

The Bored Vassal

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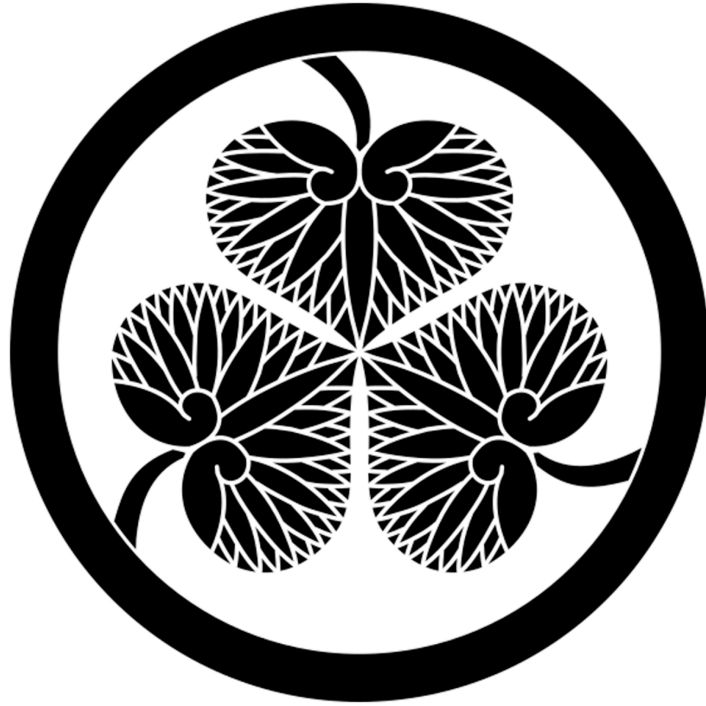
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Crest of the Tokugawa clan from
the early Edo period

1 THE BORED VASSAL

1

THE TIME WAS just before eight in the evening. The place was Nakano-cho in Yoshiwara, the red-light district.

At the height of peace during the Genroku era (1688-1704) in Edo, evenings in Nakano-cho were tinted over the past few days by the scattering of cherry blossoms, the first tidings of spring. Naturally, a little before eight at night was the time for the pleasure seekers to emerge.

Suddenly, vulgar shouts disrupted the quarter.

“Stop! Hey you stop! Coward! If you’re a true samurai, you don’t pick a fight and run away! Hey! Draw! Stop and fight!”

Led by a mature man past forty years of age, four rugged samurai were chasing down a lone man. They seemed intent on forcing him into a brutish fight. But no matter how you looked at it, their challenge seemed half-hearted. If the one being challenged also believed a reasonable action would be to draw his sword like a man, he looked like he would do well. He appeared to be eighteen or nineteen years old, perhaps, a page in the employ of a daimyo of some renown. Although he still wore the thick, hanging bangs of a boy, he must have already been initiated into manhood.

This may not serve as an explanation, but the lone man looked to be a master swordsman as did the four pursuing him. One who may have mistakenly had the confidence of no fear of defeat and another who spoiled the most for a fight took turns changing places with the forty-year-old who was the first to catch up to the youth to block his path. With their hands already on the pommels of their swords, they insulted and challenged him.

“Look at that pale white face. You’re too sweet to have any skills. Draw! Draw!”

The striking looks of the young man were obvious in a glance, but the uncouth, mad assassins seemed to have no use for his rare good looks.

While enduring their taunts and abuse, the young man earnestly apologized.

"I'm sorry. Please forgive me, but I was in a hurry. I'm so sorry. Please excuse me."

"What? Are you gonna fight or what?! Draw!"

"I...I don't know how to fight. Please forgive me."

"Idiot! What do you mean you don't know how to fight? Do we look like fools to you?"

"I'm sorry. I've always been a poor talker. I try to apologize, but never know what to say. I'm on an errand for my master and am in a hurry. Please forgive me. Please let me through. Please."

"Can't do that! What you said changes nothing. I don't know about your shabby master from nowhere. If you have business in this place, it's probably nothing important. Another thing, that pasty face of yours bugs me. Recently, I've heard about theater folks selling their pretty faces and going in and out of the mansions. I hear they're putting on airs and acting like they're samurai. You're probably one of those firefly samurai. Your bad luck was meeting us here. Draw! Draw and die with honor!"

This scene revealed the source of the fight to be the youth's tender appearance. Their irritation was pointless. Nevertheless, only one was being threatened, and the other four were making threats. In any age, the crowd would sympathize with the weaker side, the youth. Courtesans' young attendants, delivery boys, and blind masseurs all added to the tumult.

"Oh! How pitiful. Those samurai are just jealous."

"Sure are. Those raggedy samurai are definitely rejects in love."

"They don't get much love. The girls don't give a damn about any of 'em, so they pick fights and take it out on someone else."

But talk is talk, the voices in the crowd remarking on this sad affair were clear calls for justice. Regrettably, no one had the power to act.

Someone in the crowd boldly lamented that if this were a play or public storytelling, usually, an elite courtesan wearing a long trailing *uchikake* overgarment would materialize and defiantly hiss, "If my body is harmed, Go-machi will go dark." And with no resistance, the troublemakers would scatter like baby spiders. Unfortunately, for this evening's trouble, not one courtesan or female impersonator seemed to be between clients, and the usual peacemaking woman had not appeared. A boisterous voice could be heard from someone in the crowd begin to lament.

"Brutes! How awful! At a time like this, it would be nice if the Lord of Nagawarigesui [Lord of the Long Open Sewer] would come."

"That's right. That's right. He always appears just in time."

Who they were talking about was unclear, but hazarding a guess from their mutterings, he was the Lord of Nagawarigesui, an extraordinarily popular figure on Go-machi Boulevard. Had the troublemakers heard the grumbling? Maybe not because the four persisted in tormenting the youth

who only apologized.

“Fool! I don’t accept your apology. Draw! Draw so I can slice you up!”

They browbeat and shouted at him; the challenges never stopped. As the anxious crowd wiped the sweat from their brows, a voice cried out, “Ah! He’s here! He’s here! The Lord of Nagawarigesui is coming!”

“What? How? Where is he?...Of course, the Lord came.”

“Yes. Yes. That’s the Lord’s walk.”

At the same time shouts of relief rose from the crowd, a lone shadow with his hands in his kimono leisurely strolled down the replica of Kyoto’s Nakanochomachi Boulevard from the Great Gate. It was no ordinary shadow. He was tall, about five feet six inches. He wore the waxy white sheath of his long sword low, perhaps to conceal his status. His face was hidden deep inside a *Sojuro* hood. He cut a manly figure in his casual dress and leather-soled barefoot sandals.

Without hesitation, a brash delivery boy caught sight of him and ran over. Were they friends? The boy said, “Lord! You went to some great place, right? Quick! Come with me.”

A calm, solemn voice from inside the hood said, “What has you so upset?”

“If this don’t bother you, what will?! Take a look over there.”

“Aha ha. They look bored, too. But they do have a bit of flair.”

“You’re always so cool. Forget the flair. They’ve been bugging everyone for a while. Those four guys are wild and won’t quit.”

“What started the fight?”

“Nothing. Nothing at all. I saw everything, right from the start with my own eyes. That young lord seemed to be going somewhere incognito for some fun. When he was coming back from his business, those four bumped into him at that corner over there and picked a fight. They probably have some pointless grudge. The young guy didn’t laugh. He didn’t do anything. If some guy’s laughing gets on your nerves, you make him draw. But they got no reason to pick a fight. That pretty face on him probably pissed ‘em off. They got no right to do that, right? Don’t that make you mad?”

“Aha ha. That’s an amusing tale, but why are you telling me?”

“Don’t you get it? It’s sad, you gotta help that guy somehow.”

“So they’ve become a nuisance. Well, I’ll have a look.”

With complete indifference and hands still inside his kimono, he plodded into the crowd and assessed the situation in a glance. A slight complacent smile crossed his face when he said to no one in particular, “I’m so sorry, but it seems you’ve been waiting for my assistance.”

“What!? Even the lord’s strength is no match for those four.”

“That’s not true. That young man alone is more than able,” said the young lord.

“You’re kidding! Those four men are strong and have teamed up against

him. No matter how you look at it. I don't think the young fellow has a fair chance."

"You've completely misjudged him. Although he is humbly apologizing, the way he glances around and his stance suggest skills beyond complete mastery. The young man I see is a fierce tiger baring his fangs."

In that moment, some things were said while others were left unsaid. Although the youth persisted in his frequent apologies, his four opponents rejected them. When the young man, who seemed amazed by their stubbornness, retreated a few steps and appeared to slowly move one hand to clasp his ornate sword, his attitude transformed. He seemed to validate the words of the enigmatic hooded one.

The youth's vibrant voice called out, "You animals covered in human skin should listen to a little reason. But if you want to fight that much...I'll be the rival you desire! Draw! Draw and come closer!"

A glint of light was thrown from the blade being drawn. As his cheeks flushed a faint red, the gallant youth edged closer to the four. The one who had seemed so soft until now abruptly changed and no longer possessed unsurpassed beauty. The spirit of his sword swelled! Stunned, the four samurai staggered back, although they had picked this fight.

"We're not animals! Your draw satisfies us. Men! Ready yourselves...Draw!"

When the experienced forty-year-old gave the orders he flashed a sliding blade, an unexpected addition to a solitary fight. It all appeared to have been planned.

Seeing this, the mysterious hooded figure known as the Lord of Nagawarigesui had a faint smile of satisfaction when he said, "Aha ha, the young man seems to be fond of the small sword of the Yoshin school. Unfortunately, those four large men will be thoroughly shamed by the depth of his skill. This situation will soon be intriguing. Look, look, the one on the left is moving forward."

As the lord quietly spoke, the youth's bangs suddenly spread apart and swung at his brow. In an instant, his long sleeve quickly fluttered like a leaf, then the man on the left could only crawl along the ground for a long time. Admirably, this bloodless attack on vital parts used the flats of the sword. Now, three stood in anger.

"Boy! Now you've made this interesting."

While shouting, they steadily moved closer to each other to stand in formation, each one holding his raised sword with both hands in a fighting stance. As they approached on tiptoe, the men on the left and the right launched a simultaneous attack. However, the youth's dexterity was invigorating. Before they got too close, both of them laughably went down to the left and to the right. Just like the first one, blows from the flats on vital parts easily brought them to their knees and left them crawling.

Seeing this, the last man, the forty-year-old, turned as red as a boiled octopus as the crowd pressed in. Suddenly, what then appeared seemed to be a disciple accompanied by six or seven men with half-shaven heads, who looked like sturdy swordsmen. His rebuke clearly showed they were reinforcements.

“These guys are cowards! This boy...this errand boy is a nuisance. What is this? Out of the way. It’s no use. We gotta do it!”

Just as this was heard, the brash delivery boy from moments ago shrieked at the suspicious hooded figure dubbed the Lord of Nagawarigesui.

“They can’t! Don’t let ‘em! Lord, that’s Akatani Denkurou who goes around challenging dojos to fight. Those punks are his backups. He’ll fight any young guy, so you gotta hurry and save him.”

When he heard this, the hooded one showed his first sign of slight agitation.

“Aha ha, that ronin is Akatani Denkurou? He’s so unpopular, he makes people foam at the mouth,” said the young lord to himself and plodded into the center of the crowd. Without making a fuss, he protected the youth’s back. Slowly, in a calm, disciplined tone, he said to Akatani, “Don’t say anything and embarrass yourself in public, just leave.”

“What?! You gotta smart mouth. Who are you?”

“Oh, excuse me, you don’t know who I am? I’m a lowly vassal here to bother you. Well, it appears you’ve left me no choice, so I will introduce myself,” he quietly grumbled and slowly grabbed and pushed aside his hood with one hand. The sight of his face shocked with its menace. Vividly engraved into his distinctly white, broad face was a scar shaped like a crescent moon carved by a sword. That manly shaved face had a distinct gouge. Was it ghastly? Perhaps, it was so beautiful that a glimpse would sent shivers through the observer.

The sight raised doubts.

The man said to be the swordsman Akatani Denkurou stared at the scar between his eyebrows. Suddenly startled and agitated, he blurted out an order, “We’ve run into a bad one. Pull back! Get out of here!”

Akatani pulled his sword first and in the confusion disappeared into the crowd.

2

THIS COULD ONLY be declared a mystery. The terrifying scar was nothing less than menacing. Nothing about the scar was mysterious or suspicious, but was as expected. Not only Akatani Denkurou, anyone would flee at the sight of that crescent shape on his brow.

This mysterious young warrior who tried to hide under the hood was no stranger. At that time in Happyakiya-cho in Edo, every person who wore a sword, even a bamboo one, knew his name. He was Saotome

Mondonosuke, also known as the Bored Vassal.

He lived in Nagawarigesui. His stipend was the twelve hundred *koku* of rice of a direct vassal. The secret of his sword was the Moroha school of Shinogiki Chikunsai. It happened three years ago. He was thirty-one when he received the menacing crescent scar from swordsmen known as the Chohan Gang of Seven who haunted Kaminarimon gate in Asakusa. The scar was a memento from these rivals as he cut each one down with a single stroke.

Of course, the source of the menace felt by others was his eradication of all seven. The bigger threat was Saotome's first display of the Moroha school's technique of aiming your sword directly at your enemy's face. Although they were unrivaled as swordsmen at that time and walked around stirring up trouble as if the dojos in Edo were empty, had the Gang of Seven ever encountered the face-attack technique? No man alone could ever beat him. Because each man met a tragic end, the crescent scar received by Saotome Mondonosuke was proof of his heroics. His reputation for bravery rapidly spread throughout Edo.

He was also a man with power, a samurai in the role of a direct vassal to the shogun, with no need to bow to anyone but the shogun. Akatani Denkurou's quick disappearance at the sight of the crescent scar was no longer a mystery, but the actions of the page Mondonosuke aided was a bit suspicious. If rescued from any danger even if nothing had to be done, the law of the warrior demanded a word of thanks be spoken. When Mondonosuke realized this, the youth had already vanished like smoke.

"Aha ha, even the boy is gone. That's a little odd."

He cocked his head in disbelief, in time, he gently slipped on his hood. With both hands in his kimono, his barefoot sandals carried him soundlessly through the admiring crowd. He turned leisurely toward Edomachi. Even as he turned to leave, he didn't browse and, naturally, made no sign of going into any of the brothels. Without a word, he only turned slowly and left. However, he wasn't without a goal.

This is what gave rise to Mondonosuke's novel nickname of the Bored Vassal. His aimless wandering around Go-machi Boulevard did not begin today or yesterday. This had been his daily routine, barely missing a day or a night, for most of the past three years. This would be remarkable even if there were a woman to visit frequently, only an eccentric would wander around with no companion. However, from Mondonosuke's perspective, the reason was not important at all. As long as he lived in this world, he would be bored and not bored.

Boredom! Boredom! The mystery of boredom! Why was he so bored? The unspoken but known origin was the rare age of rampant peace of the Genroku era. This eminent direct vassal was always bored.

Without repeating what's been said, the essential duty of a direct vassal

was to be prepared for unrest in the land, but the land of Edo was too brazenly peaceful and exhibited a peace that provoked anger in him. Despite having unrivaled physical strength, there was no war to profit from this strength. There was no opportunity for him to distinguish himself. Rather the extravagance of this perfect peace was plain to see. To a true direct vassal like Saotome Mondonosuke, nothing was more natural than to consider this world to be boring.

Although bored, Mondonosuke was cynical because the world is not always boring.

*If you look down from a high mountain into a valley
And the flowers of the melons and eggplants are blooming
Wonderful. Wonderful.*

[from a folk song celebrating fertility]

Why was something so commonplace celebrated? The quirky voice of a singing john burst from the second story accompanied by a banging instrument.

“Tee hee hee...Don’t talk nonsense. I’d be happy too if I got their rank just by being born.”

Hearing this, Mondonosuke revealed a sad smile as he plodded around a corner onto the street leading to Sumi-cho.

Was it a chance encounter or an ambush? He heard the sounds of running steps and a woman’s voice shamelessly call out, “Aah! I’ve been waiting quite some time for you. Don’t you dare refuse me today.”

The owner of that voice forgot her social position and, for a very long time, nurtured an incredible love for the famous high-ranking samurai Saotome Mondonosuke. She was Sanchajorou Mizunami of the brothel Awaji Tower. The woman’s words were joyous, but Mondonosuke’s cold smile said it all.

“Night after night, you pester me. If I could easily lose myself in women and drink, I wouldn’t be this bored.”

He lightly brushed away her hand and casually turned toward Ageya-machi.

After he walked two unhurried rounds of the quarter with no goal, it was exactly eleven. A time close to midnight was no time to visit a brothel, except for the pleasure seeker planning to stay the night. Mondonosuke finished his solitary round and continued down the street to retire to his mansion in Honjo Nagawarigesui.

OF COURSE, AN estate fit for a man of high standing with no official position and an *omotedaka*, official land valuation, of twelve hundred koku had a huge mansion covering more than one hundred twenty-eight thousand square feet and was a reflection of the bored man. Three

housemaids, two gardeners, a lone foot soldier as the gatekeeper, and too few underservants were employed to maintain the estate. The housemaids employed for this vital work would have the strange existence of seldom being seen.

Also, this peculiar man was already in his prime at thirty-four years old. Without a wife or a concubine, a concern was who was there to wake him and to take care of him. However, god is a great joker and, fortunately, gave the peculiar man a younger sister. She was a deceptively beautiful girl of seventeen who had been aptly named Kikuji [path of chrysanthemums].

If you happened to enter the sitting room to have a look, you would see the bedding laid out, and the bored man splayed on his back still wearing his Sojuro hood and long wax-colored sheath.

After hearing the noise he made, the sounds of gentle rustling of clothes approached. It was his sister Kikuji. However, she spoke no greeting.

She entered soundlessly. Her lovely face turned away from the flickering light of the *tankei* lamp, and without a word, she helped her brother into his nightclothes from behind. This was their custom. When the bored man silently got up to change into his nightclothes, the only sound was sobbing.

He asked, "Oh! Kiku, are you crying?"

Was he right? She was unnerved and let out a sigh, her face turned away. At that moment, large teardrops fell and scattered on the round flesh of her knees. Naturally, suspicions rose in the bored man.

"This has never happened before, not even once. Did something happen this evening?"

"..."

"I don't understand your silence. Are you sad and in tears because your brother has no official title and does not go out into the world?"

"..."

"You're tightlipped. Well, your big brother is out every night enjoying the nightlife. You're crying because you despise that?"

"..."

"You're quite stubborn. Well then, I won't ask anything else."

Kikuji hesitated to speak as she blushed a deep crimson to the nape of her neck. What could be the cause? As if angered by something, she abruptly said in a quiet voice, "I heard you, but promise you won't scold me."

"You say such surprising things. I won't scold you. I won't scold you."

"You promise."

"Yes, on my word, I will not scold you. What happened?"

"All right, I'll tell you. I've met a once-in-a-lifetime sorrow."

"What? A once-in-a-lifetime sorrow? Tell me every last detail."

"Well, this is what happened..."

"What happened?"

"I'm a little afraid you'll scold me, but the truth is...lately, I've been deceiving you. A few days ago, I pledged to marry."

"What! What! Ha ha, that's not so easy. No, no. Wait. Hold on. I will soon beat my boredom. Let me sit properly. Wait a second! Now, what do you have to say. 'A few days ago, I... ' What? Tell me again."

"Oh! You're horrible. It's embarrassing. I won't say it twice."

"Oooh. You're blushing. I was a little distracted and missed the important part. Tell me everything. Leave nothing out."

"The truth is I have been deceiving you. A few days ago, I pledged to marry."

"Aha ha ha. Okay. Okay. Excellent! Well done! I thought you were still a little girl, but in the blink of an eye, you have achieved great success in the world. How admirable! Splendid! I'm a pretty smart fellow, but I am so bored I don't have a woman. That someone you're talking about, where is he from?"

"No, not now. I'll tell you later. I have a more urgent matter to speak of. The truth is he visits me every evening after you go out. But for some reason he didn't come this evening."

"So he intends to discuss a serious matter. You were going to bring him to see me and talk of matters of love."

"Oh stop! This is not a joke. Without fail, he visits from eight in the evening to ten, but for some reason, he never came tonight and I'm worried. A messenger came here and told me he vanished."

"What? He disappeared? About what time did that happen?"

"Before eleven when you returned home from your amusements, the messenger said he searched for him before coming."

"Aaah!"

As if a trace of boredom left the world, Saotome Mondonosuke turned to face his beloved little sister. He thought for a moment about what could be going on, then hit on an idea. His eyes blazed with an unusual brilliance, and he spoke with vigor, "Yes, I understand. You are asking to borrow the power of your big brother."

"Well...I'm not sure whether it is good or bad to ask a favor for what looks like an amorous matter, but I could not come up with a plan by myself. I've been anxiously waiting for some time for you to come home."

"Really? Isn't that funny? I've lived without savoring useless love. For me to aid in another's romance is not as disgusting as I would have expected. If you were looking for something else, it would be a little troubling and my involvement would be wrong. But when the man has been chosen, he is a special object to search for. I understand. Your brother will certainly help."

"Good! Will you do as I asked?"

"I'm confident. Very confident. And together with you, I'm still

confident. During episodes of boredom, Saotome Mondonosuke is more bored than the average person. If I act now, the sounds of the Moroha school and the twelve hundred koku of the direct vassal will be heard.”

“I’m so happy! Will you go right now?”

“I will leave immediately. If I do, then the boredom will be swept away. I may return in the dead of night or at daybreak. But what is the name of this darling man? And where is he from?”

“His name is Kirishima Kyoya. He serves in the villa of Sakakibara Dainaiki.”

“What a sweet name. Well then, I will return with Kyoya as a gift to you.”

“Oh...do whatever you like...”

“Your face is red, how cute! What do you mean ‘whatever’? If I return with him, as punishment for having to hear about your love affair, I will feast on rice and sweet potato porridge.”

Leaving his sister with his affectionate teasing, he wrapped his face, as usual, deep in his Sojuro hood and walked in his leather-soled barefoot sandals in deliberate, bouncy strides to the street and disappeared as if sucked into the darkness of the night.

4

THE TIME WAS a little past midnight. The only sound in the night air was the faint unearthly baying of stray dogs. The bored man glided soundlessly like a shadow down the street along the Miyato River in the dark night. The lapping waves seemed to die on the shore at the address of 7-chome, the enclosure of Lord Sakakibara Dainaiki’s villa. The instant he spied his target, his muscles tightened as he noiselessly approached on tiptoe. The tension was to be expected. Nearly three years of boredom had passed, now, an incident demanding at least a shred of Mondonosuke’s physical and mental strength came out of nowhere.

Still, this mystifying incident may or may not require the face-attack posture of the Moroha school. This emergency is the case of a missing man named Kirishima Kyoya. Did he disappear on his own accord? Was he kidnapped? If he were kidnapped, by whose hand and why? First, Mondonosuke had to gauge the situation. He surveyed the layout of the estate as he cautiously walked toward Dainaiki’s villa. He didn’t know if they were friend or foe.

This villa on the banks of the Sumida River mostly served as a substitute for a country home. Thus, the defenses were rather spartan. But spartan was relative because Lord Sakakibara Dainaiki had a salary of one hundred twenty thousand koku. The suitable number of guards left behind during the master’s absence, the security at the gate, and the construction of the guards’ row house were thorough and hard to dismiss.

Of course, if he brazenly forced his way in, the likes of Sakakibara

possessing enormous wealth would not fear Mondonosuke, a direct vassal of the shogun with no official position. However, if he feigned some slight and confronted him directly, he worried that the incident would be covered up. Meanwhile, the bored man continued to study the grounds in his shadowy approach until he fully grasped the situation.

When he was near the gate, he could see light leaking through the window frame of the guardhouse. This light radiating from the guardhouse at a little after midnight was proof that someone was still out. How many guards were manning the gate? When he crept up to the guard's window to peek inside through a crack, something was off.

There was nothing strange about a sturdy guard manning the gate, but he was the gatekeeper for a man with a huge stipend and, from the looks of it, fairly bored and engrossed in a solitary game of shogi, a game also favored by the bored man.

Would he play some difficult checkmate move? As he watched the guard turn pale in deep thought with arms folded, the bored man was struck by an ingenious plan. With a complacent smirk on his face, he pressed flush against the wall below the guard window, then in a tone welling up with emotion, called out.

“Gatekeeper...Oooh gatekeeper...”

That call at a place where the mansion faced the Sumida River was no ordinary call. He thought his call to the gatekeeper in an eerie voice sounded like a *kappa* [water sprite] at home in the deep pool of Kappagabuchi calling to a human in the pool. The guard appeared to shudder slightly and timidly approached the window to peer out. As he was looking around, he said, “That’s weird. I thought I heard a creepy voice calling. No, it was just my imagination.”

He looked, saw nothing, but was a little alarmed. When he returned his gaze to the *shogi* board, he heard the same queer tone of the bored man modulating the lonely air in the dead of night.

“Gatekeeper...Oooh gatekeeper...”

“Dammit. It’s that creepy voice again. Where’s it coming from?”

He fearfully looked out and searched, but never discovered the man flush against the wall beneath the projection of the lattice window. When the eerie creature seemed to have gone away, the guard heard the pursuing voice of the bored man again.

“Gatekeeper...Oooh gatekeeper...”

Finally, he was provoked.

“You prankster. You’re some kind of kappa. You think you’re gonna transform me...well, you’re not!” the guard said in a brave but trembling voice. As he nervously slid open the wicket gate, he saw a frightful face and was grabbed and forcefully pushed by someone with superior martial arts training, needless to say, the bored man.

“Ow! Who are you? That was you imitating a kappa!”

As the bored man used his palm to plug the mouth on the verge of screaming, he gently held the guard under his arm, calmly climbed into the guardroom, and eased his mask to the side as if to say look at this. The face thrust before the guard’s eyes was the pale elegant face marked by the vivid crescent moon scar, the mere sight of which swiftly scattered Akatani Denkurou and his gang of dojo challengers in Nakano-cho, Yoshiwara.

“Ah, it’s you, Sir!”

“It would be nice if you didn’t tell everyone. If you recognize me from this scar and do not behave, I’ll show you the face-attack posture of the Moroha school. I’m at this villa to investigate the disappearance of Kirishima Kyoya, who went missing while you were on duty. Now, tell me everything you know.”

“Yes, I’ll tell you...I’ll tell you. But please stop twisting my hand?”

“Does this little thing hurt that much?”

“Like my bones are about to snap...”

“Oh my. The daimyo is probably a hell of a drunk. Usually, the gatekeeper is a proficient man among the guards, but you’re rather helpless. Aha ha. A weevil in one hundred twenty thousand koku of rice. Look, I’m releasing you so you can tell me everything. First, when did the incident occur?”

“It was around ten. Kyoya had urgent business this evening and when he returned from wherever he went, a messenger delivered an urgent letter from somewhere addressed to him.

“So he left immediately. I was stationed at the gate at that time. And just as he went out to the road at that gate over there, I heard shouts like a fight was breaking out. I thought that was strange. When I went to investigate, seven or eight men in black were carrying what looked like a fast palanquin. After they left as if making an escape...Wait a minute, have a look at this.

“He dropped this short sword and this letter.

“I know that a letter written by someone else is not a crime, and nothing has been changed, but the letter is addressed to Kyoya. And this short sword is the one he usually wears.

“Thinking about all of this, I thought he might be in some sort of trouble. Only I know where Kyoya goes everyday. So to be on the safe side, I sent a fellow to ask around. But there were no traces of where he went. I’m worried about what might have happened to him.”

Mondonosuke said, “Aha. So this is why I’m not at home. The envoy you sent to investigate failed. Just to be sure, let me see those two items dropped on the road.”

He took and scrutinized the objects. There was nothing special about the short sword. What struck him was the tiny writing in a woman’s hand on the back of the letter...it was Kikuji’s.

“What is this?”

He thought this couldn't possibly be Kikuji's handwriting. He ripped open the letter to find a short, hastily written note.

A terrible thing has happened. The letter
explains it all. Please hurry. I'll be waiting.

- Kikuji

Suspicious, he quickly scanned the letter, but the handwriting provoked more doubts. His sister, like him, had learned the official handwriting style only to put in a good word for others. The characters in the letter were mere scribbles that looked nothing like her writing.

The only clue was an oily stain on the left side of the sheet of paper. He sniffed the stain; it smelled like the low-grade scent of the plum flower blossom in a disgraceful affair. The hair oil favored by Kikuji would have released the more refined scent of the *Oncidium* orchid. The bored man's eyes now gleamed with a peculiar brightness, and he huffed in anger.

“Those idiots. They forged this letter.”

At that moment...

“Gatekeeper, we have returned. Please open the gate.”

As the voice spoke, the guard fumbled about like a confused novice. However, the moment he opened the gate, the bored man cast about his keen eyes scanning the scene. They were carrying a suspiciously empty palanquin into the compound.

That was unusual. A palanquin decorated with gold studs was to be expected, but the red lantern was out of place, and the skeleton of a burnt lantern remained. When he looked at the end of the pole, he saw a lantern that must have been borrowed at their destination. The crest on the lantern was unusual. This fascinating crest had the undyed pattern of a T enclosed by a circle, a pattern remotely related to the crest of a daimyo or a samurai residence.

The fashionable lantern was built with crimson spines. It looked familiar to the bored man. An unexpected tingling slowly rose in his breast. In his three years of wandering, the bored man recalled often seeing that lantern with an elite courtesan going about the quarter around Go-machi Boulevard.

“That was pretty fancy. People who got the time visit the quarter.”

Hearing the palanquin bearers carping, the bored man immediately asked a shrewd question, “Who was carried in that palanquin and where did he go? I wonder if...”

After a chat with the palanquin bearers, the agitated gatekeeper climbed back in and said, “There was some emergency at the villa, and his mistress Otsugi was summoned here. She was returned home a few minutes ago.”

“What? A concubine was here at the villa?”

“Yes, she'd been staying for a long time because of some illness.”

“Aha ha, the daimyo keeps a spirited mistress,” he muttered with a hint of sarcasm. The mistress had been recuperating from an illness over a long time, and her name was only heard in the villa. The gentle-looking young man, Kirishima Kyoya, had been on duty, and the mistress was said to have stayed at the villa. As if Mondonosuke instantly grasped the situation from the crest charged with the spirit of the quarter on the lantern returned on the palanquin, the bored man spoke in a resolute tone, “Let me borrow that palanquin for a short time.”

“I...I...I can’t. It cannot be used by a commoner without permission. The passenger of that palanquin is the lord. It cannot be lent out.”

“Wait. Who is a commoner? If Sakakibara Dainaiki is a lord with one hundred twenty thousand koku, I’m no less than a direct vassal of the shogun. If the direct vassal Saotome Mondonosuke borrows the palanquin, there should be no complaints. This will not be a burden on the palanquin bearers. Now, stop shaking and go quickly.”

As he spoke with some menace, he lifted the curtain, got into the palanquin, and calmly gave the order.

“Well...Go! Back to the quarter from wherever you came. Hurry!”

5

HE WAS TAKEN to the Great Gate of Yoshiwara burdened by the comings and goings of the fashionable set and the pleasure seekers. Of course, the Great Gate had been closed to stop visitors. But he would enter because at the gate, he saw a face he hadn’t seen in over three years and was greeted with, “Saotome Mondonosuke, you’ve come to visit again.”

As he looked askance at the district official of the site, he quickly slipped through the gate and entered a house, which surprisingly was the Awaji Tower, where Sanchajorou Mizunami ambushed him last night to spark a lovers’ quarrel.

Naturally, Mizunami was delighted. Although the direct vassal may have mistakenly come to this brothel of low-ranking courtesans and had no intention of entering, he entered. Full of herself, her cheeks flushed a seductive crimson. She affectionately said, “My my! Thank you for coming. Well...are you going to grant my wish?”

“Wait a moment. Granting your wish or not comes second. First, I have a request. Will you listen?”

“Uh, well, whatever you want my dear, I’ll do anything...”

“Is that so? Thank you. Thank you very much. What elite courtesan is the owner of the sign with an undyed T enclosed by a circle?”

“Oh! She is a madam of a house in the quarter. That is the crest of Okishifu, the madam of the T.”

“Oh really? Now, I’d like you to secretly find this courtesan, Madam T. Will you do it?”

“Well, if I do, will you grant my wish?”

“That depends on the wind and the weather. If I grant your every wish, will you quickly go and return?”

She was in high spirits when she left. Soon she returned, excited with surprising news.

“There was a suspicious group of characters at Madam T’s. A young woman of pedigree with an attractive young man, and six or seven tough-looking samurai.”

“What?! A young woman with a young man? You’ve been a great help. Now, if you’ll excuse me. We’ll meet again.”

With his hood placed as usual, he quickly stood and headed to Ageya-cho to meet Okishifu.

“Mondonosuke. If it’s urgent, you should come through here,” she said in parting as she went inside. Without a word, she swiftly pushed open the *shoji* screen to Madam T’s room. The scene he observed was absurd.

From his left and right sides, two women were menacing, scolding, and cajoling a handsome page cowering and nearly trembling in the far corner of the room to drink the teahouse sake, whose strength made it undrinkable.

Without a doubt, the woman dressed in the long uchikake overgarment was Madam T. Needless to say, the other woman dressed in the house garment was Otsugi. Perhaps it was a coincidence, but the most surprising sight was the handsome young man. He was the youth who had inexplicably vanished like a puff of smoke despite being rescued from the Akatani Denkurou gang in Nakano-cho earlier that evening. The bored man thought this was a bit odd and called out as he stared.

“Young man, are you Kirishima Kyoya?”

“Ah! You are...”

He squirmed and blushed in shame after recognizing the hooded man. Mondonosuke waved aside the youth’s attempts to speak. After he fitfully pushed aside his hood, Otsugi glared daggers at that pale elegant face.

“Hmph! That crescent scar...”

“If you’re trying to hide, it’s too late!” he solemnly threatened the stunned Otsugi who looked about to flee, then turned to Kyoya.

“You’re the fellow who disappeared earlier from Nakano-cho. Although we’ve never met, you know that I am Kikuji’s older brother. Did you run away because you were embarrassed and thought I would challenge you?”

“Yes...I was rude to leave without speaking.”

“Nevermind. Your leaving despite knowing who I was makes your position more pitiful. From what I’ve observed, I understand for the most part what is going on, but to be sure, I would like to hear the entire story. So, what happened?”

An unnerved Kyoya spoke, but seemed to be intimidated by Otsugi’s presence. The bored man bellowed in a grave tone, “She doesn’t matter!

Saotome Mondonosuke has the authority as a direct vassal of the shogun. Therefore, speak candidly.”

“Well then, I will speak. For a long time, Otsugi felt I...”

“Were you pestered to have an indiscreet, illicit affair with no thought to your rank?”

“Yes.... But how shall I say this, Lord, I would never partake in such immorality behind your back, even at the risk to my life. And...”

“And you have exchanged vows with another. You are saying that there is nothing higher than remaining faithful to your love.”

“Yes.... Please understand.”

“No, you’ve done well. If Kikuji heard that, she would surely...no, if she heard it from the person with whom she exchanged vows, she would cry tears of joy. Her older brother would certainly be happy to hear that. But I’m a little suspicious. For the time being, Otsugi will be known as the adored concubine supported by one hundred twenty thousand koku. Despite this, why were you brought to this kind of place?”

“No, it’s not particularly odd. Madam T entered service at the mansion as a chambermaid. For some reason, she sunk into the life of the quarter and pursued its intimacies. Otsugi sent him a forged letter to lure him to this indecent place and force him into the loathsome behavior witnessed here,” spoke a familiar-sounding voice as a man carrying a strong blade burst in. He was undoubtedly Akatani Denkurou from earlier in the evening. With a tinge of anger, he rushed toward the pale face of the bored man and was met by a clear voice, “So, you will do this whore’s dirty work to exploit Kyoya.”

Denkurou said, “Once again, you sniffed out the bad guys! When we were about to snatch Kyoya, you got in the way. You’re always in the way. Since you won’t quit, I have no choice. You better kill me or I’ll kill you. Draw! Draw!”

The idiot didn’t understand the situation and whipped his blade out of its sheath. The bored man smirked and quietly delivered words that seemed to boil up from the pit of his belly.

“Fool! Don’t you know that this crescent scar is ready at any time?”

Denkurou seemed to grasp the urgency and instantly gained courage because each of his disciples had seized a blade and rushed to his side. Free of fear, he thrust his blade close to Mondonosuke’s face. Like a master of the sword, his face exposed menace. However, the depth of the bored man’s courage dwarfed any menace.

“Aha ha. You are all lined up. Very nice. Good work. Well then, Kyoya, so that the person waiting impatiently for you will no longer live with a tear-stained face, we shall depart right away. The sight of the foul blood of these fools would amount to nothing. Just one more word to Otsugi. At great pains, you received this cute fellow as a gift for this house. In the future,

make a pet of an actor or a jester to your heart's content. Well, we'll be on our way."

After Mondonosuke finished speaking, he covered his face. With Kyoya following, he fearlessly strolled closer to the forest of blades with his arms folded in his kimono sleeves. Strangely, Denkurou's gang could not lift even one finger. That was surely the remarkable mysterious power of the sword released from the body of the man. When the bored man took a quick step forward, the forest of swords staggered back two. When he stepped forward again, they stumbled back three more. Untroubled by a challenge from even one sword, the two finally reached the night air.

Outside, however, a powerful foe seeking revenge lay in wait. It was Sanchajorou Mizunami. As soon as she saw him, she rushed up and grabbed his sleeve. But before she could speak, the bored man said, "Forgive me, I should have mentioned a prior engagement, but I'm so ill-mannered. I don't know how to humor women, and I apologize. Please forgive me."

With those final words, he swept back his sleeves and hurried down the street.

When they returned to the mansion, Kikuji blushed to the nape of her neck, the bored man pushed forward Kyoya, who also blushed shyly, and teased them with elegant words brimming with affection.

"My body is quite a gift. If I see something harmful with my eyes or hear something hurtful with my ears, I suddenly become blind and deaf. So please, don't let my presence stand in the way of your joy."

No older brother is like this one. The bored man burst into refreshing laughter as the night came to a peaceful end. The delightful tale of this delightful man begins now.

CREDITS

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MITSUZO SASAKI (佐々木味津三 née 光三) was born on March 18, 1896 in Oritsugu-mura (now Shitara-cho), Kita Shitara-gun, Aichi Prefecture.

After graduating from the Department of Political Science of Meiji University, he worked as a journalist and wrote novels on the side. He gained attention when Kikuchi Kan published his story “The Youth who Beat a Horse to Death” (馬を殴り殺した少年) in *Taikan* (大観) in 191

His father’s debts and older brother’s death forced him to steer his writings from pure literature, *jun bungaku*, to popular novels. Although reluctant, he was encouraged by Akutagawa Ryunosuke.

His most popular novels, *Umon Torimonochō* (右門捕物帖, *Umon’s Detective Notebook*) and *Hatamoto Taikutsu Otoko* (旗本退屈男, *The Bored Vassal*), were set in the Edo period. Both series have been the sources of numerous movies and television dramas since 1930.

Sadly, he wrote himself to death and died on February 6, 1934 at thirty-seven years old.

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