sensed him when we looked at the hut but I was too lazy to really look.‘*

„What ...“, Ichiro forced himself to say despite his craving to scream the words, „what have you done to him?“

„Oh, don't worry“, the cat feigned sympathy, „your son is not hurt ... not, yet, that is.“

„He's not my son“, Ichiro hissed whose Mind got slowly into gear again. „And you, you are Kyorou, aren't you? Kyorou, the coward! Who is so afraid even of mere peasants so he has to tie them down before he can kill them!“

The grin vanished in an instant and was replaced by an insane, outraged face. In a flash his hand went into his kimono and came back with a short blade. His fist pressed Ichiro's head against the frame while the blade slowly went through his fur. Not hard enough to actually break the skin but a few hairs didn't survive it.

„Let's see“, Kyorou hissed in uncontrollable fury, „if your big mouth can scream as well as ...“

The insane cat stopped and took a step back. The grin returned and worried Ichiro quite a lot.

„No“, Kyorou whispered. „No, not so fast. Your death must be slow! I want you to curse every breath which will have to make! Yes! Yes! Hehehe!“

His glance went to Kuma. The bar feigned bored disinterest.

The cat just laughed: „Ah, how much fun I'll have with you two! To break your pride! Pleading you will for your death! Yes! Pleading!“

Giggling madly, he pulled Gakuro away with him.

„Sound promising“, Kuma growled when he was out of earshot. „I just wished, I could talk him into leaving me out of this. Then, for the first time, you would at least have to take the punishment for the messes you get me into all the time.“

The rabbit didn't respond to that, he knew that Kuma didn't mean that seriously. No guards could be seen. „Can you break loose?“

Kuma strained his powerful muscles. The ropes and bamboo poles groaned and creaked.

When Kuma lumbered, one quickly got the impression that he was carrying a lot of fat around and tried to avoid any unnecessary movements.

An impression which Kuma carefully cultivated.

He actually managed to bend the whole frame.

But to rip the ropes apart, even he didn't manage.

With a curse, he gave up. „If I just were a Ninja“, he mumbled. „Then I could swallow my tongue.“

„And Gakuro?“ Ichiro asked. Desperately, he tried to find a way out of this.

At that very moment, they realized what Kyorou was probably up to.

Horried, they look at each other.

„That ...“, Kuma swallowed, „that ... he wouldn't dare! Even someone like him ...“ He trailed off.

„He would“, Ichiro replied darkly.

They hadn't wait for long. After a short time, Kyorou came back.

In his fist, he held the long, tender ears of Gakuro. The poor bay had to stagger on tiptoes next to his torturer. His face was contorted with pain. Kyorou grinned happily when he saw the grim stare of the ronin. „Ah, I just thought that might get your attention.“

Again, he took the skinning knife out of his kimono. Very slowly, he let it glide through the fur of Gakuro. The boy couldn't stop a silent whimpering.

With some effort, Ichiro could clear his throat. Only when he was sure of his voice, he talked: „Yes, you have our attention and our contempt. You have made it absolutely clear that you have no honor. Now, what do you want?“

„Oh, pretty simple“, Kyorou mocked him. „You see, samurai are so incredibly stupid. No matter how many of you we kill, they keep coming back. Therefore, we thought that some kind of deterrent would help.“ He pointed the blade at them: „Nobody cares what I do with you. I can do whatever I want. And my plan is to hang your furs to dry over the street. Now, *that* will impress them!“

Maliciously, he pulled at the ears of Gakuro: „And this brat is first!“ The boy cried out when his whole weight pulled on his ears. Desperately, he stretched so they wouldn't be torn out. Kyorou just gave Kuma and Ichiro a provocative grin: „But don't worry! I have a lot of experience and I'll take my time! We surely don't want ...“

At that very moment, his fist jerked when Gakuro jumped. Astonished, the cat looked down at his victim which had curled in a small ball with the dexterity of the young and forced his tied hands from behind his back to the front.

Angry about the interruption, Kyorou pulled once more at the ears but Gakuro was already one step ahead. Before the bandit knew what hit him, the hands of the boy had closed around the wakizashi of the cat. Kyorou jumped back but Gakuro didn't let go and the very next moment, he not only had the sword pulled free but also turned it around while it was pulled out of the scabbard and cut a long wound over the belly of the mad bandit.

Kyorou howled from anger and surprise. He threw his skinning knife which hit very close to the head of Ichiro into the bamboo frame, pressed a hand over the wound and drew his katana.

„I'll get you for this, you bastard“, he spat.

„You shouldn't judge other by your own standards“, Gakuro replied dryly.

Since he had no chance to cut his bonds, he raised the wakizashi with tied hands and took the basic form. Ichiro didn't expect him to last long, though: His education was still a long way from finished and to fight against an enemy with a much longer ranger was pure desperation. And the wound of the bandit wouldn't weaken or kill him fast enough.

Then, two things happened at once.

With an angry yell, Kyorou jumped his victim.

And something fell out of the sky and buried the cat with a sound of smashing bones beneath it.

## 21 The Tide Turns

The impact was heavy enough to throw Gakuro away. Stunned, the boy stopped lying on his side.

Surprised, Kuma and Ichiro looked up but there was no sign where the body had come from which lay now dead on the shattered remains of Kyorou.

Angry at himself, Ichiro shook of the thoughts. There was still no guard around and he didn't expect such a good chance to escape again.

*„Gakuro! Please stand up!“* he prayed silently because he didn't dare to raise any unwanted attention.

Out of the corner of his eyes, he noticed Kuma staring at the boy as if his gaze alone would wake him up.

But their luck didn't last long enough. A surprised cry and a bandit came running. Judging from the sounds, he wouldn't be alone for long. Two more bandits appeared shortly after him. Together, they surrounded the fallen bodies.

Calls sounded, weapons were drawn and many eyes searched the sheer rock above them for any signs of other attackers.

And Gakuro still didn't stir.

Out of sheer desperation, Ichiro tugged at his bonds but the rope hadn't got any more loose in the last few moments.

None of the bandits seemed to care.

The leader came and bent slowly over the remains of Kyorou as if he still couldn't quite believe what had just happened.

Carefully, he stretched out his hand, as if he wanted to grasp what his eyes saw.

Then the young man stood up and the bandits gave a start.

Mouths fell open while everyone tried to understand what he saw.

*„Konnichi-wa, Hokito-san“,* the young man said politely, whose naked skin shone in the sunlight where it wasn't covered by clothing. He seemed to have shaved most of his fur and a smooth, pale skin was now exposed to the world. The only hair left were on the top and the back of his head, even the round, flat ears were bald.

Puzzled, the leader looked at the newcomer and the tip of his katana sank a little bit.

*„How do you know ...“,* he started to say when the young man took a blank object out of his clothing and pointed it at the bandit.

The man sensed it to be some kind of weapon because he pulled his sword up and jumped the man with a yell.

In the middle of the jump, the weapon gave a loud bang which was reflected at the rock above.

Blood and flesh sprayed out of a horrible wound and the leader was thrown back. He tumbled quite a distance before he finally lay still. Broken eyes stared at the sky while his katana jumped over the uneven ground and vanished in a crack.

For a moment, everyone seemed to hold their breath and it was dead silent.

*„Kill him!“* the voice of the second in command ordered. *„He can't possibly have another shot in such a small thing!“*

The smile on the face of the young man didn't change when he turned and pointed his weapon at him.

Just at that moment, Ichiro realized what had bothered him all the time: All that was left from Kyorou was just a bloody heap but there wasn't even the smallest drop of it on the young man.

*„What the hell is that?“* Kuma cursed quietly. *„A gaijin<sup>1</sup>? Or an oni<sup>2</sup>?“*

*„I have no idea“,* Ichiro hissed back. *„And I don't intend to find out. Gakuro! Wake up!“*

Confused, Gakuro turned onto his back when another shot banged. The loud noise bit painfully into Ichiro's ears and he could see that Gakuro jerked and tried to press his hands on his ears but they were still tied.

This shot wasn't aimed well, Kuma decided, because it just hit the shoulder of the new leader. With half an eye, he watched the battle while he now joined Ichiro urging Gakuro on. The cries of the bandits swallowed their words.

The new leader cried out in pain and was thrown around by the force of the impact. A second shot banged and Kuma had to take back his opinion when it turned the other shoulder of the man into a bloody pulp.

Aghast, they had to watch how the attacker systematically shot the leader into a cripple.

*„How many shots does he have in that cursed thing?“* Ichiro wondered while the legs of the leader were shot away.

Then, the first bandit was close enough to hit with his katana.

With a smooth movement, the young man evaded the blade and shot into the heart of the man at the same time. The next one got his neck snapped with such a casual gesture that Ichiro felt sick.

Shot by shot came out of the weapon and bandit by bandit fell.

Without warning, a black block fell out of the handle of the weapon but the young man seemed to have anticipated this because he already had a new block ready which he pushed into the weapon as a replacement.

*„10“,* Kuma, who seemed to have counted, shouted to Ichiro. *„He has 10 shots in that thing!“*

At last, Gakuro had managed to stagger to his feet. Sheer luck had it that nobody cared about them because the bandits were still completely occupied with their futile attempt to stop the attack.

<sup>1</sup> A stranger or someone from Europe

<sup>2</sup> Daemon



More and more bandits were slaughtered while Gakuro frantically searched for the wakizashi which he had lost. If it would have helped, Ichiro would have howled with frustration, but he was completely helpless.

A few moments later, the bandits started to realize that they stood no chance against this war machine in human form which had fallen all of a sudden out of the skies. They turned to flee.

No one made it to the edge of the forest. The survivors, panic stricken, barricaded themselves in the cave which they used as hideout.

Ichiro had seen teppo<sup>1</sup> in battle before but they had only one shot before you had to reload. And he knew how hard it was to hit something over some distance. Or ran in blind panic over uneven ground. Therefore, they were usually used like archers: In a large group firing at the same time. No rifleman could say who died by his bullet which Ichiro thought dishonorable. But the new weapon was more effective than swords and arrows and therefore, it had an increase in popularity by the bakufu<sup>2</sup>.

Whatever it was that attacked the bandits right now killed with an unsettling efficiency.

Finally, Gakuro came staggering towards them.

To Ichiro's horror, the attacker had noticed Gakuro, too.

„Gakuro! Look out!“ he yelled.

Gakuro's head jerked around. He saw the danger and Ichiro thanked the gods that the boy immediately doubled his efforts to reach them instead of starting a futile attempt to stop the attacker.

Then his blood started to boil, when he realized: *„He probably thinks we are bandits, too!“*

But for some reason, the strange man made no attempts to attack them or shoot Gakuro.

„We are no bandits!“ Kuma yelled at the man. „We are helpless victims of these criminals!“

The attacker gave no sign that he had heard and came ever closer.

Despite the fact that he made no effort to reach them and the fact that, every now and then, he fired a shot at one of the bandits who tried to take to opportunity to flee, he reached them in the same moments as Gakuro.

Gakuro raised his wakizashi to cut Ichiro loose but the young man grabbed the blade with his free hand and didn't let go.

„Please!“ Gakuro pleaded. „I just want to cut him loose! We are no bandits, I swear! Let us go!“

„No“, the young man replied unmoved and Ichiro swallowed hard. The voice sounded strangely flat and he spoke the word unusually slowly as if his mind was occupied with something else. But his movements were quick and exact.

Gakuro staked everything on one chance and grabbed the hilt with both hands. Then, he jumped again and put his feet against the arm of the stranger.

Then he pressed with all the force he could muster.

Even with the weight of the boy pulling at his hand, it didn't move by the breath of a hair.

Ichiro realized that they were lost without hope: *„Whatever he plans to do with us, we are completely helpless.“*

„Please“, he tried again. „We are no bandits! We are bounty hunters and just wanted to earn the reward ...“

„I know“, the stranger cut him short and put his weapon away.

With his free hand, he plucked Gakuro and went around the frame.

Ichiro couldn't see what he did but he felt the vibrations when Gakuro hit the frame and then he heard a new, rasping sound.

„Gakuro!“ he cried desperately.

Without looking back, the stranger went over to the entrance of the cave.

„Seems“, Kuma said slowly. „we've got a problem.“

„Gakuro!“ Ichiro yelled again because he felt the boy move. Cold panic grabbed his heart.

„I'm fine“, Gakuro shouted. „He just tied me to the frame.“

A large weight fell from Ichiro's heart. „Can you free yourself?“

He could hear and feel Gakuro working on his bonds but eventually, the boy had to admit is defeat: „Damn, what is this? It's just a thin thread but it won't break!“

„Gakuro“, Ichiro told him while the sound of more shots echoed out of the cave, „next time I tell you to stay but, you stay, you hear me!“

„If there is a next time“, Kuma growled.

„Thank you“, Ichiro snapped. „That really helped! I'm really happy you said that!“

„What do you think he is? An oni<sup>3</sup>?“ Kuma asked utterly unimpressed. „Or a gaijin? I've heard the most strange stories about them.“

„If he is a gaijin“, Gakuro joined in, „how could the bakufu drive them out of our country? Or is that now the revenge?“

Ichiro stared at Kuma as if the bear had lost his mind: „Is that all you can think about? We should try to escape!“

„What, nerves?“ Kuma mocked him. „Afraid all of a sudden?“

„That ...“, Ichiro pressed the words out, „is ... not ... the ... right ... moment!“ The last word, he almost yelled.

„There he comes“, Kuma said instead of an answer.

It seemed that three bandits had survived the massacre. Shaking from fear, they walked in front of the stranger who lead them to Ichiro and Kuma. In some distance, he pushed them on the ground. Then he came over to the tied prisoners. On his back, he wore two katana.

In front of Ichiro, he stopped.

<sup>1</sup>Matchlock guns

<sup>2</sup>Government

<sup>3</sup>Daemon

Ichiro had never heard of an etymologist but if he had, he would have described his current feelings like that: „You really feel how all his attention suddenly focuses on yourself. Just like an interesting bug, pinned down a moment before and scrutinized under a magnifying glass. It's as if you're completely naked, no fur, no skin, nothing to hide and if he could read you like an open book.“

He took a deep breath when the stranger finally stopped staring at him and went over to Kuma. The bear took the mustering stoically but even he shivered when the stranger was satisfied.

„You're not hurt“, he said with his slow, monotonous voice.

„All you had to do was ask“, Kuma murmured angrily.

„Incorrect“, the stranger replied and suddenly had one of the sword from his back in his hand. Neither Kuma nor Ichiro had been able to see him draw, so fast it had happened.

Before Kuma could open his mouth, the sword hissed through the air.

Again, neither Kuma nor Ichiro could see him move. His arms turned into blurs, the blade whistled as it moved and there were loud knocks when it hit something.

Because both had been bound for so long, they sagged helplessly to the ground when the ropes released them. With some effort, Ichiro rose far enough to see how the stranger cut Gakuro loose. Then he put the sword away as he had drawn it. It looked as if it would vanish in his hand and reappear in the scabbard the next moment.

The grip which pulled Ichiro from the ground was firm but not painful. Gakuro was thrown over a shoulder but this time, the boy was smart enough to keep his big mouth shut. He didn't even try something foolish like reaching for one of the swords next to him.

Only Ichiro staggered a little more than necessary while his thoughts rotated about escape.

„What will happen with us?“ he asked when he was allowed to sit down next to the surviving bandits. Gakuro was dropped as well but the stranger ignored the question.

„And how about me?“ Kuma growled.

„And the stone“, the stranger said, „in your left hand?“

„Stone?“ Kuma seemed genuinely innocent and rose clumsily. A stone on the ground moved a little bit. It looked as if he had just put his hand on it for support. He lolloped over but Ichiro was astonished how easy his friend moved after being tied down for so many hours.

„Stop“, the stranger ordered when Kuma wanted to sit down after a withering glance at the surviving bandits.

Kuma stiffened but rose again. His face seemed unimpressed but Ichiro knew his friend well enough to know the little signs which showed how he felt inside. The situation took to the bear and Ichiro prayed to the gods that he didn't lose control.

The stranger stretched out a hand and a stone sprang from the ground into it. Ichiro and the others stared how casually the man worked magic. It was spooky and terrifying.

Kuma swallowed hard.

Without moving a muscle, the stranger threw the stone over to Kuma who caught it instinctively.

His surprise got even greater, when the stranger ordered: „Hit me over the head.“

The bear needed no further invitation. Ichiro later swore he felt the ground shake when Kuma hit the stranger so hard with the stone that it split shattered.

„Sit“, the stranger ordered then in the same, monotonous voice as before.

Stunned, Kuma let the fragments of the stone drop the ground. There wasn't even a superficial laceration on the head of the stranger, his voice hadn't changed and he didn't show any sign that something had just hit him.

After Kuma had followed the order, the stranger selected one of the prisoners and picked him up as if he was a weightless puppet.

Then he looked critically at the small group which sat on the ground. „Closer“, he demanded. „You“, he pointed at Ichiro, „take your smaller clone onto your lap.“

Ichiro wondered what these instructions meant but slowly, he started to worry if it might have been better to die with the bandits. Still, he followed the order without hesitation. When he embraced Gakuro, he could feel the boy shaking from fear.

„Or fury“, he thought. *„Probably not a good time to try to find out.“*

At last, the stranger seemed to be satisfied and went a few steps away.

„Move means death“, he told them and sat down with his prisoner. Somehow, it didn't sound like a threat but Ichiro was beyond deluding himself.

The prisoner whimpered when the stranger sat down behind him and gently put his hands on his head.

Then Ichiro felt his hair stand on end.

Something ... happened right now.

Something horrible!

Something started to tear and tug at him.

The air stood still as a rock but there was a tremendous pull which came from the stranger who tore at the foundations of his self.

The prisoner screamed.

Ichiro could make out that he had started to jump up, trying to break free from this horrible grip, but on the way, he had been frozen in the air. Only his lungs seemed to still move, producing the endless outcry.

Everyone in the tiny group had the threat of the man still in his ear but panic began to dissolve the self-control.

One of the two remaining bandits lost his nerves first.

Yelling, he jumped up but didn't get far.

After only two steps, the man was stopped by invisible forces. Just like a puppet whose strings had been cut, he toppled. Lifeless eyes started into nothingness.

With the last drops of willpower, Ichiro grabbed Gakuro and the thought to stay put no matter what happened.

## 22 Inside the Stranger

*„Transfer of the memories has begun and will be finished in seven minutes“, someone reported.*

*„Person 23 has lost his nerves as expected and got killed by the scattering radiation. The expected educational effect has been achieved. The remaining persons are safe, now.“*

*„No magic activity in sensor range.“*

*„Tactical report. Energy store 3 loses its charge at an unexpected rate. No impact on the current mission. It should be replaced during the next maintenance cycle.“*

*„Integration of the language knowledge has begun.“*

## 23 Escape!

Ichiro was shaking uncontrollably when it finally stopped.

He only noticed because someone threw something at his feet. Carefully, he opened his eyes.

It was his daisho.

„Who are you?“ His voice was hoarse as if he had yelled a whole day. Maybe he had. He couldn't tell.

„My name is Pau Tai“, the stranger replied with a totally new voice. All of a sudden, he spoke much more naturally, the words came with the right speed and the stress was where it belonged. „I'm a priest of the goddess Ookaa'h.“

Each of them got his weapons back. Ichiro wasn't wondering alone how the stranger knew which belonged to whom.

For a moment, Ichiro considered killing himself here and now to make up for the shame of having been captured alive but he was still bound by the promise made to Gakuro.

Kuma just shot him a glance.

He swallowed hard, when Kuma slowly drew his katana as if to look for kinks.

The next moment, Ichiro had grabbed Gakuro and they ran for their lives while Kuma covered their escape.

The bandit followed on his heels. At first, Ichiro was about to send him away but he didn't. For one, he needed all his strength to force his aching muscles to move and secondly, the man knew the area like his own sleeves.

Soon, he took the lead and they ran at an impressive speed through the complex maze of paths in the forest.

*„This way, we leave less trails“, Ichiro thought relievedly while he forced his tired legs to keep up. „That will buy us more time. Kuma! Your sacrifice won't be forgotten, I swear!“*

Behind them, Kuma rose his katana and concentrated on his last battle.

That Pau Tai hadn't tried to simply circumvent him, he took as a success. Also, Pau hadn't drawn his strange weapon, yet. *„If I've counted right“, the bear thought, „then he*

*should have at least three shots left. If he starts with that, I'm in trouble.“*

Kuma also felt nervous about the lack of movement by his enemy. Everyone he had fought so far, had moved at least a bit or said something.

Pau just stood there like a human-shaped rock. He said nothing, his face was as still as a mask. His eyes were as lifeless as polished jewels.

The bear knew that he could only delay Pau as much as the man allowed him to.

He rose the katana a bit more but didn't attack. *„Gakuro, I'll buy you as much time as I can“, he promised to himself. „I hope you make it!“*

Then, he waited.

Deep in the wood, Ichiro and Gakuro had to deal with completely different problems. Through the long time of having been tied, their muscles felt like jelly. And the horror after their release hadn't enhanced things one bit.

It was more and more difficult for Ichiro to keep up with the bandit and Gakuro with his short legs was in an even worse situation. But when the boy finally stumbled from exhaustion, it was the bandit he grabbed first and hauled him on his shoulders.

He and Ichiro stared at each other but both saved the breath which an argument would cost them. Ichiro knew well enough that he was too spent to carry the boy. He was grateful for what the bandit did but he also worried about the reasons why he did it. Whatever his reasons might be, now, Ichiro could keep up with him much more easily.

Unfortunately, that wasn't enough. Just when they started to hope they had escaped Pau, they ran onto a clearing where the man already waited for them.

On his back was again a sword and Ichiro recognised the weapon of Kuma instantly. He knew that there were not many possibilities how it could have got there.

To his surprise, the bandit handed him Gakuro. „Good luck“, was all he said.

„But ...“, Ichiro started.

„Kyorou was a monster“, the bandit interrupted him while he tried to get his breath under control. Then, he drew his sword. „Nobody liked him. He deserved to die. But not like that. And not all the others.“

Ichiro was at a loss what to say.

„Go now“, the bandit said and turned to face his enemy.

So all Ichiro could do was to press his right fist against the left palm, bow and then to run back into the forest.

„I see, you beat the bear“, the bandit shouted at Pau. „Let's see how well I do.“

Since escape didn't seem to work, Ichiro and Gakuro searched for a spot to hide. This strategy seemed to pay off since the sun went down without any sign of the stranger. They didn't dare to light a fire and eventually, the night came. Exhaustion took its toll and Ichiro lost his fight against the sleepiness.

The next morning, the sound of a sword being drawn woke him. In an instant, he was awake and his hand shot to his own sword even.

Two things made him stop.

Firstly, his hand grabbed only empty space.

And secondly, the sword which pressed coldly against his throat, looked just like his own.

## Story Notes

### A Introduction

As you can easily see, I'm fascinated by the ancient Japan or rather inspired by it. My Japan resembles the one from Earth around the year 1640. In both places, the Shogun has pacified the land with an iron fist by claiming the power and forbidding the rivaling lords to maintain large standing armies. The families of the lords had to live in costly residencies which had to be erected in Edo and were not allowed to leave the city. Today, we would call them hostages, a word which an educated lord would not dream of using in this respect.

Christianity, quite active for a couple of years, is of no importance anymore. All lords which have been baptized are either dead or converted back to Buddhism. A rebellion by Christian peasants against their daimyo<sup>1</sup> in the year 1637 was suppressed bloodily and since then, any contact with gaijin<sup>2</sup> was punished with death.

Some lords are now looking for a way to protect their inherited privileges. After the horrible battle at Sekigahara, where a hundred-thousand samurai lost their lives, the land enjoys 40 years of a quite stable peace. Since that time, ronin<sup>3</sup> have become problem since the laws of the bakufu reduced the standing armies driving many of the samurai into poverty and a life without a future since it was unthinkable for a samurai to change his profession. These unemployed soldiers, often of noble origin, often became fierce criminals to earn a living.

So two generations have passed since Sengoku-jidai, the epoch of civil war, and the memories of this time of blood and desperation begins to fade into myths and legends. The class of the samurai<sup>4</sup> has started on its long demise. Since no big wars and battles have to be fought, sweet decadence is luring them and quite a few samurai families fall to it.

### B Furies

Most characters in my story are furies, that is humans with the bodies of animals but since there are also some aliens<sup>5</sup> which have their completely own form.

Why furies, you might ask. Also, I'm anticipating that quite a few people will find the very idea sick, abnormal or even diabolical when this book is published.

<sup>1</sup>Feudal Lord. Note that the Japanese knows no plural: A daimyo, several daimyo.

<sup>2</sup>Stranger(s), in this context: foreigner(s)

<sup>3</sup>Masterless samurai. Literally: Man of the waves, that is someone who is driven by the tides of fate.

<sup>4</sup>Literally: One who serves. The samurai called themselves bushi which means warrior. Only when the name reached Europe, the word samurai became the honorable warrior or knight that we know.

<sup>5</sup>Well, since the story doesn't take place on Earth, one could argue that everyone is an alien but we don't want to split hairs here. Since almost all characters have a pelt, that might not be advisable ...

My answer: I just happen to like furies. And if you think that's sick or abnormal, why not put Grimms Fairy Tales (Puss-in-Boots, Wolf and Seven Kids, etc) and the Bible on the pyre as well. Burning books has been a great social activity of the past, I've heard. And shouldn't we honor our traditions more?

And to answer the accusation that I have a bad influence on young people: Firstly, I don't force anyone to read my books and secondly, it's not my books that are so great but the alternatives which are so bad.

## C Enquiries

A word to all people who really know about the history of Japan or Japan itself: I'm guilty of not doing many enquiries before I write something. Actually, I try to do as few enquiries as possible just to get the main points right. So if you can read it here, that doesn't mean it's true, correct or right. If I'm in doubt, I always decide for my characters and their relationships over the environment. Just imagine that my world is only similar to the Japan you know.

Why Japan, then? Well, the stories are produced by my fantasy and while I saw it developing in my mental cinema, I've been reading Usagi Yojimbo by Stan Sakai and Lone Wolf and Cub by Kazuo Koike and Goseki Kojima and other mangas which influenced me quite a lot.

## D Japanese Names

Tightly related to enquiries are the many different Japanese names which will create nightmares for my non-Japanese readership (because they are so uncommon) and the same is probably true for any Japanese readership should I ever have one (but for different reasons). To get this one right, I've downloaded the electronic dictionary JMedict which contains a file with over 68'000 names of people and places.

Then, I spent a couple of hours to write a small program which picks a male, female and family name at random from this list so I could create characters by the press of a button. It's fascinating to see what kind of ideas a name can bring one when one learns what the Kanji mean.

This leaves me with a small problem, though: Some of the Kanji are probably dated after 1600 which puts me in the danger to use names which haven't existed at the time when my story took place.

Luckily, I can defend myself with the excuse that some letters in my world are simply much older than on Earth. It's cheap but better than nothing.

It's just a little bit unsettling that I cannot say where the name Shinohero comes from because I can't find it anymore in the file. Oh well.

The Kanji<sup>1</sup> for Fukute stand for "luck" and "hand". His first name Tamaro consists of the symbols for "jewel, ball"

<sup>1</sup>Japanese writing symbols

(tama) and "son" (-ro, a pretty common ending of male names in Japan). Otomori consists of the Kanji for "sound", "forest", Kagero means "shadow, phantom" and "son" - the shadow of his lord. We'll meet both in the second chapter.

Akato Ichiro: Akato means "bright, light" and "door", Ichiro is "enjoy, rejoice", "knowledge, wisdom" and "clear, cheerful" - someone, who enjoys clear ideas.

Kuma uses the kanji Sakekawa ("rice-wine" and "river"), his given name is Kumaichiro: "bear", "one", "son" - first son of a bear.

Note that all names are given in Japanese order, that is family name first.

And lastly, something which greatly confuses people used to Latin letters: Ichiro, Kumaichiro and Eikichiro use the same Latin letters but (ichiro) but in Japanese, they are written completely different. Even the suffix -ro uses different symbols: 怡知朗 - Ichiro, 熊一郎 - Kumaichiro and 栄吉郎 - Eikichiro.

The spelling is like in German: Ichiro - e as in knee, chi as in Tai Chi, ro as in rope.

## E Bungee Without a Rope

I'm making a living as a software developer. Just like most people in my profession, I like to spend many hours to write a program to solve a problem which I could have done manually in a few moments because it just might happen to have to do it again. This text which you are reading is written in a pseudo-language which I developed, which I can convert in many different outputs for web display, printing or proofreading. It saves me a couple of hours for each book that I write. It would be a good investment if it hadn't taken 300 hours to write.

All the times and heights and the section "Bungee Without a Rope" come from another program which simulated the complete process and could give me detailed numbers for any point in time. Of course, I could have just written down something (which reader would check if the numbers add up?) but that's how we software developers are: Always a little more accurate in areas where it doesn't count.

Sidenote: My program doesn't take into account that a body doesn't get faster than roughly 53 m/s in air. So the numbers are probably wrong anyway.

## F Pau Tai

The name "Pau Tai" is not a correct Japanese name but made up by me. There is a symbol for "Tai" but I couldn't find a kanji for "Pau" so one would have to write it with the Japanese syllable alphabet called Hiragana (that would be PA-U). But why Pau Tai?

The name is an homage to Pan Tau, the great mime who always silently stood in the background and made people happy. I even thought for a while to use Pan Tau as a name



but firstly, I wanted to avoid any trouble with possible copyright holders and secondly, I found that too clumsy. Even if I could find two kanji for "Pan" and "Tau".

To conclude this analysis of names: Philmann Dark stands for "loving" and "human" and, well, "dark", a mysterious friend of mankind.

## G The Ideas

When someone with the powers of Dark shows up, the question is inevitable: Why does he kill the bandits? And why use a handgun instead of a sword?

The first one is relatively easy: The bandits would have been killed anyway. If not by Dark himself, then by the magistrate or by the lord of the province himself.

One possibility which Dark has always to take into account is that one of the bandit could have had children but the only way that that could have happened would have been that the band would have disbanded (quite unlikely) or that they had raped women. In the latter case, the chances of survival of the children would have been slim at best: bastards were not very welcome and were usually outcast to restore the honor of the family.

So the conclusion was that for the bandits, it's not a big difference when and by whom they are killed because their time was running out anyway (except they would have been hired by an outside lord to damage the reputation of the local lord). But it would have made a difference for the people living in the area. Since Pau usually decides for the offsprings (that means more options in the future), the bandits had to die now.

To counter the argument that Dark might have killed the leader and save the rest, I reply: The real Dark might have done that. But I as author (with my divine powers within the limits of this story) decided that none of them was worth more space with the exception of Eikichiro.

The handgun finally is just pure laziness. Dark could have shown his superiority just as easily with a sword but to describe a shooting is much more simple than a sword-fight.

Dark doesn't have to collect the bullet casings (his weapon doesn't need them) and the wounds will be wiped out by the fire which he'll create. This way, the magistrate will never become suspicious that something didn't happen the way Ichiro will report it and Ichiro already knows better than to chat about the secrets of Pau.

Most of the time, anyway.

Mainly, when it comes to the fact that Pau might be a gaijin<sup>1</sup> because it would cost his life (which he wouldn't care about) but he promised to protect Gakuro. Or, what might be worse: Pau could decide to protect him.

The original idea for the start of the story was a different one, though. In the first version, Ichiro would also try to protect the city but would get caught along with Gakuro.

Meanwhile, Pau would meet Lord Fukute (that happens in the second chapter, now). Pau would have talked Otomori into rescuing Ichiro.

In the camp of the bandits, they would have found Ichiro more dead than alive. To save his life, Pau would have merged with him which would have created the interesting situation of a mortal with divine powers. But for reasons which I can't explain here, this turned out to be a bad solution. I don't mind writing a scene in which someone is tortured but there are enough maniacs running around and I prefer not to read the headline that I gave someone ideas.

And if you should wonder why Ichiro would be in a lot of trouble if someone finds out that Pau is a gaijin: To make sure that the lords cannot raise an army of mercenaries or equip them with superior foreign weapons and thus disturb the balance of power in Japan, any contact with gaijin is punished with the death penalty.

And that means really any contact. Court proceedings knew no defendant at that time and the shogun was a very busy man who didn't usually spend a lot of time on an obvious case. If a lord would have learned this, he wouldn't have hesitated either: It would have been the life on an unknown ronin against the suspicion of high-treason.

Let's see how Lord Fukute meets Pau Tai and what happens when Pau Tai meets the Shogun for the first time.

<sup>1</sup>Someone not born in Japan. Did you know that most Japanese words mean something else depending on the context?