

OWL SHOGUN STUDIOS

妖怪の国
YOKAI
COUNTRY

PART I:

THE TALES OF TEMUJIN



Story & Art By:

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This is a **fantasy** inspired by **history**...

Yokai Country™ and the lands of Wakuni derive their essence from the ancient **far east**. This is a world of clashing armies, celestial beings, mythical apparitions, sorcerers, and much more.

It is a cruel, violent, and unjust place. There is death, war, and all manner of strong themes that may not be suitable for some audiences. This book is not meant for the faint of heart nor the easily outraged. Read at your own discretion.

Most critically, this series of books is meant to emulate the unique **Japanese storytelling** tradition of **shōnen** manga with **seinen** characteristics. Now turn the page, dear reader, and let us now embark on this magnificent journey together...

- The Owl Shogun

Part 1
The Tales of Temujin



Story & Art:
Josh Alicea



序幕

TEMUJIN MUGEN

The wanderer meandered along the pristine forest riding atop his demonic steed. Rays of bright, aureate light with emerald hues peeked through the mesmerizing canopy of bamboo; the lush foliage merging to form a dazzling jade ceiling. It is a peaceful and tranquil setting. The rustling of leaves brought with it a gentle wind. But the air also bore a most displeasing of scents. The wanderer knew he was closing in on his destination, for he could smell the peculiar odor of rotten flesh.

Upon reaching the forest clearing, he gazes down from atop the steep hill which overlooks a fertile valley. Below is a quaint farming village of humble means. Recognizing this as the correct place, he beckoned his servile beast to carry him forth. As they arrive, the wanderer is met with fear and suspicion. The townsfolk appeared famished and bore

gloomy expressions. Even the children scurried away back to their pitiful dwellings. Every move the wanderer made was carefully observed; the source of their apprehension being the mysterious creature which he rode atop of.

This unusual beast was both frightening and majestic; conjuring up imagery of an ancient time where man and the gods once lived side by side... A relic of a bygone age. And yet here it was – a rarity even in this blood-soaked land of war and monsters. Chimeric in appearance, this fabled steed possesses an amalgamation of various animal traits. Its body seems to be horse-like yet covered in reptilian scales. Its neck is serpentine, and its head resembles a mighty dragon. Its eyes are black as the night with silver irises. Crowning this magnificent being is the mane of a lion with large deer-like antlers protruding from its rigid cranium.

It's rider, the wanderer, calmly rides forth wearing a brilliant sapphire robe; his shoulders sparsely covered in black, multi-plated metallic armor. The design of his outfit is reminiscent of many of the bandits and outlaws who now roamed the lands of Wakuni with no homeland to call their own. His hair is jet black and smooth as silk; though stylistically it is rough and unkept. And like his clothes, his eyes bear a deep cerulean hue.

Upon his head he wears a *sugegasa*, a type of conical straw hat favored by rice cultivators. It offered excellent protection against the harsh sun. Wrappings of red-dyed linen kept the outfit firmly in place by the waist. Attached to this crimson sash is a leather bag full of all of the tools he'd need for the job. Put together, along with the wanderer's mythical beast, they both seemed to resemble characters ripped straight out of the classical myths.

A decrepit old man approaches the warrior with

hesitant motions. He was malnourished and clothed in a samue, a kimono-like article of loosely strewn fabric made for breathability in hot and humid summers. The colors were muted, and the material torn and practically falling apart. After slowly trudging along the wet mud, he reaches the bizarre outsider and speaks.

“Are you the one we called for? You do not look like an Onmyōji sent from the capital...”

“No...” The wanderer casually confirms. “All the same, I have answered the call while the bureau has not. Rest assured; I will put a stop to it.”

The old man, relieved to hear such words, drops to the ground and prostrates himself at the wanderer’s feet.

“Oh, praise the kami!... I beg of thee... Please slay that vile creature and rid us of its evil...”

The wanderer does not respond right away. He simply looks at the old man and is somewhat taken aback by his desperation. He switches his gaze and carefully studies the environment around him; noticing all too acutely as to the palpable dread which plagues the villagers. It was a mood that had seeped into every nook and cranny of this miserable place on the far side of the inaka. For certain, this village had suffered for far too long. The wanderer then smirks and addresses the timid elder.

“Let’s get one thing clear. I’m not doing this for you out of the goodness of my heart. It’s a job. Nothing more.”

“I... I understand... As long as you kill it, I care not of your intentions. The creature resides in the temple up the mountain. Many have tried to slay it and yet none have returned... Be careful.”

“You needn’t worry. Fighting monsters is my specialty. Well... One of them, anyways.”

And thus, the lone wanderer and his draconic beast trotted along towards the edge of this dreary village. Eventually, they reach the base of the mountainous temple path. Numerous rows of peculiar looking tōrō, or stone lanterns, guide the faithful with a trail of lights up and down the slope. They are most useful during nighttime ascents or on days of heavy mist. A wooden torii gate, painted in an alluring hue of vibrant vermillion, stood at the entrance of this sacred space.

Slips of paper folded into a unique zigzagging pattern, known as gohei, hung from the wooden structure. Beyond the impressive torii gate is a perilous flight of stairs which led up to the mountain peak. Even from the base of the slope, the wanderer could feel an ominous presence from up on high and proceeded to disembark from his beast.

“Best I travel on foot from here on out, Kuromaru.”

With a gentle tap of the index finger, the body of his beastly companion brightens up with an innate luminous glow until, suddenly, it transforms into an amorphous blob of flames. It would be only seconds later that these flames condensed into the physical form of a pendant of sorts. The wanderer then picks it up and places the pendant securely around his neck. Afterwards, he reluctantly begins this most arduous of climbs.

With each laborious step, the smell of rot and decay grew ever more potent. Additionally, he could not help but feel a persistent sensation of malice. It was as if the very air itself was corrupted by an unseen magical force. He soon discovered the source of these horrid scents, for the entire mountainside was lined up with dastardly rows of decapitated heads perched atop wooden pikes. This colonnade of unholy pillars led all the way up to the end of

the path. Flies and maggots congregated in and around these lifeless husks of human remains. Even bits of bare bone are clearly visible. But despite the unsettling nature of this very crude attempt at scaring away trespassers, the wanderer presses onward. After a tiring trek, he finally reaches the top.

Greeting him at the summit is an remarkably tall five-story pagoda which towered over him; surpassed in height only by the surrounding bamboo forest. He could feel that the source of the dark aura emanated from the pagoda itself. Readying his mind for whatever foul deeds awaited him, he cautiously approaches the temple and enters its hallowed halls. To his surprise, all he found was a lone monk chanting whispered prayers next to a modestly built shrine.

The space is dark; illuminated only by a sparse collection of wax candles. The monk, bald and decrepit, continued with his hushed invocations without any hint or indication that he was even aware of the wanderer's presence. The wanderer quietly steps onto the wooden floor and creeps closer and closer; silencing his breath. Alas, the solitary monk finally took notice. He halted his chants and spoke to the wanderer while not once turning to face him.

"Oh? A visitor? And what brings you to this holy place? Come to pay respects to the dead as well?"

"Hardly..." The wanderer answers as he corrects his straw hat. "I'm just a traveler passing through."

"I see..." The monk states in a solemn tone. "What a shame... Used to be, people would come and pray to the kami. They would invoke all manner of kotodama... But in these dark days, they've forgotten the old traditions..."

"Is that why you killed all those people?"

The monk tilts his head slightly; still refusing to turn his gaze and face this now unwelcome visitor.

“I know not what you mean, stranger... I am but a simple monk... Devoted to the teachings of the kami...”

The wanderer smirks. “There have been rampant reports of disappearances in these parts... Violent deaths... But every time people got close to uncovering the culprit’s identity, the killings suddenly ceased, only to resume in another location... Like chasing a ghost... I admit... Even for me, it was quite a challenge to track you down... *Yokai*.”

Quietude fills the air. Not a word is spoken for what seems like an eternity. Finally, the monk tilts his head just enough to reveal frightening umbral eyes. Pulsating veins protruded from all over his face and his blackened teeth became sharpened fangs like that of a foul snake.

“You are not the *first* onmyōji sent to kill me... And you will certainly not be the last!!!”

In an instant, the monk’s supposedly frail body ignites into a maelstrom of reddish flames. His body then quickly bursts with an explosive release of energy. The sheer corporeal detonation was such that it effectively generated hurricane force whirlwinds; the structural integrity of the wooden pagoda tested to its absolute limits. After a few seconds of tempestuous gales, it looked as though the tower would collapse on account of the immense strain. However, the patient wanderer simply stood there undeterred and demonstrably unamused.

“You are mistaken, yokai... I am no onmyōji.”

He reaches into his leather pouch and pulls out several paper tags with arcane sigils written in dark squid ink. After performing a sequence of specific hand signs in a particular order, the symbols on the tags start to light up. Flames manifest all around him as an ethereal mass begins to spawn out of thin air. The wanderer then reaches into the fire and

pulls out a tsurugi, a double-edged straight sword with ancient roots to the dynasties of old.

As the dust settles, a terrifying entity emerges from the transformative fog. Gone was the humanoid visage of a harmless monk. Looming over the wanderer is a most grotesque horror of unimaginable disfigurement. The yokai possessed an ogre-like face with massive horns and charcoal teeth. Multiple human heads sprouted out of its back and shoulders; each with varying facial features. Some appeared distraught while others cried or even laughed hysterically. Throughout the monster's body are dozens of prying yellow eyes. Its fingers are long and tipped with raven-like claws. Other traits included bestial fur, virulent warts, and aquatic scales which all coalesced into a veritable nightmare... A truly despicable abomination.

Without hesitation, the yokai swings its mighty arms as the wanderer braces for impact. Upon contact with the floor, the walls of the pagoda temple are blown apart; nearly toppling the multi-storied tower. The wanderer manages to elude its deadly swing and skids along the grass moistened my morning dew. His feet then begin to emit a radiant surge of amber-tinted flames and, with a light tap, dashes towards the creature at incredible speeds. The wanderer attempts to inflict a clean cut into the monster's flesh but his tsurugi blade proved ineffective. The yokai's skin was tougher than even the most prized armor. It then unleashed a second swing with its oversized limbs. Just like before, the wanderer successfully gets out of the way via a fanciful dance of dodges and evasions.

This exercise in avoidance is aided by channeling a consistent stream of this magical energy into his feet; enhancing his movements which often enabled gravity-

defying maneuvers. He strove to maintain a careful distance; striking only when the moment was most opportune.

Finally, an opening presented itself! The wanderer concentrated golden flames into his sword which then became fully enveloped by a raging inferno. With a forceful tap on the ground, he sped towards the demon like a shooting star and managed to sever an entire arm. The creature moaned in agony and began to lash out erratically. It crushed boulders, toppled trees, and even destroyed what remained of the pagoda temple in a ferocious tantrum of irate rage. All the while, the wanderer eluded its grip and closely analyzed its attack patterns.

But without warning, a phallic-like object penetrates through the wanderer's chest from behind; dislodging and obliterating his internal organs. A torrential cascade of blood sprays all over the verdurous grass which gathers into deep puddles of crimson. Perplexed, the mortally wounded wanderer turned his head and was shocked to see that what struck him from behind was a claw belonging to the very arm he had severed only moments prior. Somehow, it reanimated and moved of its own accord. The wanderer's strength quickly began to fail him.

His vision blurred and darkened. Within seconds, he could no longer stand and collapsed onto the ground. He struggled to reach for his sword. But after a few more moments of fruitless toil, his breath gave out and his mind ultimately faded into the void.

The giant yokai clumsily tramples over the soft mountain soil and snatches the fallen warrior. The wanderer's neck arched back; the spark of his life all but extinguished. Seeing this, the demon cackled happily and slithered its diseased tongue.

“You did well for a human... But I’m afraid you will never gain admittance into the lands of Takamagahara... Time to devour our soul!”

The villainous yokai opened its jaws wide. The seams of its mouth extended well down to its torso; revealing an uncannily large vacuum of an orifice. Inside the throat are a dense cluster of hands and ghoulish faces reaching out desperately to consume the wanderer’s now motionless vessel. The entities screamed out for sustenance. Black acidic saliva dripped down as noxious fumes vaporized from the bowels of the beast. Its wart-infested purple tongue wrapped around the wanderer’s corpse as it inched closer within reach of the throatily phantoms.

But just when the yokai was about to clamp down with its devilish teeth, something unexpected had occurred which defied all reason. For certain, the wanderer was dead. The massive hole in his chest was still clearly visible as he was drained of all blood. And yet, the fingers twitched.

All of a sudden, five sigil-inscribed slips of paper dart towards the ground from all directions and surround the demon. The symbols etched onto the paper began to glow as strings of light connected each slip via ethereal chains of golden fire; forming a circle around the beast. The ground beneath the yokai’s feet also began to display a pentagram pattern of light. Finally, the human corpse slowly devolved into mud which broke apart into a cascade of earthy goop. A man then casually approaches.

“It never ceases to amaze me how beings of such immense power can still fall for these simple illusions.”

To the yokai’s disdain, the man talking was none other than the wanderer himself; perfectly uninjured.

“But how?! I killed you!”

“A replacement spell... It’s one of the first things they teach us in the bureau. Though basic, it can be quite useful in certain situations... Or to prank one’s opponent.”

In a rampant fit of fury, the yokai sought to charge towards the mocking wanderer, only to be repelled by an invisible force. Try and try as it might, it could not move from its exact spot.

“It is pointless, friend. I have already erected the prison that shall seal your fate.”

The yokai ignores this statement and continues to lash out repeatedly in an attempt to escape. Every time it came upon the edge of the barrier, a wall of ethereal energy would manifest to reveal the true shape of his seal, only for it to flicker out of visible range immediately after. It was indeed trapped within a force field of sorts. The yokai concluded that the slips of paper thrown by the wanderer had something to do with it. The demon looked to the ground and became further stoked by rage at the thought that it could be stopped by so harmless an object.

As the beast kept indulging in blatant futility, the wanderer performed a series of obscure incantations which channeled his energy towards a singular point in his body. His invocations end with a swift gesture as he clasps his hands together in prayer with only the index and middle fingers extended.

“Farewell, yokai.”

“Curse you, damned human!!!”

In a matter of seconds, the moist ground beneath the monster’s feet starts to glow with intense luminosity until, alas, an explosive burst of condensed flames erupted like a volcano. Thanks to the durability of the pentagram barrier, the blast was directed upwards towards the heavens which

gave the appearance of a mighty pillar of light. It did not take long before the wicked yokai disintegrated into vapor. As the flames subsided, nothing remained of the yokai except for a tiny floating orb. Its luminosity gave it the appearance of a miniature sun. The sphere even gave off a gentle rhythmic drumming noise which resembled that of a heartbeat. The wanderer walks right up to the strange orb and swallows it whole. Satisfied with this rewarding meal, he proceeds to descend back down to the valley below; his mission now thoroughly complete.

The wanderer rode across the deep inaka, the rural countryside, atop his chimeric mount. On the other side of a desolate hill, hundreds of bodies hung from the branches of a leafless tree. Their empty cadavers decorated the tree like lanterns during a festival. Their throats were slit, and their bellies cut open to allow the entrails to leak out. The only living things left were the crows who flocked to pick on their flesh and deteriorating eyeballs. But beyond the shadows of this ghastly tree was a far greater disaster.

For as far as he could see, the land was bathed in death. Apparently, this was the site of a great battlefield. Broken pieces of armor and shattered weapons littered the ground. Still erected to face the sky are the many war banners emblazoned with the dragon of the imperial family. The stench of rot and decay was unbearable even for him. There must have been thousands who perished.

But amongst the slaughtered, there was something which caught his eye. Given their tarnished armor, it would be easy to mistake them as any common bandit. However, wrapped around the heads of a significant number of fallen

combatants are purple-hued fabrics. In an instant, he understood what had transpired. No doubt, these men were rebels. He had heard that the western provinces erupted in open revolt years ago with dreams of overthrowing the emperor. Disinterested in involving himself with the wars of this hellish period, Temujin and his mount simply rode forth through this field of corpses. He tried his best not to mourn the dead, for he wanted nothing to do with imperial politics anymore. But with such chaos, business booms. For it is in times of strife that yokai flourish.

Eventually, the wanderer reaches a heavily fortified military encampment located several miles to the north. Surrounding this morose settlement are thick stone walls of colossal height. Built just over a century ago during the disastrous Wutei Heresy, these herculean edifices have long stood to defend the region against countless incursions – both foreign and domestic.

Garrisoning the top of these high walls are members of the imperial army dressed in their impressive regalia. Their lamellar armor was made from square-shaped iron plates laced together by cord; forming a metallic coating that covered most of their body. This is complimented by other protective gear for the shoulders, metal bracers for the forearms, and metal greaves for the legs. Those of higher rank of course displayed far more ornamentality in their armor sets to signify their prestige.

The base of the walls were built primarily of stone and wood. On the top of the walkways, where the soldiers patrolled, there is a dazzling array of blue roofing which lined the entirety of the camp perimeter. Constructed in the burgeoning yosemune style, the bamboo tiling slanted in a downward curve. As the soldiers scan the azure horizon,

some spot the wanderer perched atop his loyal dragon-horse steed. Many are stunned by the sight of this creature.

“Look! It’s really him...” One soldier whispered.

“To think he willingly fought that thing...” Another timidly added. “What manner of strength does he possess?”

“Not strength.” A third proposes. “Onmyōdō... Foul sorcery which defies the natural order.”

“For a disgraced fellow, he sure does live up to the name.” Another interjects. “I’d give just about anything to be able to fight yokai as he does.”

“Folk like us aren’t allowed to know about their sacred arts... It is forbidden.”

“Says who?”

Before long, a few more youthful cadets end up joining in on the discussion with cautious admiration. This catches the attention of their superior officer who is clad in a most extravagant armor featuring iron dragons sculpted along his shoulder pads and helmet. Though not much older than his fellows, his stern eyes and manner of cadence demonstrated a man who has seen numerous battlefields.

The other young men, hearing the clanging of heavy footsteps, turn around and immediately straighten their backs in attention.

“What’s going on here? Why are you all gawking like children? Return to your posts!”

“A man approaches from the southern gate.” One cadet informs. “He rides atop a horned kirin.”

“Kirin?” The captain recites as he shifts his gaze to observe the incoming magician. “I see... So that man has returned after all... Open the gates!” He orders reluctantly. The captain then turns to face a nearby cadet. “Notify the general of his arrival.”

“Yes sir!” The soldier shouts as he presses his fist against an open palm and bows in deference before leaving to deliver his message.

The wanderer beckons his steed towards the military encampment at a relaxed pace. Upon reaching the mighty walls, a pair of colossal bronze doors begin to rise thanks to a complex system of internal gears and pulleys. The sudden displacement of soil formed a brief cloud of dust. When the gigantic doors had fully parted, the blue wanderer urged his four-legged companion forward. However, standing in his way was the captain.

“You managed to vanquish the yokai after all...”

“You seem disappointed.” The wanderer retorts.

“More like perplexed.”

“Does it truly bother you that I don’t conform to your ideas of what a warrior should or should not be?”

“I do not condone our reliance on rogues who do not obey the chain of command. Especially one whom even the Mikado considers unsavory.”

The wanderer, apathetic towards all further discussion, ignores the captain’s commentary and steadily drives his Kirin forward past the officer.

“Fair enough... But your precious warrior’s code means nothing to me. I can’t eat honor or glory. Once I’m paid, you won’t have to see me again.”

As he makes his way to the other side of the gate, the wanderer jumps off of his kirin and heads towards the barracks where the general resides. The officer clenches his fists in vexation and grits his teeth.

“Wait!” The captain barks; prompting the wanderer to pause and look back. As he cleared his throat, he spoke. “I will escort you to him.”

The two men walk past tent after tent, the sheer size and scale of the encampment becoming ever clearer. Situated in the very center of the barracks is the main keep of the garrison. It was less an administrative building and more a fortress. This stronghold, forged from imposing stone, is several stories tall and linked to various watch towers. Each tower, much like the outer walls, is decorated with blue bamboo roofing in the yosemune style. Dramatic war banners and stately flags are present everywhere; their yellow-hued fabrics emblazoned with the red dragon – a symbol of imperial authority. Everywhere the wanderer gazes upon, heavily armored imperial soldiers kept strict guard of the fortress grounds while an army of local peasants tended to the more menial tasks and labors.

Interestingly enough, whenever someone caught a glimpse of the captain, they would immediately halt whatever activities they were conducting only to then bow down as a sign of respect. This prompts the wanderer to shift his attention more to his escort's visually impressive armor. Typically, such ornateness is reserved only for higher ranks. For someone so young to possess such flair... His curiosity got the best of him as he could not help but inquire.

"If I may ask, how does one so young get to become captain this early in his career?"

"My story is nothing special... Just hard work and a bit of luck. Before the purple-turban rebellion, I partook in four expeditions into the north and fought against countless barbarian hordes. The Mikado recognized my valor and bestowed this rank onto me."

"Ah yes! The profaned lands of Aterui. Not the most pleasant of places. I'm impressed."

"You've been here before?"

“Once... On assignment.” The wanderer admits. “There was a particularly nasty yokai rampaging around the border. Several of us were sent to take care of it.”

“Back when you were still serving the bureau?”

To this question, the wanderer pauses for the briefest of moments to collect his thoughts.

“It was a long time ago... A different life.”

Once they enter the main keep, the wanderer follows the captain for what seems like forever. In time, they finally reach the central chamber where the general and his many magisterial officers work. The chamber is cold and unfeeling yet abundant in fineries and luxurious décor. Colorful fabrics and exquisitely crafted furniture added a sense of vitality to an otherwise dreary setting.

The general, a short and stout-looking man with an excessively long beard and kingly attire, sat upon an elevated floor surrounded by his advisors. The walls are graced with vermilion pillars and beautifully rendered bronze dragons sculpted at the base. Next to each pillar of this splendid hall are lamellar-armored soldiers; their hands firmly gripping their swords with stone-faced gazes.

The captain continues to walk towards the general but stops about halfway. He then presses a fist against an open palm, bows, and addresses his superior.

“General Feng.” He announces. “I present to you the hunter who accepted the contract.”

On cue, the wanderer reaches into his leather waist pouch and removes from it a simple paper tag with strange ink inscriptions written on it. He then drops it; allowing the paper slip to gently fall upon the polished wooden floor. Next, he utters a single phrase which spurs the paper to explode into a miniature cyclone of mist. As the ashen vapors

subside, an object is seen to have been summoned from within the misty veil. To everyone's disgust, the object in question was none other than the severed head of a felled yokai... The very monk he had just recently slain. The wanderer then picks up the head with his bare hands and offers it to the general.

"The demon terrorizing the people around Ningyo Pass is no more." The wanderer calmly states.

To this, General Feng chuckles with delight as he vigorously twirls his long beard.

"It appears that the tales of your prowess is no mere exaggeration, as my advisors would suggest. Such is the renown of Temujin Mugen – the Blue Wanderer of Wakuni."

"While I appreciate the flattery, the only thing I care about is getting paid."

"Of course." General Feng grins. "But before we conclude our business, I would ask a question. Surely on the way here you saw the results of our most recent battle?"

"You wish me to perform funerary rites?"

"No, not that." Feng sighs. "Five bloody years now... That's how long this damned rebellion has gone for... Soon to be in its sixth year... Too long in fact. The Mikado has lost all patience and demands an end to the war. But these purple-turban traitors are a sneaky bunch, hiding in the most remote corners of the empire. Like rodents, they scurry off in the mountains where armies cannot penetrate. They have even proven difficult to kill; emboldened by their religious zeal. I've lost many good men to them." The general then leans forward from his chair and locks his eyes upon the wanderer. "But a man of your particular talents might tip the scales in our favor."

"You want me to fight in the army?"

“And why not?” He grins. “You would be conducting a great service to the empire. You can help us put an end to needless suffering and destruction.”

“Even if you quell this rebellion, it wouldn’t change the very circumstances which led to it. Eventually, another rebellion will resurface. That is the curse of our land.”

“You think I do not know the plight of the people? I was once a farmer myself; you know? But to rise up in arms against the Mikado is never the answer! They have killed indiscriminately... Slaughtered entire villages... How is this a path to peace? How can such wanton violence lead to any meaningful change?”

“It’s not my place to offer an opinion, general. I was absolved of my duties to the imperial court long ago.”

“And what of your oath to the people? Do you no longer follow your creed which compels all onmyōji to fight in the defense of their fellow man?”

“I am no longer an onmyōji. I am simply a hunter.”

The soldiers in the room became alarmed by his blatant refusal of General Feng’s offer. Who was this exiled mage to think he could deny so generous an invitation as this? It was unthinkable! Outrageous even! Temujin notices the visible frustration of the people around him and does his best not to grin. As for General Feng, he maintains his stoic disposition whilst continuing to stroke his beard.

“Think about it.” General Feng insists. “You would no longer have to wander endlessly throughout the land like some vagabond. Once the rebellion is squashed, I’ll even push to reinstate you into the bureau. You’ll be given land and title. You shall be an Onmyōji once more; with all the honors and privileges such a rank affords.”

“A mighty generous offer.” The wanderer comments.

“Your gifts merit such value.” Feng adds.

“But tempting as it is.” Temujin says whilst tapping on his straw hat. “I’m afraid I must decline.”

“Really?” General Feng mutters in surprise. “But I shall pay you a fine salary. You won’t have to hunt and forage for your food. You will live as the capital nobles, so long as you use your magic to vanquish those purple-turban fiends.”

“The code forbids using my onmyōdō on humans for most occasions. Thus, my answer is the same. I prefer to work alone without chains around my neck.”

“I see... That is a shame... But to each his own.”

The general begrudgingly accepts his guests’ refusal with visible disappointment. He then quickly turns his head and addresses one of his nearby soldiers.

“Give the wanderer what he came for.”

The captain walks up to the statuesque Temujin and hands him a leather pouch. Mugen takes the money and inspects its contents only to become increasingly puzzled by what he sees.

“These are bronze coins... We agreed on silver.”

“The war has been tough on us all.” General Feng spitefully states. “My silver belongs only to those who pledge fealty to the emperor.”

“An interesting change of heart... Very well.”

With a quick glance, Temujin could read the room. The general’s multitude of imperial soldiers were practically oozing with bloodlust. They were staring daggers at him, itching for a chance to cut him down where he stood. Knowing that he had overextended his welcome, he makes his way towards the exit without further delay. The wanderer does not bow in deference. He simply turns around and walks away as he would for any common man.

“Wanderer!” Feng angrily shouts. “Exile or not, you must observe the proper etiquette. You will bow!”

“And if I refuse?”

One soldier steps forth and unsheathes his blade in a blind fury; ready to engage in combat.

“Insolent swine! How dare you speak to General Feng in such a manner?!”

“Step down, Tezuko!” The captain orders.

Beads of sweat flowed down the captain’s brow as his eyes became fixated upon Temujin’s right hand. Gripped between the spellcaster’s fingers are glowing paper slips with particles of flaming embers emanating from them like snow fall. Seeing that the wayward soldier was no longer a threat, Temujin places the tags back into his leather pouch; much to the captain’s relief. General Feng observes this scene with apprehension as he kept on stroking his beard and rests his back against the chair.

“Fine...” Temujin says under a laborious sigh. “If it means so much to you.” He then clasps his hands together and performs an exaggerated bow to get the point across. Afterwards, he straightens his back, corrects his hat, and walks away. None dared to follow the wanderer except for the captain who hurried to catch up with the blue-robed sorcerer. When he senses his approach, Temujin stops in his tracks and looks over to him.

“As you can see, I kept my word, captain. I’ve been paid; thus I am leaving you in peace.”

“Just now, you said that you don’t use your magic against people. But when Tezuko drew his sword just now, what were you planning to do?”

“Simple... Had he made good on his threat, I would have incinerated him.”

“It’s a good thing you didn’t then.” The captain says with a nervous breath. “General Feng wishes to host you for the evening. He is granting you a room to stay along with a hot bath and food for both you and your kirin.”

To this, Temujin stared blankly at the captain with suspicion. He leered into his eyes to determine deceit but found none to be had... He was sincere.

“I don’t get it. Why show such courtesy after what just transpired?”

“I am only relaying his words. For that, you’ll have to ask the general yourself.”

As the afternoon sun slowly descends below the horizon, Temujin is escorted by two guides through an enchanting path of bamboo with emerald-tinted lights shimmering through the dense leafy canopy. Eventually, they reach a forest clearing where they stumble upon a most unusual of places. Though the land of Hitoku is defined mostly by its temperate climate and vast woodlands, the continent of Wakuni as a whole is largely volcanic. And with such rampant geological activity, comes the natural wonders that are hot springs, or *onsen* in the native tongue.

“You can’t be serious.” Temujin comments.

“Rest assured, mister Mugen.” One guide states. “Our role is to ensure that you enjoy your stay here at the fortress until General Feng has concluded his tasks for the day.”

“Please remove your clothes.” The other guide calmly instructs. “You can place them on this rack. Once you’re satisfied, we’ll fetch you fresh robes.”

Seeing no harm in it, the wanderer does as they suggest and begins to remove every article of clothing until he is

naked and bare. The guides encase his clothes in a thick linen towel and proceed to walk away. This alarmed Temujin.

“Where are you going with that?”

“You have been on the road for a long time. Your outfit reeks of unpleasant odors. We shall thoroughly wash it so that, when you return to the inaka, you can do so smelling more appropriate.”

“Hmm...”

Having grown accustomed to his own scent, Temujin did not consider that he might be offensive to others by his sheer stench. He always figured that he could never be as bad smelling as Kuromaru. Agreeing to their thoughtful service, he nods and turns away. The wind caressed his exposed skin like daggers of ice. It was time to submerge himself in the nourishing waters of the onsen. Little by little, he allows himself to sink into the steaming pool of milky water. He could feel his body tingle and his entire being was overcome by much-needed relaxation.

Once night had fully oppressed the land in darkness, the only source of illumination came from a rather charming assortment of wax candles, paper lanterns, and stone tōrō. Temujin then stretches his arms, leans against the rocky edge, and allows his mind to sink further into an almost meditative state.

Later that evening, Temujin exits the pool and is given a fresh change of clothes. The two men tasked with escorting the wanderer take him back to the fortress where they end up in a massive hall filled with simple yet alluring furnishings. Rather than adhere to the stern and imposing stone walls seen in much of the camp, this room was fashioned more like your typical aristocrat’s home. The floors are covered with soft tatami mats, colorful silk

curtains, and the walls graced with the most dazzling of paintings. But the most jaw-dropping aspect of the room was placed in the center – a massive, long table made of the finest wood. To his delight, a great plethora of plates and dishes were served atop this table displaying a vast array of culinary delicacies.

Many of these dishes were not easily available to the common folk. Some were invented exclusively for the imperial family and only trickled down to the nobility after many decades. The alluring smells seeped into his nose and beckoned his hunger. It had been ages since he feasted on such savory food. For too long he had to subsist on berries, nuts, and whatever wild game he could hunt. He had become so habituated to such bland eating that he forgot just how delicious food can truly be. He considered for a moment the possibility of his food being poisoned. But had they wanted him dead, they would have attempted an arrest. At the very least, they could have sent an onmyōji from the capital to hunt him down. Concluding that no such dangers were likely, he grabbed the chopsticks placed on the table and started eating. Oh, how sumptuous it all was!

Once he was about halfway into his meal, General Feng arrives. No longer was he clad in his soldierly attire but dressed in a more regal kimono. He was pleased to see Temujin enjoying the food with such relish and sat close to him on the cushioned floor.

“How was the onsen?” Feng asks.

“I admit.” Temujin begins while wiping away bits of sticky rice from his mouth. “It’s been a while since I’ve last enjoyed such a refreshing dip. My thanks.”

“And the food? Better than anything that you might find in the wild, eh?”

"I've missed that much more. Although..." Temujin then places his chopsticks down, chugs on a cup of water, and turns his body to face that of the general. "I am surprised... For a man so easily offended, you were quick to shower me with such sensorial pleasures."

"Forgive my outburst." Feng laments. "There are a great many amongst the military who think poorly of onmyōji – former or otherwise. They feel that you sorcerers are not to be trusted."

"It is a sentiment I've grown accustomed to. To be fair, we've done little to inspire good will."

"Be that as it may, you are still an exile. Thus, I must appear resolute in front of the men, lest word gets back to the capital that I am friendly with an outcast."

"Then why treat me so well?"

"Officially, you took the money and left."

"So what are we *really* doing here?"

General Feng does not reply right away, preferring to collect his thoughts before expressing his views. He took a few pieces of grilled fish from a nearby plate and began chewing as he pondered over what to say.

"In the simplest of terms... I'd like for you to share with me insight into your way of life."

"You want me to tell you bedtime stories?" He jests.

"You saw the battlefield just outside the fortress. The mountains of corpses which defile the soil. War and death. It's all anyone ever talks about now. There's only so much of it a man can endure before he breaks. I'm hoping your stories can offer some... Healthy distraction."

"Would it not make more sense to arrest me?"

"You are an exile, not an outlaw." Feng says. "The Mikado *tolerates* your wanderings because you've done a

superb job ridding the land of monsters. And ever since the purple turbans plunged this country into chaos, yokai now roam the world with impunity. Your exploits have allowed us to focus on the war rather than divert precious resources to fighting beasts.”

“I hunt yokai because it is lucrative.”

“Regardless of your reasons, you’re doing a hell of a lot more than the rest of your colleagues. Those conceited sorcerers who cloister themselves in their pagoda towers, clinging to dusty scrolls, and obsessing over the slow movement of stars while the rest of the world burns.” The general then leans forward and whispers. “If you ask me, I believe that your banishment was unjust.”

“It’s all in the past.” Temujin says.

General Feng pauses once more and stokes his beard as he ponders over what next to say.

“You know? I once dabbled in the art of yin and yang myself when I was but a lad. I always admired how your kind can conjure spells and combat against unimaginable horrors. Things such as yokai, ayakashi, and mononoke.”

“No more horrific than the battlefield. I’ve had my fair share of experiences to last several lifetimes.”

“Of course...” Feng smirks. “I forget... You served during the uprising in Kamui. Nasty business that was.”

“It was no uprising.” Temujin corrects; his tone of voice firmer. “Only a slaughter. And *we* were the ones who committed the deed. After that, I lost complete faith in the empire... And then... Well... You know the rest.”

“So... Just to clarify... You *never* would have accepted my offer purely out of principle? No matter how much coin I threw at you?”

“Yes.”

Upon hearing this, General Feng stood up and slowly made his way towards the exit. But just before he leaves, he tilts his head back to gaze at Temujin who remained comfortably seated.

“You may leave this place if you wish. I won’t hold it against you. I know all too well of the hatred that you must feel towards us.”

Feng then slides open the door and steps out. Temujin, however, calls to him with a gentle voice.

“General.” He mutters – prompting Feng to halt his cadence and look back towards him. Temujin then makes a simple gesture of the hands. “The night is still young. It would be dishonorable to leave without repaying you for your kindness. Take a seat next to me and I will regale you with a few tales that come to mind. Hopefully, they will offer some reprieve from your daily toil.”

THANKS FOR READING

PART ONE

JOSH ALICEA



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