

The Samurai Of Time

Tome 1

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Prologue:

Every man and every woman moves through life like warriors on an invisible battlefield. Like the stars, they are born, they burn, they waver, and then they carve a singular line through the darkness of the world.

Each carries a purpose.
A role.
A mission that nothing can divert.

And even if human beings seem fragile, even if their doubts are gaping wounds, their destinies interlock, collide, or unite like the pieces of the same cosmic mechanism. On the chessboard of the universe, no place is left to chance: every move prepares a clash, a meeting, a war, or a revelation.

Within this great immutable order, a name had just awakened.
Shiro Takano.

His story, humble until now, had begun to crack like armor grown too tight. Within him, a force he could not yet understand was emerging a muted pressure, as if the very air were waiting for him to act. Already, his heart beat faster, pushed by something greater than himself: a silent voice rising from the far side of time.

His battle was about to begin.

An inner battle first, against his fears, his difference, and his limitations.
Then an outer battle, against the forces advancing in the shadows, ready to tear the world apart.

Shiro did not yet know the nature of his role.
But the Universe was no longer waiting.

For when destiny opens, it never asks for permission.
It strikes, it burns, and it carries those it has chosen straight into the heart of chaos.

Chapter 1 – The Shadow of Xedus

In modern times, within the central government palace of the megacity of Bôôt, located north of the 22nd parallel on the planet Xedus, a great lordly hall stands out. Its opalescent walls, carved with abstract lines, frame three wide opaque openings. The warm-colored floor is scattered with statues of important figures, shaped from ancient stones and laid haphazardly across the ground.

A tall, imposing man named Tenebro stands proudly beneath a vast translucent dome adorned with religious motifs. Armed with a two-meter twisted iron rod tipped with a sharpened blade gripped in his left hand, he embodies the union of three bodies draped in tattered garments that symbolize authority: a policeman, a man of law, and a military officer. Tenebro's disproportionate head fuses these three faces into a single expression of hatred. Their blood-soaked lips and their deep blue irises and pupils, set within sclera streaked with swollen red veins, reveal a soul consumed. Tenebro wears extravagant boots made from human bones. His bald skull is crowned with a thick ring of barbed wire whose spikes sink deeply into his flesh. In a powerful, unified voice, Tenebro proclaims:

"I am Tenebro, adoptive father of the exiled and the outcast. Born from the fires of hell, I am the beginning of all life, and after countless battles across the ages, I remain determined to rule as the absolute master of Xedus."

Slowly, he lifts his massive head. A malicious smile curves his lips as he gazes up at the dome. At its zenith, two adjacent celestial bodies shine brilliantly. With a gesture of solemn approval, he nods. Then, in a chilling voice, he declares:

"No one will hinder the destiny I have set for him. No one, not even you, Shiro Takano."

Suddenly, Tenebro tilts his head. His cunning stare fixes one of the previously opaque openings, which suddenly illuminates and becomes transparent. With a surge of arrogance, he furrows his brows and chuckles. Raising his voice, he announces:

"The god you worship is meaningless before my power. Remember that, once and for all."

Tenebro then steps heavily toward a large glass opening overlooking the outside world. He lifts his muscular right arm, points outward with his index finger, and spreads his hand wide as he solemnly declares:

"Look, and see for yourself the world created in my image."

Beyond the glass, tall and massive pyramid-shaped buildings appear, damaged or entirely destroyed. They rise from an apocalyptic landscape dominated by enormous chimneys spewing thick black smoke. These structures are built by metamorphs, stacked upon one another, some screaming in agony, others already claimed by death. With disdain, he says:

“The strongest and worthiest metamorphs, now my lieutenants, are fully loyal and dedicated to me until death. The weaker ones serve to assemble the chimneys of hell until their final breath, so that from the depths may burst the oxygen of life, vital to my creation.”

Behind Tenebro, emerging through one of the translucent openings with a firm yet silent step, appears a samurai named Shiro Takano. Originally from Earth during the final years of the Heian period, he holds in his right hand a long sword soaked with blood along its golden edge. Shiro Takano, of average height and solid build, wears armor made of tiny black-and-gold lacquered iron scales with wide shoulder plates adorned with thick red cords. His belt bears a medium-sized blade, and at the height of his abdomen are sheathed six daggers. His hands, forearms, and feet are protected by metal plates whose protruding ends tear anything they touch. His face is concealed behind a fierce golden grimace mask that reveals large, round, light grey-green eyes. His helmet, fitted with a metal visor, is crowned with a jet-black carp, aggressive in form, with large fangs and clawed fins poised to strike.

With a swift motion, Shiro thrusts his sword forward and wipes the blood from its blade as he declares in a calm, firm tone:

“Tenebro, your end is inevitable. After several centuries of relentless battle, I intend to finish this with my own hands. Your evil reign ends today. As the vengeful arm of the God of Xedus, I will liberate this world and restore the peace it deserves.”

In one instinctive motion, Shiro raises his sword in both hands above him and steps into combat. Tenebro quickly turns toward his sworn enemy and, with only his left hand gripping the twisted staff, halts the deadly strike. The weapons clash violently and lock together. Under the strain, both warriors’ faces contort as the golden-edged sword and the keen iron pole grind against one another. Tenebro’s eyes widen as he sees the blade pushing inexorably toward his neck. He swiftly brings his right hand to the weapon’s handle. With tremendous force, he gradually pushes back the samurai’s blade.

Suddenly, a powerful aura erupts from both fighters, violently cracking the palace walls. Veins bulge to the point of bursting on Tenebro’s faces. He begins to smile, laughing arrogantly.

“You seem confident, Takano!”

In a titanic and brutal clash, Shiro and Tenebro unleash the full intensity of their weapons, striking without restraint. The two warriors, each fighting in their own fierce style, wound one another while shouting in pain. Fueled by adrenaline, they continue relentlessly. Gaining a slight advantage, Shiro adds fierce kicks to the blows of his sword. Still fighting, he casts a sudden glance toward the back of the hall. His expression freezes for an instant, revealing profound fear, as if he were staring through time itself.

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At the same moment on Earth, in the National Museum of Los Angeles, ten thieves dressed entirely in black and wearing masks with comical expressions quickly surround one of their own, disguised as Stan Laurel. The thieves move methodically, stealing paintings, vases, and other precious objects and packing them carefully into crates, ready for rapid extraction. Stan Laurel, assuming the role of leader, stands confidently before a valuable painting. Before

taking it down, he glances toward the control room where Tom, a Caucasian night guard in his forties, sits before a row of security monitors, calmly reading a newspaper while chewing noisily on a piece of candy. Behind him, comfortably seated on a worn little chair, is Ouchiya, an eleven-year-old Japanese boy with a round build, frantically playing on a handheld game console.

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On Xedus, back in the lordly palace, Tenebro, using immense strength, forces Shiro back and launches a savage counterattack while the samurai is still lost in thought. The King of Darkness pivots his massive weapon with power, roaring his determination as he strikes hard to inflict a serious wound. Shiro screams in pain as the blow pierces his armor and sends him stumbling backward. Regaining awareness, the samurai stands, trembling, his breath broken and uneven. Tenebro exults with triumph, pleased with the major strike he has landed. He pauses for a moment, smacking the handle of his weapon into the palm of his right hand. In a questioning tone, he says:

“I have always wondered where the art you wield comes from. For I am certain it belongs neither to the traditions nor to the centuries-old art of war practiced by the nations of Xedus.”

With a wicked smile, Tenebro raises his weapon. Suddenly he darts toward the samurai and thrusts it at Shiro’s face. Grimacing in pain, Shiro reacts with remarkable resolve, blocking the deadly attack at the last second with both hands. Metal grinds against metal. In a tense stance, Shiro leans closer to Tenebro and says firmly:

“I will send you back to hell, where you belong, Tenebro.”

Tenebro grimaces with all three faces, baring his teeth. He pushes one of his faces closer to Shiro’s and replies arrogantly:

“You’re wrong, Takano. And I’ve already told you, my power is far greater than you imagine. Enough to crush you like an insect.”

Shiro struggles to hold his sword against Tenebro’s. Closing the remaining distance, he violently slams his helmet against Tenebro’s broad forehead. With biting irony, he says:

“Not powerful enough to create life, though. The life you’ve been desperately trying to forge since the beginning of your reign over Xedus.”

Tenebro is stunned by the cutting remark. His eyes widen, showing deep sorrow. Then, abruptly recovering, he furrows his brows and tenses every muscle in his body. He grinds his weapon against Shiro’s with unprecedented force. The palace walls crack dangerously, and the glass of the dome trembles violently. With all his might, Tenebro forces Shiro back several steps, shouting:

“Shut up, Takano! Shut up!”

The two enemies resume their brutal fight, clashing their weapons with rage and determination. Sweat drips from their faces as their weapons lock once more. The heavy air of the hall vibrates violently, further fracturing the remaining walls and shattering the dome

overhead. Shiro shifts slightly, pivots his entire body, and delivers a powerful spinning kick to Tenebro's faces, disorienting him. He seizes the opening and lands a devastating strike with his sword, mortally wounding Tenebro and causing him to stagger dangerously.

Catching his breath, Shiro steps close to his enemy. With a swift motion, he wipes the blood from his blade and takes his stance, ready to deliver the final blow when suddenly his expression freezes again, filled with fear, as he plunges through the fabric of time.

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At the same moment on Earth, in the control room of the National Museum of Los Angeles, Tom, taken aback, notices interference appearing on the surveillance screens. He gets up and strolls over, casually tapping the monitors firmly with his right hand. Tilting his head, he peers curiously behind the screens and says in a mocking tone:

"Incredible! This damn equipment! I knew this would happen one day. No matter how often we ask, the answer is always the same: too expensive, or not for now, all because 'we don't have the budget.'"

Ouchiya, tearing his attention away from his video game, looks at Tom, then, slightly furrowing his brows, turns his gaze toward the screens. He grimaces a little, shrugs, and asks calmly:

"What's going on? Is it serious, Uncle Tom?"

Tom glances at the boy, opens his eyes wide, then lets out a heavy sigh as he rubs his forehead wearily. He walks back to his desk and, with a decisive gesture, puts on his work cap. Then, raising his hands in a helpless gesture toward Ouchiya, he admits bluntly:

"Damn! So much for my peaceful evening, that's over. I won't be long, Ouchiya. I'm going to the main control room to fix this mess. In the meantime, you stay here, keep playing quietly on your chair, and don't take advantage of it to eat all my candy, okay?"

"I'd get a stomachache pretty fast if I ate as much candy as you do, Uncle. And Auntie definitely wouldn't be happy about it," Ouchiya replies in an amused tone.

"You're right, and it wouldn't be good for your teeth either. Look at me at my age, I already have to wear these damn dentures that do me more harm than good. And on top of that, they're not even covered by my insurance," Tom says, flashing a wide grin at Ouchiya and showing his teeth.

He strolls toward the exit door, then suddenly stops. His face lights up with satisfaction and, in a fulfilled tone, he adds:

"I know you're still too young to understand certain things in life, but I wanted to tell you that I truly became a different man from the moment you joined our family. Your aunt and I still mourn your mother's sudden death in Japan with that strange smuggling affair, but I don't regret our decision to welcome you into our home for a second."

Looking slightly embarrassed, Tom pulls himself together, adjusts his cap, sniffs loudly, then pulls a comical face as he stares insistently at Ouchiya and says in a cheerful tone:

"All right, time to work! The system's not going to fix itself. And don't forget, Ouchiya: keep your hands off my candy!"

The night guard turns around and steps through the doorway, leaving it slightly ajar, then disappears quickly down the main corridor. Ouchiya gives a faint smile and goes back to his game. Furrowing his brows again, he murmurs triumphantly:
“Here, I’m the one who makes the rules, so get lost!”

In the main corridor, walking with a confident stride, Tom hums cheerfully under the glow of the emergency lights. Suddenly his face freezes, cutting his melody short. His mouth falls open as he discovers an empty space where a contemporary painting once hung. Behind him, two well-hidden thieves move in a threatening manner. They leap at him, armed with long machetes. The thieves give him no chance and strike him with a series of brutal blows, killing him. Tom screams in pain before collapsing lifeless, his blood spreading thickly across the floor.

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On Xedus, in the lordly palace, Tenebro comes to his senses, shaking his head. He quickly pushes himself back up onto his muscular legs. Fixing his vengeful gaze on his enemy, still disoriented by fear, Tenebro takes advantage of Shiro’s inattention to deliver a powerful blow that shatters his chest armor and wounds him badly. Shiro crashes heavily to the floor and screams in pain. Through his distress, he once again casts his worried gaze toward the back of the hall. In a burst of explosive rage, Tenebro strides virilely toward his opponent, raising his weapon high to crush his skull. But, surprised to see his sworn enemy gripped by a fear like never before, he halts his killing stroke and lets his left arm, still holding the iron pole, fall gently to the ground with a dull thud. Stunned, Tenebro exclaims:
“What is happening to you, Takano? Never, in all the years I’ve fought you, have I seen such despair on your face... Why?”

Shiro, his eyes full of fear, looks at Tenebro, then quickly down at his wound. His features twisted with pain, his left hand pressed hard against his chest, he struggles to his feet and staggers backward, shouting:
“No! No!”

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At the same moment on Earth, in the main corridor of the museum, Ouchiya, his face tight with anxiety and his game console still in hand, walks slowly under the emergency lights. Suddenly, his barely audible steps splash against something wet. Intrigued, he stops and looks down at his shoes, then stares in horror and shock as he discovers Tom’s blood-soaked body lying on the floor. His eyes widen with fear and he screams:
“Uncle!”

The two thieves, until then lurking back in a dark corner of the corridor, watch Ouchiya with impassive faces. Suddenly, they stand and walk toward the boy with steady, silent strides, stepping fully into view. Tears welling in his eyes, Ouchiya backs away a few steps and drops his game. Grabbing his head with his trembling, disoriented hands, he collapses to his knees, stammering:
“H-help... somebody help me!”

Gasping for air, Ouchiya curls up into himself, his head buried in his hands, his body trembling as he continues to babble. Stan Laurel, emerging from one of the museum’s

galleries, is alerted by the scene. He looks toward Ouchiya and, with a weary air, shrugs. With a sharp gesture, he drags his finger across his own throat and then, raising only his index finger, signals to his two accomplices as they advance toward the child. One of them, nodding with a tired expression, stops and joins Stan, while the other continues his macabre approach. Catching his breath, he slowly draws his long machete, letting it scrape faintly against the inside of its sheath, and positions himself in front of the boy.

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On Xedus, in the lordly palace, Shiro removes his left hand from the wound in his chest, which has instantly regenerated, along with his armor. His face flushed, tears swelling in his eyes, he cries out his despair and anger. Swift and agile, the samurai hurls himself at Tenebro and unleashes a furious series of sword strikes, punctuated with powerful kicks. Caught off guard by the intensity of the assault, Tenebro stumbles back, losing control of the situation. Suddenly he falls face-first to the floor, his weapon sliding far from his hand. Consumed by a rage and intensity unlike anything before, Shiro is about to deliver a decisive, killing blow when he suddenly stops and shouts, his gaze lost across time:

“Ouchiya!”

A moment later, Tenebro stirs, slowly opens his eyes, and regains his senses. He springs back up onto his stout legs, quickly retrieves his weapon, and takes his stance again, gripping it firmly with both hands. Mouth agape, his three faces reveal eyes full of doubt as he desperately searches the grand hall for his enemy.

“Where are you, Takano?” he asks, shaken.

Taking a few steps forward, Tenebro suddenly lets his weapon fall to the floor when he realizes the hall is strangely empty of Shiro’s presence.

“How is that possible?” Tenebro exclaims.

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On Earth, in the main corridor of the National Museum, Ouchiya moans in terror and trembles all over. Exposing his neck to the thief, the man calmly kneels down, gripping his long machete in both hands. He lifts his arms high and, with a sharp motion, brings the blade down with all his strength toward the child’s neck, the cutting edge hissing through the air. Behind them, Stan Laurel walks casually along the corridor and, watching his accomplice, nods.

Then, raising his hands in mock protest, he says in an insolent tone:

“Yeah! This is definitely one of my best nights and this time, not a single witness left behind!”

The sinister machete blade poised above Ouchiya is suddenly stopped dead in its descent by a long sword whose cutting edge gleams with gold. The thief’s arm, abruptly blocked, forces him to raise his head and stare straight into the helmet of Shiro Takano, topped with the black carp. Suddenly, the carp’s jaws stretch wide in a wild motion, devour the thief’s head, then spit it out at once.

Stan Laurel, on his way to loot another gallery, turns his head to the left and, stunned, sees his accomplice’s head rolling along the floor, leaving a bloody trail behind it. He then pivots to face Shiro, freezes for a brief instant, and exclaims in surprise:

“Holy hell! Who the hell are you?”

Stan Laurel and his remaining accomplice snap back to their senses and draw their long machetes. Without hesitation, they rush at the samurai to engage in a deadly fight. Shiro's long sword slices effortlessly through concrete walls as well as through the thieves' bodies, while their machetes glance uselessly off the samurai's armor. Alerted by the noise of battle, more thieves burst in from all directions, hurling themselves into a doomed struggle against Shiro with various deadly weapons. The samurai drives forward relentlessly, ending the lives of all the thieves and covering the floor with their blood. Shiro flicks his blade sharply through the air to clean off the blood of his enemies, then looks around, satisfied and relieved.

With a confident stride, he walks toward Ouchiya, stepping over lifeless bodies and a severed head. Deprived of its mask, the head reveals a strange face with swollen veins and blood-smearred lips. Suddenly, its eyes spring open, the iris and pupil filling with a dark bluish blood as the sclera becomes laced with intense red veins. The severed head begins to move its mouth clumsily, then shrieks in a fused voice:

"Takano! Now that's what I call a surprise!"

Shiro has just sheathed his sword when he stops abruptly, turns, and stares wide-eyed at the severed head, answering in shock:

"That voice... It's Tenebro's! I don't understand... I am the only one, by the will of the gods, who can cross freely between the two worlds."

The severed head, weeping bloody tears, trembles nervously and, with a broad, mocking grin, fixes its gaze on Shiro and raises its voice:

"Incredible! After so many years and battles, as fierce as they were bloody, on the lands of Xedus, so that's your secret... This world, and apparently... this simple mortal. I see now. Your fighting style, your sudden disappearances during our clashes it all makes sense."

With a steady step, Shiro walks to face the severed head. Almost mechanically, he draws his sword in a swift motion, holding it high, ready to strike.

"I don't know how you discovered my secret, but it doesn't matter. Soon, peace will be restored on Xedus... and you will perish."

The severed head wears a malicious grin and lets thick drool spill from its mouth as it retorts in a contemptuous tone:

"You and that insignificant mortal will no longer be safe anywhere in this world, now that I, too, can cross it. Once I have spilled every last drop of his blood, yours will flow in turn here, or on Xedus!"

Shiro growls with displeasure, his breathing quickening. He tightens his grip on the hilt of his long sword and shouts:

"Never!"

His eyes blazing with rage, he cleaves the severed head with a sharp stroke, shattering the floor beneath it. Behind him, Ouchiya, still curled up, begins to convulse. Worried, Shiro wipes his blade quickly before sliding it back into its sheath, murmuring gravely:

"Tenebro is more dangerous than ever now."

He lifts his head and rushes to Ouchiya. Kneeling beside him, he gently gathers the boy into his arms and urges him in a combative voice:

"Fight, Ouchiya! Fight!"

Ouchiya, his eyes rolled back, trembles and convulses violently, murmuring:
“M-my... my... mom! Mom!”

Sweat beads on his forehead. Suddenly, he falls silent and his breathing stops abruptly.
“I forbid you to die! You must fight, so you can understand what binds us, because your life has just taken an unexpected turn,” Shiro cries, urgency sharp in his voice.

He shakes Ouchiya gently, the boy’s head lolling in the air, then stops his desperate motion. Bringing his masked face close to the child’s, he adds in a determined voice:
“You are now going to understand and live my story, Ouchiya Ueshiba. But for that, I must take you back to where it all began.”

Behind his mask, twisted into a fierce grimace, Shiro closes his eyes as if to pass through time. Gradually, his body begins to dissolve, merging with Ouchiya’s.

After a moment, the samurai disappears completely into the boy’s body, leaving Ouchiya alone, lying in the main corridor. Suddenly, Ouchiya gasps, his eyes flying open as his breathing quickens. Then his breath slowly returns to a normal rhythm. His eyes close gently, and his chest rises and falls in a calm cadence as he murmurs words from the past:
“Sh... Shiro! Shiro, the basket is full, the basket is full!”

Chapter 2 – The Village of Koshikake

At the end of summer, on a beautiful sunny day, in a terraced rice field on the mountainside near the village of Koshikake in the province of Niigata, Japan, in the year 1170, a family and their two children, all wearing conical hats, are busy harvesting rice. Yukiko, the mother, her face flushed and dripping with sweat, slowly straightens up. Of average height and slender build, she wipes her forehead and, turning toward the bank, calls out:

“Shiro! Shiro, the basket is full, it’s waiting for you.”

Not far away, a ten-year-old boy named Shiro, tall and thin, stands with his feet sunk in mud up to his knees. Bent over, he sinks a little deeper with each step as he struggles to drag a basket filled with rice plants toward a cart parked on the bank. Nodding his head, he groans in a plaintive tone:

“Mother, not again! I can’t take it anymore, this work is really hard. I’m still just a kid.”

Miya, a twelve-year-old girl whose black hair is barely visible under her hat, climbs the bank with ease, revealing a moderately round face. Holding a basket overflowing with rice plants, she empties it smoothly into the cart, then turns to Shiro with a teasing smile and calls out:

“Need a hand, little brother?”

Shiro straightens up, exhausted. He stares at Miya, revealing his wide, intense light green eyes. His Caucasian face, tired yet harmonious, brightens as he removes his hat and lets his slightly wavy chestnut hair fall free. Out of breath, he wipes his forehead and says gratefully in a weary voice:

“Thank you, Miya. You’re saving me.”

“It’s not the first time,” she replies cheerfully.

Miya goes back down into the rice field and walks over to her brother, firmly taking hold of the basket to haul it up the bank and quickly empty it into the cart. Relieved of the effort, Shiro walks toward the cart and collapses onto the ground in one motion. His face red with fatigue, he looks at his older sister and says, panting but enthusiastic:

“Hey, will you come play with me tonight?”

Miya turns around, grimaces, and drops the empty basket to the ground with a weary gesture. Her face clouded with sadness, she looks at Shiro while removing her hat, revealing her short-cropped hair. Sighing, she answers:

“Unfortunately, that won’t be possible today, Shiro. Mother needs me, you can see there’s a lot to do for tonight.”

“Oh, come on, Miya, Okuni and Yagyu will be there and...” Shiro insists... “Maybe Anzu will be there too,” he adds, a little more brightly.

Miya, a faint smirk tugging at her lips, wipes her forehead with her left forearm before sitting gently down next to her brother.

“I don’t think Anzu’s father will let her come and play with you. You know that.”

Shiro frowns, looking at Miya with an innocent expression.
“So I can only see her at school! I still don’t understand why.”

Embarrassed, Miya avoids his gaze and bites her lip. Then she gently wraps her right arm around her little brother, pulling him close.
“Don’t worry, Shiro. That’s adults’ business. What matters is that Okuni and Yagyu will be there and will play with you.”

“I’ll never understand the grown-ups in the village and their strange reactions when they look at me. Like old Shinaka, the schoolmaster, always ready to scold me and spit all over me with his rotten teeth,” Shiro grumbles.

Miya turns her head away, hiding a discreet smile as Shiro continues to complain. Suddenly, in the distance, a flock of birds takes off above the mountains, accompanied by a growing, rhythmic splashing sound that stirs the vegetation into unusual activity. Alarmed and highly alert, Miya pulls away from Shiro and jumps to her feet. Scanning the horizon, she exclaims in confusion:
“What is that?”

Shiro, eyes wide, realizes something is wrong. He stands up abruptly and presses himself against his sister, his face filled with anxiety and fear.
“I’ve never heard such a racket coming from the mountains in my entire life,” he says in a worried voice.

Their father, Obata Takano, standing in the rice field, straightens abruptly, revealing a face worn by labor. With sun-darkened skin, short but solidly built, he turns toward the horizon, then strides quickly toward the bank, closely followed by Yukiko. Their faces betray their concern as they head toward Shiro and Miya. Reaching them first, Obata first scans the village, partially hidden by dry lands, then the distant stretches beyond.

“Obata, what’s happening?” Yukiko asks, urgency in her voice.

Obata, his face stoic, tears his gaze from the horizon to meet Yukiko’s, breathing calmly and in a controlled manner.
“No need to worry just yet. Let’s stay calm, Yukiko you too, children,” he says, sounding almost reassuring.

Taking a few more steps, Obata climbs fully onto the bank. From there, he looks again toward the horizon. His eyes narrow briefly, deepening the lines of his face, then suddenly relax with a smile.
“Yes, that’s it. I recognize their banners now. Those are the flags of the warriors of the Minamoto clan.”

Shiro, his legs caked in dried mud up to his knees, wears a perplexed expression. He presses himself against Obata, wrapping his arms around his father’s waist, and asks in an anxious voice:
“Father! Are those warriors going to hurt us?”

Sensitive to the fear clearly visible on his son's face, Obata gives him a reassuring smile as he leans down slightly to place a protective hand on his shoulder.

"Do not be afraid, my son. They are on our side and will not harm us, believe me."

"Then why are they coming here?" Shiro asks.

Obata furrows his brows and straightens slowly, his forced smile betraying a hint of anxiety. His gaze turns at once toward the village at the foot of the mountain.

"I don't know yet. Now go back to your mother and sister."

Obata stands tall again and, with confidence, turns toward his family, raising his voice:

"As chief of the village of Koshikake, it is my duty to welcome our guests with honor, whoever they may be. Leave the work for now and all of you go home. I will join you as soon as I can," he adds in a conciliatory tone.

Without letting the slightest doubt show on his face, Obata turns and strides resolutely toward the entrance to the village, leaving his family behind.

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In the family home, early in the evening, Yukiko and Miya, dressed in their finest clothes, finish carefully arranging the last dishes on the table. Nearby, a blazing fire lights the room, supplemented by several lanterns. Once her task is done, Yukiko leans against a sliding door that leads to the bedrooms, her gaze lost in emptiness. Then, suddenly coming back to herself, she turns toward Obata, who is wearing his official village chief attire.

"What if we hid it, just for a while?" Yukiko suggests anxiously.

"That would be too risky for him, and for all of us," Obata replies.

"We must not reveal it, or even hint that it exists, at least for the duration of their visit to the village, I beg you, Obata," Yukiko insists.

With an expression of humble sincerity, Obata gives Yukiko a light, reassuring smile. Then he turns toward Shiro, who is quietly playing while sitting in the kitchen, and announces in a calm voice:

"Shiro, tonight we will be receiving Lord Ueshiba, the ruler of our great province."

Shiro suddenly stops playing. His eyes grow wide as he stares at his father and asks in surprise:

"Lord Ueshiba? But... what is a lord, Father?"

"You're still too young to understand it all, but the lord is the highest ruler of our province, just like I guide our small village. Don't be afraid; once he has eaten and rested, he will leave at dawn with his warriors and go back to his palace," Obata explains in a steady tone.

"His warriors and his palace? What does all that mean?" Shiro exclaims.

"Well, his warriors are a bit like the good, hardworking people in our community, who labor for the life and survival of the village. And his palace, you can imagine it as a kind of large home, like ours," Obata adds, trying to reassure and convince Shiro gently.

“So we’re going to welcome him into our palace? We could ask Okuni and Yagyu to come, and maybe... Anzu too,” Shiro continues eagerly.

“That’s not exactly what I meant, but we’ll talk about it later, all right? For now, you must get ready to welcome our beloved lord with all the respect he deserves,” Obata replies.

He crouches down in front of Shiro and calmly places his right hand on his son’s shoulder, adding in a comforting tone:

“You will present yourself to Lord Takenori Ueshiba only when I tell you to, understood?”

Shiro nods while continuing to play, then looks up at his father:

“Why are you and Mother so worried?”

Obata lets out a slight sigh, keeping a gentle pressure on his son’s shoulder. He says:

“Forgive me, I’m simply not used to such visits. We are so insignificant compared to his Greatness.”

Shiro, understanding in his own way, gives a small shrug and quickly turns his attention back to his toys. With his nimble little fingers, he resumes playing energetically and says calmly:

“I’ll wait for your signal, don’t worry, Father.”

Chapter 3 – The Lord of Niigata

In the village of Koshikake, in the early evening, a warm and humid wind stirs the vegetation illuminated by the full moon in front of the house of the village chief. Lord Takenori Ueshiba, distinguished ruler of the Niigata prefecture, arrives dressed in his formal presentation attire. Of average height and well built, the lord, his features somewhat drawn, bears a face marked by wisdom. At his belt he wears a full set of swords long, medium, and short finely decorated and displaying vivid colors. Accompanied by two imposing samurai, ready to confront anyone who might dare approach the great ruler, he stops calmly before the entrance porch.

Lord Ueshiba, his graying hair pulled tightly into a topknot, bends down to remove his sandals and, with fluid precision, places his long sword before the doorway. Then he steps inside, while his two guards immediately take firm positions to stand watch.

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Inside, Obata, standing behind the door, welcomes the lord with his head lowered. He follows him at a respectful distance. Yukiko and Miya, standing with their heads bowed, flank the dining table. Lord Ueshiba, carrying himself with dignity, advances silently and confidently. Reaching the table, neatly set with carefully arranged dishes, he sits, leaving his short sword at his belt and removing his medium sword, which he sets gently to his right.

Obata, a few steps away, nods to his wife and daughter to indicate their roles, then approaches and sits respectfully across from the lord. Yukiko and Miya immediately move into action, serving the guest generously and then Obata, before slipping quickly behind a rice-paper partition.

Lord Ueshiba, upright and distinguished, studies the village chief intently and says in an authoritative tone:

“I realize that, due to your circumstances, you and your family are far removed from the expectations and customs of the city. I will therefore overlook the stricter formalities practiced at court. Nonetheless, this meal appears exquisite, and I look forward to enjoying it. But before that, I wish to know whether your entire family is present, Obata.”

Obata bows respectfully, though a flicker of fear crosses his face.

“Uh... yes, my lord.”

Lord Ueshiba takes a deep breath and slightly furrows his brows. Scanning the room from left to right, he presses Obata again, this time with a sharper tone:

“I have been told you have a ten-year-old son. Where is he?”

Obata, anxiety settling visibly on his face, glances briefly toward the lord, then discreetly toward Yukiko, still in the back kitchen wearing a somber expression. Bowing respectfully, he replies:

“Yes, my lord. I do indeed have a ten-year-old son, named Shiro.”

“Then why is he not here?” the lord insists.

Obata lifts his head, revealing a face marked by deep distress. Claspings his rough, work-worn hands together in a gesture of supplication, he pleads:

“My lord, when you see him, I beg you to be kind and indulgent toward his difference.”

Clearly taken aback, Lord Ueshiba fixes his gaze on Obata. Then, as the tension in his face relaxes, an ironic smile forms and he replies with a hint of mockery:

“Come now, Obata. Your son can hardly be more marked than the Tairas, our sworn enemies those I have personally cut down in many of my campaigns.”

Relaxing into his seat, the lord purses his lips slightly. He glances at the tableware, picks it up with elegance, then delicately takes some food, dips it in sauce, and eats with deliberate care. As he slowly swallows, he casts a penetrating glance at the village chief:

“Well then, bring in your son. Let me see... this difference.”

Obata’s anxious expression deepens. His hands tremble slightly. Turning toward the back kitchen, he raises his voice:

“Shiro, you may come in. And do not forget to bow respectfully before your lord.”

Shiro, intimidated but dressed in ceremonial attire, advances slowly toward the table and bows respectfully to the guest. Lord Ueshiba, still indifferent, keeps his attention on the various dishes arranged in small plates. When Shiro lifts his head, revealing his face, the lord takes another bite, dipping the food into sauce and swallowing greedily. Chewing slowly, he lifts his head calmly and observes Shiro standing before him.

Suddenly, he chokes. His face freezes in astonishment. At once, his right hand abandons his utensils and moves instinctively to the hilt of his medium sword, ready to draw it.

Terrified, Obata bows deeply, his hands joined in supplication:

“My lord, I beg you!”

Lord Ueshiba remains motionless. A long, heavy silence settles over the room. Then, slowly, his features relax, and his hand moves away from the sword. Without even glancing at his utensils, he picks them up again, takes more food, dips it, and brings it to his mouth. As he savors each bite, he continues to observe Shiro with a mixture of curiosity and intensity.

Chapter 4 – The Revelation

Later that night, in the outdoor tea pavilion illuminated by several lanterns and adjoining the house, Obata and Lord Ueshiba sit kneeling on a straw mat surrounded by small statuettes representing various gods. With deliberate movements, the village chief carefully takes a long-handled ladle and dips it generously into a small cauldron set over a lively fire. He then proceeds to fill two small cups with the hot liquid, moving with a methodical, almost ritual precision. Taking one of the cups, he lowers his head and offers it to the lord in a respectful tone:

“Your tea, my lord.”

The noble guest, seated in a straight, composed posture, delicately takes the cup and brings it gently to his lips, letting the rising aromas fill his senses. In a strangely thoughtful tone, he says:

“So this boy with the... irregular face is your providence. Quite an unusual story, the one you have just told me.”

“The benevolent gods, in my time of misfortune, heard me and granted my prayer. He is the son I so long awaited, and for that I am both grateful and indebted,” Obata replies.

“You will not be able to hide him from the world forever. Be certain of this: he will inevitably suffer the judgment of ignorance and conformity,” the lord concludes, his voice rising slightly.

His expression serene, Lord Ueshiba sips his tea slowly, then places his empty cup down with careful intention. Thoughtful, he lifts his head and gazes straight ahead, inhaling deeply before saying in a calm voice:

“There is the scent of jasmine here... and the delicate perfume of flowers. Peace truly reigns in abundance in your garden.”

Using the lantern light, he studies the various arrangements of flowers around him, where lush vegetation borders the pond dotted with large stones. Then he fixes his gaze forward once more, the lines of his face betraying deep concern, and declares solemnly:

“We suffered great losses during the Heiji Rebellion against our enemies, the Taira. Therefore, with the approval of our commander-in-chief, Minamoto no Yorimasa, I have ordered that throughout my entire province the most promising young commoners be trained in the art of combat. They will become samurai serving exclusively under my command.”

Obata, stunned, fixes the lord with an insistent look and answers in a tone of surprise:

“But my lord, it is the nobles who have always had the honor and duty of wearing the sword. They are the guardians of peace and harmony in your ancestral lands under your command.”

Lord Ueshiba, lost momentarily in thought, regains his composure. Straightening proudly, he gazes sharply ahead and says with conviction:

“Far too many nobles have fallen in these battles. We must accept that new confrontations

against the Taira will soon occur. I must prepare us and this time, we Minamoto will win this war.”

“May the gods hear you, my lord, and grant your words,” Obata replies respectfully.

“Your son, along with the other boys of the village, will be required to undergo samurai training under my weapons master, Seigo Harunobu. There will be no alternative,” the lord adds firmly.

Obata bows politely and lifts his head. His face, stunned, searches uncertainly while he brings his hands together in a gesture of objection, looking toward his guest with bewilderment.

“I thank you for this honor and your gracious intention, my lord. But my village is poor, it is very small, and there are very few children,” Obata answers respectfully.

Lord Ueshiba inhales deeply, his eyes showing irritation. Then he composes himself and turns sharply toward Obata, saying in an authoritative tone:

“I have also decided that my only son, the young lord Kikouchi who is the same age as Shiro will follow this training and shall be your ward for the entire duration of his education.”

Clenching his fists, his expression grave, the lord fixes Obata with a penetrating stare and raises his voice:

“I decree that you shall raise him as your own son. In due time, I will return for him. These measures are for his protection. There are too many traitors and too many enemies, inside and outside my palace, who would gladly kill him to deprive me of a worthy successor.”

Overwhelmed by the lord’s authority, Obata quickly bows low in submission and answers:

“Rest assured, my lord. The young lord Kikouchi will be kept hidden and raised as my own son.”

“You will present him to the villagers as your nephew. In three days, before sunset, he will arrive accompanied by Fujio Nishioka, his protector, one of my most loyal samurai. But heed my warning, Obata: if harm should befall my son, I will order the execution of your entire family, your entire village, and lastly, you yourself,” the lord adds coldly.

Obata’s face fills with fear and worry. He bows again, his hands stretched out before him, and replies with solemn gravity:

“Let the gods bear witness, my lord, and may your judgment fall upon me if I fail in my duty.”

The lord’s expression softens. He unclenches his fists, letting the tension slip away, then slowly straightens, turning his gaze toward the pond. In a composed tone, he says:

“Some months ago, I learned of the existence of your small village, discreet and well hidden. Its rugged terrain convinced me instantly. Koshikake will also, in time, welcome several samurai families and their children. They will join the training under Master Harunobu. But for now, prepare to receive my son Kikouchi in three days. Three days, Obata.”

Obata rises and, looking respectfully toward the lord, answers with a tone of humble devotion:

“Everything will be done to welcome him under the best conditions, my lord. You have my word.”

Chapter 5 – Kikouchi

Three days later, somewhere along a mountain path following a river on a beautiful sunny day, on the road leading to the village of Koshikake, a samurai named Fujio Nishioka, in his thirties, and a ten-year-old boy named Kikouchi Ueshiba ride side by side on their respective horses, both wearing conical straw hats. Fujio, his expression alert, scans the horizon, his two swords ready at his side, while Kikouchi, carrying himself with a certain elegance, wipes the sweat from his brow. His round, well-kept face reddened by the heat, he groans in a tired voice:

“Fujio, let’s stop here for a moment by the river. I’m thirsty and it’s terribly hot. And my backside is killing me.”

Briefly relaxing his vigilance, Fujio glances toward Kikouchi and answers in a measured tone: “Very well, young lord. But remain on your horse a little longer while I make sure there is no danger nearby.”

Without waiting, Kikouchi guides his horse toward the riverbank and brings it to a sudden stop. He dismounts awkwardly and trudges toward the quiet-running water. Behind him, Fujio continues inspecting the surroundings with meticulous care. Irritated by the young lord’s impatience, his seasoned warrior’s expression tightens, his smile betraying a hint of dissatisfaction. He calls out:

“I asked you to wait, young lord!”

Kikouchi, standing at the edge of the river, removes his hat with a weary gesture and tosses it onto the rocky ground. His mid-length black hair, pulled neatly back, ends in a perfectly executed chonmage knot. Grimacing, he turns toward Fujio and protests:

“Oh, you and your sense of duty. I’m thirsty!”

Without waiting for a reply, Kikouchi looks toward the river, crouches, and plunges his hands into the water, drinking greedily as it spills around his mouth. A little farther up the bank, his horse drinks as well. Fujio quickly reaches Kikouchi’s side and dismounts. He removes his hat, revealing a face dripping with sweat and black hair arranged in the immaculate style of a samurai. Fujio kneels next to the young lord, his swords at his waist ready to be drawn at a moment’s notice. He soaks a cloth generously in the river, sniffs it carefully, then wipes his cheeks, forehead, and neck in an orderly manner. With restraint, he splashes water over his face and drinks several small sips of the precious liquid.

Kikouchi suddenly begins to grimace, clutching his stomach. He presses his lips together, stands with a stiff back, and then collapses on the ground a few paces from his horse, muttering painfully:

“Oh... I think I drank too much, Fujio.”

Fujio smiles mischievously, letting the water drip from his hands. He turns toward the young lord, his brows rising expressively as he responds in an accusatory tone:

“Your impatience again, young lord! And what if the water had been poisoned?”

Kikouchi's eyes widen with alarm. He springs upright, sunlight piercing the blackness of his eyes.

"What!?" he exclaims.

Fujio quickly resumes his upright posture, retrieves his hat, and approaches the young lord with a reassuring tone:

"Calm yourself, young lord. If that were the case, you would already be dying. One day, you will be called to become the greatest representative of the prefecture and a powerful samurai as well. I hope that wisdom will find you by then."

Kikouchi freezes, his head sinking slightly between his shoulders as he watches his protector finish scolding him with tact. Then, before he can even raise his hand to his mouth, the young lord lets out a loud belch.

"Sorry, it slipped out... but you're right, as always, Fujio!"

Amused, Fujio glances at Kikouchi and offers him a respectful nod.

"How long until we arrive at... uncle Obata's?" the young lord asks.

Fujio places his hat back on his head and secures it, then walks toward his horse and answers confidently:

"We are at the foot of the second mountain. If all goes well, we should arrive by sunset."

Kikouchi sighs heavily, puts his hat back on, and walks toward his horse. As he prepares to mount, he turns to Fujio and says mockingly:

"Being a city boy... surely that won't be too difficult."

Fujio mounts his horse as well. Sitting tall and authoritative, he looks toward Kikouchi and says in a firm tone:

"I believe this unexpected event will be most beneficial for you, young lord. It will allow you to understand that every social class within your domain matters. One day, like your father, our great lord, you will have to fight for them, risking your life if necessary, for your wealth and greatness depend on it."

"All right, all right! I get the lesson, Fujio. And as always, you're right even if it's starting to get annoying," Kikouchi replies with a weary sigh.

Fujio and Kikouchi urge their horses forward, resuming their journey under the rhythmic sound of hooves as they head toward the village of Koshikake.

Chapter 6 – Introductions

In the evening, inside Obata's home, warmly lit by the kitchen fire and several lanterns, the family is finishing a hearty meal when suddenly, someone knocks at the door. Shiro stops chewing his last bites and, mouth full, turns his gaze toward the entrance. Spitting crumbs, he shouts:

"It's him, I'm sure of it! It's my cousin!"

"Calm down, Shiro, and swallow your food quickly, or you'll choke before even introducing yourself to him," Obata scolds.

Wearing his everyday clothes, Obata casts a discreet glance at Yukiko. Driven by his son's excitement and Miya's quieter anticipation he stands and walks briskly toward the front door. A flicker of apprehension appears on his face as he swallows dryly and straightens his clothing. Then, with a firm hand, he opens the door. A cool breeze brushes past him, refreshing and brightening his expression.

Fujio, still wearing his hat and emanating a military aura, stands discreetly in the shadows to the right of the entrance. His right hand rests alertly on the hilt of his long sword, ready for anything, as he calls out in an authoritative voice:

"Obata Takano!"

Obata's clothes flutter lightly in the breeze as he bows immediately. Straightening again, he nods respectfully and replies in a calm tone:

"Yes, I am the village chief."

Reassured, Fujio nods and withdraws the hand ready for war from the sword hilt. He steps aside promptly, revealing the young lord Kikouchi. The boy steps forward quietly, removing his straw hat with a casual gesture before greeting Obata. His face looks tired, with dark circles under his eyes, and he replies wearily:

"Good evening, Un... uncle."

Obata, concern flickering across his face, bows respectfully to Kikouchi and answers warmly: "My nephew! I have been expecting you. Welcome to my home."

Immediately, Obata ushers Kikouchi inside with welcoming gestures. A lightly gusting wind pushes them into the house, and Obata quickly closes the door behind them.

Yukiko, Miya, and Shiro step forward together. They stop and bow respectfully to the young lord. Kikouchi stands tall and returns the greeting to each member of the family until he stops in front of Shiro. The young lord studies Shiro's face intently, staring at him with growing puzzlement.

Shiro, delighted to meet his cousin, beams and addresses him impatiently:

"So we finally meet, cousin! They've told me so much about you!"

Kikouchi stiffens, failing to return the sentiment. His eyes linger on every detail of Shiro's face before he suddenly exclaims:
"Huh... but... this is strange!"

Seeing the discomfort rising in the young lord's expression, Obata steps in between the two children. He extends his arm and gently guides Kikouchi toward the table, speaking hurriedly:
"Come eat, my nephew. After such a tiring journey, you must be very hungry."

Pulled along despite himself, Kikouchi looks at Obata with his mouth half open and protests:
"But, uncle...!"

Obata, his face tight with worry, urges Kikouchi to sit at the table, where a carefully prepared plate awaits him. Disturbed by his encounter with Shiro, the young lord struggles to grasp his utensils or focus on the generous meal before him. The village chief sits beside him and says in a reassuring tone:

"Be at ease and eat your fill. You will have time to get used to Shiro. You'll see, he is very kind, helpful, and plays with everyone without distinction."

Miya watches as Shiro's expression grows vacant. She rushes to him and gently wraps an arm around his shoulders, speaking in a comforting voice:

"Don't worry, little brother. Give him a bit of time. The journey must have exhausted him."

"Anzu's father also grimaces at me like that every time he sees me... just like some people in the village. You think Kikouchi will do that too every time he looks at me?" Shiro asks innocently.

"No! Well... maybe a little at first, but it'll pass, you'll see. I'm sure of it," Miya adds with conviction.

"Shiro and Miya, go to bed now. Kikouchi would like to be alone for a while, and tomorrow will be a long day," Yukiko says gently.

Kikouchi, his facial features still tense, eats greedily before pausing to glance strangely at Shiro as the boy walks toward his room.

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Later that night, in Shiro's room where Kikouchi has been placed to sleep, the two boys lie facing each other, both sound asleep. Suddenly Shiro begins grimacing, letting out faint whimpers while twisting restlessly in his bed. Awakened by the noise, Kikouchi opens his eyes and quickly sits up, looking toward Shiro. He murmurs mockingly:

"This boy is truly, truly strange in every possible way! Well, this promises to be... interesting. I don't know if I'll survive all these years with such a bizarre creature."

Kikouchi grimaces, lies back down at once, and pulls the covers tightly over his ears. Meanwhile, across from him, Shiro writhes, his blankets slipping off. Suddenly, he begins to mumble incoherently through clenched teeth, speaking fragments of a dream that pulls him into a strange nightmare:

"Where am I? Father, Mother, help me! I'm here... inside some strange cavern. But...!"

Chapter 7 – Xedus

On the planet Xedus, on the island of Bôôt, inside a very deep cavern, Shiro stands, his face filled with worry and confusion. Dressed in a padded kimono, he searches desperately with his eyes. Walking barefoot with hesitant steps on a sandy ground that barely cushions the soles of his feet, he is drawn toward the sight of two humanoid figures. They are, in truth, two scientists at work, bearing rank insignia on their chests one displaying three stars.

Clad in full protective suits made from a thick, waterproof, high-temperature synthetic material, their faces remain hidden behind tinted visors. Standing not far from each other beside a mechanical transport vehicle short-framed and drop-shaped, resting on enormous deep-tread wheels they diligently perform their tasks.

Brazon, the three-star scientist, assisted by a tablet projected in hologram form over his left forearm, takes notes before a gently boiling, black-reddish expanse. In a laborious tone, he dictates:

“Study of soil samples in the northeast of the island of Bôôt, on the 22nd parallel of Xedus. We have progressed from ground level to reach the outer core of the planet’s heterogeneous layer, at precisely 10,310 meters in depth. Temperature: exactly 3,500 degrees. I, Brazon, three-star physicist, will now collect samples at various points of a molten, gelatinous material stagnant on the surface, while my colleague Sogurt, one-star level, will perform underground extractions at several depths exceeding 250 meters of very high density, to reach the liquid state zone where he will proceed with further sampling.”

Shiro, eyes and mouth wide open, rushes forward waving his hands toward Brazon and cries out:

“But...! Who are you? Where am I?”

Brazon steps forward, walking directly on the boiling surface as if nothing were amiss, continuing to take notes. Shiro stops before him, stunned by the scientist’s complete indifference. Desperate, the boy tries to grab Brazon’s arm but his hand passes straight through the suit. Speechless, Shiro staggers back, glancing down at his feet, horrified to see the molten gelatinous substance covering them entirely, without feeling a hint of pain. Panic rising, he turns toward Sogurt and screams:

“Father, help me! I’m surrounded by magic and sorcery!”

Sogurt continues working, struggling to operate a long, mechanically guided tube not yet connected. A powerful drilling beam at its tip activates, boring rapidly through the heterogeneous layer, when suddenly, under the scientist’s worried gaze, the tube jams and bends dangerously. Urgently, Sogurt attempts to shut down the perforation beam but it plunges deeper, spiraling out of control, before releasing a thick black-fire liquid, cold in consistency, which gushes violently upward. The extreme temperature difference causes the liquid to froth wildly, splattering and completely covering Brazon, who is still taking notes on his forearm display.

Shiro watches, aghast, as the scientist collapses heavily to the ground under the torrent. Brazon writhes violently, his visor melting as the foreign substance engulfs his face, though without revealing a single detail of it. Gradually, his movements slow. Before Shiro's stunned eyes, the fluid begins seeping slowly into every orifice of Brazon's head.

"But...! What is this...?" Shiro exclaims.

Sogurt finally manages to shut off the drilling beam, stopping the flow of black-fire liquid. Panting, he approaches Brazon. Behind the tinted visor, he observes his colleague's head still covered by the strange substance. Without uttering a word, panic taking over his movements, he sprints toward the transport vehicle, his feet sinking into the boiling ground at every step.

Shiro leans closer to Brazon's head. Before he can grasp what he's seeing, the foreign substance sinks entirely into the scientist's skin. Suddenly, Brazon's lips redden, and his eyes snap open to a terrifying extent the iris and pupil flooding with deep dark-blue blood, while the sclera fills with swollen, bright-red veins. Then his eyelids slam shut, making Shiro jump in fright.

At the vehicle, Sogurt opens the side door, releasing a hovering stretcher. He rushes back to Brazon. Mechanical arms emerge from the stretcher, lift the scientist, and place him upon it. One of the articulated hands with seven fingers immediately sets an oxygen mask onto Brazon's face, whose breathing becomes visible again. Desperate, Sogurt guides the stretcher back toward the transport vehicle. The side door closes swiftly behind him, and the machine begins its ascent toward the surface, its massive tires pressing into the ground.

"No! Don't leave me here!" Shiro cries.

His eyes wide and trembling with fear, Shiro turns around, alone. The boiling expanse, now overtaken by the spreading black-fire liquid, advances steadily toward him.

"I... I must get out of here!"

Paralyzed, he watches helplessly as the liquid reaches his feet, then quickly swallows his entire body up to his head, leaving only his eyes to express his terror. His mouth fills with the substance, and he screams his despair, choking out fragments of words before slowly rising from his nightmare:

"Father! Mother! Help me! Save me!"

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Shiro jolts awake, his forehead dripping with sweat and his breath frantic.

"I... I can't breathe!" he gasps.

Panting into the darkness of the room, his face drawn, he searches with his eyes and glances toward Kikouchi, still sleeping soundly. Slowly, he swallows, forcing his breathing back to normal. Then he lies down again, his body still trembling and drenched in sweat.

Chapter 8 – Shiro's Daily Life

The next day, under a beautiful summer sky, Shiro and Kikouchi walk at a casual pace, keeping a noticeable distance between them. They follow the path toward the center of the village. Shiro, looking uncertain, glances toward Kikouchi.

“Cousin, why don't you come closer? It would be easier for me to introduce you to my lifelong friends Okuni and his little brother Yagyu, the blacksmith's sons.”

“Fine! But keep your distance from me,” Kikouchi replies in an annoyed tone.

“As you wish, cousin,” Shiro says, shrugging lightly.

Smiling, Shiro suddenly raises his finger and exclaims:

“Look over there. That's Okuni and Yagyu Takeda's house and forge! We're the same age, except Yagyu he's two years younger.”

Kikouchi grimaces, stops walking, and looks sharply at Shiro with furrowed brows.

“From now on, I don't want you to call me cousin anymore. Call me Sei Kikouchi. I said Kikouchi.”

“But I thought...” Shiro begins, troubled.

“Leave the thinking to the monks,” Kikouchi snaps.

Shiro's smile fades. He steps forward hesitantly, his hands slightly raised in uncertainty.

“You... you don't seem to like me very much,” he says sadly.

Uncomfortable, Kikouchi tilts his head from side to side and scratches his hair vigorously.

“Give me a bit more time, all right?” he replies in a more conciliatory tone.

“I understand. And, according to my parents, not long ago you... you lost your entire family in a tragic way. So I'll wait. I'll be patient, Kikouchi,” Shiro says gently. “It must be very hard to live without them.”

Kikouchi, struck by melancholy, turns away from Shiro and looks toward the horizon. Tall, lush trees stand like a protective wall around the small village.

“I... I'm like a bird in a silk cage,” he says in a pained, plaintive voice.

Shiro nods slowly, moved. Then he takes a deep breath, turns his head toward the village center, and suddenly exclaims with joy:

“Kikouchi, look there’s Anzu!”

Kikouchi quickly regains his composure and turns in the same direction. A frail girl appears Anzu Tado, eight years old, with long, light chestnut hair. She stops, holding a basket of laundry, and smiles brightly at the two boys.

“When I could barely walk, she comforted me whenever the village kids took my toys! She’s been my best friend since forever,” Shiro says cheerfully.

Anzu nods vigorously toward Shiro, still smiling. Then her father appears behind her a small, thin man with an unpleasant expression. He ushers Anzu inside and casts a heavy, uncomfortable look toward Shiro.

“He’s always grimacing at me... but why?” Shiro asks sadly.

“Have you ever looked at your reflection in water?” Kikouchi replies.

“What? Of course! Every time I go to the little pond in my father’s tea pavilion,” Shiro answers, staring at Kikouchi in confusion.

“And what do you see?” Kikouchi presses.

Shiro’s eyes widen. He looks down at his hands and body.

“Well... I guess I must see something special.”

Chapter 9 – Master Harunobu

Kikouchi nods up and down, studying Shiro intently, when suddenly, before he can say another word, the sound of hooves rings out. The boys turn, surprised, and look toward the village entrance. Three mounted samurai approach.

Obata, the village chief, arrives at a run, breathless and wearing his work clothes. He positions himself in front of Shiro and Kikouchi, bows respectfully, and motions for them to do the same with firm gestures.

At the center of the three halted riders sits a far more distinguished samurai: Seigo Harunobu. Around fifty years old, his face bears deep lines; his tall, solid frame gives him a commanding presence. His graying hair is tied in a topknot, and he wears a richly colored military robe with a long and a medium sword at his waist.

Master Harunobu fixes Obata with a stern, unwavering gaze and barely returns his bow before speaking in a gravelly tone:

“Are you Obata Takano, the chief of this village?”

“Yes, and I welcome you,” Obata replies respectfully.

“I am Seigo Harunobu, weapons master of the great and powerful Lord Takenori Ueshiba. I assume you have received my instructions and that I may begin making use of them immediately,” he says, authoritative as ever.

Obata lifts his head and stands upright to face Harunobu.

“Yes, Master Harunobu, and the village has also been informed of your requirements. I have been expecting you eagerly.”

“Is the school prepared according to the recommended specifications?” Harunobu asks firmly.

“Everything has been arranged according to the orders of our great lord,” Obata replies.

Harunobu’s expression loosens; a hint of relief softens his features. He now looks sharply at the two boys.

“Good. Tomorrow, all the boys concerned must report to the school. And you two stand straight and face me so I can look at you.”

Shiro, intimidated, and Kikouchi, more composed, both straighten up before Master Harunobu.

Harunobu looks first at Kikouchi. Then, maintaining his authoritative posture, he turns toward Shiro and holds his gaze for a long moment, letting the sound of birds rise among the gentle

rustling of leaves. Curious and intrigued, he nudges his horse forward until he stands almost directly before the boy, his other riders lingering behind.

“You must be Shiro Takano, son of Obata Takano.”

Shiro, stunned, freezes in place and nods timidly.

Harunobu suddenly lets a slight smile form on his lips.

“Indeed. Indeed.”

Chapter 10 – The Weight of Duty

Inside Obata's home, at the end of the evening, the warmth of the family fire and the glow of several lanterns fill the room. Obata, his features tense, eats nervously. Seated around the table with his family, he looks toward Yukiko, who turns to Shiro with a gentle expression and says calmly:

"I know this won't be easy, but be grateful for the immense privilege of receiving this training. If the gods allow it, you may become a samurai in the service of our great lord."

Shiro lifts his head, swallowing hard. His eyes glisten with tears as he looks toward his mother. In a pained voice, he replies:

"I... I dreamed of becoming a great farmer like Father. There is so much work to be done here. And does the lord really need me?"

Obata suddenly stops chewing. He straightens sharply, his face hardening as he looks at his son.

"Shiro! You will do as the lord commands, for the honor of your family. There is no question of refusing."

"But Okuni! Why... why wasn't he chosen?" Shiro cries out in distress.

"Because of the privileged duty he must fulfill as the eldest in his family he is to become a blacksmith like his father. And his little brother Yagyu, as well as your cousin Kikouchi here, must also follow the training without exception, just like you," Obata replies firmly.

Miya, saddened, glances discreetly at Shiro. He stares wide-eyed, his anger mixing with deep sorrow. Suddenly he drops his chopsticks, stretches out his work-worn hands toward his father, and pleads:

"Isn't being a farmer considered an honor in the eyes of our great lord?"

Embarrassed, Obata searches briefly for words, then exhales heavily and sets down his utensils. Clasp ing his hands together, he looks at his son and speaks calmly but firmly:

"Do not try to understand for now, my son. Matters have become so complicated lately. You must place your trust in the wishes of your lord. Look at your cousin Kikouchi he has suffered the tragic loss of his parents, yet even he does not question the orders of our lord."

Yukiko, filled with tenderness, glances at Shiro with a look meant to reassure him, while Kikouchi keeps his head lowered, eating quietly. She gently adds:

"We are the first to feel sorrow over this, Shiro. But know this: it is the lord's will, and no one in this world can oppose it without facing death."

Shiro, his face red with anger and weighed down by obligation, grabs a piece of food and stuffs it violently into his mouth. His chopsticks tremble as he mutters resentfully:

“The lord is really not kind! And I forbid him from hurting you.”

Chapter 11 – The Training School

At dawn, beneath a cool wind, in front of Obata's house surrounded by lush vegetation, the rising sun illuminates Shiro and Kikouchi. One with loose chestnut hair, the other with black hair tied in a topknot, both wearing padded tunics, they respectfully bow to the village chief. The children begin walking toward the village center when, after only a few steps, Shiro turns back with a sorrowful expression. He stares at his father standing on the porch. Forced to look away, Shiro turns again and continues walking beside his cousin, heading toward the training school, while the steady breeze whispers through the trees.

At the end of summer, taking the path toward the center of the village where the warrior school awaits them, Shiro and Kikouchi walk along the marked trail accompanied by the soft chirping of birds. The wind gently lifts their hair Shiro's loose and Kikouchi's tightly bound when suddenly, through the rustling of leaves, a voice calls from afar. It is Okuni Takeda, the blacksmith's eldest son.

"Shiro! Shiro, we're here!"

Shiro lifts his head sharply, still shaken by the forced separation from his family. When he sees Okuni, relief floods his face in the form of a wide smile. He calls out:

"Okuni! My friend! I'm so happy you're here!"

Shiro quickens his pace toward Okuni, whose disheveled black hair and sturdy frame contrast with his younger brother Yagyu, who has long dark-chestnut hair and a frail build. Yagyu, serious and restless, stamps with impatience and waves his hands excitedly toward Shiro.

"I... I can't believe it! We've been chosen for warrior training, and we'll soon become samurai. It'll be an honor to fight for our almighty lord!"

Shiro reaches the two brothers and greets them warmly. He meets Yagyu's gaze, pulls a slight face, and tells him:

"Calm down, Yagyu. Calm down."

Beaming, Yagyu's cheeks flush with excitement as he notices Kikouchi approaching.

"It's great to finally meet you, Kikouchi. You really weren't lucky, getting sick just a few days after arriving in the village," he says with heartfelt concern.

Kikouchi, surprised by the boy's kindness, bows respectfully to him and then to Okuni, who both return the gesture.

"I'm glad to finally meet you as well. Shiro spoke of you often while I was recovering," Kikouchi answers warmly.

“You too, Kikouchi, coming from the big city you’ll follow the training and become a warrior to fight for your lord!” Yagyu adds, bursting with energy.

Kikouchi raises an eyebrow, slightly amused, and replies in a steady tone:

“Tell me about it, Yagyu. Shiro’s right you should calm down a little. You’re always so excited by unexpected events!”

Okuni steps forward with his hands respectfully joined. He smiles, glances from his little brother to Kikouchi, and says:

“From the moment Yagyu was born, he has always been nervous and impulsive. I apologize on his behalf, dear Kikouchi. But like all of us in the village, you’ll get used to his fiery nature. Imagine when my mother serves him a dish he hates, or when my father orders him to do a chore he doesn’t like!”

Okuni bursts out laughing, prompting Kikouchi and Shiro to join him, while Yagyu looks on, offended. Okuni eventually calms down, his smile fading, and he looks at Shiro, his lifelong friend, with sadness.

“It seems the days of wandering and playing in the woods together are over.”

Shiro’s expression darkens, sadness washing over his features. But he pulls himself together, places a gentle, brotherly hand on Okuni’s shoulder, and says:

“Don’t worry, my friend. I promise I’ll visit you as often as I can and I’ll keep my promise.”

“Everything is changing so fast around us lately, Shiro, and we must accept it,” Okuni replies. “And my destiny is changing too. As you’ve known since our first steps together, I want to take over my father’s forge and become a respected blacksmith like him. But what matters most right now is that you promise to look after my little brother.”

Yagyu’s eyes widen, his face turning red with anger. He thrusts himself between Shiro and Okuni, glaring at his brother, and shouts with pride:

“I... I’m not afraid of anything or anyone! And now I’ll learn to fight like a warrior so you stop protecting me every time something happens!”

Shiro gently grips both of Yagyu’s shoulders with calm reassurance.

“Relax, Yagyu. Your big brother worries about you, that’s all. It’s normal he’s your brother.”

“Well, now I...” Yagyu stammers, unable to finish his sentence.

Chapter 12 – The Nobles

Shiro and Okuni immediately cut Yagyu off, calming him and patting him lightly on the back, while Kikouchi watches with a puzzled expression. Just then, mocking laughter from children echoes along the path.

Startled, the four of them fall silent and turn their gaze toward the entrance of the training school. They see six well-groomed children of about ten years old, wearing neat, light-colored tunics, standing in a tight circle. With their faces still hidden from view, they continue laughing loudly in a dismissive way. Okuni lifts his head and studies the newcomers with curious intensity.

“Who are they?”

“They’re certainly the descendants of great and noble samurai, of powerful blood,” Kikouchi says proudly and confidently.

Shiro, taken aback, stares at his cousin, his wavy hair shifting in the wind.

“But... how can you say that? Do you know them?”

Caught off guard, Kikouchi looks around, then clears his throat, eyes wide, forcing a small, awkward smile.

“Uh... I meant... yes, well, I remember now. When Master Seigo Harunobu came, he said samurai families would also move into the village, and... I think these must be the chosen children of those warriors.”

Okuni looks blankly at Kikouchi, then at his friend and his little brother, slowly nodding his head.

“Well then, I wish you all a good day and good luck with your new companions. I have to go; my father is waiting for me at the forge so I can begin my apprenticeship, and there’s no way I can arrive late on the first day. I’d be punished for sure.”

He bows quickly to the trio, then turns and runs down the path toward the forge. Shiro, Kikouchi, and Yagyu barely have time to return the gesture before their attention goes back to the six newcomers.

The nobles suddenly stop laughing. They deliberately break their circle and finally come fully into view. The first boy, tall and well built, is named Jomei. His black hair is pulled tightly back into a perfectly shaped medium-length topknot. He stands proudly, wearing a sly expression.

Right behind him are a pair of twins, Chikara and Chiyako both tall and slender, their faces oddly distant. Their medium-length red hair partly covers their eyes, ending in small topknots.

Jomei, clearly the leader, steps forward with a firm, confident posture.

“I am Jomei Yomekura, from a powerful samurai family. And you must be the low-blooded peasants we were told about.”

“And commoners are not worthy of becoming samurai!” the twins add together, laughing again.

Yagyu, his face flushed with anger, breaks away from his two companions and strides toward the twins.

“Say that again!” he shouts.

Shiro and Kikouchi leap forward and manage to grab him just in time, keeping him at a safe distance from Jomei.

“Calm down, Yagyu,” Shiro says.

“You heard what they just said!” Yagyu shoots back.

“Ignore their insults,” Kikouchi adds.

“I present to you Chikara and Chiyako Otani, the twins. They come from a fearsome lineage of samurai,” Jomei declares proudly.

Shiro, Kikouchi, and Yagyu watch as Jomei, still smirking, gestures toward the three remaining boys, who now step forward as well.

The first, named Udo, has black hair pulled back into a short topknot. His face is round and plump; he is heavily built and of average height. The second, named Eisen, has short black hair tied into a small knot, a hard, mean face, and a sturdy frame. The third, Kayoua, with medium-length light chestnut hair worn loose, is smaller and has a reserved expression.

“I also present, all from great samurai lines: Udo Matsushige, Eisen Tsuboi, and Kayoua Kodama!” Jomei shouts proudly.

A faint breeze lifts Jomei’s topknot as he turns his head and looks at the trio with absolute confidence. He walks toward them with measured steps, the birds chirping and the trees murmuring in the wind. Once facing them, without the slightest bow, he studies each of them in turn until his eyes suddenly lock onto Shiro.

His face twists with disgust.

“That... that face!”

“What about his face?” Yagyu snaps.

“Calm down, Yagyu. I’m starting to get used to it now,” Shiro says quietly.

“How... how is that possible?” Jomei murmurs, scrutinizing every line of Obata’s son’s face.

“If you make fun of Shiro again, you’d better watch yourself,” Yagyu warns.

Jomei whips his head around and glares at Yagyu aggressively. The tension thickens as Udo steps closer. With a faint smile, he first bows to Kikouchi, then to Yagyu only to suddenly fall silent when his gaze lands on Shiro’s face.

“Jomei is right, dear Yagyu. And sadly, you don’t stand a chance against him. As a certain philosopher once said: ‘A mountain that shakes is a mountain that crumbles,’” Udo says in a stunned voice.

“No, Udo! You’re not going to start again with your stupid quotes from some unknown philosopher that no one’s ever heard of,” Jomei snaps.

Still shaken by what he’s seen, Udo backs away a few steps and stops beside Eisen and Kayoua, who have remained at a safe distance. They too stare at Shiro with a strange, uneasy fascination.

“I welcome you all and ask that you now join me inside the training school,” Master Seigo Harunobu suddenly calls in a strong, commanding voice.

Standing firmly on the school’s entrance porch, the master, dressed in a solemn, simple tunic, turns and disappears inside, leaving the sliding door wide open behind him.

Jomei looks toward the entrance, then once more fixes his strange stare on Shiro’s face.

“You, the one with the funny face here’s a word of advice: walk in front of me. And know this: ever since the gods allowed me to walk this earth, I’ve been learning to fight like the men of my clan,” Jomei says in a threatening tone.

Chikara and Chiyako, still affected by what they’ve just seen, begin moving toward the school entrance with Udo, Eisen, and Kayoua at their side. The twins call out to the trio:

“You’ll pay dearly if you dare stand against our rank!”

Shiro, walking beside Yagyu whose face is still red with anger also heads toward the school, leaving Kikouchi face-to-face with Jomei. Jomei steps closer to the young lord, looking him up and down.

“You seem different from the two peasant lowbloods. Are you from the city? If so, you’re in luck. If you submit to my will, I might allow you to join my group.”

Kikouchi remains calm and unmoved by Jomei’s remark and his offer. He straightens, fists clenched, and looks him directly in the eyes.

“Jomei, yes, I come from the city. And I have no wish to get along with you or with anyone else, for that matter. And do not even try to call me lowblood. If you do...”

“We’re only waiting on the two of you!” the master suddenly shouts. “Hurry up I’d like to begin my lesson.”

Jomei lets out a sarcastic chuckle, giving Kikouchi one last up-and-down look. Then he turns and strides proudly toward the school entrance.

“You’ve had your chance, dear Kikouchi from the city,” he calls over his shoulder.

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Inside the training school, stark in its severe simplicity, a heavy silence hangs in the air. The students, including the trio still kept slightly apart, sit cross-legged on straw mats laid over finely crafted, well-oiled wooden flooring. They face Master Harunobu and his assistant, a young samurai named Shinsuke, whose head is completely shaved. Broad-shouldered and imposing, Shinsuke wears a long, plain tunic.

Proudly seated, the master turns his head to the right.

“This is Shinsuke Nishioka, my assistant,” he announces respectfully. “He will support me throughout your training.”

Harunobu then looks over all the students and continues in a firm tone:

“With his valuable help, we will teach you the way of the warrior, based on a code of honor resting upon seven essential virtues: honesty, courage, kindness, respect, sincerity, honor, and loyalty. Your journey will be shaped by training in many forms of combat both armed and unarmed. Your inner strength of character will be forged through discipline and spirituality so that, if the gods so will it, you may someday become samurai.”

The master closes his eyes and takes a deep, almost blissful breath. He remains silent for a moment, letting a new and unfamiliar atmosphere fill the room. It seems to bounce off every inner wall and settle, almost magnetically, upon the pale faces of the young students, freezing time for an instant.

But one student, Jomei, quickly breaks free from that stillness. He raises his arm high and thrusts his index finger upward. Startled by the urgency in his gesture, the master opens his eyes and frowns slightly. Emerging from his brief reverie, he addresses Jomei calmly:

“What troubles you so deeply, Jomei?”

Sensing an opportunity, Jomei lowers his arm and, with open disgust, looks toward the trio fixing especially on Shiro. He declares loudly, in a contemptuous tone:

“The two farmers and the one from the city should introduce themselves to our caste. They were born from inferior classes. These commoners are going to benefit from our art just to become low-grade samurai if they ever do.”

“I understand what bothers you, Jomei,” Master Harunobu replies. “But know this: if your lord orders you to sit in class among commoners, then you will obey his will. Otherwise, you dishonor his greatness, and your family will bear the shame forever. The warrior’s path requires you to practice respect especially toward your new companions.”

The master takes a deep breath, then turns his gaze to Shiro and nods calmly. Surprised and honored to be given the responsibility of presenting his cousin and his friend's younger brother, Shiro rises to his feet, a wide smile on his face. He turns respectfully toward Kikouchi and Yagyu, seated at his right, and begins, his voice trembling slightly:

"I... I present to you Yagyu Takeda, younger brother of my friend Okuni, who will one day be the village's great blacksmith. Yagyu is a bit hot-tempered and nervous, but I'm sure he'll become a fine warrior. And next to him is my dear cousin Kikouchi Takano, who came from the big city and whom I am still getting to know today. He came to live with my family because, sadly"

"Their names and yours were enough, bastard!" Jomei suddenly shouts.

"Jomei!" the master barks sharply, cutting him off.

Chikara, with a sly look, stares at Shiro and adds:

"Master, he really has a strange face, don't you think?"

"He just makes me want to beat him up," Chiyako chimes in, cracking his knuckles with a cruel grin.

"He was probably sired by a demon, because he doesn't look like us! Soon he'll grow horns on his head," Jomei sneers, laughing with the twins, while all three wear thin smiles filled with malice.

Shiro remains motionless, like a statue carved in granite. His expression is stunned and devastated. He looks, hurt, at Jomei, the twins, Udo, Eisen, and Kayoua, all laughing with mouths wide open. Then he turns, one hand outstretched in despair toward Kikouchi and Yagyu.

They, stunned by how quickly things have escalated, remain motionless, unable to utter a single word petrified by the crude insults thrown by Jomei and his followers, and silently echoed by the rest of the class.

Shiro's shoulders sag. His arms fall limp at his sides. Crushed under the weight of grief and humiliation, he turns his tear-filled eyes toward Master Harunobu, searching desperately for an answer an explanation for such hatred.

Then, suddenly disconnecting from the moment, he spins around and bolts for the exit, his bare feet slapping against the wooden floor. He wipes his tears with the back of his hand as he runs out of the school.

The master snaps out of his shock and reacts swiftly. He rises to his feet and strides toward Jomei and the twins, cutting short their cruel amusement. In a firm, threatening tone, he says:

"If you or the twins let your tongues slip even one more time against one of your comrades, I swear I'll make you swallow them."

Chapter 13 – Lineage Tensions

In Obata's house, in the tea pavilion adorned on all sides with time-worn stone statuettes representing various gods of nature, Shiro lies deep in thought. His face is sad, his wavy hair gently swept by the wind. He is stretched out along the edge of the pond, one hand plunged into the water, caressing jet-black carp that circle calmly and fearlessly around his fingers.

"Beautiful place... and fascinating fish," Master Harunobu says warmly.

Startled, Shiro jumps. He sits up and stares at the master in disbelief.

"Wh-what are you doing here?" he stammers under his breath.

Harunobu, calm, lowers himself smoothly to sit beside Shiro. He rolls up the sleeve of his right arm, leans over, and plunges his hand generously into the water, gently stroking one of the carp.

"First of all," he says in a conciliatory tone, "from now on I want you to call me Master Harunobu or simply 'master.' It's a question of respect for who I am and the place I hold."

Uncomfortable, Shiro grimaces and quickly brings both hands his right still wet to his head, letting the water soak his hair and drip down his face, which is still flushed with emotion.

"I... I'm sorry. Apart from old Shinaka, our teacher, no one here was ever called 'master.'"

Harunobu smiles, his expression soft but intent. He calmly withdraws his hand from the water and lets it drip dry in the breeze. Then he turns to Shiro and replies in a patient tone:

"Then you will have to change your habits and your priorities, Shiro Takano. You'll get used to it very quickly, believe me."

Shiro opens his eyes wide as his hands slide slowly down his face. He starts to feel his features anxiously.

"Master... am I really so different from the others?" he asks innocently.

"Obviously," the master answers, without a hint of ambiguity.

Harunobu carefully pulls his sleeve back down and leans closer, bringing his face near that of his young student.

"Know this, young Shiro: we are all different from one another. In temperament, appearance, emotion, the way our hair grows... and so on."

He pauses, taking a deep breath, then continues:

“But we all shine toward a single purpose.”

Bewildered, Shiro’s shoulders sag. He raises his hands slightly in a helpless gesture.

“And what purpose is that, master?” he asks.

“To exist,” Harunobu replies calmly.

Shiro’s stunned expression deepens as he falls silent, thinking. Then suddenly his eyes widen, and he thrusts his work-worn hands out toward Master Harunobu.

“I... I wanted to exist,” he cries in a loud, almost reproachful voice, “but one day, everything changed like night swallowing the day!”

Harunobu’s face reflects an understanding that feels entirely natural. He straightens slightly and gently bites his lower lip. Then he takes Shiro’s hands forged by labor into his own large hands shaped by war. He holds them delicately.

“Shiro, the events surrounding you have changed radically,” he says with great care, “and with them, your destiny. It has been pushed onto an unexpected path. But know this: your honor will only grow greater as you serve your lord.”

Shiro squints up into the sun, letting its light pierce his pale grey-green eyes. He grimaces slightly, then lifts his shoulders with weary resignation.

“I... I don’t even know if this destiny is really mine,” he answers dully. “Jomei is right. I’m nothing but a farmer with a strange face.”

Harunobu lets out a small sympathetic sigh. He now places both hands warmly on Shiro’s thin shoulders.

“Then give your life meaning,” the master says firmly, “by awakening the warrior that sleeps within you. Every person, without exception, carries that potential.”

Shiro, almost unconsciously, wraps his hands around his own throat. He sticks his tongue out to the side and pulls a face, then quickly pulls it back in and looks at the master with surprise.

“Me? A warrior?” he says naively.

“You are still very young, and many aspects of your life are beyond your understanding for now,” Harunobu explains. “But if you learn to know yourself, while following the warrior’s path that I will teach you, then this constant uncertainty that eats at you will fade away.”

“I will listen to your teaching, Master Harunobu,” Shiro replies, “and I will do my best to become, if the gods so will, a samurai in my lord’s service, and to honor my parents, whom I love more than anything.”

Using his hands pressed against his knees for support, Harunobu rises to his feet. His hazel, almond-shaped eyes rest on Shiro with wisdom and pride.

“The code will be very difficult to learn,” he says. “So be courageous and stubborn. Now, I must go back to the school; the students are surely growing impatient.”

“Master, could you ask Jomei, the twins, and the others to be kinder to me from now on?” Shiro asks, scratching his nose with a kind of hopeful awkwardness.

Harunobu furrows his brow and fixes Shiro with a steady look. Then he suddenly laughs dry and ironic.

“Certainly not.”

His expression grows serious again.

“And don’t hold too much against them,” he adds. “For them, this is difficult as well. Don’t forget they are nobles, from samurai families going back generations.”

Harunobu casts one last satisfied look around the pavilion, then strides briskly toward the school.

Alone again, Shiro lets the wind play with his hair as birds sing around him. He gazes at the surface of the pond, grimaces, and lets out a long sigh.

“Well... at least I tried.”

Chapter 14 – The First Trials

Inside the training school, on a morning brightened by the sun's early rays, all the students sit cross-legged facing the master and his assistant, Shinsuke. The latter speaks with plain simplicity:

“I would like everyone to take the written text placed before you and read it together. We will recite this testimony to begin learning what the warrior's path truly resembles. Every morning, before any lesson begins, it shall precede all that you do.”

Shiro, Yagyu, Kikouchi, and the rest of the class, all attentive, take the text in hand and, together with the master and Shinsuke, raise their voices. Their chant echoes throughout the school:

“Glory to the lord, for I make heaven and earth his servants.
Illuminating my lord, I turn lightning and storm into his might.
Protecting my lord, I forge my benevolence, my life, and my loyalty into his armor.
Sheltering my lord, I make my wisdom his steadfast roof.
Arming my lord, I make my silent and devastating spirit his blade.”

Days pass quickly, carrying them inexorably into autumn, its withering colors spreading across the village. Inside the training school, time seems neither rushed nor lenient. Shiro, deep in his exercises, shouts out his determination.

They strike hard with their fists, padded with straw-filled cloth, against watermelons that barely feel a thing. With mischievous delight, the master then arranges his students and has them handle a brush with barely visible dexterity, their writing twisting pitifully on the page. Soon after, the time for hand-to-hand combat arrives, teaching them each day, alone against themselves, various techniques both on the ground and at a distance.

By late autumn, Shiro his medium-length hair tied into a small topknot stands ready for combat. Facing him is his cousin Kikouchi, as they attempt to apply their meager skills. Their fists are wrapped in straw-stuffed cloth for protection. Under the attentive gaze of the master, his assistant, and the other students, the two boys begin with a cautious approach. Then suddenly, Kikouchi, hiding an undeniable past experience, takes control of the duel in an instant and delivers a swift, direct kick to Shiro's face. Shiro freezes, then collapses heavily onto the ground, while Jomei, the twins, and their group watch with thinly veiled amusement.

In the following days, Shiro determined and courageous faces Eisen on the ground, only to be quickly and brutally dismissed by a chokehold, abruptly halted by the master's stern command. Jomei, the twins, Eisen, Kayoua, and Udo revel loudly in the miserable spectacle Shiro offers them, while Kikouchi and Yagyu look on, the latter barely restraining himself from charging in to settle the matter.

Chapter 15 – Anzu, the Scent of Fate

Under a generous, star-filled sky, on the balcony of Anzu Tado's house hidden from hostile eyes and from the murderous wind stripping away the last stubborn leaves Shiro sits on the wooden floor beside her. He wears a thick tunic, his face marked with bruises, his topknot loosely tied. Anzu, wrapped in a heavy blanket pulled up to her ears, sits close to him. Together, in silent admiration, they watch the trees sway under the cold breeze, the quiet of nature absolute.

Slowly, they turn away from the scene and look into each other's eyes. Anzu, her face delicate and her smile soft, whispers gently:

"The night is our only ally now, Shiro. It's the only thing that lets us keep seeing each other in secret. But we must be careful if my father finds out, he'll be furious like never before."

"And who knows what he'd do to me," Shiro mutters, barely louder than her.

Anzu leans closer, slips her small hands out of her blanket, and warms them against Shiro's.

"Now that you've begun this training, I suppose you must already miss old Master Shinaka," she says with playful amusement.

Shiro bursts into a light groan of protest, followed by a half-forced grimace.

"Especially when he sprayed me with spit every time he scolded me with those rotten teeth of his," he retorts indignantly.

He straightens his chest a little and declares with dramatic conviction:

"But don't worry, Anzu. Someday I'll become a respected samurai in this whole village, and old Shinaka will have no choice but to stay far away from me."

Anzu laughs softly, then fixes her gaze on him.

"So, how are your cousin Kikouchi and Yagyu doing?"

"Kikouchi is incredible. Every lesson we have, he learns faster than anyone. It's strange everything seems easy for him, as if the gods themselves decided he should become a powerful samurai. Even Jomei and the twins, who are without doubt the strongest in the class, bow to him."

Shiro takes a long breath.

"As for Yagyu, he's still as restless as a storm. Every time he faces someone, he improves, even with all that nervous energy. He almost never repeats the same mistakes. I'm sure his big brother Okuni wouldn't even recognize him now."

Anzu listens carefully, her hair gently lifted by the wind. She tightens her hands around Shiro's.

"Looking at you... you really don't seem well."

Shiro forces a faint smile, his shoulders sinking.

"You're right, Anzu. My classmates are making my life miserable lately. They enjoy hitting me, and I have a hard time giving anything back."

With a small hint of irony, he adds:

"I'm just a farmer, after all. I never asked to become a fighter."

Anzu's compassionate expression softens further. She opens her hands to examine Shiro's palms. The calluses of farm work are slowly fading.

"No matter what you say, Shiro, your hands are changing day after day. They'll soon be the hands of a warrior the hands of a samurai."

With gentle sincerity, she adds:

"May the gods walk with you through your training, and may they give you the strength and determination you need."

Under the starry vault, as the cold breeze brushes gently around them, Shiro and Anzu share a long, quiet moment. Their hands remain intertwined, and slowly they lean closer, letting their foreheads rest softly against each other.

Chapter 16 – First Doubts

Three years later, in the heart of winter, at morning training inside the school, Shiro and Jomei now bigger, stronger children stand facing each other in thick combat garments. Their breaths escape in pale clouds behind the small bamboo cages protecting their heads. Both wear torso guards made of interwoven bamboo slats. Wooden swords rest firmly in their hands.

Suddenly, Jomei attacks without giving Shiro the slightest chance to take control. His wooden blade crashes forward. Shiro barely manages to parry, their swords clacking and shuddering through a rapid exchange.

Then, a sudden, brutal strike from Jomei slams into Shiro's head cage. The impact is so violent that the bamboo mask explodes into splinters. Shiro collapses to the floor, stunned.

Harunobu, seated calmly nearby, watches with a steady, unreadable gaze. Shinsuke, alarmed by the abrupt end of the duel, rushes toward Shiro, helping him up and removing the shattered cage.

Jomei, the undeniable victor, lifts off his own headpiece and smirks triumphantly. He rests his sword on his right shoulder, standing tall, solid, and full of pride. His voice, dripping with contempt, cuts through the cold air.

"You will never rise above your station, monster. Pathetic. You hold and swing your sword like a farmer beating rice with a flail."

He raises his chin arrogantly.

"Now you understand the difference between us."

Jomei rejoins Chikara and Chiyako, who are electric with excitement after witnessing the fight. With a cruel glint in his eyes, Jomei glances toward Yagyu.

"Your future won't be any brighter than his," he says smugly.

Offended, Yagyu jumps to his feet and points at Chiyako with quivering anger.

"I'll make you eat dirt soon enough, Chiyako!"

Triggered by the outburst, Jomei storms toward Yagyu. In one swift motion, he presses the tip of his wooden sword under Yagyu's throat while the twins restrain him from behind.

"Kikouchi's voice rings out, sharp and commanding:

"Jomei! Chiyako! Chikara! Release him!"

Jomei halts mid-gesture and turns to Kikouchi. With a small, taunting smirk, he lowers his sword.

“Why bother protecting this arrogant brat?”

Still pinned, Yagyu wriggles under the twins’ grip.

“Me? Arrogant!?”

Kikouchi rises gracefully. He locks his gaze on Jomei and walks steadily toward him. Jomei steps back from Yagyu, hardening his features, and stands face-to-face with Kikouchi.

“I uphold the interest and honor of my life, as every samurai must!” Jomei declares.

Kikouchi comes even closer and answers with quiet firmness:

“But you are not a samurai yet.”

Jomei clenches his jaw, gripping his wooden sword until his knuckles pale.

“That’s enough, Jomei!” Harunobu’s voice booms across the room.

Color floods Jomei’s face. He bows respectfully to the master, then returns to his place with the twins at his sides.

Shiro, still disoriented and slightly bruised, receives treatment from Shinsuke. With a trembling whisper, he confides:

“I... I’ll never be good enough. I can’t keep up. Everything is too fast... and he hits so hard.”

Shinsuke nods, acknowledging the truth of it.

“Jomei is a formidable opponent. But you must give time the chance to shape you, Shiro. As I taught you create within yourself a calm, steady atmosphere, one filled with peace.”

Shiro nods slowly, closes his eyes, and begins to guide his breathing back under control little by little.

Chapter 17 – Nightmares

In Shiro's room, deep in the night, he sleeps quietly. Then suddenly, he curls in on himself, his face twisting in pain. He mumbles in a trembling voice, dragged once again into a strange nightmare. He cries out:

“Where... where am I? No! No! What... what is this strange world!?”

*

On the planet Xedus, in the megacity of Bôôt on the 22nd parallels, Shiro with his wavy hair loose is lit by two closely aligned suns shining intensely in a cloudless blue sky. His face is tense, troubled. Clothed in a kimono, he walks barefoot along a road barely wider than a cart. Its surface is rough, springy, flat, and gray.

He stops, frowns, and bends down to feel it with his fingers. Then he stands again and takes a deep breath.

Recovering his awareness, he turns on himself, observing the landscape around him with growing astonishment. Under carefully arranged, multicolored vegetation, countless gray pathways wind between towering trees whose enormous leaves shift from green to blackish tones.

Off in the distance, near the megacity of Bôôt, silent skimmers sleek, streamlined craft glowing with blue lines float in the air. Some carry several passengers and travel swiftly above the trees and white pyramid-shaped buildings of all sizes. Moving in straight lines, they descend to their destinations with silent precision.

Suddenly, high above, a gust of wind blows through a flock of large, brightly colored birds. They screech loudly and vanish above thickening clouds.

Shiro's eyes widen in awe as he turns toward a massive structure on his left. A tall, wide, pyramidal building rises, white with deep red grooves, pierced by hundreds of identical glass openings.

“What kind of world is this!?”

Mouth agape, he stares. Then he spots Brazon, the three-star scientist, standing at the entrance sweating, panting, breathing heavily.

“I... I know you!” Shiro exclaims.

“You're the one who was covered by that strange black liquid in the cavern... in my last nightmare!”

He hurries toward Brazon.

“I see your face is still covered with those swollen veins, and your eyes are still filled with that dark-blue blood. And... all your hair is gone.”

Standing before him now, Shiro adds, perplexed:

“Mister... you don’t look well at all. Can you hear me?”

He reaches for Brazon’s arm, but to his shock, his hand passes straight through.

“The gods witness once again this wicked, twisted magic,” Shiro mutters darkly.

Brazon, now much stronger, effortlessly lifts a heavy ignition device with one arm. With his right, he conjures and manipulates a holographic tablet. His lips stretch into a sinister smile as he declares:

“When this detonates, the underground will release black fumes acrid, yet divine for this essence of life will transform our world and turn us into Metamorphs, servants of our creator, Tenebro! He is the beginning of all life, and he returns to reclaim his rights, to remake creation in his image. Tenebro will give life to his future children, who will populate Xedus.”

Finishing the device’s programming, Brazon raises his voice:

“On this glorious day, the god of Xedus will die, and in his place, the god Tenebro will be reborn!”

Shiro, confused and horrified, approaches carefully, studying the scientist’s face as it grows more grotesque by the second.

“How strange... I understand this terrible language of his, and its meaning is terrifying! And why is this ugliness spreading across his face!?”

Suddenly, a violent underground explosion erupts nearby. Startled, Shiro looks toward the blast. The ground trembles beneath his feet. He stumbles and falls hard onto the gray surface.

He struggles back to his feet, just as a thick black smoke bursts upward from the earth.

From the building’s entrance, hundreds of people in simple two-piece garments flee under deafening sirens. Their faces show confusion and fear. They rush toward the explosion site, unaware of the doom awaiting them. Brazon watches them with ecstatic delight.

Shiro runs toward the smoke, but freezes in place as a horrifying sight unfolds.

The inhabitants of Xedus are forcibly engulfed by the smoke. They collapse violently, twitching and thrashing as they inhale it against their will.

“Look! They are becoming what Tenebro desires. They are now Metamorphs devoted to his will and his greatness,” Brazon proclaims.

Through the ever-thickening smoke, the transformed Metamorphs men and women emerge and follow Brazon toward the blast site. The black cloud ascends, rolling quickly toward

Bôôt. Soon, Shiro sees thousands more Metamorphs pouring from the megacity, running toward the crater.

“I must understand why this place is so important to them!” he cries.

At the explosion site, a vast crater spews black smoke wildly. Thousands of Metamorphs begin to surround it. Then, instinctively, the weakest among them lean over the edge, forming a ring around the hole. They lie down, stacking themselves, screaming in pain as they force their bodies together, building a towering, grotesque chimney of flesh through which the smoke rises even more densely.

Three high-ranking Metamorphs appear one from the legal system, one from the military, one from law enforcement. They climb the living tower. Reaching the top, they deliberately drop inside, disappearing forever.

Shiro stares, shaken by the anguish-filled moans echoing from the tower.

Then, at the top of the horrific structure, a colossal figure rises. Tenebro. His body is massive, muscular, crowned by three fused faces the lawman, the soldier, the policeman. He wears boots fashioned from human bones as he descends the tower, crushing the Metamorphs beneath him without hesitation.

Brazon approaches reverently. When Tenebro reaches the ground, the scientist kneels in submission, staring at him as if entranced.

Tenebro raises his three faces toward the thousands who surround him. He steps forward with thunderous force, then stops. Bending down, he picks up a twisted wire of thorned metal. He shapes it with deliberate care into a crown and places it onto his skull. Blood trickles down his fused faces.

Then he lifts his arms wide, spinning slowly, and shouts with a chilling, tyrannical voice:

“One way or another, you will all die for me. Be grateful to the last, for you will make way for my descendants!”

His eyes fix on Shiro. Slowly, he lowers his arms and strides toward him with heavy, murderous steps.

Shiro trembles uncontrollably. Words fail him. He gasps and tears free from the nightmare.

*

Shiro twists violently in his bed, groaning in terror.

“No! Tenebro! Stop! You’re going to crush me! My stomach!”

He jolts awake, clutching his lower belly, gasping for air, sweat running down his forehead.

Kikouchi, disturbed by his cries, sits up abruptly, hair disheveled, rubbing his eyes.

“What’s happening? And why do you cry out like that in your sleep?”

Shiro sits with difficulty, his face pale and shaken.

“It’s that nightmare again...”

Kikouchi yawns widely, then studies him, puzzled.

“What are you talking about?”

“It’s the second time I’ve been dragged into that strange dream. I’m on a world called Xedus. People wear the strangest clothes. Horrible things happen. There are even two suns! And now the whole place is ruled by a terrifying, three-faced being called Tenebro.”

“Tenebro? Xedus? Two suns? And three faces!?” Kikouchi exclaims. “And it’s not the first time? You really should tell the master. He might help you understand.”

“I’ll look weak again if I do. I won’t say a word. And you, Kikouchi promise me you won’t tell anyone. Maybe I won’t have this nightmare again.”

“I’ll stay quiet as a carp, don’t worry,” Kikouchi replies. “And you’re not weak just a bit too kind, patient, grateful... and a little strange, too.” He smiles faintly. “Now sleep. Tomorrow will be a hard day.”

Shiro wipes the sweat from his brow, regains a steady breath, lies down, and pulls the covers tightly over himself.

With a tired whisper, he mutters:

“A little strange...”

Chapter 18 – The Bond with Kikouchi

Much later in the night, Kikouchi suddenly opens his eyes. He rubs his nose and looks over at Shiro's empty bed.

"Hey... Shiro? Are you there?"

Kikouchi gets up and walks quietly to the foot of Shiro's bed. He pulls the blanket up in one swift motion.

"But... where is he?" he mutters, stunned.

He scans the room in the dim light, until his gaze stops on the slightly open balcony door.

"All right then," he says under his breath.

He hurriedly gets dressed, instinctively slipping his wooden sword into his belt. Then he walks to the door, steps outside without making a sound, and whispers:

"What are you hiding from me, Shiro Takano?"

*

At Anzu's house, on the balcony, late in the cold night, snowflakes fall without pause. Shiro and Anzu sit face-to-face, wrapped together in a thick blanket. Now older, with her long hair falling loose, Anzu looks at Shiro with concern.

"You look really tired. I'm surprised to see you so late," she says gently.

Shiro raises his head, letting a faint smile cross his face.

"I'm sorry for coming this late, but I needed to see you. The night has been... difficult and full of turmoil."

"Did something happen with Kikouchi?" Anzu asks.

"No. Kikouchi has nothing to do with it. I just had a nightmare, and it shook me so badly I couldn't sleep anymore," Shiro replies.

"You were afraid of your nightmare? Tell me about it," Anzu says, surprised.

Snow settles softly on Shiro's long wavy hair. He gathers himself and lifts his chin with a hint of pride.

"Know this, Anzu: a future samurai does not know weakness or fear least of all fear of a dream. It would be a disgrace for him."

Anzu's long hair dances in the wind as she smiles. Her face, pale from the cold, grows tender as she nestles closer to Shiro, keeping a small distance between them.

"Hearing you say that is really surprising," she says, amused.

"Don't laugh, Anzu. I'm serious. I dream of being recognized by everyone. For that, I have to become a samurai, so that I'll be respected," Shiro answers proudly.

Anzu, shivering again, presses herself fully against him and buries part of her face under the blanket.

"Be patient, Shiro. Time is passing. It's already been three years that you've trained every day with the others. You're getting closer to your goal the path the gods have traced for you."

Shiro's gaze drifts, troubled, into the night. He holds Anzu more tightly in his arms.

"Maybe the gods have traced another road for us. One different from the life we're being forced to live," he says quietly.

Holding her even closer, he adds in a soft, confused tone:

"What's happening to us, Anzu?"

Embarrassed, Anzu looks away and gently pulls out of his arms. She suddenly stands up and yanks the blanket to wrap it around her shoulders.

"Come on, future samurai, pull yourself together," she exclaims. "It's time for you to go home, and I'm going back to bed before I get sick."

She pauses for a moment, breathing hard, warm mist escaping from her lips into the icy air. Then she looks at Shiro first with a stern expression, which quickly softens. In her eyes, a growing and accepted love betrays itself. She lowers her head toward his and kisses him gently on the forehead. Then she turns on her heel and hurries back inside, leaving Shiro alone under the falling snow.

Shiro, dazed, begins to shiver. But a quiet happiness spreads across his face. In a flash, he stands and slips away silently from the balcony, his wooden sword at his belt.

*

On the side path near Anzu's house, a few moments later, Kikouchi crouches behind a thick tree, blowing warm air into his hands. He watches Shiro walk quickly toward home along the main path, heavily covered in snow. Kikouchi smiles, his lips turning blue from the cold.

"So that's what it was..."

"Spying on your comrade?" a voice says quietly.

Startled, Kikouchi turns and finds himself facing Fujio, wrapped in a thick tunic.

“Always where no one expects you, dear Fujio,” he says.

“I’m only doing my duty, exactly as your father, the lord, ordered me,” Fujio replies.

“Speaking of that, have you received any letters? I would like some news from my family,” Kikouchi adds.

Fujio kneels, making the snow crunch under his weight. He then shakes his head slowly from side to side with a regretful look.

“No. But the next dispatch should arrive in three days. All we can do is hope,” he answers sadly.

Kikouchi grimaces with understanding.

“I forgot how hard it is to reach this little village, buried in the middle of the mountains,” he says.

Fujio smiles broadly and bows respectfully.

“Is wisdom and understanding a hidden virtue of the young lord?” he says.

Kikouchi frowns, purses his lips, then turns his gaze back to the main path.

“Disappear. I’m going back to bed before I run into my... lovestruck cousin,” Kikouchi mutters.

*

On the main path leading home, through drifting snow, Shiro walks slowly, face glowing with happiness. Suddenly, his progress is blocked as Jomei, Chikara, and Chiyako surround him with hostile, threatening gestures.

“What... what do you want?” Shiro asks.

“What are you doing out here at this hour, monster?” Jomei replies disdainfully.

“How about we avoid trouble tonight?” Shiro answers.

Jomei, irritated, steps right up to him, face-to-face. He shoves Shiro hard while hooking his leg, sending him crashing into the snow. Jomei immediately pulls out his wooden sword and adopts a battle stance.

“Once I’ve finally put you in your place, you’ll lower your head every time you see me,” he snarls.

Chikara and Chiyako, their faces filled with arrogance, draw their wooden swords as well.

“That goes for us too,” Chikara adds menacingly.

Shiro, eyes wide, gets back to his feet, raising his hands in a calming gesture.

“I don’t want to fight you, Jomei, or you two either, but”

Jomei suddenly spins his sword in the air and declares harshly:

“Now you’re going to bow your back and submit. Understood, monster?”

He lunges and strikes Shiro hard several times in the torso. Shiro stumbles backward, shielding his face. Then Jomei unleashes a kick that cracks against Shiro’s head. Shiro crashes to the ground, dazed and disoriented.

Through his blurred vision, he sees Jomei standing over him, sword raised high.

“And to make sure you don’t forget what I just said, I’ll leave you a little souvenir,” Jomei says.

The wooden blade whistles as it falls only to be suddenly blocked by another sword with a sharp crack. Jomei freezes, then looks up and finds Kikouchi in front of him, pushing his weapon back with a firm, decisive movement.

Shiro, still dizzy, stares gratefully at his cousin.

“Ki... Kikouchi...”

Kikouchi steps forward and plants himself between Shiro and Jomei, sword in hand.

“Go home, Jomei. You and your lackeys. Tomorrow is going to be a hard day,” he says.

Jomei grips his sword with both hands, eyes full of resentment.

“This is getting really annoying your interfering all the time,” he growls.

“Stop it right there,” Kikouchi replies.

Red with anger, Jomei suddenly attacks, striking hard at Kikouchi’s blade. Kikouchi, perfectly calm, parries with a flawless movement. The swords clash with a sharp snap. He then launches several quick strikes, which Jomei manages to block. Jomei counters in turn, the fight quickly growing tense and intense.

Shiro manages to stand up and throws himself between them.

“Please, don’t fight because of me. And with all this noise, the villagers will wake up,” he pleads.

Jomei is quickly flanked again by Chikara and Chiyako, weapons in hand. He raises his arm in a signal, sheathing his sword. The twins follow his example, though their faces betray bitter frustration.

“He’s right, the monster. But soon the day will come when no one will be able to save him,” Jomei says.

He turns and walks away with the twins, crushing the snow under their feet as they go, laughing to themselves.

Kikouchi, his face hardened by deep displeasure, slides his sword back into his belt and heads toward home with quick, decisive steps.

“Hurry up. We need to get back,” he calls over his shoulder.

Shiro starts walking, then running through the snow to catch up.

“Wait... Kikouchi!” he pants.

Kikouchi stops and turns toward him, studying him with a severe gaze.

“Stop being so forgiving and lenient every time they insult you,” he snaps. “And now you know yes, you’re different from us. So be stronger. Otherwise...”

“Yes, I’m different. I’ve carried that burden since I was very small. But that doesn’t make me some talented fighter. The gods don’t seem to care about me. Who am I, Kikouchi, to deserve this?” Shiro says, his voice full of pain.

“You are the son of Obata Takano. Be proud of that. Only the gods know why you’re different. Right now, I’m freezing. Let’s go home and continue this discussion under warm blankets,” Kikouchi answers, more gently.

*

A little later, in Shiro and Kikouchi’s room, both are tucked under their blankets, sitting facing each other in their beds.

“The master teaches us the art of combat,” Kikouchi says. “From now on, I don’t want to see you just stand there and let them treat you like this. And without even drawing your sword, on top of that.”

“You must be worthy and proud of your place, even if you’re different. You have to fight at all times, because in the future you’ll be called to conquer or die.”

Shiro hangs his head, burying it into his blanket.

“I can’t do it. I just can’t, Kikouchi,” he says, exhausted and sad.

“Then follow the way of the warrior. But if you just want to cling to your miserable little life, better not get involved at all,” Kikouchi replies sharply.

Shiro lifts his head, eyes full of distress. He clasps his hands together, pleading:

“Help me, Kikouchi. Please, I’m begging you. So that I can honor my parents and serve our great lord properly.”

Kikouchi remains still, face expressionless.

“No,” he says.

Shiro stares, speechless, his hands falling limp.

“No?” he repeats weakly.

Kikouchi’s features stay hard for a moment then soften. He adds, more calmly:

“It’s the master who will teach you combat and the virtues of the code of honor.”

He nods, fixing his gaze on Shiro.

“As for me, I’ll help you learn how to call upon your energy the one every true warrior must possess within. Once you master it, it will allow you to change.”

Shiro’s face brightens. He looks at Kikouchi with hopeful intensity.

“May the gods bless you, my dear cousin,” he says.

Kikouchi frowns and points a finger at him.

“Don’t get too excited, Takano. Now sleep. Tomorrow will be a hard day.”

Shiro smiles faintly and lies down, pulling his blankets up around him.

“I’ll let you rest... but know that I’m happy about this unexpected closeness and especially about your help, which I never dared hope for,” he says softly.

“Your wish has been granted, Shiro. You can thank the gods, but don’t think things will be easy. Now, good night,” Kikouchi replies, his voice drained with fatigue.

Chapter 19 – First Signs of Destiny

Under the blazing late-morning sun, the forest throbbed with abundant life. Leaves whispered in the gentle breeze, carrying with it scents of resin and damp earth. Between slender trunks, shafts of light fell like golden rain, drawing shifting patterns across the ground.

Shiro, Kikouchi, and Yagyu, still adolescents but already marked by the harshness of their training, advanced at a brisk pace. Their sandals slapped against the soft ground, occasionally sinking into the fresh mud left by recent rains. Their cheeks, flushed from the effort and the sweat beading on their foreheads, betrayed the endurance they imposed on themselves every day. Each wore at his belt a wooden practice sword, polished by use a symbol of their training and a reflection of their determination.

Their shoulders trembled under the strain, but none of them even thought of slowing. Their master's words rang inside them like an inner bell: "The way of the blade does not tolerate softness. It is in trial that the steel of the soul is forged."

They crossed the natural obstacles that lined their path: treacherous roots, fallen trunks, steep slopes. Without a word, each encouraged the others to push on, driven by the urgency of a meeting fixed by their master.

Soon, they emerged onto the bank of a clear little stream whose discreet murmur joined the distant song of birds. The cooler, wetter air brought a welcome respite. The shimmering water wound lazily between moss-covered stones, inviting them to stop. Exhausted and panting, the three youths halted there, chests heaving.

Two years had passed since their first initiatory trials. Their gaze was no longer that of children. In their eyes already shone the fire of warriors in the making, eager to prove their worth, yet still fragile before the vastness of the path unfolding ahead of them.

"For a short run," Yagyu rasped, his voice hoarse and broken by short breaths. His features, still marked by adolescence, lit up with feverish enthusiasm. "This is what you call a short run, I'm telling you!"

Shiro Takano, his face tensed by fatigue but already bearing a certain gravity, bowed slightly, resting his hands on his knees. His ragged breathing gradually slowed, and he shook his head firmly.

"We must reach the meeting point as quickly as possible. The master expects us before sunset. If we fail to keep our word, he will show us no mercy."

Kikouchi, calmer, his features softened by a smile that soothed as much as it inspired confidence, raised a hand in a pacifying gesture. His smooth voice contrasted with the urgency driving his companions.

“Let’s give ourselves a moment, Shiro. The cool water of this stream, a few wild fruits to quiet our hunger... Once we’re refreshed, we’ll be faster and more focused.”

Yagyu, whose step had grown unsteady, suddenly grimaced and clutched his lower belly. His eyes narrowed with a kind of comical distress that contrasted starkly with the seriousness of his friends.

“Wise words, Kikouchi... but right now, only one urgent matter torments me.”

He arched his back with an exaggerated groan.

“I need to relieve myself, and quickly, or I’ll die here before I even face the master’s wrath!”

A brief, involuntary laugh escaped Kikouchi’s lips, while Shiro rolled his eyes, caught between patience and exasperation. In spite of their mission’s gravity, that fleeting lightness reminded them that beneath the wooden swords and the solemn oaths, they were still just boys learning to become men.

Yagyu cast hurried looks left and right, like a child caught in the act, his eyes wide as if he feared a demon might leap out from behind every tree. Then, without another word, he bounded toward a dense thicket, sending a shower of leaves into the air. The branches shook noisily, then closed behind him, hiding his silhouette.

“Yagyu! Don’t go too far!” Shiro called in a firm voice, the tone betraying the authority he was trying to assume.

A muffled laugh rose from the foliage, followed by a theatrical sigh.

“You sound just like my mother!” came Yagyu’s distant, mocking voice. “At this rate you’ll be telling me to be home before dark and wear a thick coat!”

Shiro and Kikouchi exchanged a discreet smile, part conspiratorial, part resigned. Despite themselves, Yagyu’s antics had a way of cracking the tension of the moment. They crouched by the stream, letting their fingers brush the surface of the water with care. One after the other, they sniffed it to make sure it was pure, then splashed their faces. The fresh water cooled their flushed features, lightening the weight of their effort for a brief instant. At last they drank slowly, savoring the gentleness of each swallow while keeping a watchful eye on their surroundings.

Shiro straightened up, visibly reinvigorated. He walked toward a patch of bushes, picked a few wild fruits and placed them carefully into a small cloth, then turned to Kikouchi, his eyes gleaming with a spark of pride.

“We’ve made good progress,” he declared with conviction. “I believe we’ll reach the meeting point before nightfall, without difficulty.”

Kikouchi nodded briefly while splashing his face again. But then his features hardened. His brows drew together, and his hand slid instinctively to the hilt of his wooden sword, ready to draw.

A rustling in the undergrowth immediately caught their attention. Three figures emerged from between the young trees: Jomei, Chikara, and Chiyako. Out of breath, their flushed faces betrayed the intensity of their march. Without a word, they bent over the stream. Their movements, quick and almost animal, evoked thirsty wolves sniffing the water before plunging in to drink. They gulped down mouthful after mouthful, as if each sip brought them closer to some long-awaited revenge.

Jomei was the first to straighten. Water was still dripping from his chin when he turned toward Shiro, fixing him with a burning look of resentment. His lips curled into a hard, almost predatory smile.

“Well, now, what a coincidence... what a coincidence,” he said in a firm voice that pulsed with barely contained challenge.

At his unspoken signal, Chikara and Chiyako stood up as well. Their sharp gazes combed the surroundings as though searching for prey.

“But where’s the little arrogant one?” Chiyako sneered.

Shiro allowed himself a restrained smile. With a strangely calm air, he slowly lifted his index finger and pointed toward the bush where Yagyu had disappeared.

“He went to relieve himself,” he answered evenly.

As soon as the words were spoken, the bush shook and Yagyu’s voice burst forth, full of feigned outrage.

“Little arrogant one? At last, some clear-sighted disciples!” he shouted. “I was afraid your minds were as dry as your throats...”

A hand shot out of the foliage holding a branch like a sword, a ridiculous gesture that drew an involuntary smile from both Shiro and Kikouchi.

Kikouchi, however, stayed tense, his eyes locked on the newcomers. His lips thinned, his jaw tightened, and his fingers clenched harder around the hilt of his wooden sword.

“Did you get lost?” he asked in a hard, wary voice.

But Jomei was already stepping forward, his face carved with anger nursed over too many years. With a low hiss of wood, he drew his training sword and raised it in a brutal gesture.

“On guard, monster,” he growled. “Today I’ll give you the beating you deserve.”

His arm came down in a sharp stroke, aimed at Shiro’s face. But Shiro, quick as lightning, pulled his sword free and parried at the last second. The crisp crack of the two wooden blades rang out like a peal of thunder, freezing the moment.

Shiro’s eyes widened. He felt rage surge in his chest.

“When will you finally accept my difference!?” he cried, his voice vibrating like a blade on the verge of breaking.

Jomei let out a cruel laugh. Without answering, he redoubled his attacks. Their swords clashed with a savage clamor, each impact echoing through the forest. Blows followed one after another, brutal, fierce, each of them fighting to impose his strength. The onlookers stood rooted to the spot, chilled, caught between fascination and fear.

Then, suddenly, the bushes burst open. Yagyu came tearing out, running as though a thousand vengeful spirits were on his heels. His white face, bulging eyes, and flailing arms gave him the look of a runaway madman.

“Run! Quickly!” he screamed, his voice strangled.

Shiro and Jomei stopped their duel, stunned, their swords frozen mid-air. But Yagyu did not slow.

“I’m not joking this time! It’s not my stomach tormenting me... it’s a much bigger belly, covered in fur and teeth!”

A low growl rose in the distance, faint at first, then closer and closer. The ground trembled. Then, all at once, a bestial roar shook the air.

Kikouchi spun around, breath short, brows furrowed. Branches snapped in a crash, revealing a massive bulk of muscle and fur. A gigantic bear appeared, jaws gaping, lips peeled back from gleaming fangs. Its glowing eyes burned with primal fury. Each of its steps sounded like a hammer blow on the earth.

Kikouchi’s blood ran cold. Without waiting, he sprang back and bolted after Yagyu, his heart pounding. Yagyu, already perched halfway up a tree, was yelling:

“Climb! Up! Pretend you’re a squirrel, it always works with hungry beasts!”

But Shiro did not yield. His eyes burned with unwavering resolve. In a sharp movement, he grabbed Jomei by the collar and hurled him backward, sending him crashing into Chiyako and Chikara, forcing them all three to retreat. Then he turned, alone, to face the beast.

He waved his arms and shouted to draw the bear’s fury toward himself.

“Follow the stream to the little wooden bridge!” he shouted to his rivals. “Stay by the pines, that’s the right way!”

His eyes locked on the looming shadow of the bear. A fierce cry tore from his throat as he broke into a run, not to attack, but to pull the monster’s rage after him.

At long strides, he sprinted toward a tree with thick branches, the same one where Kikouchi and Yagyu had taken refuge. The group’s jester, shaken but still loud-mouthed, was already urging him on with wild gestures.

“Faster, Shiro! Climb like it’s your mother-in-law chasing you!”

With a nimble leap, Shiro gripped the rough bark and scrambled up from branch to branch, agile and swift, until he reached his companions high in the protective canopy. His muscles burned from the effort, but survival instinct guided every move.

The enraged bear reached the foot of the tree and suddenly reared up on its hind legs. Its gaping jaws, bristling with shining fangs, opened in a roar that made the air vibrate and echoed deep in their guts. The beast battered the trunk with its sharp claws, stripping bark away in a spray of splinters, as if nothing could keep it from dragging them down.

In the narrow gap between branches, Shiro stopped for a moment to catch his breath, his face flushed, panting. Fingers clenched tightly to the bark, he stole a glance downward.

“That... that was close,” he murmured, throat tight.

Drawing in a deep breath, he climbed a little higher, until he could pull himself up onto a strong branch where Kikouchi and Yagyu were already perched, their fingers white from gripping the wood so hard.

Kikouchi, still shaken, turned to Yagyu with a look of disbelief.

“But... what happened?” he asked, his voice trembling with emotion.

Yagyu, red-faced and gasping, gave a helpless little shrug.

“Nothing! I was just... well... relieving myself, when suddenly I heard a growl...”

Shiro froze. His eyes flew wide open, as if a ridiculous idea had just struck him.

“Wait... you peed on the bear!”

Yagyu’s eyes bulged, his mouth hanging open. He shook his burning cheeks frantically.

“Uh... no! I mean... I don’t think so... or maybe... But it shouldn’t have been walking there anyway!” he stammered, unable to defend himself properly.

A suspended silence followed, shattered an instant later by a burst of nervous laughter. Shiro and Kikouchi, in spite of the fear still lodged in their chests, let out muffled chuckles. Their shoulders shook, teetering between panic and hysterics. Even the bear, still roaring below, could not suffocate that brief moment of madness.

Regaining some composure, Shiro rummaged inside his jacket. Slowly, he pulled out the small knotted cloth and unfolded it, revealing the wild fruits he had picked earlier. The simple, brotherly gesture brought an unexpected warmth to the moment of danger. He held the offering out to his companions.

Kikouchi grabbed one of the fruits, bit into it heartily and, mouth still half full, declared cautiously:

“Once this bear is gone, we climb down and continue our forced march.”

Yagyu raised an eyebrow, swallowed his fruit with a sulky look, and grumbled:

“Not sure we’ll arrive first... unless the master gives extra points for surviving a raging bear.”

Shiro, now serious again, looked at his two companions with gravity.

“What matters most right now is that we arrive together and unharmed.”

Chapter 20 – Disillusion

Sunlight filtered through the high openings of the training hall, casting beams that sliced the space into golden bands. Dust floated in the air, dancing to the rhythm of feet striking the wooden floor. The atmosphere was thick with expectation and tension.

Seated in silence, Master Harunobu observed. His motionless silhouette commanded respect, but it was his gaze sharp, attentive, unwavering that ruled the hall like an invisible blade. His eyes suddenly settled on Shiro.

“Shiro,” he said in a calm voice that nonetheless carried implacable authority, “today you will show your valor in combat. You will face several opponents.”

A shiver pulsed through the assembly. The very breath of the room seemed to stop. In one corner, Jomei and the twins exchanged a complicit glance. Their lips twisted into smothered snickers, echoes of a muted mockery that fooled no one.

A circle was marked out to delimit the combat area. Inside it, standing, the opponents sized one another up eyes fixed, muscles taut.

Kayoua was the first to advance. His wooden sword cut through the air, his movements broad and almost theatrical, yet frighteningly precise. Each gesture radiated the pride of a student sure of himself. Shiro, fully focused, parried with agility, his arms vibrating under the strength of the blows. But the assault grew fiercer, faster. At last, Kayoua’s furious cry split the air and, with a sharp strike, he forced Shiro to yield, bending him under the pressure.

He barely had time to catch his breath before Eisen stepped forward, fists wrapped in heavy cloth stuffed with straw. His eyes burned with raw fervor, and his heavy step echoed like that of a bull charging into the arena. He struck without restraint, each impact reverberating through Shiro’s body. Shiro held on, dodging, retreating, but his breath shattered and he was knocked down, crushed beneath Eisen’s relentless aggression.

Then Udo entered, without sword or weapon, but with the cruelty of a born grappler. His massive body crashed into Shiro, seized him, hurled him to the ground, pinned him without mercy. His arms twisted Shiro like a rag doll. Red marks and bruises bloomed across Shiro’s face, his body groaning with every impact. Finally, in a brutal crash, he was thrown out of the circle, hitting the floor with a dull thud.

Silence settled. Every gaze turned toward Harunobu. His face remained impassive, but nothing in his disapproving eyes hid the standard he demanded.

Panting, body battered yet inner flame unquenched, Shiro got back to his feet. His legs trembled, but he refused to fall. Without waiting, he moved off to a corner of the hall. There, short of breath, lips pressed tight, he resumed his drills at once. His arms rose and struck into empty space, his wooden sword cutting the air alone, as if he were punishing himself for his weakness.

His classmates watched. Some snickered, others looked away. But Yagyu, crouched nearby, shook his head and muttered just loud enough for Kikouchi to hear:

“At this rate, he’s going to end up fighting his own shadow... and I’m not sure he’d win that one either.”

Kikouchi shot him a reproachful look, but his lips trembled with a smile he could not fully suppress.

Shiro, for his part, heard nothing. In his mind, only one voice rang out: his master’s, cold, demanding, unyielding.

*

Night wrapped Shiro and Kikouchi’s room in near-complete darkness, broken only by the dying flicker of an oil lamp sputtering in a corner. The air felt heavy, saturated with a dense silence in which every breath sounded like a complaint.

Curled up in his bed, Shiro trembled under the invisible weight of his wounds. His short, ragged breaths shattered the stillness of the room. The blows he had taken in combat had left his body bruised, but the pain of his flesh was nothing beside the deeper ache strangling him from within.

His eyelids, tightly clenched, seemed to fight against visions he could no longer control. Yet the darkness brought no relief. The shadow of the nightmare, sly and persistent, returned to seize him with the cruelty of an invisible foe.

Shiro doubled over, clutching the sheets in his clenched fists. Sweat pearled across his forehead, slid down his temples, and seeped into the hollow of his neck. His closed eyelids quivered, shaken by spasms, as if his eyes were trying to flee a vision too violent to bear.

Each breath dragged from his chest was a struggle. His teeth clenched, a low moan rose from his throat. The dream became a prison. He was no longer in his room. No longer in his bed.

His sleep tore open abruptly like a wound.

*

On Xedus, in the Megalopolis of Hîvrîs, wind rushed through the skeletons of stone and metal, drawing groans from the ruins like wails of ghosts trapped within them. Low clouds smothered the light, casting a pale, sickly glow over the sea of rubble. Shiro, dressed in a simple kimono, walked forward step by step, his sandals striking shards of slate and glass. His face, pale as ash, seemed swallowed by the chaos around him.

All around, the remains of the megalopolis rose like broken pyramids, gaping scars left by a war that had devoured Hîvrîs down to its foundations. Each hesitant step brought him closer to a dark mass: the ruins of a colossal building, carved from a black stone with sharp edges like the blades of a giant sabre driven into the earth.

Shiro stopped. His eyes widened, his mouth parted.

In front of him stood a woman, motionless, as if she had emerged from the ruins themselves. Tall, with long blond hair whipped by the wind, her fragile silhouette was wrapped in torn clothing. In her arms, she held a baby tightly against her. The child lifted clear, luminous eyes—so bright they seemed almost unreal. In that gaze flickered a pure light, a fragile, uncorrupted flame, as if the entire universe were mirrored in its pupils.

A heavy sound rang out, breaking the moment: the step of a colossus.

Ténèbro appeared. His massive frame swallowed the light. His head, encircled by a thick crown of barbed wire, seemed crushed under that deliberate torture, beads of dried blood clinging to the twisted metal. His three faces, grave and frozen in an expression of fanatical faith, inspired a mute terror. Each pair of eyes carried the burn of a conviction: pain was worship, destruction an offering.

He approached slowly, each step making the stones vibrate. Reaching the woman, he stretched out his enormous hands. She did not resist. In a solemn gesture, she handed him the child, her face locked in a chilling resignation.

For an instant, silence weighed upon the ruins. Ténèbro's three faces bent toward the baby. The child's clear eyes met his, and for a fleeting moment, a strange brightness seemed to shake the darkness within him. The breath of the world hung in the balance.

Then his brows knitted, his features hardened. The light turned to a wound. His jaw tightened with a rumble of uncontrollable fury. In a brutal gesture, Ténèbro hurled the baby toward the nearby canal. The fragile little body traced a desperate arc through the air before striking the black water with a splash that seemed to tear the silence apart.

The mother did not move. Her face bore a terrible blend of disappointment and weariness. Not a cry, not a tear only the weight of a bottomless resignation.

Behind Ténèbro, another figure emerged: a massive Metamorph with a thick beard and a bare skull marked at its center by a reddish metal growth embedded in the flesh like a living wound. His eyes gleamed with cruel zeal, a faithful reflection of his master's dark faith.

Ténèbro watched him for a moment with his threefold gaze. Then, raising one arm, he pointed toward the heart of the city with his index finger and closed his fist in a gesture of absolute command.

The lieutenant bowed with morbid fervor. A cruel smile stretched across his face as he brandished a crude weapon, a blade cut from war scrap. At once, behind him, a horde of Metamorphs male and female poured forth. Armed with pikes, twisted metal, and improvised blades, they moved into formation. Their marching steps thundered like a war drum, a deep rumble that shook the bowels of the ruins.

Ténèbro followed them at an unhurried pace, never once looking back at the fallen mother, abandoned in her solitude.

Shiro, an invisible witness, felt his heart constrict. His eyes fixed on the black water. The baby was floating there, its tiny arms flailing, its cries tearing through the air like invisible blades. And no one cared.

Then, out of the water, a figure burst forth.

A boy, barely ten years old, broke the surface. His black hair, heavy with water, clung to a face already marked by suffering and trial. Around his neck hung a simple necklace, set with a greenish stone that shone with a strange light, like a living ember. His movements were quick, precise, bearing the weight of a maturity far too heavy for his age.

He swam powerfully toward the baby, seized him with infinite gentleness, and drew him close, his determined eyes burning with fierce resolve. Then, without hesitation, he turned toward the bank, each stroke slicing the dark water like a shard of light in the midst of shadows.

On the bank waited a small makeshift boat, protected by a rust-eaten metal roof. The boy climbed aboard, holding the infant carefully against him. Inside, side by side, several other children his age, each wearing the same glowing necklace, watched over sleeping babies in their arms. The rescue was repeating itself, over and over, far from the gaze of the powerful.

The craft, silent, slowly and discreetly pushed away from the shore. It slipped along the dark current on crude oars, drifting farther and farther, carrying its precious burden toward an unknown future.

*

Shiro tore himself out of the nightmare with a violent jolt. His face, twisted by anguish, was streaming with sweat. His ragged breathing filled the room, bouncing off the bare walls like the panting of a hunted animal. His fingers trembled as he passed a hand over his forehead to wipe away the cold moisture. His eyes, wide open, stared blankly ahead, glassy, as if still trying to pierce the darkness that had swallowed him.

He inhaled deeply, several times, to regain control. Yet inside him, the nightmare remained, seared into his memory burning like a mark pressed onto his soul with red-hot iron.

Chapter 21 – Haya

A year had passed. Time had chiselled Shiro's features: his cheekbones had grown firmer, his gaze more assured, and a faint shadow of beard lent his face the first lines of manhood.

That evening, he walked quietly through an autumn landscape at his sister Miya's side. The trees, half stripped, were shedding their last russet leaves, which twirled slowly through the air before settling on the ground like fragments of dying embers. The damp scent of earth and dried grass filled the air, a reminder that winter was drawing near.

In her arms, Miya carried a little girl of barely four years old: Haya. Her raven-black hair fell in silky strands around her face, and her bright, lively eyes already shone with a sharp, independent spirit. Her small hands never stopped moving, curious about everything, impatient about nothing.

As they approached, the door of the Takeda house flew open with a bang. Yagyu burst out, his hair impeccably combed, his topknot tied to perfection. He fussed about like a court servant late to a ceremony, his round eyes full of impatience.

"Haya! Quickly!" he cried, bending towards the little girl with dramatic urgency. "Mother is waiting to wash you and put you to bed, and believe me, she's taken out the big basin!"

Little Haya fixed him with her wide black eyes. Her lips tightened and, at once, a sulky frown creased her face. She shook her head with unexpected force.

"No!" she protested, with the determination of a tiny general refusing to surrender.

Yagyu rolled his eyes and spread his arms in theatrical despair.

"There you go. Four years old and already a rebel's spirit. I'm telling you, this child will rule over me one day... and I'll have to ask her permission just to go to bed!"

Miya stifled a smile, while Shiro, amused despite his fatigue, shook his head gently. The contrast between the gravity of the trials he had faced and the light comedy of this moment brought a quiet, vital warmth to his heart.

Yagyu, a strained smile on his lips and shoulders stiff, took his little sister from Miya's arms, trying to hide his nervousness behind a clumsy show of authority that impressed no one. His fingers tightened a little too firmly around Haya's small waist, as if he wanted to prove he was in control.

"Since Father left with Okuni to join the other blacksmiths at the temple in Niigata," he declared in a solemn tone that rang slightly false, "I am the one responsible for you, little sister."

Haya, cheeks puffed out in defiance, shook her head vigorously. Her short little locks swung in the air like two stubborn whips, batting away the authority Yagyu tried to impose. Her bright black eyes flashed with open resistance.

“I don’t want to sleep!” she protested vehemently, folding her arms tight across her chest.

Stung by this miniature revolt, Yagyu raised his index finger and pointed it under her nose, taking on the stern look of an old schoolmaster. His forehead creased with importance.

“You are going to obey,” he ordered, his tone mock-menacing.

But Haya was far from intimidated. She wrinkled her little nose in a mischievous grimace. Her eyes sparkled, then, in a sudden burst, she leaned forward and closed her teeth on the outstretched finger.

“Ow!” Yagyu yelped, jerking back and shaking his hand as if he’d been bitten by a wild animal. “Stop, Haya! Let go!”

Miya raised a hand to her mouth to hide a laugh, her amused eyes shining in the orange glow of the setting sun. Shiro could not suppress his smile. He stepped forward calmly, took his friend’s hand and gently freed the imprisoned finger from the small jaws. Then, without brusqueness, he lifted Haya into his own arms and settled her comfortably against him. The child let herself be held, clinging to his kimono with the proud air of someone who had just won a great battle.

“Come on,” Shiro said softly. “I’ll walk you home. Your mother is waiting to wash you.”

The warmth of the child in his arms eased something inside him. His gaze, softened for a moment, shifted then towards Yagyu. His brows drew together slightly, and a more serious shadow passed over his face.

“I wonder,” he added in a lower voice, “what is being said at the temple.”

Yagyu, still annoyed and rubbing his sore finger, grimaced. His lips tightened before he shook his hand with an exaggerated sigh, as though trying to shake off both the pain and his frustration.

“We’ll find out soon enough,” he replied with a fatalistic tone, “since they’re supposed to be back before the first snows fall.”

At those words, Shiro’s eyes widened. He lifted his head, and his gaze lit up with a fierce conviction, one that carried both excitement and dread. His breath quickened slightly, as if the words rising within him bore the weight of destiny.

“This year will be decisive for us,” he said. “We’ll finally know whether we deserve to become samurai in the service of our lord.”

Yagyu met his gaze with equal intensity, his nervousness fading for a moment. His lips curved into a brief smile that held as much hope as fear.

“Then, if our wish is granted,” he said slowly, “our lives will be changed forever.”

Together, Shiro, Yagyu, Miya and little Haya nestled against her brother all raised their eyes to the horizon. The setting sun set the sky ablaze with glowing colours, bathing the valley in gold and crimson. The bare trees stood out like dark silhouettes, and the distant mountains themselves seemed to be catching fire.

The autumn wind tugged at their clothes, and a handful of russet leaves spun in circles around them before landing softly on the ground in a faint rustle.

Shiro half closed his eyes, then let his eyelids fall completely. In that suspended silence, he sealed, deep within his heart, this fragile instant of unity, as a promise that whatever the harshness of the future, nothing would ever rob him of it.

Chapter 22 – The Fight

At dawn, the training hall already vibrated with the muffled murmur of spectators. The rising sun filtered through the wooden shutters, drawing pale shafts of light that sliced the air into faint bands. The wooden floor echoed with the students' footsteps, and the scent of polished wood mingled with the acrid smell of sweat.

Shiro, outwardly calm and composed, opened his eyes behind the wooden cage protecting his face. His breathing, however, betrayed the tension locked in his chest. In front of him, Kikouchi stood ready, legs firmly planted, his gaze hard and unforgiving. Behind his own face guard, his eyes flashed, and he no longer seemed like a fellow student, but a merciless judge.

The signal was given.

Both opponents sprang toward each other, and the sharp crack of their wooden swords instantly filled the hall. Each impact rang out like a clap of thunder, bouncing off the walls. The students gathered all around held their breath, captivated by a confrontation that had long since surpassed the simple framework of practice.

The fight grew in intensity. Blows were exchanged with mounting brutality. Then, with a harsh crash, Kikouchi's weapon struck with ruthless speed: Shiro's face cage shattered into splinters, scattering fragments across the floor. The impact tore a shocked murmur from the assembly.

Shiro staggered, his breath short. But Kikouchi, relentless, gave him no respite.

"Resume the fight!" he snapped, his voice harsh. "Technique is not enough!"

Around them, Jomei, Chikara and Chiyako burst into mocking laughter. Their sharp, grating giggles cut through the air, underlining Shiro's humiliation. Their cruel smiles seemed to feed on his disarray, each peal of laughter landing on his pride like an invisible blow.

Kayoua, who had been sitting motionless until then, cast a troubled glance toward Jomei and the twins. His eyes narrowed, his face tightened, and suddenly he stood up. His footsteps echoed in the strained silence as he moved to go sit beside Yagyū. The gesture, heavy with meaning, was soon followed by Udo, then Eisen, who left their places one by one to join him. Their choice was clear: a sign of loyalty, of respect, or perhaps of defiance toward the mockers.

Yagyū was left speechless for a moment, before a smile slowly spread across his lips. His eyes gleamed with amused satisfaction: the balance of power had shifted before his very eyes. He folded his arms, looking pleased, as if watching a play whose plot he had finally understood.

Udo, grave, leaned slightly toward him. His voice was low but carried far enough for some to hear.

“A philosopher once said: the hatred you pour out will be the hatred that topples you.”

The words fell like a prophecy.

Meanwhile, Shinsuke hurried toward Shiro. With precise movements, he placed a new face cage over his head. He adjusted it carefully, then locked his gaze onto his student's, holding him with an intensity that was almost paternal.

“Your senses, Shiro,” he said firmly. “Let your senses lead you.”

Shiro nodded, drawing in a deep breath. His hands tightened around his weapon. Back in guard, he faced Kikouchi again. The intensity in Kikouchi's eyes left no doubt: there would be no holding back.

Kikouchi stepped forward with a sharp, controlled movement, his voice cracking like a whip.

“This can't go on. You're going to let it out.”

His fingers clenched so hard around the hilt that his knuckles turned white. His gaze burned with an almost hateful flame.

“That is why you're different from us,” he went on, each word hissing like an arrow. “It's not your face that sets you apart, Shiro... you're just weak.”

The words pierced Shiro like an invisible blade. His breath caught, his eyes widened. His legs bent ever so slightly, his body recoiling despite himself, wobbling in his stance.

“What...?” he stammered, his voice strangled, as if the blow to his mind were more painful than any strike he'd taken.

But Kikouchi gave him no time to recover. With a sudden, explosive movement, his wooden sword came down with implacable precision, a mix of disciplined technique and raw aggression. The impact vibrated through Shiro's arm, sending a dull ache shooting up to his shoulder. The shock rang out like a gong, chilling the air of the hall.

“Shame on you!” Kikouchi roared, his voice bursting like a storm.

Drawing in a sharp breath, he unleashed a relentless barrage of blows. His strikes hammered Shiro's chest and sides with such brutality that Shiro was forced to retreat again and again. Each impact echoed through the hall like an accusation hurled straight at his core. Wood crashed against wood, against flesh, against pride.

“Haven't you understood?” Kikouchi shouted, his eyes blazing. “Your face is nothing but the reflection of your failure!”

Shiro reeled, breathless, legs unsteady. His vision blurred with tears held back. His face twisted in pain and shame, but his hands did not let go. His whitened fingers clung to the hilt

of his sword as if he were gripping both his weapon and the last scraps of his dignity. He tried to steady himself, though his heart thundered in his chest.

“Stop, Kikouchi!” he pleaded, his voice constricted, a mix of helpless anger and hurt.

Kikouchi burst into a nervous, cruel laugh that spread through the hall like poison. His eyes gleamed with bitter irony, his lips curling into a contemptuous smirk.

“Your whole family,” he spat, “will have nothing but contempt for you.”

The sentence, sharp as acid, struck Shiro harder than any blow. His features froze, his muscles trembled. But Kikouchi was already moving. He leaped forward, his sandals slamming on the floor like war drums, and brought his sword down with brutal force on Shiro’s shoulder. The impact almost sent him crashing to the ground; the dry crack seemed to reverberate inside his bones.

Kikouchi stopped just a few inches from his face, panting, his gaze blazing with hatred. His words sliced through the silence like blades.

“You’re nothing but a failure. The lord has no use for a coward.”

Shiro, grimacing in pain, remained frozen. His mouth opened as if to answer, but no sound came. Behind the grid of his face guard, his features were strained to the breaking point, as if they might shatter under the weight of humiliation.

Kikouchi stepped back with a mocking smile. His body shifted smoothly back into guard, cold and controlled, ready to finish the demonstration.

“Jomei is right!” he thundered, his voice rolling across the hall like thunder. “You will never become a samurai!”

The words struck Shiro like a slap. His stunned face turned slightly aside, as though he were seeking something to hold on to in the void. His lips trembled, and in a breath barely louder than a whisper, he murmured:

“Obata... Yukiko... Miya... Anzu... I must defend their honour...”

A heavy silence fell. Then, suddenly, a fire lit up his features. His eyes, clouded for an instant by pain, hardened with a fierce flame. His breath turned rough, almost animal. In a wild cry that ripped through the hall, his voice erupted like a torrent that had been held back too long.

Shiro hurled himself at Kikouchi with a new ferocity, every stroke of his sword charged not only with technique, but with despair, rage and fierce determination. The clash of their weapons resounded like rolling thunder, filling the air with invisible sparks.

The students, stunned, remained rooted to the spot, eyes wide. Their held breath accompanied this duel that had become more than an exercise: it was a battle of souls.

Kikouchi, taken aback by this sudden explosion of strength, was forced to give ground. His arms blocked and parried in haste, his legs bent under the assault. One strike came so close it

grazed his face cage, nearly splitting it. Forced into a corner, he had to retaliate with all his remaining fury. In a lightning-fast counterattack, he brought his sword down with renewed, devastating power.

The wood shattered. Shiro's face cage exploded into a rain of splinters, fragments flying and clattering across the floor. The blow sent Shiro sprawling backward.

His body hit the ground with a dull thud and rolled... until it came to rest at the feet of Master Harunobu.

Silence fell over the school, dense and solemn. Only the ragged breathing of the students could be heard, all of them frozen in expectation. Every eye turned toward the master.

Harunobu, straight and immovable as a mountain, let a faint smile appear at the corner of his lips, almost imperceptible. His face remained stern, but his eyes held a rare glimmer. Slowly, he raised his hand and saluted both students. The gesture, heavy with gravity, had the weight of a verdict.

Then his gaze settled on Shiro. In those deep eyes burned a light that pierced the entire assembly: pride. A recognition long awaited, long feared, that sealed the moment.

"At last," he declared, his voice ringing like a bell in the silence. "Here is the long-awaited warrior... for now, you exist."

The words fell like a blessing.

Shiro, still panting, found the strength to sit up. His breath, though uneven, grew gradually deeper, calmer. The tension in his features eased little by little. His eyes, still wet with effort, lifted toward Kikouchi. Kikouchi, his brow still lined with anger and his gaze ablaze, stood motionless. Then his eyebrows relaxed, his lips softened, and with a slow, controlled movement, he bowed his head.

The spectators' silence was broken by that simple motion. It was neither defeat nor victory: it was recognition. On his now-composed face appeared the first trace of a new respect, almost fraternal.

Shiro bowed his head in return. Between them, in that brief instant, a bond was forged not with words, but through combat, pain, and honour.

Chapter 23 – The Duel

On the border plain of Toyoma, the summer wind swept across the valley, making the tall grasses ripple like a green and golden sea. The sky, vast and clear, stretched without a single cloud, letting the bright light of day reign supreme.

Shiro rode at the head of the group, his expression serene, his back straight. His topknot, perfectly tied, reflected the new discipline of his status. At his waist, the long sword and the short sword rested in their lacquered scabbards, unmistakable signs of his condition as a samurai. His combat tunic, reinforced with bamboo plates at the shoulders and chest, gave off a faint clatter with the rhythmic movement of his mount.

His face bore ceremonial war paint: broad red strokes over a white base, his black eyebrows thickened and emphasized. A symbol of tradition, but also of mystery, it made him both familiar and intimidating to behold.

At his side rode Kikouchi and Yagyu. Their carefully pulled topknots spoke of the pride of men now confirmed in their rank. At their belts hung the pairing of short and medium sword, while small provincial flags snapped in the wind behind their saddles. On each, a black fish stood out solemnly against a white background: dark, threatening, like a silent promise of power.

At the very front of the small column rode Fujio. His wide straw hat, worn by years of travel, gave him the bearing of a hardened veteran, vigilant even in the appearance of peace. His eyes, narrowed, nonetheless scanned every rise and hollow of the valley.

The group advanced, their horses' hooves drumming a regular cadence on the dry earth. The air was rich with the scent of resin warmed by the sun, while the steady song of insects wove a summer melody around them.

Suddenly, Yagyu heaved an exaggerated sigh and almost rolled his eyes.

"Already a year that we've had the privilege of carrying a sword... and still not a single fight in sight!" he grumbled in a plaintive tone.

His voice broke the solemnity of the column, drawing a faint, amused smile from Kikouchi, who turned his head slightly toward him. His lips curved in a mocking smirk.

"Calm down, Yagyu," he replied in an even voice. "Just because tension is brewing at the border with the Taira doesn't mean you'll cross blades that easily."

But Yagyu shrugged and put on a fake serious expression. A sly smile crept over his lips as he cast a sideways glance at Shiro.

"Exactly," he said with a mischievous sparkle. "I still remember that glorious day when the master forced you to fight Jomei... to earn the right to bear the title of samurai!"

His short laugh punctuated the sentence, half teasing, half admiring, as if he could never quite decide between mockery and camaraderie.

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Flashback

Under a scorching sun, the dust of the outdoor training ground rose in opaque swirls, clinging to throats and sweat-soaked faces.

Shiro, shut behind his wooden mask, was dripping with sweat. His tense features revealed the strain of relentless effort, but also that contained fury that burned deep inside him. Each gulp of air he drew into his lungs tore at his chest.

Facing him, Jomei advanced with the arrogance of a predator certain of its prey. His strikes fell with ruthless regularity, brutal and precise, like the lashes of a storm. The hard crack of wood echoed again and again, each impact vibrating through Shiro's bones.

On the defensive, Shiro barely parried. His aching arms sometimes trembled under the shock, but his legs held. Each movement was now nothing more than an expression of raw survival instinct, and yet behind his harsh, ragged breathing shone an unyielding will. With every counterattack, he screamed his determination inwardly, refusing to yield, refusing to give up.

Driven by his own brutality, Jomei chained blows and feints with cruel mastery. The circle of students around them held its breath, torn between fear and fascination. Then, with a guttural cry that split the air like a peal of thunder, Shiro unleashed a sudden, explosive counterattack.

His wooden blade shot forward with unexpected speed. The strike, powerful and direct, took Jomei by surprise. He staggered, thrown off balance by that sudden eruption of strength. Shiro, eyes wide and wild with rage, didn't stop. Swept up in his momentum, he rained down a flurry of fierce blows. Some smashed full force into Jomei's torso, wrenching muffled grunts from him; others whistled past his flank with the violence of a gusting wind.

Dust billowed around them, blurring vision and stifling voices. The circle watched, breathless.

"Enough!"

Master Harunobu's powerful voice cracked through the air like thunder.

Both opponents froze. Their bodies, rigid, shook with fatigue, breaths short and ragged, faces streaming with sweat. The dust slowly fell around them, like a veil settling over the scene.

Jomei, his face crimson with anger and humiliation, tore off his wooden mask in a violent gesture. Eyes blazing, he rushed up to Shiro, who was still struggling to catch his breath.

He drew himself up proudly, chest thrust out, mouth foaming with rage.

"Don't deceive yourself, monster!" he growled, his voice raw. "This is nothing but a draw! You'll never have my forgiveness... and I will never acknowledge you... NEVER!"

His words rang out like a sentence, carved into the burning air of the yard. They etched themselves into Shiro's memory like an invisible scar, deeper than any blow struck that day.

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End of Flashback

The vision faded, dissolving into the rustling of the wind. The green valley reclaimed its place.

Kikouchi turned to Shiro. His dark gaze, heavy with resignation, fell on him like a truth he would rather not have spoken aloud.

"Unfortunately," he said in a grave tone, "Jomei, Chikara and Chiyako still haven't changed their minds about your status."

The silence grew dense for a moment, but Yagyu was quick to break it. Straightening proudly in his saddle, he puffed out his chest as though single-handedly bearing the clan's banner. His lips stretched into a bold grin, and his voice rang out, brimming with a mixture of naivety and defiance:

"Let them stay in their little caste of privileged brats!" he exclaimed. "What matters is that we are now samurai, in the service of our all-powerful lord!"

His words floated in the warm air, both earnest and reckless. Kikouchi turned his gaze away, a faint, ironic smile brushing his lips, while Shiro, more serious, remained pensive, his eyes fixed on the horizon where the small flags fluttered in the wind.

He didn't answer. A discreet, almost invisible smile passed over his painted face. Straight in the saddle, he let the calm of his posture respond in silence to all old grudges. The wind tugged at his topknot; his features remained impassive, and his silence became his only reply sharper than any retort.

It was then that Fujio, at the head of the column, narrowed his eyes. His keen gaze, usually so serene, suddenly locked onto the hollow below the ridge. His shoulders tensed, his fingers tightened on the reins. The atmosphere changed at once, as though the valley itself were holding its breath.

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Down in the hollow, two riders burst from the high grass with a rustling sweep. Taira samurai.

The first, young, barely into his twenties, wore pale armour that caught and reflected the sunlight. His upright posture and rigid back betrayed the pride of a novice who had not yet tasted defeat. His eyes, burning with restrained fervour, scanned the horizon intently.

The second, older, bore on his features the severity of long experience. His face, weathered by campaigns and lined with discreet scars, inspired both respect and caution. His broad-chested horse stood firm, pawing the ground without needless agitation, a reflection of its master: tried by battles, calm before danger.

Both riders reined in their mounts at once. The horses' nostrils snorted twin plumes of white, and a heavy silence settled. The two men fixed Fujio with an icy gravity, saying nothing, as though their presence alone made the air vibrate.

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On the ridge of the valley, Fujio's expression suddenly hardened. He yanked the reins sharply.

"Stop!" he ordered, his voice clear, firm, leaving no room for discussion.

Immediately, Shiro, Kikouchi and Yagyu halted their horses. Hooves sank into the dry earth with a dull thud. The animals snorted, muscles twitching beneath the tension thickening the air. They tossed their heads and pawed the ground, as though they sensed the gravity of what was coming before their riders did.

All three young samurai stared, with a mix of curiosity and apprehension, at the two Taira emerging from the grass below.

Yagyu, unable to contain himself, broke into a wide grin. His eyes shone, his hands trembled with excitement. His arm slid instinctively toward the hilt of his long sword, which he stroked with his fingertips, as though the steel were already calling to him. He nudged his horse closer to Fujio, his mount almost prancing under the pressure of his legs.

"The gods have finally heard me!" he exclaimed, his voice vibrating with almost childlike joy.

But Fujio, without even turning his head, snapped back:

"Calm yourself, Yagyu."

His voice cracked like a whip, restoring order by sheer authority.

Then his gaze shifted to Shiro and Kikouchi.

"You three, wait here for my return."

Without another word, he dug his heels into his horse's flanks. The animal leapt forward, galloping down the slope, cutting through the tall grasses with a steady rustle. Fujio slowed as he neared the two Taira. His upper body dipped slightly forward. Holding the reins tight, he began to speak.

Words passed between them in low voices, but no sound reached Shiro's ears. Their faces remained unreadable, their eyes hard, yet the tension surrounding them seemed on the verge of erupting at the slightest phrase. Even the horses appeared taut, stamping without moving forward.

Then, in a sudden movement, Fujio drew back on the reins. His mount reared and spun. The samurai galloped back up toward his companions. As he approached, his features, drawn tight at first, began to loosen. A faint smile, discreet but loaded with meaning, traced itself across his disciplined face.

Reaching the group, he pulled his horse up in a puff of dust and locked his gaze on Shiro. His tone was grave as he spoke into the charged silence:

“The young Taira warrior wishes to face you on the open ground below,” he said solemnly. “He has made the request with respect.”

Shiro’s eyes widened slightly. His breath caught, as though the universe had paused with him. Then, slowly, his features eased. A small, resolute smile formed on his lips. He bowed his head respectfully, the gesture calm and firm.

“So be it,” he replied simply, in a steady voice at odds with the silent storm pounding in his chest.

At his side, Kikouchi stifled a short laugh. His eyes gleamed with a mix of mischief and admiration.

“To think Master Harunobu expressly asked you to wear that dreadful makeup so you’d go unnoticed in the eyes of the enemy...” he murmured.

Shiro turned toward him with a quiet look. His lips curved in a slight, almost conspiratorial smile.

“Tonight, I’ll tell him his trick failed,” he answered with serene irony. “But that I had the honour of facing my first enemy... a Taira samurai.”

The simple words hung in the heavy air, laden with unshakable pride. The silence that followed thrummed like a drawn bowstring.

Fujio, solid in his saddle, lifted his head with noble bearing. His dark eyes fixed on the two enemy riders as he raised his voice, powerful and clear, like the beat of a war drum:

“They claim their training is superior to ours!”

The declaration electrified the atmosphere. The horses pranced, their hooves drumming the hardened ground, as if they too were answering the call.

Yagyu, unable to contain the blaze inside him, began bouncing restlessly in his saddle. His hands, clenched around the hilt of his sword, trembled with impatience. His eyes burned with a young, devouring fire.

“Let me face him, I beg you!” he cried in a firm, almost imploring voice, like a hunting dog howling to be loosed.

Fujio swung around sharply. His cold, implacable gaze pinned him in place like a blade.

“Patience, Yagyu,” he said, calm but unyielding. “Your time will come.”

Yagyu pressed his lips together, almost biting his cheek to swallow his frustration. His knuckles whitened on the reins. His ragged breaths betrayed the storm inside him, but he held his tongue and lowered his head slightly.

Kikouchi, more measured, met Shiro's eyes. He said nothing. But in his gaze shone a silent encouragement, a brotherly promise of support.

Then the sky itself seemed to want to consecrate the moment. The rain began to fall. Fine at first, like a delicate veil, then thicker, drumming on armour and straw hats in a grave, steady music. Droplets slid down cheeks, ran over sheathed blades, splashed on the earth in tiny bursts.

Shiro tilted his straw hat forward to shield his painted features. His hand briefly caressed the neck of Sumi, his faithful horse, who snorted softly, as if urging him on. With a sure gesture, he nudged the animal forward, riding slowly down toward the small patch of open ground below.

Each step sent up little splashes of muddy water. Each beat of Sumi's hooves sounded like the pulse of fate.

Chapter 24 – The Art of Peace

On the patch of ground before him, the young Taira samurai urged his warhorse forward. His name was Toshiro. Slender yet commanding in stature, he rode with the easy nobility of one habituated to authority. At his belt hung three swords short, medium, and long privilege of his caste and brilliant proof of his superior rank.

His posture, straight yet supple, radiated the confidence of one who believed he embodied the future of his clan. Beneath the shadow of a wide straw hat, most of his features were obscured, but his eyes dark and sharp cut through the rain like a drawn blade.

Without a word, Toshiro dismounted. The movement was fluid, precise, the gesture of a man whose training had been drilled to perfection. His horse, perfectly disciplined, did not so much as shift.

With a firm hand, he seized his spear, spun it once to feel its weight, then settled into his stance. His legs flexed, his body leaning subtly forward. Everything in him breathed assurance, authority... and a quiet contempt for weakness.

The rain now hammered the earth in earnest. The soil drank it greedily, turning the clearing into a muddy arena where two destinies were about to collide.

Shiro, outwardly calm, dismounted in turn. His sandals sank into the waterlogged ground, flinging up fine splashes. Rain streamed down his cheeks, carving dark trails through the red and white pigments of his war paint, yet his eyes remained clear, focused two steady flames at the heart of the storm.

He grasped his own spear and set it spinning in his hand with practiced sureness. Then, step by step, he advanced toward Toshiro, each movement marked by disciplined restraint. As they drew closer, the sound of raindrops drumming on their armour set a heavy cadence, like the muffled roll of a distant war drum.

At proper distance, the two samurai stopped. Time seemed to hold its breath. In the same solemn motion, they bowed deeply to one another, sealing with that gesture the nobility of the combat that ought to follow.

Then Shiro's voice rose, clear and steady, despite the rumbling thunder rolling across the sky.

"I am Shiro Takano, son of Obata Takano, chief of the village of Koshikake. I serve under Lord Ueshiba of the province of Niigata."

His gaze slid over the gleaming plates of his opponent's armour, lingered on the three swords hanging at his waist. A discreet smile touched his lips respectful, yet tinged with a fine edge of challenge.

"And I am honoured," he added calmly, "to be able to cross weapons with a young lord."

Lifting his chin, he fixed Toshiro with an intense, unwavering stare.

“For only lords have the right to bear three swords.”

A subtle shiver ran through the invisible circle of witnesses above, as though this simple statement had just reminded everyone of what was truly at stake.

Toshiro narrowed his eyes. When he replied, his voice carried a thin, sharp provocation, a mingling of arrogance and cutting curiosity.

“Shiro Takano... Why are you the only one who wears a mask so ugly and ridiculous?”

The insult rang out, borne by the rain and silence alike. Shiro tightened his grip on the spear; the tendons in his wrist stood out. He kept his silence for a long moment, a silence more incisive than any retort. At last, his voice rose firm and clean, like a blade sliding free of its scabbard.

“Have the courtesy to give your name.”

A flicker of surprise crossed Toshiro’s face, taken aback by this implacable calm. Yet he bowed slightly, as honour demanded, even though his eyes still burned with proud fire.

“I am Toshiro Okura, son of the mighty Lord Yoshida Okura of the province of Ishikawa,” he declared, his tone vibrating with pride. “And I am under the protection of the powerful gods of war.”

The words rang out with the gravity of an invocation.

Then Shiro slowly raised his head toward the heavens. The rain intensified, drumming on his shoulders and armour. With a measured gesture, he removed his straw hat. Drops rolled off his hair, slicked back into a tight knot, and his painted face appeared fully in the grey light.

The water smeared the pigments; the broad red and white strokes drawn by Harunobu seemed to bleed beneath the rain, giving his features an almost otherworldly intensity.

Time stalled. Even the wind seemed to still.

Toshiro’s eyes flew wide. His pupils dilated, his breath caught short. His face, frozen by shock, twisted into an expression he failed to master. His mouth opened on a cry he could barely contain.

“How... How is this possible?!”

His words, broken by sheer incredulity, were swallowed by the hammering rain. Around them, the valley seemed to turn to stone, as if the world itself were holding its breath before this revelation.

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Higher up the slope, Yagyu watched the scene, as tense as a falcon tethered too long. Under his straw hat, his glance kept leaping from Shiro to Toshiro, unable to settle. His fingers clenched and unclenched around the hilt of his long sword, stroking it, seizing it tight, as though the cold touch of the steel might quell the fire raging in his veins.

“Why is it taking so long?” he muttered, impatience vibrating in his voice. His foot tapped against the stirrup, betraying a nervousness he could no longer contain.

Then, louder, he let out in a frustrated breath:

“He’s mocking him!”

Fujio and Kikouchi, by contrast, did not move. Frozen on their horses, their silhouettes might have been carved from stone. Their eyes remained fixed on the arena below, impassive in appearance, but their silence bore the weight of the moment. They knew this was far more than a simple challenge it would determine Shiro’s honour, his future, and perhaps his reputation for years to come.

*

Down in the clearing, Toshiro took a step forward, his face twisted by horror. His hand shook slightly on the shaft of his spear. His eyes, wide, refused to leave Shiro’s face war paint running in streaks, yet enhanced rather than hidden by the rain, like colours crying over his features.

“Who... who are you?” he stammered, his voice strangled, as though the answer might shatter everything he had been taught since childhood.

Shiro held his gaze. Slowly, he raised his spear, his bearing dignified and unflinching. His voice, firm, carried through the rain and thunder.

“I told you already. I am Shiro Takano, son of Obata Takano, chief of the village of Koshikake. And I serve under Lord Ueshiba of the province of Niigata.”

But Toshiro did not calm. His chest heaved violently. His fingers clenched so hard around his spear that his knuckles turned white. When he finally spoke, his voice burst out tense, nearly broken.

“Your face!”

He stumbled back a step, as though struck by a curse. His breath came in ragged pulls; his eyes shook, suspended between fear and outright refusal.

“The gods who witness this day will never... never allow it to be said that I engaged in combat against... you and your monstrous face!”

His words, heavy with dread, echoed across the sodden clearing like a solemn verdict. The relentless drumming of the rain only underlined the cold finality of his pronouncement.

Shiro lowered his head slightly. His eyes roamed around him, searching for a sign, a response something that might break this wall of rejection. He found only the pounding of the downpour and the tense silence of the earth.

His breathing grew heavier. Yet when he spoke again, his voice gentled, deepened, took on an almost meditative cadence.

“Since childhood,” he said quietly, “I have suffered this same judgment. And even now, I still have no answer to give...”

He lifted his gaze to the swollen sky, where lightning occasionally split the rain into stark, white shards. Under that fleeting light, his silhouette seemed to grow larger.

“...But I hope that one day,” he continued, voice grave, “the gods themselves will bring us the long-awaited clarity.”

Then he slowly lowered his spear. The gesture held calm, respect almost serenity. His stance was no longer an invitation to battle, but an appeal to something higher.

“I regret depriving you of this duel,” he said softly. “But if the gods of war cannot witness us and bless our courageous deeds, then let it be so.”

A breath swept across the valley, as if even the rain had slowed to listen.

Toshiro’s chest still rose and fell sharply, but at last he raised a hand in a gesture of refusal. The raw terror that had warped his features began to ebb, replaced by a sober gravity. His eyes, now free of panic, were tinged with sincere respect.

“You are right, Takano,” he said at last, slowly. “And I do not doubt that you are a warrior of great worth.”

Shiro’s face lit with a quiet, satisfied smile. The breath he had been holding finally escaped him. He bowed deeply, his reverence measured, every movement marked by restraint and dignity.

“I am proud,” he murmured, his voice deep but softened, “to have met a young lord for the first time. I hope our paths cross again... so that next time, we may truly fight.”

His words, simple but heartfelt, rang across the rain-darkened air.

Gradually, Toshiro’s tension faded. His shoulders loosened, his breathing steadied. His fingers, once locked white around his spear, relaxed at last. In a noble gesture, he lowered his weapon to a defensive angle and bowed his head to Shiro. His gaze, stripped now of fear, shone with an unexpected respect.

“You are my first Minamoto adversary,” he declared, his voice steady, resonant as a promise. “It was an honour to meet you. To see you again one day will make of this moment a memory worthy of the battlefield... where death, subtle and patient, will be forced to choose a side.”

The rain kept falling, washing away the traces of a duel that had not taken place. Yet in the heavy silence, a different mark had been made, carved not in blood but in spirit: destiny would bring them together again.

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Shiro, his face still bright with a relieved smile, mounted Sumi once more and set his horse to a light trot. Raindrops slid from his shoulders and dripped from the brim of his straw hat, but his seat remained firm and assured. In a few strides he rejoined Fujio, Kikouchi, and Yagyu waiting higher up on the ridge.

Yagyu, incapable of containing himself, was the first to break the silence. He leaned almost out of his saddle to get closer to Shiro's face. His eyes sparkled with a nervous tension half curiosity, half frustration.

"Your face!" he burst out. "And why didn't you cut his head off?"

His voice, sharp and trembling, held as much disappointment as impatience.

Shiro calmly tilted his straw hat back into place, as though reclaiming the understated shell of the ordinary man. Yet beneath it, his features remained marked by a deep, settled calm.

"Have you already forgotten what Master Harunobu taught us?" he replied in an even tone. "The hardest art for a samurai is to win without fighting."

Fujio, straight in his saddle, nodded slowly. His grave eyes rested on Shiro, and in a quiet, respectful breath he added:

"That is the art of peace."

Silence settled over them. Even the rain seemed softer, as though the heavens themselves approved.

Shiro, soothed, felt a rare serenity wash through him. His gaze shifted to Kikouchi, and in his eyes shone a silent gratitude.

"And I thank the gods," he murmured, "for allowing me to accomplish such a delicate act. For the days to come may not always end the same way."

Kikouchi bowed his head, a brief but genuine salute. His voice, low and steady, sounded like an oath.

"I honour your choice, my friend."

Yagyu, still unable to hide his emotions, pulled a face balanced between frustration and admiration. His cheeks puffed out, and he let out a grumble:

"For this time..."

Shiro gave a faint, lopsided smile. In a brotherly gesture, he laid his right hand on Yagyu's shoulder and held his gaze, frank and steady.

"I am doing my best to carry the title of samurai with honour," he said, his voice resonant. "So know this, brother-in-arms: it was not fear that guided me."

Around them, the valley seemed to breathe again. The horses shook themselves, tossing their rain-soaked manes. The wind, gentler now, barely stirred the banners where the clan's black fish rippled against white.

And the small column moved on, more united than before, advancing toward an uncertain future one already rich with promises and trials, steel and storms, honour and the fragile, obstinate art of peace.

Chapter 25 – The Destiny of the Gods

Inside the training hall, Master Harunobu sat in seiza upon the polished wooden floor, unmoving for a long while. His hands rested calmly on his knees, and his steady breathing filled the room like the echo of some ancient tide. His eyes, firmly anchored in those of Shiro, seemed to search every hidden corner of the young warrior's soul. The silence thickened, broken only by the crackling of torches and the faint groan of worked timber.

At last, his voice rose. Slow, deliberate each word falling like a stone into clear water. "Never before have I heard the Gods speak so clearly... Strange, and troubling."

He paused, the flicker of the flames reflecting in his gaze, deepening the intensity of his stare. "But what matters most for you, Shiro, is the code. The one that demands you always be prepared whatever comes, even the unpredictable."

Harunobu folded his arms. His face remained impassive, carved from discipline and years of wisdom, yet his eyes betrayed a contradictory spark concern mixed with hope as though he saw in Shiro both a promise and a threat.

Shiro, still kneeling, kept his back straight though his heart weighed heavily within him. The echo of his nightmares still clung to his thoughts, yet from beneath that burden, a faint smile emerged. Fragile, but sincere. A breath of relief softened his features; he had finally spoken his truth. He bowed deeply in respect toward his master, and toward Shinsuke, the silent instructor who had stood by him all this time.

Suddenly, Shinsuke straightened. Taller, more imposing in the wavering torchlight, he lifted a steady hand toward Shiro, as though to underline the gravity of his next words. His voice rang out, deep and unwavering:

"These nightmares are premonitions sent by the Gods. Be careful, Shiro. The outcome of all this may one day place you before a terrible choice one that will weigh not only on you, but on those around you."

His words hung in the air long after they were spoken, carried and amplified by the hall's wooden walls.

Silence fell again. The flames wavered, casting shifting silhouettes upon the partitions long forms of men, warriors, spectres... Shiro felt his heart clench. For the first time, he understood that his burden reached far beyond the deformity of his face. These nightmares he had believed to be private torments might in truth be the traces of a greater design, hidden still, and of which he was but an unwilling vessel.

His voice rose, raw with pain:

"My face!... Was that also the will of the Gods?"

Another silence. Then Harunobu answered, his tone calm, almost intimate, as if sharing a secret entrusted to him alone:

“The Gods, too, may keep their secrets.”

The simple words fell with the weight of an eternal riddle.

Shiro bowed once more, respectfully. A faint, solemn smile touched his lips. Behind it trembled gravity, faith, and a silent gratitude toward his teachers.

Then, slowly, he rose. His steps echoed across the empty hall as he crossed the torchlit space and slid open the door. The night greeted him with its cool breath and its mantle of darkness, as though the world outside were already calling him back to the weight of his destiny.

Chapter 26 – The Armor

That evening, Shiro, Kikouchi, and Yagyu hurried toward Okuni's forge. They arrived out of breath before the great black door. An orange glow seeped through the cracks, promising heat and radiance. Okuni was already waiting for them, his face tense, as if pushed back by a worry he could no longer contain. At the sight of him, Shiro quickened his pace.

"What's going on, my friend?" Shiro asked, his voice tinged with concern.

Okuni bowed deeply to them, respectful and hurried. Yagyu, fists clenched, straightened at once, instinctively protective.

"If someone's trying to intimidate you, I'll slit his throat!" he snapped, his jaw tight.

Kikouchi, cold and direct, spoke before Okuni could answer.

"It's Jomei," he said, low and hard.

Okuni shook his head, frowning as if to chase away a foolish rumor.

"No! What's the matter with you all? Calm down and follow me," he ordered.

He pushed open the door and gestured them inside. The heat of the workshop wrapped around them at once, together with the vivid glow of the forges. He closed the door behind them as one closes one world upon another.

•

The furnace roared, casting restless light across the walls. The air quivered with heat, with the smell of hot metal and burnt oil; sweat beaded at the temples as though the forge itself were perspiring. In the half-light, two large shapes draped in white cloth rested on raised platforms like sacred sleepers. The shadows of the craftsmen passed and repassed, long and ghostlike, while sparks rose and whirled up to the rafters.

Kikouchi, struck speechless, widened his eyes and turned toward Okuni.

"What... what is this?" he breathed, his voice choked with wonder.

Okuni took a slow, deliberate step, his posture heavy with the weight of a man about to offer more than an object: a symbol. He stopped beside the first platform, his gaze bright, and cast a look full of affection at Yagyu. His calloused fingers closed around a thin cord. With a sharp tug, he pulled it. The sheet slid down in a soft sigh of dust, revealing the first marvel.

"It will protect you from your recklessness and your hot-headedness, little brother," he declared, his voice firm yet gentle, as if the object itself were meant to speak to the boy's soul.

Yagyu froze, his mouth slightly open, unable to contain the flood of emotion surging through him. Before him stood a black helmet, its face guard edged in polished metal that instantly caught the light. The crown of the helmet rose in a sculpted figure, a terrifying and splendid representation of Susanoo, god of winds and tempests: a stylized maw, crests of metal shaped like crashing waves, horns tilted toward the sky. Beneath it lay a dark cuirass, made of perfectly fitted lamellae whose deep sheen shifted between matte and mirror. The work of the hammer could be read in every curve; one could sense the hand of a master who had breathed his soul into the iron.

Across the plates and rivets ran a pattern, almost runic interlaced waves and lightning bolts so that the armor seemed to capture and reflect the fury of the elements. The crackle of the furnace and the hiss of the coals blended with the sound of their own breathing.

“It’s... incredible,” Yagyu stammered, his voice tight, eyes shining. “It’s the god Susanoo...”

At his side, Shiro, eyes wide, fixed Okuni with intensity. His breath grew heavier under the emotion.

“So that’s what it was,” he said quietly, “the reason for your many trips to the temple in Niigata.”

Okuni allowed himself a faint smile in which pride and exhaustion mingled.

“Not only that...” he answered slowly. “But yes, I was granted permission to forge your armors. Armors that will soon represent you... and protect you for the rest of your lives.”

His words rang out like an oath. The forge, saturated with heat and the smell of iron, seemed to transform into a sanctuary. The roar of the flames became the breath of some ancient god.

Drawn irresistibly, Yagyu stepped closer to his armor. Slowly like a man approaching an altar he extended his hand. His trembling fingers brushed the dark lamellae, cold to the touch yet charged with a life of their own.

“I... I really can’t wait to go into battle with it,” he murmured, eyes wet, voice cracked with awe.

A smile flickered at the corner of Okuni’s lips, but he was already turning toward the second platform. His face clouded, his posture grew even straighter, almost hieratic. His eyes shone with a fierce pride, edged with pain, as if he were about to offer a piece of himself.

He grasped the second cord. The gesture, slow and solemn, drew the cloth down in a wave of white, like a crest breaking.

Absolute silence fell. Even the furnace seemed to hold its breath.

Shiro felt his heart contract. His features froze, his eyes widened under the shock of a brutal revelation. Before him stood another black armor, its face guard edged with metal, but crowned this time with a unique ornament: a sculpted wave, captured at the height of a tidal surge. Nestled in that rising wall of water was a squat carp, jet-black, massive and deformed,

its maw bristling with enormous, grotesquely oversized teeth. Its fins, armed with hooked spines, looked ready to shred the very air.

The mask attached to the armor bore a golden sneer, ferocious, almost demonic, as if the creature had taken shape solely to lend its features to Shiro.

Kikouchi drew in a sharp breath, his eyes wide with a mixture of horror and fascination.

“A carp... but not just any carp. A monster from the depths,” he whispered.

Shiro, trembling with excitement, stepped forward. His fingers caressed the armor of countless tiny scales of black and gold lacquered iron. Each scale shivered like living skin under his touch. The wide, imposing shoulder guards were bound with thick red cords, symbols of strength and blood. Six daggers sheathed at the waist completed the harness, while the hand and foot guards extended into spiked blades, ready to rip and tear.

Breathless, Shiro closed his eyes for an instant. Through that contact he felt a deep, ancient energy seep into him: a mixture of fury, resilience, and solitude.

Then, with almost religious care, Okuni stepped to a stand in front of the armor. He took both hands to lift a gigantic weapon: a sabre of unusual, almost excessive length. His arms trembled slightly under the weight, as if the steel itself bore the weight of its own history.

He held it out to Shiro. The flames of the forge glinted on the blade still concealed within its black lacquered scabbard.

Shiro reached out with both hands. His fingers closed around the guard with grave intent and, slowly, he drew the blade.

A flash burst forth pure, cutting as though lightning had just torn through the forge. White light washed across their faces, and the silence was broken only by the whisper of steel slicing the air.

“It’s... a cavalry sabre,” Shiro breathed, spellbound, his eyes reflecting the blade’s shine.

Okuni nodded, his features marked by contained satisfaction.

“Yes. Forged for momentum, for speed for striking not only the man, but the mount. It is a weapon of the charge... a weapon of destiny.”

The blade caught the light of the furnace like flowing water, its reflections undulating like waves of fire. Its edge, tinged with a bright yellow hue, shimmered with a unique, almost unreal radiance. Overcome by an emotion that tightened his throat, Shiro slowly raised the sabre to his forehead. His eyes burned with intensity as he bowed deeply, greeting the weapon as one bows to a deity. The silence that followed seemed louder than the roar of the flames.

Okuni spread his arms wide before him. His face shone with restrained pride, but when he spoke, his voice vibrated with an almost religious solemnity.

“I have also forged all your new swords,” he declared. “They are made from a softer steel, but their edge is strengthened by a secret: a powder of yellow iron fused with the hardest metals. Stronger than anything that currently exists.”

His tone rose, filling the room like a proclamation:

“They will not bend, they will not shatter... and they will never break.”

A breath seemed to pass through the workshop, as though the walls themselves had been holding their air. The fire crackled louder, flinging a shower of sparks toward the ceiling as if to approve the forger’s words.

Drawn by the brilliance of the cavalry sabre, Kikouchi came closer and carefully took it up. His gaze hardened before the cold beauty of the steel. His usually impassive features tightened under the impact of what he saw.

“Its beauty is matched only by its terrible efficiency,” he murmured, his tone grave, almost covetous.

But already, Okuni’s voice was dropping. A shadow seemed to settle over his shoulders, making them sag under the weight of a sincere regret.

“I did not receive seigneurial permission to forge your armor,” he said, turning to Kikouchi. “No explanation was given to me.”

Silence fell again. The torch flames trembled, as if to emphasize the emptiness of that answer.

Kikouchi, whose pride often fed on his self-control, slid the sabre back into its scabbard with slow care. His hard features remained composed. He inclined his head slightly and answered in a calm, steady voice:

“I understand. There will surely be an explanation in due time.”

Okuni shook his head, his expression darkening. His eyes clouded over with gravity.

“Unfortunately,” he went on, “your armors will only be handed over once they have been blessed by the monks... and only with Lord Ueshiba’s approval. That may take time... much more than I had hoped.”

His gaze moved from Shiro to Yagyu, as if to temper their youthful eagerness. Behind him, the fire rumbled like a caged beast, punctuating each of his words.

Yagyu pressed his lips together. His fingers drummed nervously against his thigh, and his foot, restless, betrayed an impatience he could not tame. But he bit back his reply, swallowed it, and turned away without protest. For once, his silence spoke louder than his usual outbursts.

Kikouchi, meanwhile, remained impassive. His eyes were lost in the flames, though his heart, despite his composure, hummed with a mute frustration.

As for Shiro, he was still absorbed by the sabre's glow. His hands, steady yet trembling with respect, traced a slow, solemn arc through the air. The blade cut through the enclosed space of the forge, producing a subtle vibration, almost an invisible breath. The air itself seemed to quiver, as if the metal were singing a melody only it could know.

Shiro lowered the sabre against his chest and whispered, his voice full of emotion:

"You truly have great talent, Okuni. This weapon... it draws me. It's as if it were calling me."

A red flare from the furnace leapt suddenly across his face. The pigments of his makeup, mixed with sweat, began to glow like blood and flame. And in that incandescent aura, each of them understood that a silent promise had just been made: Shiro now bore a weapon worthy of his destiny.

The excitement of the young samurai slowly ebbed, replaced by a grave stillness. The workshop resumed its familiar rhythm: crackle of fire, breath of bellows, clink of cooling metal. But beneath that music of daily toil resonated a new certainty: this moment had marked a decisive step toward a future heavier, more sacred and far more perilous.

Chapter 27 – Eternal Love

Night had settled, peaceful and vast, sprinkled with distant stars that shimmered like forgotten lanterns hung in the immensity of the sky. A gentle breeze rustled the leaves of the nearby trees, and the full moon stood high above them like a silent witness, bathing the balcony in a silver glow. In the distance, the village noises had faded; only the creaking of wood and the soft song of crickets remained.

Shiro and Anzu stood side by side, unmoving, each lost in the turmoil of their thoughts. Their silhouettes brushed against each other, yet an invisible distance seemed to keep them apart. Shiro drew in a deep breath, his heart pounding with force. Then, in a low voice shaken by an emotion far too long held back, he broke the silence.

“Anzu... I can’t keep my feelings to myself any longer. Every passing day makes this secret more unbearable.”

Anzu slowly turned her gaze toward him. Her eyes glimmered in the starlight, filled with tenderness and pain intertwined. She reached forward, her trembling hands slipping into Shiro’s. Her slender fingers, hesitant at first, curled around his as if seeking shelter.

“I feel the same, Shiro,” she confessed softly, her voice fragile, almost breaking. “But this can only bring harm. I believe it would be wiser if we saw each other less.”

Shiro’s face tightened. His brows drew together with force, and his hands, trembling with both passion and fear, tightened their grip around hers, unwilling to let go.

“You don’t mean that,” he cried in despair.

Anzu lowered her head at once. Her lips pressed together, her throat tightened, and her delicate shoulders tensed. She stepped back slightly, as if trying to escape the burning intensity of her own feelings.

“Who would ever want our union to happen?” she whispered. “My father has never stopped opposing you, refusing to accept you... ever since I can remember.”

Her words fell like stones in the quiet of the night. Shiro reacted instantly. In a movement driven as much by rebellion as by tenderness, he pulled her into his arms and held her tightly. His breath, quick and warm, mingled with hers.

“No,” he murmured, his voice trembling. “My family would never oppose us. And your father... I will ask for Master Harunobu’s support. He has the influence needed.”

Their breaths entwined, warm and uneven, filling the air with a palpable tension. The world around them seemed to fade away, as though the night itself were holding its breath.

Anzu lifted her gaze to him, her eyes shining with unshed tears. Her lips quivered as she gently shook her head, as though afraid to believe his promises.

“It is like walking on burning coals... not knowing whether we will end up completely consumed,” she whispered, her voice cracking.

Shiro lifted her face with his hands. His palms, roughened by training, cupped her cheeks with infinite tenderness. He plunged his gaze into hers with an intensity so vivid it felt as though his entire soul were reaching for her. The moon wrapped them in its pale halo, making Anzu’s tears glisten like sacred pearls.

“I am now a samurai,” he said softly, yet with conviction. “Did I not say I would become one someday?”

He leaned closer, his forehead nearly touching hers.

“I will never allow anyone to stand against our union. Because I love you more than anything in this world... not even the gods could make me yield.”

Anzu’s expression softened, glowing with a newfound calm. She placed her hands over his, sealing them against her skin.

“I love you too, Shiro... and I always have. I trust you. I will wait patiently for the day the master allows and blesses our union.”

Shiro held her tightly, then kissed her with a passion filled with promise. When he lifted his head, his eyes shone with a deep, unwavering light.

“Our love is eternal,” he said simply.

The silence of the night covered the balcony, as if the entire world had heard their vow and bowed before it. But far off in the valley, a darker echo rumbled: the pounding of training drums, the thudding of hooves on distant paths, and the forges that never ceased to hammer steel.

The time for confidences was giving way to the time of trials.

For while love had just anchored itself in their hearts, destiny was already shaping its own challenges.

And as Shiro and Anzu remained embraced beneath the watchful stars, the invisible wheel of the future began to turn, ready to carry them toward promises kept... or broken.

Chapter 28 – Blood Writes Xedus

At the border of Toyama, the village seemed suspended in a single breath.

Under the white daylight, Shiro his face painted with the markings of war rode at a steady pace beside Eisen and Kayoua. All three wore their combat gear, their armor still stained with the dust of the road. Ahead of them, Fujio guided the small group, straight in the saddle, his hand firm on the reins.

They passed the village boundary without hearing a single voice raised in greeting. No children running near the doors, no women sweeping the thresholds, no elder bent over a jar or a bundle of wood. Only the wind slipped between the houses, raising swirls of dust.

“Let the horses drink, and quench your thirst,” ordered Fujio in a firm tone.

The three young samurai dismounted and led their mounts to a stone trough. The animals plunged their muzzles eagerly into the water, making it splash. Eisen, one hand resting on his sword, scanned the empty streets with narrowed eyes.

“It’s strange... no one came to greet us,” he murmured.

Shiro knelt beside the trough and splashed water onto his face and neck. The cool liquid traced bright streaks through his makeup, then he slowly rose, his features tightening.

“There is tension in this place,” he breathed.

Kayoua, after drinking, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. His brow furrowed as he observed the surroundings.

“Our relations with the Taira are becoming unbearable,” he growled.

Fujio dismounted as well. He bent over the trough, gathered water in his hands, and washed his face. Droplets ran down his cheeks and beard. Straightening, he surveyed the area, left and right, as if searching for an unseen predator.

Then the screams erupted.

Shrill, tearing cries burst from the lower houses. Voices of men, women, children mixed with muffled pleas.

“To arms!” roared Fujio.

In a single movement, Shiro, Eisen, and Kayoua placed their hands on the hilts of their long swords and drew them with a sharp hiss. Their gazes turned toward two houses further down. Four Taira samurai had just emerged, splitting into two pairs before rushing into each home.

“There! We have to intervene!” shouted Shiro.

Fujio unsheathed his own sword and turned toward his young warriors.

“Shiro and Kayoua, enter the first house. Eisen comes with me to the second!”

Without hesitation, Fujio and Eisen dashed downhill toward the second house. Shiro and Kayoua sprinted toward the first, blades in hand.

Shiro reached it first. With a violent kick, he struck the door. It flew inward with a crash, slamming against the inner wall.

“Kayoua! Stay here and block their escape!” he barked.

Kayoua nodded sharply and positioned himself in the doorway, his sword raised, ready to cut down anyone attempting to flee. Shiro slipped inside.

•

Pale light filtered through half-open shutters. The air was thick with smoke, sweat, and the suffocating scent of fear. Shiro advanced cautiously, his blade angled low, his steps muffled by straw mats. His eyes probed each corner.

At the back of the room, he saw the first Taira samurai. The warrior, face hard and cold, was already pulling his blade from the body of an old woman. Her expression, frozen in terror, still seemed to scream as her lifeless form slid toward the floor.

Shiro’s breath caught. His eyes darted to the right.

There, the second Taira had already raised his arm. His sword was poised to fall upon a middle-aged man, trembling and moaning, his hands clasped as if in a desperate final prayer.

“No!” roared Shiro.

He lunged forward, sword raised but his cry only hastened the strike. The blade fell. The man collapsed, cut down in an instant.

Shiro crashed into the Taira, and the house filled with the violent clash of metal. The duel ignited, swift and brutal. The enemy samurai lifted his blade again, meeting Shiro’s attack with ferocious determination.

Behind him, the first Taira used the chaos to flee toward the exit. Shiro, overwhelmed for a moment, stepped back. The enemy’s blade ripped through his tunic and bit into his arm. A searing pain shot across his flesh. He clenched his teeth, face twisted, but forced himself to remain guarded.

A sharp noise outside. Shiro glanced toward the doorway and saw Kayoua leaping aside to intercept the fleeing samurai. Their swords collided. Within a handful of exchanges, blood sprayed the ground. The Taira fell, impaled by Kayoua’s blade.

Fueled by a rising fury, Shiro turned back to his own opponent. He pressed forward, launching a storm of attacks faster, heavier, more precise. Each strike clattered violently against the enemy's sword, shaking the beams overhead. Then, spotting an opening, Shiro drove his blade straight through the Taira's chest. The warrior froze, eyes wide, then crumpled.

Shiro stood there a moment, breath ragged, his face contorted with raw anger. His chest heaved. His fingers clenched the hilt of his sword as if refusing to believe the battle was over.

"Shiro, pull yourself together!" Kayoua shouted from the entrance. "Eisen is wounded!"

Shiro jerked his head toward him, as though waking from a haze.

"Is... is it serious?" he asked, still trembling.

Kayoua nodded, his expression grim.

"The wound is deep! We must return to the village quickly."

Shiro bowed to him. Kayoua returned the gesture and disappeared outside.

Left alone, Shiro wiped his sword on the fallen Taira's tunic, then sheathed it with a sharp motion. He turned to the bodies of the two innocent villagers the old woman and the man lying in the room's shadow. A heavy malaise settled inside him. He bowed deeply in respect.

Then something caught his eye.

On the wall, beside the body of the Taira samurai, a streak of blood thrown there during the fight had splattered. Under his gaze, the thick liquid continued to trickle downward, stretching, dividing, forming lines, curves, spirals. Shiro felt his heart tighten.

The blood, sliding down the wall, was shaping letters.

A word was appearing.

A word he knew.

A word he feared.

Xedus.

He stepped closer, stunned, his eyes fixed on this impossible phenomenon.

"Xedus..." he whispered, his throat tightening.

Chapter 29 – The Revelation

Night had fallen, and in the room he shared with Kikouchi, the silence felt as heavy as a blanket too thick to breathe beneath.

Shiro sat facing his cousin, his face marked by exhaustion and sorrow. He absently played with the edge of his sleeve, unable to chase away the images of the battle.

Kikouchi, leaning against the wall, watched him steadily.

“The passing of time and the trials of combat will forge your conscience,” he said calmly. “You must not burden yourself with guilt. On the contrary, you must learn to place the death of innocents into perspective.”

Shiro nodded slowly, then drew in a deep breath, as if gathering what little courage remained in him.

“Kikouchi...” he began, his voice hesitant. “There is something I wish to tell you. A revelation I experienced during the fight.”

Kikouchi’s brows tightened with a hint of concern.

“What do you mean?” he asked, intrigued.

“I want you to help me understand,” Shiro replied.

Kikouchi fixed him with a more intent gaze.

“Tell me, Shiro.”

Shiro bit his lower lip gently, then nodded, as if finally accepting to set down a weight he had carried too long.

“I... I still cannot grasp its meaning,” he confessed. “But during the fight, in that house... the blood of my enemy was thrown against the wall. As it slowly trickled down... it formed a name. A strange name. The name was: Xedus.”

Kikouchi’s eyes widened. He folded his arms, remaining silent for a moment.

“You said... Xedus,” he repeated, his tone deepening.

He paused.

“Only the Gods are capable of addressing our humble minds in such a manner.”

Shiro straightened slightly, his hands raised as if to push away the idea.

“What do they want from me?” he asked, distressed.

Kikouchi lifted his shoulders subtly, his expression grave.

“I do not know. The Gods can be just as mysterious as they are powerful. When they choose to reveal it, you will discover what that strange name means.”

Shiro pressed a finger against his lips, thoughtful.

“The nightmares... and now this word,” he whispered.

Kikouchi reached out and gave him a reassuring gesture.

“Do not cloud your mind with confusion. If you need guidance, the master may have answers.”

Shiro nodded, his lips tightening.

“I will go to him as soon as the opportunity arises,” he said.

He raised his eyes toward his cousin and allowed a faint smile to cross his face.

“Thank you for listening, Kikouchi.”

Chapter 30 – Master Harunobu Falls

One year later, in the height of summer, the sun crushed the landscape beneath a white, merciless light.

At the entrance to the village of Obata, Shiro, Kikouchi, Eisen, and Fujio arrived at full gallop, their faces flushed from heat and haste. The moment they crossed the boundary, their eyes widened in shock.

Two houses were still burning. Thick, black smoke billowed upward in heavy columns, staining the sky. Flames, suffocated but still alive, crackled behind collapsing walls. Villagers formed a desperate chain, passing buckets of water and hurling them onto the blaze.

Shiro. Shiro. We were attacked.

The shout tore through the chaos.

Okuni appeared, stumbling forward, his face blackened with soot, his breath ragged. He collapsed to his knees before them.

Shiro jumped from his horse and rushed to his side.

“What happened, my friend?” he asked, lifting him by the shoulders.

“It was... fast... and deadly,” Okuni stammered, his voice broken.

Shiro scanned the surroundings, panic rising in his chest.

“What... what happened here?” he insisted.

Okuni raised a trembling hand and pointed toward the upper part of the village, toward the training school.

“The school... go to the school,” he managed to say.

•

The sight before the training school was worse.

Shiro and Kikouchi, their faces marked by a silent grief, advanced among the bodies of fallen samurai scattered on the ground. Some still stared blankly at the sky, others lay with their fingers frozen around the hilt of their swords. Blood had dried in dark patches beneath them.

Shiro suddenly turned his head. His eyes widened, and his arm shot forward.

“No!” he cried.

They pushed past the fallen and dropped to their knees beside Master Harunobu.

The old warrior lay on his back, his face strangely peaceful despite the violence of death, as though he were still standing guard over the school he had devoted his life to.

Behind them, Fujio arrived at a brisk pace, leading his horse and Kikouchi's. His expression was tense, his eyes sharp and urgent.

"We must leave at once," he said, his tone leaving no room for debate.

Shiro looked back at him, stunned.

"What are you talking about, Fujio?"

Fujio stepped closer, his voice low and grave as he bent toward Kikouchi.

"The situation is dire," he said. "I have been told that the Taira sent shadow warriors. And it seems they were well informed."

Shiro's brows knit in confusion.

"Shadow warriors?" he repeated.

Fujio straightened.

"They are former samurai, fallen from honor," he explained. "They lost their souls, their code, everything. Now they fight for coin... and they serve the cause of the great Taira lord."

Kikouchi was already on his feet, scanning the area with alert, calculating eyes.

"And those mercenaries will return to finish what they were paid to do," he added bitterly.

Shiro stared at him, bewildered.

"What are you talking about, Kikouchi?"

Kikouchi turned toward him with a look filled with sorrow.

"I feared the day everything would collapse," he murmured.

Fujio took another step, his movements more urgent.

"We must leave immediately," he insisted.

Kikouchi and Fujio moved swiftly to their horses. Kikouchi placed his foot in the stirrup, swung himself into the saddle, then turned toward Shiro.

"I hope to return soon, my friend, and explain everything to you," he said, his voice tight.

Shiro rose slowly, his expression hollow.

“But... no! Kikouchi!” he protested.

His cousin lifted a hand, refusing the plea, and drew in a steadying breath.

“I’m truly sorry... but right now, urgency leaves us no choice,” he said.

Fujio and Kikouchi spurred their horses. The animals surged forward in a cloud of dust and vanished down the path.

Shiro remained alone, disoriented, facing the lifeless body of Master Harunobu.

Chapter 31 – Vengeance

Night had fallen over Obata's estate. Inside the secluded tea pavilion, the lanterns flickered gently, casting trembling halos upon the tatami mats.

Kneeling before the small stone statues of the nature gods, Shiro kept his eyes closed in prayer. Thin sticks of incense burned before him, releasing slow spirals of smoke that heightened the solemnity of the moment. Behind him, Okuni approached with uneven steps. His expression, ravaged by grief, seemed carved in suffering. He knelt beside Shiro and joined his hands in silence.

"Haya... my little sister... she could not escape the deadly sentence of those murderers," he murmured. "She was walking innocently near the school."

Shiro swallowed hard. A knot tightened in his throat.

"Her brutal loss wounds me deeply," he replied, his voice trembling. "Know that I stand with you in this trial, my friend."

"This trial is unbearable," Okuni whispered, barely breathing.

Shiro opened his eyes wide and straightened, his lips pressed together.

"Then," he said, his tone steady, "I will avenge her... in honor of the innocents, the master... and Haya."

Okuni turned to him, stunned.

"What?" he stammered.

Shiro clenched his fists, his brows lowering into a determined frown.

"The armor," he declared. "I will be strong enough to bring back the heads of those cowards."

Okuni shook his head and raised his hands in refusal.

"You cannot take justice into your own hands without the approval of your master," he protested.

Shiro exhaled sharply, a brief flare of anger in his breath.

"Lord Ueshiba will not receive news of this attack for several days," he said. "The shadow warriors are still close. And no one is supposed to know that I am leaving to seek justice."

Okuni stared into the distance, torn. Duty pulled him one way, vengeance the other. After a long moment, he stood and bowed respectfully to the gods.

“Then, my friend...” he said at last, turning to Shiro, “I will await you at the forge. I will prepare your armor.”

He hurried away and vanished into the night.

Shiro closed his eyes and drew a long, steady breath, as though anchoring his decision deep within himself.

“Anzu, my love,” he whispered, “your fragrance lingers so gently in the air... it warms my heart each time.”

Behind him, Anzu stepped into the soft glow of the lanterns, worry etched across her delicate features. She clasped her hands against her chest, hesitant, then approached. Shiro opened his eyes, rose, and found himself standing before her.

“The gods have been merciful,” he said with visible relief. “You are unharmed.”

Anzu nodded softly, her eyes meeting his with trembling sincerity.

“I was at home,” she said, “preparing dinner when the attack happened.”

Shiro wrapped his arms around her. She leaned into him, fragile and warm, then gently freed herself. From her sleeve, she drew a small flask and placed it carefully into his hand.

“I heard your conversation with Okuni,” she murmured. “I share your grief. But if you must punish those cowards... and if you might never return... then I want my incense to follow you into battle, so that our love endures forever.”

Shiro lowered his gaze to the flask she had entrusted him. He accepted it with reverence, bowed to her, and pressed a tender kiss to her lips.

Chapter 32 – The Blessed Armor

Inside Okuni's forge, the night pulsed with the rhythm of fire. The flames roared, glowing red, sometimes spitting showers of sparks that rose through the heavy, heated air. Before the blazing hearth, Shiro stood tall. In the glow of the furnace, his face looked carved from determination itself.

Okuni worked around him in complete silence. Piece after piece, he equipped him with the armor: the greaves, the cuirass, the shoulder guards, the bracers... Each component locked into place with a metallic click, enveloping Shiro's body and transforming him slowly into a warrior of steel.

At last, Okuni took the helmet and turned toward him. Shiro still held Anzu's small flask between his fingers.

"The incense of my love, Anzu," Shiro said, lifting the flask, "will forever imbue my helmet. Should I fall in battle, its fragrance will honor the champion who takes my head."

Okuni bowed respectfully, took the flask, and poured a few drops inside the helmet before closing it. He placed it carefully upon Shiro's head and lowered the mask over his face.

Then he fastened at Shiro's hip the new long and medium swords, their lacquered scabbards gleaming faintly in the forge light. He secured six sheathed daggers as well, their golden-edged blades ready for swift release, aligned neatly along the belt.

He returned to the forge and, with great care, lifted a massive sword sheathed in black lacquer adorned with gold. Turning back to Shiro, he presented it with both hands, as though offering a sacred relic.

"It is now blessed by the Gods, like all your armament," he declared. "Its longer blade, forged for your stature, can keep enemies at distance, and sever body or head even through a helmet."

Shiro gazed at the great sword with admiration and bowed deeply.

Okuni inclined his head in return.

"The samurai embodies the ideal of strength and courage," he said. "Your rank now allows you to be accompanied by any weapons crafted by your forgeron."

Shiro grasped the great sword, feeling its balance and weight, then nodded.

"Indeed," he said quietly. "And as long as it is not worn at the hip, it is not bound by the laws of nobility."

Okuni took a burning torch, gestured toward the door leading behind the forge, and invited Shiro to follow.

*

Behind the forge, the night smelled of ash and resin.

Shiro approached his horse, Sumi, already saddled and harnessed. Attached to the saddle, alongside his travel gear, were a bow, a quiver of arrows, a spear... and a fishing net.

Shiro stopped, puzzled, and turned toward Okuni.

“Why this fishing net?” he asked.

Okuni halted before him, raising the torch. In the wavering light, his eyes took on a dark, ominous gleam.

“You will place inside it,” he said, pointing to the net, “and bring back to me every head of those cowards.”

Shiro nodded without hesitation. He mounted Sumi with agile ease and secured the long black-and-gold scabbard of the great sword along the horse’s right flank.

“I can feel myself becoming very powerful...” he murmured, almost surprised by the force rising within him.

Okuni lifted his gaze.

“It is the Gods manifesting,” he replied calmly. “According to Udo, the shadow warriors have still not left the Toyama border, near the great hill.”

“They are waiting,” Shiro said, his voice turning hard, “so they can return and finish their mission.”

He said no more.

With a sharp pressure of his heels, he urged Sumi forward.

The horse leapt into the night at full gallop, carrying the armored samurai an avenging shadow swallowed by darkness.

Chapter 33 – The Hunt for the Shadow Warriors

At dawn, a pale grey light brushed the border hill of Toyama. Crouched on a narrow rocky ledge, Shiro watched the landscape below. The cool morning wind slid across his armor and stirred the clumps of grass wedged between the stones. Far beneath him, he saw ten hooded silhouettes dismounting. The shadow warriors, each with a sword strapped to his back, formed a loose circle around their horses. At their center stood a man distinguished by a wide white cord crossing his right shoulder.

Shiro narrowed his eyes.

“You must be their leader,” he whispered.

He returned to his horse, took his bow and quiver, then resettled himself on the ledge. Back straight, he nocked a first arrow. The string groaned softly under tension.

“The way of the bow,” he murmured, “is to aim at the center of oneself, until the inner world and the outer world become one...”

He inhaled deeply. His breath grew slow, steady.

With a fluid gesture, he released the string.

The arrow hissed into the cold air. Below, one of the shadow warriors collapsed without a cry, his throat pierced clean through.

Before the others could react, Shiro loosed a second arrow, then a third. The shafts sliced through the dawn. Three more warriors were struck down, falling instantly.

The survivors panicked. Deep, indistinct exclamations rose toward Shiro. Instinctively, the remaining warriors rushed back to their horses, vaulted into the saddle, and followed their leader. All vanished into a dense patch of forest, swallowed by bamboo and pine.

Shiro lowered his bow, his heartbeat quickening.

*

Later that morning, sunlight bathed the banks of a broad, shallow river.

Along the shore, the leader of the shadow warriors, followed by six men, urged his horse into a brisk trot, moving upstream. The hooves sent pale bursts of water scattering over the river’s gleaming surface.

Shiro suddenly appeared on the opposite bank.

He urged Sumi into a furious gallop, crossing the river in a cascade of icy spray. Standing tall in his stirrups, he readied his bow once more. Arrows flew, sharp and whistling.

Two warriors were struck and fell heavily into the water. The leader, with only one companion left, yanked hard on his reins and veered upstream, fleeing the ambush. The three other survivors charged straight toward Shiro, swords drawn.

Shiro dropped his bow, grabbed the great sword, and drew it in a bright metallic flare. The first warrior closed in. Shiro brought down his weapon in a single, devastating stroke that shattered the enemy blade and split the man's body cleanly in two. The warrior collapsed in an explosion of blood.

The remaining two crashed into Sumi from the side. The horse reared, lost balance, and all three tumbled together into the freezing river. Shiro was thrown against the stones, his great sword ripped from his grasp and swept away by the current.

The warriors were already upon him, screaming their fury, swords raised.

Drenched, Shiro rolled to one knee, his eyes blazing. With a fierce pull, he drew both the long sword and the medium sword. Their twin hiss echoed over the water. Blows rained down from all sides heavy, violent. One warrior sliced through part of Shiro's right shoulder guard; another severed the leather ties of the left thigh plate. Fabric and straps flew in tatters.

But adrenaline surged through Shiro like fire. Precision returned. Rhythm returned. In a sharp combination, he deflected a strike, broke his opponent's balance, and drove the long blade through the man's torso. The second warrior followed soon after, his throat cut cleanly by the medium sword.

Silence fell again, broken only by the murmur of the river.

Breathing hard, Shiro clenched his jaw and looked downstream. In the distance, the leader's silhouette still fled.

*

The sun stood high when Shiro reached a bamboo field.

He dismounted, slid the long sword from his belt, and entered between the tall, slender stalks. The wind made their leaves tremble, producing a constant, whispering music. The soil cushioned his steps. He advanced cautiously, senses sharpened.

Suddenly a shape leapt out from between the canes. A shadow warrior, sword already descending, cut the air with deadly speed.

Shiro reacted instantly. He blocked the strike with controlled violence, riposted in the same motion, and ended the fight within two swift exchanges. The man fell among the bamboo leaves.

A heavier rustle echoed through the grove. The leader appeared.

His face remained hidden beneath a dark hood.

Calmly, he stepped into a small clearing formed by fallen bamboo trunks, like a natural circle. His posture was straight, dignified. He beckoned Shiro forward with a slight gesture, then drew his sword. His stance shifted into a precise, lethal form.

“Without any remorse for my actions,” he said coldly, “let destiny unfold... and let the Gods be witness.”

Shiro advanced with confident steps until he reached proper distance. He held the long sword with both hands, body angled, feet rooted firmly in the earth.

“I am Shiro Takano, son of Obata Takano,” he declared. “I belong in body and spirit to Lord Ueshiba.”

His voice rose, stronger.

“And I will make you pay for your cowardly deeds!”

His grip tightened.
Time seemed to contract.

In an instant, the leader hurled himself forward with arrow-like speed. But Shiro had already anticipated him. He blocked the first strike, diverted the blade, then, in a violent circular motion, drove his own sword upward. His blade pierced through the leader’s face, straight through the hood. The man froze, then collapsed heavily onto the bamboo floor.

Shiro remained still, sword raised, hilt pointed to the sky. He slowly regained his breath.

“To possess the sixth sense,” he murmured, “is the absolute weapon of any true samurai. It is the mastery of anticipation.”

He lowered his gaze to the fallen body. With a precise movement, he withdrew the blade from the skull, let it gleam a moment above the hood, then, in a single sharp strike, severed the head. It rolled across the bamboo leaves and came to rest against a fallen stalk.

Chapter 34 – The Net of Heads

Night had already fallen when Shiro returned to Okuni's forge. He approached at a steady trot, back straight upon Sumi's saddle. Behind him, tied to the harness, the fishing net swung heavily bloated with the severed heads of the shadow warriors. Thick drops of blood dripped from it, hitting the ground with a dull, rhythmic patter.

At the entrance of the forge, Shiro halted his horse, dismounted, and hung the net from a wooden beam. The heads swayed slowly, their faces frozen in twisted grimaces.

"The honor of Haya, of our master, and of the samurai has been fulfilled," he declared in a grave voice. "Let the Gods bear witness. Now I may return home in silence."

As he prepared to mount again, the leaves in the surrounding trees and shrubs began to rustle. The wind rose suddenly moving in waves, each stronger than the last pushing unmistakably toward the village's exit. Branches bent in the same direction, as if guided by an invisible hand.

Shiro frowned, his gaze fixed on the strange phenomenon repeating itself, growing clearer each second.

"What... what is happening?" he whispered.

His eyes fell upon the net. The blood dripping from it had shifted now flowing in steady, continuous lines. On the ground, the streams spread, joined, and crossed... slowly shaping a word once more.

Xedus.

"Xedus..." he echoed, bewildered. "Again this strange name."

He lifted his head. The trees rustled once more toward the village exit, the wind pushing insistently in the same direction like a divine breath marking a path.

"Is this... the divine wind showing me the way?" he asked aloud.

Without a moment's hesitation, Shiro set his foot in the stirrup, mounted Sumi, and launched forward at a gallop yielding himself fully to the invisible force guiding him through the night.

*

At dawn, the wooden door of the Takeda house creaked open. Okuni stepped outside, still half-asleep, stretching his arms. Then he froze.

His eyes widened as he turned toward the forge.

There, hanging from the beam, the swollen net gleamed faintly in the morning light filled with the heads of the shadow warriors.

“Shiro... he... he succeeded!” Okuni exclaimed, his voice trembling with emotion.

*

At the palace of Lord Ueshiba, the day was already well underway.

A breathless courier knelt before the lord’s working table and presented a sealed missive. Ueshiba, seated with the composed dignity of men accustomed to carrying the weight of fateful decisions, broke the seal and read.

His eyebrows tightened as he progressed through the text.

He remained silent for a long moment, his eyes fixed on the parchment.

Then he lifted his gaze toward his son Kikouchi standing in ceremonial attire not far away.

Ueshiba placed the missive down, inhaled deeply, and spoke.

“We are in the year 1180,” he said slowly. “And the great Genpei War has been declared.”

Kikouchi stepped forward, his expression solemn, his sword at his side.

“Shall I gather troops and move toward the enemy?” he asked.

The lord raised his head, pensive.

His gaze drifted beyond the palace walls, as if he could already see armies marching through the coming snow.

“Winter is arbitrary,” he replied at last. “It will allow us to plan our crusade against the Taira with clarity.”

Kikouchi bowed deeply.

“Then let us ensure that our army remains alert and ready to act.”

A faint smile touched the lord’s stern features.

His eyes shone with pride.

“You have made a wise decision, young lord.”

Kikouchi nodded respectfully, his heart swelling with the trust placed in him.

Chapter 35 – Isolation

Further away, on the snow-covered lands of the province of Toyama, a plump rabbit was digging through the thick frost. It sniffed, scraped at the white mound with its paws, searching for a root or a hidden sprout.

Suddenly, an arrow pierced its flank.
The animal stiffened, then collapsed without a sound.

A short distance away, Shiro stepped out from behind a tree, his bow still smoking from the shot. His beard, now full and untamed, gave him the appearance of a warrior-hermit. He walked heavily toward his prey, his boots sinking deep into the snow with each step.

He stopped above the rabbit and bowed slightly.

“May the mountain gods bless you,” he said solemnly. “And may they allow me to eat my fill once again today.”

He saluted the animal, lifted it by the hind legs, and resumed his march toward his refuge.

*

The cave where he had lived for several months greeted him with its warm breath. Inside, a small fire crackled, throwing shifting shadows across the rocky walls. Shiro, wearing only a simple tunic, sat cross-legged before the flames. He ate the roasted rabbit calmly, his eyes at times lost in the embers. His right hand rested close to his medium sword, laid on the ground beside him, as if danger could rise at any moment.

Facing him, hanging from a wooden rack against the stone, rested his armor and his black-carp helmet, still and imposing in the dim light.

Shiro swallowed another bite, then glanced toward Sumi, lying at the entrance of the cave, head resting on his forelegs. His gaze returned to the helmet the symbol of his status and of his difference.

“I have lived here for months by the will of the Gods,” he murmured. “I have faced lone samurai... taken the life of each one.”

He exhaled slowly, heavily.

“And I still do not understand the meaning of these nightmares... nor the meaning of that strange word, Xedus.”

With a tired expression, Shiro set aside the remains of his meal, took his medium sword and slowly drew the blade from its scabbard. The gold-tinted edge caught the firelight, glowing like liquid metal.

“I have become a wandering samurai,” he said. “Still not knowing why I am here... nor why I am so different from the others.”

He sheathed the blade with a sharp sound. Then he reached for a small bag by his side and opened it.

“My bag keeps filling with talismans taken from my enemies,” he whispered, brushing his fingers over a few of them. “And I wait, endlessly, for a sign from the Gods.”

*

By the next morning, the snow had begun to melt.

Shiro, dressed in full combat gear, trotted on horseback through a sparse stretch of undergrowth where white patches were giving way to brown earth. He halted near a hot spring whose rising steam spread in thick clouds in the cool air.

“Winter is coming to an end,” he observed, watching the trembling surface of the water. “It is time to take one last bath before returning to the village.”

A faint smile appeared on his lips.

“I can’t wait to see you again, Anzu, my love.”

He dismounted, scanned the area cautiously, always alert to any threat, then began removing his armor and helmet. The pieces of metal and leather leaned against a nearby tree, glinting faintly in the light.

Shiro placed a hand on Sumi’s neck.

“Sumi,” he said softly. “You may go graze while I rest in this warm water, born straight from the entrails of the mountain god.”

The horse snorted lightly, then walked away at a peaceful pace.

Chapter 36 – Haya, Messenger of the Gods

His hair let loose, Shiro set his long sword on the edge of the basin and stepped into the water. Heat enveloped his body, loosening every muscle up to his face. He immersed himself up to the eyes, then leaned back against the stone, surrendering to the soothing embrace of the spring.

Not far away, a squirrel played in a tree. It leapt from branch to branch, spun around, flicked its tail through the air, carefree and lively. Shiro watched it with gentle amusement.

The animal suddenly froze, turning its back toward him. Then, in a strange and unnatural movement, it twisted its head slowly to the side, revealing a distorted, almost human mouth.

“Shiro Takano...” it said in a strange voice, deep and unreal.

Shiro’s heart skipped. He tried to shout, but his mouth only shaped silent words. His arms thrashed through the water, his muscles suddenly stiffened. He tried to rise, but could not.

His entire body tipped forward, and his head plunged beneath the crystal-clear surface.

BEGINNING OF THE FLASHBACK

The light was different. Two twin suns burned in the blue sky of the Hôpies Peninsula, thirty-third parallel, on the planet Xedus.

Shiro walked nervously across a green land dotted with smooth, heavy stones. He wore a simple tunic, and his bare feet felt the softness of the grass. Around him stretched an unknown landscape, vibrant with foreign colors and shapes.

He stopped abruptly. His lips tightened, his brows drew together.

“But... this world...?” he whispered.

A girl’s voice, soft and clear, rose behind him.

“You are on one of the last free territories in the world of Xedus.”

Shiro’s eyes widened.

“Xedus...” he repeated. “But that word...”

A small, delicate hand suddenly slipped into his large left hand. He looked down, mouth falling open in shock.

“Impossible...” he murmured.

Haya stood before him.

She smiled, radiant, dressed in a tunic of gentle, feminine colors. Her black eyes shone with pure joy, as though no shadow had ever touched her.

“Shiro!” she exclaimed. “Do I scare you now?”

He stood frozen for a moment.

“Haya...! But... if I see you, that means I am dead, doesn’t it?” he asked, shaken.

Haya burst into a small laugh. She tugged at his hand with childish energy.

“No, you’re not dead, you big fool!” she said.

She raised her arms toward him. Shiro’s face lit up suddenly; he pulled her into his arms and held her close, gently, as if afraid she might vanish like mist.

“I’m so happy to see you again,” he said, his voice trembling. “But what is happening to me? And you...?”

Haya watched him with a new seriousness, almost solemn.

“I am now a messenger sent by the Gods,” she explained. “Your messenger.”

She nodded softly.

“It is time for you to learn the truth about your existence, your difference... and your destiny. You are the will and creation of two great and powerful Gods... but serving only one of them.”

Shiro’s face tightened, shaken. His features collapsed between shock and fear, while the two suns of Xedus burned above them, silent witnesses to a truth about to be revealed.

He blinked, lips trembling.

“What? What are you saying...?” he whispered.

Haya did not answer immediately. She turned her gaze toward the horizon, where the twin suns bathed the Hôpies Peninsula in golden light.

“You were born on Earth to learn the art of combat,” she said at last. “That God is His brother... and He made you in His image. That is why your face is so different from the others.”

She turned back to him. Her small chest rose with a sigh far older than her appearance.

“It would be naïve to think that only the Japanese people govern and shape the world of Earth,” she continued. “And even more naïve to believe that the Gods are divided the way humans are. Where all religions intersect... He is one.”

Shiro frowned. His eyes darted left and right, as though searching for something solid to grasp.

“So... if I understand correctly... the world in my nightmares is called Xedus,” he murmured. “That mysterious name revealed to me by divine signs...”

“Indeed,” Haya replied, turning her eyes back to the horizon. “You are the will of the God of Xedus. You are His weapon of flesh, His warrior. And you must stop the evil that is devouring His creation.”

Shiro turned to her, lost.

“What... what do you mean?” he asked.

A shadow of fear crossed Haya’s eyes.

“You have already seen him, Shiro,” she said quietly. “Tenebro. The King of the Void. His lieutenants. Their hordes of shapeshifters. Those beings in your nightmares... They are invading Xedus, slowly and relentlessly.”

She nodded, sealing her words.

“Tenebro wants to be recognized as supreme God. He demands sovereignty. Through chaos, he falsely proclaims that he is the origin of all life, before the light itself. He is trying at all costs to create his own race, meant to replace and rule Xedus.”

Shiro remained speechless, his gaze lost on the trembling horizon.

“So the God of Xedus cannot face Tenebro, his lieutenants, the shapeshifters?” he asked in disbelief.

Haya stepped closer, took his face in her small hands and forced him to meet her eyes.

“Unfortunately, He cannot take a mortal form,” she said. “That is why you are His instrument of war. To stop this madness that threatens the balance of His world... and could destroy Him forever.”

“But His brother...!” Shiro objected.

Haya lifted her eyes toward the heavens, where the two suns seemed to watch.

“Unlike the God of Xedus, His brother, the God of Earth, created celestial beings, Angels and Archangels, to intervene during the great upheavals brought by the Evil One.”

Shiro lowered his head, crushed, his shoulders heavy.

“What an immense honor...,” he murmured. “But what if I refuse to fight for His cause?”

Haya closed her eyes. Tears slid down her young cheeks.

“Then Tenebro will rule Xedus until its extinction,” she whispered. “And you will forever ask yourself: ‘Why did I refuse to defend life over death?’ Because you were raised for this... whether you want it or not.”

Shiro managed a strained, broken smile, eyes widening in distress.

“But I don’t even know if I am ready for this mission,” he confessed.

Haya narrowed her eyes, staring at him with unsettling intensity.

“You will be ready,” she said, “the day you stand on Earth before a mountain crowned with four stone horns. There... He will come for you, during the night.”

Shiro froze. He shook his head nervously.

“But my family...!” he cried. “My friends... And Anzu, my love!”

Haya pressed her lips together.

“There will be sacrifices,” she said. “You will always have to make heavy sacrifices, Shiro Takano.”

She slipped from his arms and began walking toward the horizon, her bare feet brushing through the green grass. Her voice rose, louder, carried by the winds of Xedus.

“Time is running out, Shiro! His last children are waiting for you to save them from certain death!”

Shiro stood there, hands open in helpless protest.

“Master Harunobu was right...” he murmured. “That the future might show me the path to freedom. The code... never forget the code. The code that demands you always be ready.”

Haya kept walking. She turned one last time toward the twin suns... then vanished, simply dissolved into the air.

Shiro’s face contorted. He reached out toward her.

“HAYA! I... I still have so many questions!”

END OF THE FLASHBACK

Shiro burst out of the water in a great splash.

Breathless and trembling, he hurried out of the steaming bath, his skin flushed from heat and shock. He slipped into his simple tunic, his fingers clumsy, still trembling from the vision. His heart pounded violently.

Chapter 37 – The Enemy

A sharp whistle suddenly ripped through the air.

An arrow struck the ground, embedding itself just a few fingers from Shiro's bare foot. He dove flat onto the earth, rolled to the side, and reached for his long sword resting on the edge of the hot spring. The blade slid from its scabbard with a clear, cutting hiss.

He scanned the undergrowth.

A Taira samurai emerged, stepping out from the shadow of a thicket. He wore heavy armor and a wide conical hat that hid part of his face. His breath rose in thick clouds in the morning chill, swelling his chest in forceful gasps.

Shiro, his expression already restored to calm determination, advanced toward him at a quick and deliberate pace.

The samurai unsheathed his own long sword. Steel flashed in the light. Without uttering a word, he charged. Their blades clashed violently, the impact echoing between the trees. Shiro quickly gained the advantage. With relentless pressure, he forced his opponent to yield ground, pushing him into a mistake. A decisive blow split the armor, tore into flesh, and the Taira collapsed.

Panting, Shiro lowered his gaze to the man's chest. Beneath the cracked plastron, he spotted a talisman tied to the armor, half hidden. He bent down, removed it, and slipped it into his bag along with the other relics taken from his fallen enemies.

With a sharp, practiced motion, Shiro thrust his sword forward and wiped the blood from the blade until the golden sheen of the edge returned.

A strange breath of air made him turn around.

Between two trees stood a great white stag. Its antlers rose like a crown of sculpted branches. Thick vapor curled from its nostrils in the cold air. The animal, perfectly still, met Shiro's gaze and held it calm, fearless, with a gravity that felt almost human.

Then, soundlessly, it turned its head and walked deeper into the forest, disappearing among the trunks.

Shiro, struck by a sudden shiver along his spine, bowed respectfully in the direction the stag had vanished.

Then, as if whispered by an unseen voice, a name imposed itself upon him with sudden clarity.

"Obata..." he murmured.

Chapter 38 – The Return of the Young Lord

In the morning, within the training school of the village of Koshikake, the light entered gently. It was a peaceful brightness, still a little cold, sliding between the shutters and illuminating the wooden walls. In the great hall, everything seemed silent and restrained, as if the place itself were holding its breath.

Kikouchi stood beside the long central table. The faint mustache on his upper lip lent him a more serious, almost adult air. At his waist hung his three swords, the mark of his new rank, and over his shoulders rested a carefully tied lordly tunic. Spread out before him were several maps mountains, routes, outposts, neighboring villages. He studied the lines, symbols, and black-ink annotations with deep focus, weighing each detail with measured thought.

Around him, his advisors waited. They stood in silence, hands joined, perfectly still. No one dared speak without being asked. In their posture, one could feel how much authority Kikouchi had gained. He was no longer the student of earlier days he was a young lord rising to his full stature.

A samurai appeared at the back of the hall. He walked forward with steady steps, eyes lowered in respect. Upon reaching Kikouchi, he bowed deeply, both hands resting on his sword.

“My lord,” he said calmly. “Takano has returned. He stopped by Okuni the blacksmith. The forger is repairing his armor and sharpening all his weapons.”

Kikouchi straightened. His face softened, and a slight smile appeared brief, but meaningful. Such an expression was rare for him, and it was enough to show how important this news was.

“Have him present himself as soon as possible,” he replied simply.

The hall fell quiet once more. Yet everyone knew that Takano’s return was never ordinary. It was often the sign that a new chapter was beginning.

Chapter 39 – The Story of His Birth

Later, at the foot of the mountain, the rice fields stretched out like mirrors shattered by the breeze.

Obata, his back bent, worked in the water, his legs buried in the clear, cold mud of early spring. His hands performed the same patient, repetitive motions that the seasons had etched into him.

On the path, a figure approached.

Wearing a simple tunic, Shiro walked down toward his father. His face seemed calmer, as if washed clean by the solitude of the mountain. Obata, sensing a presence, straightened. When he saw his son, his eyes lit up with a deep, quiet pride.

He stepped out of the rice field, water running down his legs, and bowed respectfully before Shiro. The young man returned the bow with equal gravity.

They began walking side by side along the parcels, the gentle lapping of the irrigated fields marking their steps.

Shiro let his gaze wander from left to right, across the fields, the mountains, the drifting clouds.

“I miss all of this so much, sometimes,” he admitted.

They walked a little longer in silence. Then Shiro turned slightly toward his father.

“Father,” he said calmly. “Is there something you wish to tell me?”

Obata stiffened.

“What do you mean?” he asked, defensive.

Shiro gave a faint, knowing smile without directly meeting his eyes.

“For example... about my birth.”

Obata stopped. The features of his face froze. He frowned, locking his gaze with his son’s.

“Why are you asking me this?” he said, his voice roughened.

Shiro tilted his head slightly without looking away.

“I believe you’re hiding a truth,” he replied.

Obata blinked, his mouth parting slightly.

“It’s your mother...” he began.

Shiro immediately raised his hands.

“No,” he cut in. “I haven’t seen her yet.”

Obata searched for words, his eyes drifting for a moment toward the mountains.

“Who then?” he muttered.

Shiro made a calming gesture.

“It doesn’t matter, Father,” he said gently.

Obata clasped his hands, nervous, then lowered his head a little. He nodded slowly, as if finally accepting to confront his own past.

“I... I will explain,” he murmured. “And I only hope you will not hold it against me.”

Shiro bowed respectfully before him.

“Nothing that may be said will ever sever me from my family, nor from my father,” he answered. “Never.”

Obata’s face carried the imprint of an old wound. He no longer avoided his son’s eyes.

“A long time ago,” he began slowly, “your mother lost her child born dead. After that... she could never bear another.”

He paused, as if reliving each word. Then his gaze drifted toward the mountain rising above the valley.

“Crushed by despair,” he continued, “I went up there alone, in the heart of winter, to beg the Gods.”

He extended his trembling arms toward the snowy slopes, reenacting the gesture of that night.

“In the depths of my distress,” he said, “I heard... crying. The crying of a child.”

His hands quivered, miming panic and haste.

“I rushed toward the sound,” he said with a wavering smile. “And among the rocks... I found a baby, hidden away. A baby with a strange little face.”

Obata knelt, took a handful of soil, and let it spill slowly through his fingers.

“The snow was falling harder and harder,” he said. “It was starting to cover his tiny body...”

He rubbed his hands together, as if feeling again the bite of cold.

“I had to warm him... shelter him. I couldn’t let him die there, smothered in the snow, just so his crying would stop.”

He paced nervously a few steps, trapped in a memory he still couldn’t quiet.

“I called out, again and again,” he said. “But no one answered. Neither his parents, nor any living soul. I was alone, abandoned with that infant.”

He lifted his arms upward.

“The snow grew so dense that I lost any hope of finding my way home,” he said. “And then...”

His voice shifted, carrying something uncanny.

“Then something unimaginable and extraordinary happened.”

He spread his arms, palms open, as if embracing something invisible.

“I still cannot explain it, Shiro. But suddenly... I was protected. Guided. As if a divine corridor had opened before me. Surely the will of the mountain spirits.”

A shiver entered his tone.

“Thanks to them, I returned safely home, with the child warm against my chest.”

Obata held his hands out toward Shiro, as if offering him once more what he had once carried.

“Without a moment’s hesitation, your mother and I took this different baby under our protection,” he said. “And we gave him the name Shiro.”

The young man felt his throat tighten. His eyes sparkled with a restrained emotion. He bowed deeply before his father.

“No one must know of this conversation,” he said gravely. “Not even Yukiko.”

He raised his head, his features lit by a proud affection.

“I am proud to be your son,” he added. “And nothing will ever change that.”

He paused, his eyes turning toward the mountain that had sealed his destiny.

“The Gods answered your plea that day, Father,” he said softly. “And today... they have finally answered mine.”

Chapter 40 – Kikouchi Reveals His Identity

At the training school, the late-morning light filtered in at an angle, cutting the floor into pale rectangles.

Shiro entered, a pouch of talismans clenched in his right hand. He bowed his head respectfully.

“You summoned me, my lord,” he said.

Before him, Kikouchi stood surrounded by his advisors. With a firm gesture, the young lord dismissed them. Their silhouettes withdrew in silence. Then he turned to Shiro and stepped forward.

“Shiro Takano,” he said.

His tone, this time, carried a solemnity that no longer resembled the boy Shiro had known. Shiro lifted his head, stunned.

“Impossible,” he whispered.

Kikouchi’s face lit up with a warm smile. He stopped at Shiro’s side and bowed respectfully.

“I am truly sorry that all of this unfolded in such a way,” he said with heartfelt sincerity. “And I offer you my condolences for little Haya.”

Shiro stood there, speechless. Words refused to form.

“So... I was always at the side of a lord,” he stammered.

Kikouchi met his gaze without wavering.

“I am, in truth, the son of Lord Ueshiba,” he explained. “And by that right, I govern, as he does, over all the province of Niigata. For my protection, my father ordered this deception... and required your parents, and the entire village, to uphold it.”

His expression softened. The tension in his shoulders eased.

“I deeply regret this betrayal,” he added. “But it changes nothing of the friendship forged between us over the years.”

A subtle smile curved his lips.

“From now on,” he continued, “in the presence of others, you must address me formally, and obey my orders.”

Shiro raised the pouch of talismans to chest height, then presented it to Kikouchi with respect.

“Forgive me, my lord,” he said. “Please accept these offerings in all humility.”

Kikouchi took the pouch, opened it, and examined its contents: a silent collection of talismans taken from his enemies. He nodded, satisfied.

“I see that you have finally awakened the warrior that lay dormant within you,” he said. “But no more vendettas without the authorization of your lord.”

Shiro bowed deeply.

“The shadow warriors are all dead, their heads severed. I am, and remain, at the service of my lord,” he answered.

Kikouchi placed a firm hand on his shoulder.

“The Genpei war against the Taira has begun,” he said. “We have orders to march at dawn. We will advance along the coast and invade part of the lands of Jōetsu, Kaga, Wakasa, Tango, Tajima, Inaba, then Fukui. There, we will await the arrival of my father’s troops.”

A light of renewed ardor shone in Shiro’s eyes.

“I look forward to fighting at your side,” he said with dignity.

“That is exactly what I expected of you,” Kikouchi replied, bowing in turn.

After a brief silence, his brows drew together. He stepped back, hands clasped behind his back.

“And Anzu?” he asked.

Shiro’s expression darkened. His shoulders sank.

“Anzu and I suffer because of our love,” he admitted. “We do not know whether her father or anyone else will ever accept our union. Nothing is certain for now.”

A new determination settled on Kikouchi’s features.

“When this war is over,” he declared, “I give you my unwavering support for your union. And I will demand that it be accepted. Your love will be respected and acknowledged for life, in the eyes of all.”

Shiro lifted his head sharply. His eyes shone with intense gratitude.

“Kikouchi... My lord...” he breathed. “What an honor you grant me.”

Chapter 41 – The Farewells

In the evening, inside the tea pavilion of the Obata home, the calm seemed suspended in the air. A scent of warm leaves, ancient wood, and night-blooming flowers drifted slowly around the room. Lanterns cast an amber glow, soft as a breath.

Kneeling before the basin, Shiro meditated with a serene, almost luminous face. The clear water reflected the colors of dusk: a blend of rose, gold, and deep blue. Slowly, he opened his eyes and dipped his hands into the cool water. Carp slid between his fingers, their smooth flanks brushing his skin like living silk.

Behind him, in the shadows, Anzu appeared without a sound. Her light fragrance wild flowers and rice powder reached him before she did.

Shiro inhaled deeply, a tender smile touching his lips.

“I would recognize your scent among a thousand others,” he said without turning.

He straightened, turned around, and the lantern light briefly caught the gentle contours of Anzu’s face. With infinite delicacy, as if he were embracing her after years apart, he drew her into his arms. The warmth of her body pressed against his erased, for an instant, danger and all the threats looming over their future.

“I have good news, my love,” he said. “Lord Kikouchi Ueshiba will support and bless our future union after the war. No one will be able to oppose it. I am the happiest man in the world to hold you in my arms.”

Anzu lifted her gaze toward him, astonished, her eyes shining under the golden glow.

“Kikouchi?” she murmured. “You... you don’t mean your cousin... the one who left the village so suddenly during the attack?”

Shiro smiled, a blend of surprise and quiet resignation.

“It is surprising, I know,” he answered softly. “But yes. He was, all along, the son of Lord Ueshiba. The entire lie was crafted to protect him, with my parents’ complicity. And nothing has broken our friendship... on the contrary.”

Anzu’s features softened. She stepped closer, so close that her breath brushed Shiro’s.

“Then I will wait for you,” she said. “And I promise that when you return... I will finally become your wife.”

Shiro leaned toward her, their faces just a few centimeters apart.

“You are the love of my life, Anzu,” he murmured.

His eyes suddenly filled with a deep sadness, as though all the emotions he had been holding back for days had finally found a crack to escape through. Silent tears rolled down his cheeks.

Anzu raised her hand and rested her fingers on his face with a tenderness that seemed to stop time itself.

“These tears on your cheeks,” she asked gently, “are they the culmination of an impossible love?”

Shiro smiled through his tears, nodded... then kissed her long and passionately, as if that kiss were their secret vow one that could resist time, war, and even the Gods themselves.

Chapter 42 – Departure for the Genpei War

Spring. On the lands of Jōetsu, clouds of dust rose beneath the marching army.

Battalions of foot soldiers and samurai advanced in tight formation, bearing the flag of the province of Niigata: the black fish on a white field, fluttering in the wind like an omen.

Kikouchi, wearing a helmet shaped like a bear's head, rode at the front. To his right, Shiro, helmeted and armored, carried his long sword beneath Sumi's saddle. Around them marched their companions, each marked by a distinctive armor: Kayoua, his face painted with a threatening expression, clad in a uniform grey-white armor; Eisen, draped in dark tones, crowned with a black helmet whose aggressive horns cut the sky; Udo, his face brutally painted, three great black feathers rising from his skull, encased in a bamboo battle-tunic like a carapace; Yagyu, in full armor, his eye shining with impatience; and Shinsuke, in orange armor, holding a great pole-scythe whose blade caught every glimmer of light.

"It's already been three days," Yagyu growled mockingly. "And nothing! Not a single Taira in sight!"

Udo slightly turned his head toward him.

"A philosopher once said: 'If the mountain does not come to you, go to the mountain,'" he declared.

Yagyu shot him a grimace.

"Tell your philosopher to come here himself," he muttered. "I'll make him climb mountains he won't soon forget."

Kikouchi pulled lightly on the reins, slowed, and leaned toward Shiro.

"I ordered Fujio to stay ahead of the troops," he explained. "With Jomei, Chikara, and Chiyako. Even if they still refuse to grant you the respect your rank deserves, they have the right to fight. And the honor of bringing victory."

"Let's hope time will change them," Shiro replied, eyes fixed forward.

A courier arrived at full speed, raising a storm of dust. He dismounted, bowed, and handed a scroll to Kikouchi. The young lord unrolled it, and his features brightened.

"Good news!" he announced loudly. "Lord Ueshiba is driving the Taira from their lands and burning their homes. He also says the blood of their samurai flows in rivers."

Cries of satisfaction rippled through the ranks. The warriors exchanged hard looks, eager for battle.

Suddenly, ahead of them, Taira troops deployed on the plain, ranks tight, banners snapping in the wind. The air vibrated.

Yagyu grinned, his eyes shining with ferocious joy. He drew his long sword and raised the blade to the sky.

“Finally!” he shouted. “The Gods have heard me!”

The clash of the two armies was terrible. Kikouchi launched the assault, Shiro at his right, his very long sword carving open breaches in the enemy lines. Foot soldiers roared their determination, samurai surged forward, steel sang and shattered. Very quickly, despite the violence, the Minamoto took the advantage. The plain filled with overturned armor, fallen banners, and silent bodies.

Farther away, in the province of Kaga, the sunset set the sky aflame.

Shiro and Udo, at the head of several samurai, surrounded a Taira seigneurial palace. They attacked from all sides, set the building ablaze. Flames swallowed the framework, dry wood twisting and screaming. Trapped inside, the Taira warriors ran out in panic, only to fall beneath Minamoto blades.

The script of destiny seemed to be written at the tip of their swords.

Udo, breathless, wiped the long blade of his weapon, his eyes still shining from the combat. He looked with surprise at Shiro, whose sword had just descended with a nearly bestial fury upon a last opponent.

“The samurai with the strange face,” he murmured, “is like a butterfly breaking free of its chrysalis.”

At dawn, on the coast of Wakasa, the sea wind whipped a high rocky ledge.

Shiro, Eisen, and a group of foot soldiers advanced with difficulty toward the base of the cliff. Taira arrows, fired from above, sliced the air with deadly whistles. Several soldiers collapsed, struck mid-stride.

Shiro rushed toward one of them, already lifeless. He bent, seized the corpse, and hoisted it onto his shoulders as an improvised shield. Behind this rampart of flesh, he advanced, planting his feet into the loose stones, climbing the ledge step by step, arrows thudding into the dead man he held tight against him.

Once in range, he threw the corpse to the ground with a dull thud. In the same movement, he drew his long sword and hurled himself at the Taira, the steel gleaming in the hard morning light.

Like a wave crashing against a rock, the enemy collided with him.

But this time, the wave broke.

Eisen reached Shiro, weapon in hand. For a moment, he froze, chest rising heavily as he watched him fight. The way Shiro moved along the ledge dodging blades, striking, rising again under the falling arrows had something unreal.

“It looks as if the Gods protect him... and breathe their resolve into him,” he murmured, troubled.

Then he pulled himself together, tightened his grip on his sword, and leapt into the fray. At Shiro’s side, with the foot soldiers following as best as they could on the treacherous rock, he engaged the fight. The Taira, trapped between them and the edge of the cliff, were pushed back step by step. Blades struck, clashed, cut deep. Soon, their cries mingled with the roar of steel... then faded. One by one, the Taira fell, until none were left standing.

Chapter 43 – The Enemy of My Friend Is My Enemy

On the lands of Tajima, the end of the day bathed the plain in a red glow. Fighting raged everywhere.

Kikouchi's troops advanced with difficulty, slowed by the fierce resistance of the Taira warriors, who opposed a desperate defense.

Kikouchi, Shiro, Yagyu, Kayoua, Eisen, and Udo had dismounted. Sabers in hand, covered in sweat, dust, and blood, they fought at close quarters, surrounded by screams, bodies, and trampled banners. From atop his horse, Shinsuke cut through the melee and rushed to his lord's side, his great pole-scythe raised like a banner.

"Lord Kikouchi!" he shouted, forcing his voice to rise above the chaos. "Several samurai, with Fujio, Jomei, Chikara, and Chiyako, are trapped in an ambush!"

Nearby, Yagyu finished his opponent with a furious strike. He wiped his blade in a sharp gesture, then turned an ironical, bitter stare toward Shinsuke.

"It seems the Gods have decided to abandon them to their fate," he said coldly. "Let them be worthy of their dead and their sacrifices."

The tone, mocking, sounded like a sentence.

Shiro, a few steps away, pierced his enemy with a clean thrust. He sheathed his long sword automatically, then turned his head sharply.

"Sumi!"

The horse burst out of the chaos, galloping toward him. Shiro leapt onto the saddle, seized his very long sword, and tied it to his hand with a cold, steady determination. Yagyu stepped toward him, pointing a finger as if trying one last time to shatter his resolve.

"They are not worth it!" he shouted. "They never loved you, never accepted you as one of their own, Shiro Takano!"

Shiro made the long blade whistle through the air, then fixed Yagyu with a clear gaze, without anger but without yielding.

"We are brothers-in-arms, whether we wish it or not," he replied. "And I will not leave them to their fate, even if they despise me. Because, as Udo would say, the enemy of my friend is my enemy."

Without waiting for an answer, he sent Sumi into a gallop. The horse surged forward, cutting a path toward the ambush.

Farther ahead, in a hollow of terrain where the plain dipped into a natural bowl, Fujio, Jomei, Chikara, and Chiyako, surrounded by a handful of samurai, were at the end of their strength. Their armors were marked by repeated blows, blood streamed from their wounds, and their breaths came in ragged gasps. Twenty Taira samurai on horseback were closing in, forming a tightening ring of steel.

Shiro entered the basin at full speed and placed his horse between them and the enemy charge. He bowed briefly to Fujio, Jomei, Chikara, and Chiyako, who stared at him in disbelief, caught between surprise and exhaustion. Then he turned toward the Taira, whose sabers were already lowering, determined to finish them.

Shiro pushed Sumi forward and struck the first riders head-on. With a two-handed blow, he brought down his very long sword on the helmet of a Taira warrior: the heavy, blessed blade cleaved straight through, splitting the head in two despite the steel. Without losing a heartbeat, he spun, slipped between two horses, and struck again at the throat, the flank, the belly.

The melee intensified. The clang of metal and the screams of men blended into a single roar.

A sudden thunder of hooves rose behind them. Kikouchi was arriving, surrounded by his samurai. He raised his long sword, his features twisted with the intensity of battle.

“Their retreat! Cut off their retreat!” he commanded.

Kikouchi’s samurai spread out along the flanks, closing the trap. Caught between Shiro and the young lord’s advance, the Taira were quickly overwhelmed. Minamoto blades fell like a rain of steel. The enemy collapsed, cut down to the last.

Jomei, pale and exhausted, straightened with difficulty. He stared at the aftermath for a moment, then turned to Chikara and Chiyako. With a proud gesture, he saluted them, as if acknowledging before them the worth of the man who had just saved their lives.

Fujio, his forehead streaked with sweat and blood, broke into a broad smile. He lifted his sword to the sky and shouted, his voice hoarse but blazing:

“For Lord Kikouchi!”

Chapter 44 – Inaba and the Head of Okura

Later, on the lands of Inaba, victory took on a macabre shape.

On a spear planted in the ground, the head of the Taira lord Yoshida Okura was impaled, his face frozen, his eyes half-closed. At the foot of the mountain, the plain was encircled by Kikouchi's troops. The remaining Taira samurai, cornered, had no escape. Some, gravely wounded, committed ritual suicide, cutting open their bellies before being finished by a companion. Others knelt, accepting to be decapitated with dignity.

Kikouchi, on horseback, a triumphant smile brightening his face, brandished the spear where the defeated lord's head still hung. He rode across the plain, displaying the trophy to his troops.

"It is a great victory!" he shouted.

Under the eyes of the fallen warriors, he finally planted the spear into the ground, leaving the head of Yoshida Okura towering over the scene like a warning. Then, surrounded by his advisers, he turned and headed toward his command post.

Shiro arrived shortly after, trotting on Sumi, and stopped in front of the head. With a weary gesture, he removed his helmet. Sweat streamed in thick rivulets across his face. He brought the helmet closer to his nose and inhaled deeply.

"Anzu... my love," he murmured.

The faint scent of Anzu's incense, drowned beneath the smell of blood and dust, still lingered softly inside the metal.

Yagyu and Shinsuke his pole-scythe strapped across his saddle rode up beside him.

"Who is the defeated lord?" Shiro asked without taking his eyes off the severed head.

Shinsuke stepped forward, tilted his head and observed the face frozen in death.

"A fine trophy," he replied with a faint smile. "It is Yoshida Okura, lord of Ishikawa."

Shiro tightened his lips.

"Ishikawa..." he repeated. "Why was he so far from his lands?"

Suddenly, his brow furrowed. He spun toward the cluster of surviving Taira samurai.

"You said Okura?" he called out, louder.

He tugged on the reins. Sumi reared slightly, then headed straight toward the group of prisoners. Yagyu and Shinsuke exchanged a troubled glance and followed.

Bareheaded, Shiro pushed his way between the Taira. Some moved aside, eyeing him with a mix of curiosity and concern. In the center of a small group stood a samurai wearing a conical hat made of hundreds of small arrow darts, their steel points forming a bristling crown around him.

Slowly, the samurai lifted his head. His face came into view.

Shiro's eyes widened.

"Lord Toshiro Okura!" he exclaimed.

Toshiro bowed his head.

"Shiro... Shiro Takano," he answered.

He removed his conical hat, revealing his features fully.

"If I remember correctly," he said, "before we parted ways, I told you that meeting again would make this day memorable... a day where death would have to choose wisely."

Yagyu, his expression hard, abruptly stepped between Shiro and the young Taira lord.

"How do you know the name of this young lord?" he snapped. "And how does he know yours?"

Shiro offered a faint, knowing smile.

"Remember," he said, "that the most difficult art of the samurai is the one that wins without fighting."

Shinsuke stepped forward as well, humble, his gaze steady.

"It is the art of peace," he added softly.

Yagyu grimaced, then turned his eyes toward Toshiro.

"Yes... I remember now," he growled. "That day when the rain melted your mask... and I couldn't fight for the first time."

Shiro turned toward Toshiro and bowed deeply.

"Lord Toshiro, know that it is an honor to"

His words stopped abruptly. His gaze had frozen, caught by something behind the young lord.

In the distance, the mountain rose, darker than the sky. And there, before his eyes, as if the light shifted or the curtain of reality tore open, the mountain revealed four enormous stone horns rising proudly toward the heavens.

Shiro remained petrified.

Yagyū leaned closer, alarmed.

“What is it? You look like you’ve seen spirits!” he exclaimed.

Shiro did not answer. He stared at the mountain with its four stone horns with burning intensity. Then, slowly, he bowed toward it, as if greeting an invisible sanctuary.

“I am ready now... for the great journey,” he whispered.

Without another word, he pulled on the reins and guided his horse toward Kikouchi’s headquarters.

Behind him, Shinsuke and Yagyū exchanged a long, uncertain look.

“For the great journey...” Shinsuke murmured under his breath.

“He’s been driven mad by war!” Yagyū cried, raising his voice. “These must be the spirits of the warriors he slaughtered so savagely! They’re haunting him, for sure!”

Chapter 45 – Warning

Under the great command tent, Kikouchi's headquarters glowed with warm light. Lamps, either hanging or resting directly on the ground, illuminated a large map unrolled across the table, where several advisers were gathered.

"Lord Ueshiba and his army are heading at this very moment toward the Strait of Shimonoseki," one of them announced.

Kikouchi straightened with pride.

"Tomorrow," he said, "we will resume our march to join him. It is the year 1184, and four springs have already passed since we left the village of Koshikake."

A genuine smile brightened his face. He let his gaze travel over his advisers, then looked toward the entrance of the tent.

Shiro had just appeared, his silhouette outlined by the daylight behind him.

"Shiro!" called Kikouchi. "What is it?"

Shiro stepped forward and bowed deeply.

"With all the respect I owe you," he said, "I wish to speak with you privately, my lord."

With a gesture, Kikouchi dismissed his advisers. The silhouettes withdrew, leaving behind the rustling of fabric and the silence that followed.

Shiro searched for his words, his eyes briefly wandering over the map before returning to Kikouchi.

"Remember the nightmares that haunted my nights," he said, "and that strange word... Xedus."

A faint smile curved Kikouchi's lips.

"You finally discovered what it represents, didn't you?" he said softly.

Shiro fixed his gaze firmly on him.

"Xedus is the name of a world in danger," he replied. "And the creator of that world sent Haya to prepare me for the journey I must undertake, to free it from the evil consuming it."

Kikouchi's features froze.

“You’re telling me that Haya, Yagyu and Okuni’s little sister, returned from the realm of the dead... and asks you to reach the world of Xedus?” he repeated, stunned.

Shiro brought his hands together, his eyes wide.

“I am the will of two Gods,” he said, “but in the service of only one. The God of our world and the God of Xedus are in truth brothers. The first, as Haya told me, will come to fetch me tonight, within the mountain that bears the four horns of stone, to bring me to Xedus.”

Kikouchi blinked, his brows knitting together.

“This is... very strange, what you’re telling me,” he answered.

Shiro took a step forward, his voice firmer.

“That is why my face is so different,” he continued. “For from the beginning, in this world where Japan is not absolute, I was raised and trained for this mission: to free Xedus from the mighty Tenebro, born from the underworld, from his lieutenants, and from his hordes of shapeshifters.”

Kikouchi crossed his arms, his gaze sharpening.

“Tenebro. Lieutenants. Shapeshifters,” he repeated.

He stared at Shiro for a long moment, then nodded slowly, as if arriving at a decision.

“Well... all right,” he said at last, his tone composed. “I accept, out of friendship, your request to emancipate yourself, and I authorize you to leave and join your God, to honor this strange mission.”

A relieved smile lit Shiro’s face. He bowed deeply.

“I thank you, Lord Kikouchi, my friend of always, for believing me though it cannot be easy,” he said. “And above all, for supporting me. I will go tonight to the heart of the mountain... and I will leave once the sun has set.”

Kikouchi, his features tightening, stepped very close to him. His hand closed strongly around Shiro’s arm.

“But listen to me carefully, Shiro!” he warned, his tone suddenly sharp. “If at dawn your God or your creator has not answered your call... then I will have you imprisoned immediately and sent back to the village. And never again will you represent the values of the samurai. Which means... you will lose Anzu and her love forever.”

He paused, letting the weight of the threat fall heavily between them.

“Think well, my friend, before making a decision that could bear such consequences.”

Shiro stepped back, freeing himself from his grip. On his face, shock gave way to deep sorrow, mixed with the anguish of losing the love of his life. Then he gathered himself slightly, bowed one final time, and left the tent without a word.

Kikouchi, stoic, remained motionless for a long while, one finger pressed against his lips, lost in thought.

Chapter 46 – The Pact of a Thousand Samurai

Night had fallen over the mountain of the four stone horns, and silence reigned.

Shiro, fully armored, every weapon strapped to his belt, sat calmly on Sumi's back. The four stone horns towered around him like the pillars of an ancient temple, proudly raised toward the dark sky.

The wind slipped between them, warm and humid, murmuring in a deep voice.

"I am confident," Shiro whispered. "And I believe in the mission the Gods have entrusted to me since the beginning."

Behind his mask, however, sadness slowly spread across his face.
Anzu, my love... he thought, his heart wounded.

His voice rose as a vow anchored in the night.

"Anzu, my love. I will return, I swear it, and I will marry you, for our love is eternal."

He closed his eyes and released a long breath, as if offering the Gods his determination and his pain woven together.

At that moment, the mountain trembled.

A low vibration rose from the ground, like a strange lapping as though an invisible sea beat beneath the stone.

Sumi snorted, ears pricked. Shiro opened his eyes abruptly and scanned the surroundings.

"What... ?" he breathed.

Far away, the rumble of hooves emerged, faint at first, then louder, like thunder rolling down from the heavens. Silhouettes broke free from the darkness one after another: helmed and solemn, Lord Kikouchi rode at the head, followed by Udo, Kayoua, Eisen, Yagyu, Shinsuke, Jomei, Chikara, Chiyako, and Fujio and behind them, five hundred Minamoto samurai horsemen.

The column spread into a wide arc and positioned itself on Shiro's right.

The sight was unreal: a thousand hooves, a thousand armor plates, a thousand banners trembling in the evening wind.

Stunned, Shiro pulled off his helmet. He lifted his face toward this tide of steel and familiar faces.

"But... what is happening?" he stammered.

Yagyu, already brimming with swagger, urged his horse forward until he was level with him, a daring grin on his lips.

“You didn’t seriously think you’d face those demons alone, my friend?” he called.

Jomei stepped forward next, his tone graver, though pride still sculpted his features.

“You are, from this day on, a brother-in-arms to me and to the twins,” he said. “We now recognize you as one of our clan. We will follow you into your madness, whatever may come.”

Udo leaned forward, his gaze deep, his voice carrying the weight of an ancient oracle.

“I say this: if the path you walk is winding and treacherous, it is because the Gods demand far more from your insignificant carcass.”

Shiro remained silent, mouth slightly open, struck to the core by this unexpected loyalty.

Kikouchi moved his horse forward until he stood side by side with him. From beneath his bear-helm, his voice rose, clear and firm, carrying both the authority of a lord and the warmth of a friend.

“Your victories are unmatched, Shiro,” he said. “And in order to honor them, your friends and I, joined by five hundred samurai horsemen, made the promise to follow you through this night of madness.”

Shiro had no time to answer.

The vibrations intensified and from the opposite side of the mountain, a second rumble echoed.

He turned.

Descending the other slope, a second army advanced in perfect cadence.

At its head rode Lord Toshiro Okura, his armor worn from the campaign, silent and resolute. At his side rode a woman samurai with broad shoulder guards, wielding a large war-scythe as if it weighed nothing: Natsumi Okura.

Her armor, forged of dark metal adorned with delicate feminine patterns, shimmered under the dying light. Her pale face bore subtle makeup that highlighted the fineness of her features; her lips, a deep crimson, looked like a living wound amid this world of warring men. Her long black hair spilled down her back like a river of ink.

Behind them came five hundred Taira samurai horsemen, their banners snapping in the solemn wind.

The company lined up to Shiro’s left.

Toshiro approached, his dark gaze meeting Shiro’s.

“I present to you my sister and samurai, Natsumi Okura,” he said. “She agreed to follow me and postpone her death until dawn, along with my five hundred remaining samurai. But I believe the Gods expect a sacrifice from you. It would be an honor to take part in it.”

Eyes wide, Shiro bowed deeply to Toshiro and Natsumi.
She returned the bow softly, humble yet unwavering.

A crease formed on Shiro's forehead. He turned toward Kikouchi.

The Minamoto lord, as if waiting for that glance, urged his horse forward.

"The circle closes, my friend," he said gravely. "And if the Gods grant your revelations, then..."

He lifted his head, and his voice rose like an oath proclaimed before the universe.

"I, Lord Kikouchi Ueshiba of the Minamoto clan, make the exceptional pledge together with Lord Toshiro Okura of the Taira clan, and with our thousand samurai horsemen to unite under this truce. And if it truly takes place, then we shall fight under your command, to free your God from the demons ravaging his world."

Shiro's throat tightened. His whole being trembled between wonder and disbelief.
He bowed deeply to Kikouchi, then lifted his gaze to embrace the one thousand samurai assembled Minamoto and Taira, united for the first time in history.

"What an honor you grant me," he said, his voice trembling. "And I understand your doubts. Yet the very fact that you stand here proves that the Gods have willed it so."

His gaze sharpened suddenly, filled with a new precision.

"Now," he ordered, "cover your horses' eyes, close your own, and take the hand of the samurai beside you. Do not let go. The sun sets at any moment."

He guided Sumi forward and faced the thousand samurai and his twelve brothers-in-arms. He replaced his helmet, tightening around him the armor that bound him to destiny.
Then he extended his right hand toward Kikouchi, his left toward Toshiro.

Both lords grasped his hands, and with a single command, they ordered their warriors to do the same.

Soon, a vast living chain formed between the stone horns Minamoto and Taira, sworn enemies, united in a silent circle for the first time.

"Now," Shiro said, his voice deep, "let the Gods take hold of you."

The sun fell behind the ridges with unnatural speed, as if time itself had begun to run. Darkness swept the plain, swallowing its contours. Clouds rose from every direction, swelling and swirling above the mountain of the four horns.

The first lightning bolts tore the sky. Thunder rolled, circled, and then struck the stone horns with unimaginable force. A blinding wave of light engulfed the entire mountain.

The bolts converged, twisted, and knotted into a single mass of blazing brilliance that set the night on fire. In this overwhelming glow, the silhouettes of the samurai and their mounts appeared one last time shadows engraved in the flame.

Then the lightning fell not to burn, but to carry away.

It struck each samurai, each horse, one after another, in a continuous roar of thunder. Light swallowed everything, then contracted suddenly, as if sucked into another realm.

The mountain fell silent.

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Later, beneath a calm sky dotted with newborn stars, horses climbed the bare slope of the mountain of the four stone horns. Kikouchi's advisers, their faces drawn tight with worry, scanned every rock and shadow.

They reached the clearing where, moments earlier, a thousand warriors had stood.

No one remained.

No hoofprints. No armor. No fallen banners.

Nothing except cracked stone, an air tinged with the smell of burning, and at the tips of the horns, a disturbing glow: the rocky points were molten, as if fire from the heavens had melted them.

"Where have they gone?!" cried one adviser, his voice shattering the night.

He spun around, panic rising.

"But where is Lord Kikouchi?!"

The wind rose across the empty mountain.

No echo answered him.

Chapter 47 – The Children of Xedus

On the world of Xedus, above the plains of Rênôuv, three crafts sliced through the clear sky at full speed, skimming low above a vast expanse of dense, deep-green grass. Their sleek shapes, plated with glowing blue lines, made them look like spears of light gliding effortlessly through the air. They hovered a safe distance above the ground, following the curves of the cliffs with unsettling ease.

Above them, two suns burned side by side, casting their twin rays upon a sky of almost unreal blue.

Somewhere near the center of the island, three young operatives halted their flight.

The first craft slowed abruptly, then dematerialized in a faint crackle of light. Where the machine had stood a heartbeat earlier, a boy now stood upright.

Nasch.

His one-piece suit, tight-fitting with a short collar, clung to the lean muscles of his adolescent frame. His dark brown hair, streaked with copper, framed a fine, well-proportioned face tanned by a double sun. Around his neck, a necklace set with a greenish luminous stone emitted a soft glow the same radiance Shiro had once glimpsed in another time, on another path.

On his left forearm, a slender metallic prosthesis pulsed with small rhythmic lights. These lights faded as Nasch slid into the sheath at his right hip a small, intricately sculpted metallic rod he had been holding. The link between the weapon and the prosthesis sealed with a soft click. Nasch stepped forward and leaned over the edge of the cliff, staring below.

The second craft dissolved. A young girl rose gracefully to her feet.

Yina.

Her outfit, a two-piece suit with a tall collar rising to her chin, clung to her movements with ease. Her mixed-toned skin captured both the white and the golden light of the twin suns. Long braids of white-copper strands fell over her shoulders like luminous cords. Her round, full face was framed by large headphones from which a powerful instrumental track still hummed faintly.

She, too, wore a necklace strung with a greenish luminous stone. On her right forearm, a fine metallic prosthesis pulsed with a rhythmic glow. It dimmed when she slid her own sculpted metallic rod into a sheath at her left hip. She removed her headphones and let them hang around her neck, then approached the cliff's edge, her eyes fixed on the plains below.

The third craft vanished. A very young boy stood up, wavering slightly.

Tobyn.

He wore a two-piece outfit with exaggerated protective padding oversized shoulders and knees, as though he hoped the armor's proportions would compensate for his small stature. His short collar revealed a still-childlike neck. Blond-copper, wavy hair framed a round, pale face. The same greenish stone pulsed faintly at the end of the necklace resting against his chest.

On his left forearm, a thin metallic prosthesis blinked uncertainly, then stabilized as he slid his sculpted metal rod into the sheath at his right hip. His grave expression contrasted with the softness of his features. He stepped forward, eyes fixed on what lay below.

All three saw the same thing at the same moment.

Nasch narrowed his eyes. His voice rose in a fluid, melodic language unknown to Earth or Japan, its cadence strange and musical.

"Yina... do you see what I see?"

Yina rested a hand on her prosthesis, jaw tightening.

"Nasch... they're the minions of Ténébro," she answered in that same foreign tongue, whose origin remained a mystery. "They've found us and they're coming to erase us once and for all."

Tobyn shook his head violently without looking away from the plain.

"That's impossible! My scanner didn't detect them as such!"

Nasch turned sharply toward him, tension edging his voice.

"Tobyn... then who are they?"

Silence fell.

The wind brushed their suits and carried up to them a distant rumble. Their eyes met, then turned again, together, toward the plain.

There, under the doubled sunlight of Xedus, advanced an army unlike anything they had ever seen.

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Below, Shiro rode at the head of the column.

Beside him, Kikouchi, Toshiro, Natsumi, Udo, Kayoua, Eisen, Yagyu, Shinsuke, Jomei, Chikara, Chiyako, and Fujio formed a tight, unbroken guard.

Behind them, one thousand Minamoto and Taira samurai, mingled in formation, advanced at a steady trot. Their Japanese armor caught the foreign light of Xedus, and their banners snapped in a wind born from another world. Their horses set hoof upon grass grown beneath two suns for the very first time.

Shiro lifted his gaze to the unfamiliar sky.

He had left behind a mountain crowned with four stone horns.

He now entered the plain of Rênôuv.

His destiny had crossed into another world.

His battle and his legend had only just begun.

Chapter 48 – The Watcher

Present day.

Ouchiya lay unconscious in his hospital bed, prisoner of the shadows cast by the intensive care unit. Around him, the frozen whiteness of the walls and the bluish halo of the machines shaped a cold sanctuary, stripped of all human warmth. His chest rose and fell to the rhythmic, mechanical pulse of a ventilator that translated his life into numbers and signals. It was as if his breath belonged half to him, and half to the metal and plastic keeping him alive.

The silence in the room was broken only by the artificial sigh of the respirator, that hypnotic ebb and flow a strange blend of suspended life and overwhelming fragility.

At his bedside, Shiro Takano kept vigil.

He stood motionless, his back straight, wrapped in his armor as though it were a second skin. The reflections of the steel vanished into the hospital's pallid neon lights, anachronistic, almost absurd in this world of white coats and IV drips. His eyes never left Ouchiya's face, pale and unchanging.

At first glance, Shiro's expression remained solid, unwavering. But beneath that mask of strength, his mind wrestled in silence, engulfed in a storm of worry and sworn duty. Every sharp beep, every flicker on the monitor, every amplified breath from the machine reminded him of the brutality of fate and of the terrible price they had paid to reach this moment.

Words from their master resurfaced with startling clarity, as though Harunobu himself still stood behind him, watching from the dimness of a distant dojo.

"The samurai protects not only with his blade, but with his loyalty to those who depend on him."

Those words echoed within him like a living oath, a flame that neither time, nor distance, nor even death could extinguish.

Dawn was only just beginning to filter through the wide hospital window. A faint, timid glow crept across the smooth, cold floor, reaching toward the foot of the bed. The hospital itself remained in that half-night known only to nearly empty corridors.

Shiro closed his eyes for a brief instant.

His body cried out for the rest he had been refusing for far too long. His muscles, exhausted by battles, by waiting, by endless nights of keeping watch, protested in silence. Yet in that moment of surrender, his mind faltered.

The contours of the hospital room faded, swallowed by the thickness of memory. The steady sound of the respirator grew distant. The present dissolved, pulled away like a falling tide.

And already he was sinking back into another time, another world, another sky.

THE STORY CONTINUES...