

THE ARROW'S PATH



- ACT 1 -

Deep in the forest, there was a meadow. Trees had been felled there in the past, exposing a plane with stumps and lots of scattered lumber. A boy had been visiting this place, and all the animals were already accustomed to the noise he was making when shooting his bow.

He had just hit a wooden target across the meadow, and went to retrieve the arrow. Pieces of bark and soft wood, placed on stumps, were better targets than live trees. The arrow would push them off and lose its momentum instead of getting stuck inside.

As the boy searched for the last arrow, the thicket behind him started rustling. Thinking that it might be a boar, he jumped on a stump and pulled his bow, holding another arrow in his hand lest he needed to shoot again quickly.

Suddenly, out of the bushes, another boy, younger than the first one, came out stumbling and fell to the ground, scattering a bundle of branches before him. He rolled onto his back, and sighed: "This is hard. Why do I always have to search for branches while Yajiro plays with his bow?"

The older boy jumped down from his stump and started placing new targets on top of it while grumbling: "I am not playing. This is important training. Besides, you find the best branches."

Half-startled, the other one jumped to his knees, and then sat down thoughtfully.

- "How is this important?", he asked after a while.

- "Do you know how you always insist we catch rabbits alive?"

- "They are soft and have funny ears. How could you ever hurt them?"

- "They end up in the same place either way...", the older one murmured under his breath.

- "What?"

- "Nothing.", sighed Yajiro, coming closer: "But in order to not hit them by mistake, I have to be able to shoot well."

- "You could at least help sometime."

They both picked up the scattered branches, and put them in bundles. The boy stayed hidden behind a stump to retrieve arrows while Yajiro trained some more.

The sun was glowing orange as they were heading back home. Yajiro was walking alongside through the forest, trying to find interesting pieces of wood for carving, while his helper toiled down the main path, wobbling from side to side under the weight of his bundles.

While he was trying to chop off a piece of root, Yajiro suddenly heard the sound of lumber crashing, and his companion screaming. “Dachi!”, he called, running back to the forest path, where he only found the lumber bundles being strewn across the ground. The noise was now coming from a small meadow nearby, but when he arrived, there was nothing there.

But before he could call out, his small companion emerged from a thicket, being chased by a boar, screaming: “Yajiro, help!”

- “Don’t guide it towards me! Run in a circle over there!”, the bowman yelled, taking out his arrows.

- “Shoot it! Shoot it now!”, Dachi was howling nervously.

Yajiro let loose an arrow, but it just scratched the boar, making it even more agitated. It managed to prick the fleeing boy in the bottom, making a hole in his pants.

- “Dachi! Guide it away from me when you come to the middle!”

- “It is going to kill me! Shoot it! Shoot it!”

- “Just do as I say!”

Reluctantly, the chased boy made a swift shift in direction, and started running towards the thicket at the far side of the meadow. But before he could reach it, he heard a squeal behind him. When he turned to check whether the boar was dead, he saw that it was now running beside him. He screamed in horror, and threw himself to the side. After a roll and quickly getting back up, he only caught a glimpse of an arrow being stuck deep in the beast’s hind leg before it disappeared into the bushes.

The sobbing boy ran to Yajiro, who comforted him and explained that situations like this are why training is important. They picked up the scattered branches and remade the bundles. This time each took one. Dachi was concerned about the hole in his pants, and whether he will get yelled at.

Having finally arrived at Yajiro’s rundown shack at the edge of the forest, the youths stored away their loads into a corner and commenced to amuse themselves by carving wood and telling stories. At dusk, Dachi

suddenly realized he was late for supper and darted off towards the nearby town where he lived. The archer kept shaping arrows on his doorstep until he couldn't see any more. Then he went inside and sparked a fire, on which he warmed a stale piece of bread before eating it hungrily. He spent the whole night producing arrows, and finishing wooden toy sculptures he carved beforehand.

Yajiro woke up to the sound of birds chirping. He opened the door, and seeing the amount of daylight, realized that he overslept. Swiftly gathering the finished arrows in a bundle, and putting the sculptures into a small bag, he darted out of the shack without locking it and ran toward his destination.

Finally, he arrived at a major crossroad and stopped in the middle to try and catch his breath. Frantically looking around, he spotted a mule-pulled merchants' cart in the distance, heading in the opposite direction. "Master Shono!", he called, and started running towards the man, who had stopped at the hill-crest.

- "Halloa!", the merchant waved, "You are late today!"
- "Sorry!", the boy exclaimed, trying to catch his breath after loading the bundles into the cart, "I hope you did not wait for me overlong."
- "Only a short while.", he said, chewing on some dried meat
- "Here are some sculptures too.", Yajiro said, handing over the small bag.
- "Not bad.", the man smiled. "So, what will it be today?"
- "Nothing, I have to head back. Thank you for waiting."
- "Wait! Here is something for your little friend.", the merchant smiled, handing over a tethered piece of parchment filled with scribbles and numbers.
- "Thank you. Goodbye!", Yajiro exclaimed and darted off down the hill and into the woods.

Soon he was back at his shack, where his companion was already waiting for him, carrying a large wooden cage-trap on his back. He handed the tethered goatskin to Dachi, and received a piece of freshly baked bread. They headed deep into the forest, one happily eating the bread, and the other eagerly trying to read and understand the contents of the parchment.

Having arrived at a small clearing, they split up. Dachi set the bait and hid the trap inside a bush, while Yajiro scaled the nearby hill and scouted the area. They both took position and waited.

Some time had passed before the sound of an arrow was heard, followed by a “thud”, and then an approaching rustle of grass and leaves. Suddenly, a rabbit emerged in the clearing. Dachi looked at it closely from his hiding place. When it reached the bait, and started snuffling at it, another arrow was let loose and struck the ground behind it, forcing it to escape into the nearby bush, where the trap was waiting. The young boy closed the hatch, and the animal was captured.

It was an unusually fat rabbit, and Dachi was taking turns between petting it and reading his parchment, while Yajiro carried the trap on his back. They walked all the way back to the town and entered it by crossing the large bridge in front of the main gate. Arriving at the orphanage, they were greeted by an old woman who was taking care of all the children there. She let everyone play with the rabbit before taking it away to “set it free in exchange for coins that she would use to buy meat”. Yajiro found the whole farce amusing. It was an exceedingly exhausting means of procuring meat, but it allowed him to hone his skills in real-world situations.

After a few hours of playing with the other children and practicing on a swinging target in the backyard, the old woman called everyone in for supper. It was a rich, meaty rabbit stew and everyone was pleased and ate their full.

When the sun started to set, Yajiro thanked the woman and took his leave. She told him that there will always be a place in her house for him. He looked sadly for a moment, then turned around and left.

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One day, Yajiro took his small companion to a place deep in the forest that he had discovered and made his new training ground. It was a beautiful sunny clearing on top of a hillock, molded by the weather, with broken and uprooted trees, tall grass and flowers of all kinds. Dachi was writing letters into the dirt behind a stump, while the archer was aiming at nearby targets from the other side. Suddenly, a whistling was heard, and the young boy knew it was time for him to replace the targets and find the arrows. After locating the last arrow, and turning to bring them all back to Yajiro, he noticed something sparkling stuck on top of the trunk of an uprooted tree. He climbed the bark cautiously, and retrieved the item. It was a well-kept steel knife with a wooden handle embedded with silver, and both companions

were amazed at the workmanship. Dachi was reluctant to part with it, but Yajiro insisted that he had a great plan on how they could earn some coins easily.

The next day, after meting in front of the town bridge, they picked a nearby tree and drew a target on it. Yajiro used a badly-looking bow with headless arrows and pretended to be really bad at aiming. Passing people laughed at his lack of skill, and some even mocked him openly. To those he would counter with harsh words in hopes to start an altercation. Then, Dachi would come and wager his knife on the fact that his big brother was a good shot. The victim would then wager a coin or something of some small value, and then lose it as Yajiro hit the target without issue. Some people felt cheated, so the archer offered to double their wager if he could hit a far-away tree branch. Most of them left impressed, though they knew they were conned.

Some time later they were out of arrows because most were stuck on top of trees or below the grass, so the companions left and went to the orphanage to show their spoils to everyone. They had a splendid dinner, and Yajiro took some leftovers to his shack.

The following morning, they crafted some fresh arrows, put some more dirt on the bow, and went to try to repeat the feat of the previous day. Dachi thought it would be prudent to arrive there later, lest the people they deceived recognized them.

And so they came to their destination around noon, but to their amazement, they found it occupied by a band of children of all ages. - “There they are!”, the smallest one pointed at the newcomers, who just looked at each other, perplexed. The largest one out of the group approached confidently, a boy around Yajiro’s age, but stronger and fatter, yet equally scruffy.

- “I heard you have a knife that looks awfully lot like mine. Let me see it.”

- “If that is true, you should have taken better care of it.”, said Yajiro, pulling out the knife in a threatening manner. “Do not come closer.”

- “That is my knife, you better return it before I get mad.”, said the large boy casually.

- “You talk big for someone without a weapon!”, the archer growled. “I

might sell it to you if you want it so badly.”

- “I will not buy what belongs to me.”

As this exchange was happening, Dachi was talking with the other children trying to gather info. He learned that the large boy is a very good archer, and the stories of his exploits appeared to tower those of his friend. But before he could run to him and warn him, the challenge was already issued and terms agreed upon.

- “Don’t worry, Dachi, this guy is all talk. He probably can’t even hit that tree over there.”, Yajiro said confidently, pointing to a thick pine some distance away.

The large boy motioned to his followers to bring him his bow. He released the arrow, and hit a thinner tree that was further away. “Meet me there tomorrow at midday.”, he smirked.

- “Not a bad shot. But you are holding the bow wrong. Don’t forget to bring something of equal worth or the bet is off.”

And so they all parted because the children threatened to warn people about the swindlers’ trick, lest the two companions lose the knife in a wager.

Everyone was already at the appointed place when Yajiro arrived. He cleaned his bow and took some proper arrows with him. Dachi informed him that everything is ready, and that he had made sure there are no tricks that would benefit the adversary.

- “Let us get this over with!”, Yajiro exclaimed while taking position. He let loose an arrow, which hit the far-away target almost perfectly. “You might as well give me the prize. What is it anyway?”, he smiled snidely.

- “Your little friend already checked it. I’m afraid you won’t be seeing it, though.”, the large boy returned, and took his position. His stance and grip were unusual, and he took his time before releasing the arrow. But once it was airborne, it flew beautifully, and hit the target perfectly in the center.

Yajiro’s blood ran hot. He claimed that his rival had cheated and that he took too much time, for which the other mocked him and called him a sore loser. Dachi tried to calm him down but he couldn’t.

- “I want a rematch! Double or nothing!”, Yajiro shrieked, pulling out a ring that he had been wearing on a chain around his neck. Dachi tried to dissuade him, crying that there is no reason for any further wagers.

- “I would hate to take everything from you, but what can I do, since you are

so eager.”, the large boy laughed mockingly.

The rematch was to be held in one week at the same place. Dachi handed over the knife, and they went home.

The first few days they trained furiously, but as the week moved along, Dachi was increasingly late or he didn't come at all. Yajiro grumbled when he had to pick up the arrows himself, but the real reason he was so upset is that he knew that the weird stance and technique was somehow superior to his. He tried to imitate his opponent, but his precision never got better.

Yajiro was increasingly desperate by the end of the week, so he trained all day, and set up camp in the forest where he would eat the animals he caught. He was lying on the ground, tired and dispirited, when Dachi found him. The young boy explained where he had been all this while.

Early in the week, he had gone to the market with the old lady that ran the orphanage. There was a notice on a wooden board, and he tried to read it for her. He tried several times, but never managed to achieve a coherent sentence. At that moment, an old merchant read it for him, and the boy thanked him. The man told him half-jokingly that he is the best reader around, and he can come to him if he ever needed help. Dachi took him up on his offer the next day, and showed him some of his parchments. The merchant was impressed by his tenacity, and confessed that he had only recently learn how to read and was still having some trouble, but that he could introduce him to his teacher - an old scholar. The boy was so eager that he waited until the market was closed, and they went to the scholar. The old man tested the boy and, a day later, arranged an apprenticeship with the old woman for him to receive scribe training.

Yashiro was very happy for his little friend and, for a moment, completely forgot his difficult situation. He had tried to guide Dachi to a better life as best he could, and now it finally looked like it could be possible. But before he could reminisce any further, the young companion exclaimed that the story isn't yet finished.

After the first day of his apprenticeship, he asked the old man whether he had any knowledge on bow-hunting techniques. The man told him all he knew, and kindly asked him why he wanted to know. Dachi told him the whole story, and the old man smiled and called him a noble young man.

This part of the story the young companion emphasized proudly, to a

humorous extent.

Then, the old man proposed that he accompany him on his afternoon constitutional, and they went to an old hunter's hut at the edge of the town where they met with an old huntsman, a good friend of the old scholar. They were offered supper, to which the old man consented, seeing the young boy salivating. They spent some hours there, and Dachi asked a lot of questions. The huntsman even took him outside and had him shoot the bow, showing him all the different techniques and stances. They returned to the scholar's house after sundown, and Dachi barely found the orphanage. The next day he arrived early to complete his lessons and work, and ran straight to Yajiro as soon as he was done.

His friend was dumbfounded, so Dachi took the bow out of his hands and started showing him the different stances, and reciting the reasons why some are better in certain kinds of situations. Having received his bow back, Yajiro started practicing the motions of the different techniques, and testing them out in various scenarios. Dachi was sent back to the shack to bring some more arrows, and the rest of the day he spent retrieving them for his friend, and replacing targets. Yajiro's spirits have gotten up, as he was getting better and more comfortable with his newfound skills. And not a moment too soon, because the day of the challenge was close-by.

Having barely gotten any sleep, the archer left his shack just after sunrise, taking his bow, which he had carefully mended and strung, and a bundle of carefully selected arrows. He went to the challenge area and, after carefully examining it, placed some targets and started practicing his shots. Many he missed, and he grew concerned. But after Dachi found him - having started for the shack - and gave him some freshly baked bread, his mood and precision improved.

Some time before midday, the opposing band arrived, and the large boy made a few practice shots before proposing they start early since everyone was already there. This time, the challenge was to hit the most targets, which were smaller and scattered across a far-away tree.

What ensued was a nail-biting display of archery proficiency, and none of the opponents could get the upper hand. They tied for several rounds, until finally the large boy's hand slipped from all the sweat, and he missed. He admitted defeat and introduced himself as Futo. He pulled out his knife and

the valuable from the other day, and handed it to his opponent. Yajiro refused, saying that he didn't want the knife or anything else, and that all things are now with their rightful owners.

- "Besides," he added, "you have already given me something much more valuable."

- "What is that?", asked the other, perplexed.

- "Your technique. I am taking that one. And I already have ideas how to improve it."

- "You may be a swindler and a thief, but you have honor.", Futo said, throwing the knife to Yajiro. "I will be challenging you for it again very soon. Be ready."

- "Anytime!", he grinned, and they shook hands.

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When Yajiro saw a sign displaying a sword and arrow with the king's seal at the bottom, he knew that the annual army conscript selection was underway. He swiftly ran to the town square, where it was being held. While standing in line, everyone looked at him weirdly, but it didn't bother him because he hoped that this time he will make it. But he didn't. He was once again told that he was way too young, and wasn't given a chance to prove himself.

He was moping, leaning on a tree near the town gate, when the merchant Shono found him. Hearing the story, the man thought for a bit, and then told Yajiro that, in order to pass, he must be at least as tall as his cart, and that he must become more muscular. He told him that it is imperative to eat at least twice as much meat as usual, and drink a lot of milk in order to grow fast. Then he stopped for a moment before mumbling thoughtfully, as if talking to himself: "The only other way would be making a name for oneself somehow."

The old man liked Yajiro, so he promised to help him as best he could. The young archer escorted him into town and helped him move his heavy bundles and other merchandise. But he was never fully there - his eyes were looking towards the future.

Having gotten an apprenticeship arranged for him, Yajiro spent his days crafting arrows and bows for a master weapon-smith. Every morning, he

would purchase a pitcher of fresh milk, and in the afternoon he would get some meat that he would either prepare himself or have the old woman do it. Oftentimes he would go to the forest alone to hunt rabbit and cook the kill right at the site. He was getting ever stronger by the day - working the bellows and using a stiffer bow that he crafted for himself. Taller also, for he used every possible object to hang himself off of, and he practiced archery dangling upside down from branches.

One afternoon, his rival Futo was waiting in front of the shack and requested a rematch. Yajiro took out some old targets and set them up. After five rounds of nothing but draws, it was getting dark, so they commended each other and called it a tie. The following afternoon, they had a rematch that ended the same way, and also the day after that was no different. Eventually they stopped keeping score, and started practicing together and sharing experiences and advice. They became good friends and always visited new and interesting training grounds that either had discovered.

Having finished his work, Yajiro bought another pitcher of milk, which he drank on the way to his shack. Dachi and Futo were already waiting. The smaller boy had scribbled out half the yard with his stick, while the larger one looked on in confusion. They all greeted each other and went into the forest. The destination was a new training ground. Dachi used some colored mud to write out letters on the targets, which he would then call out. The archers were supposed to hit the correct target as fast as they could, but the whole game ended in utter confusion and a lot of incorrect targets hit. Seeing his friends getting increasingly upset, Dachi proposed they revert to normal training, which the others immediately agreed to.

Suddenly, the bushes started to rustle, and a boar jumped out, starting to chase Yajiro's companions. The whole scene was humorous and reminiscent of their last encounter with such a wild animal. Futo was too slow, so he suggested they split up in hopes that the animal will continue to chase the smaller target. He jumped to the side, but the boar went after him. It charged the large boy, and he only had time to lift his legs in hopes of kicking it away. Rushing towards him with bloodthirsty eyes, it suddenly squealed, jumped over Futo, and ran into the thicket. Yajiro had used a real, sharp hunting arrow, which cut the tip of the beast's tail clean off. They left for the nearby creek, where they did some arrow-fishing. With their bellies full, they

became more merry, and forgot all about the unpleasant encounter from before.

One day, Yajiro heard a commotion on his way home. In the main square a crowd gathered, and a young man with a bow and arrow was calling for challengers. Yajiro soon learned from the onlookers who came before him that the archer had just decisively defeated several people, and that there was a reward involved. This sounded quite interesting to him, so he volunteered to be the next challenger. The young man was boastful and condescending while handing him a bow - one that Yajiro immediately recognized to be intentionally faulty. He pretended to slip and let an arrow loose in order to measure the extent by which he would have to adjust his aim. The young man hit the target every time, but so did Yajiro, and always closer to the center. The round was won, and the arrogant archer left swiftly with several other men from the crowd. One of them pushed a small purse violently into the winner's hands, while snatching the faulty bow from him. The crowd cheered, and Yajiro lifted his hand in victory.

Having heard the town gossip about a prodigious young archer, Futo came to the shack the next morning. He was greatly entertained by the story, and told Yajiro to meet him in the forest in the afternoon. And so he did, and they trained together. It was a special kind of training where they would do push-ups, and then immediately shoot an arrow. The bulk of the large boy made his arms shake and twitch way before his opponent.

While resting, they talked about their lives, and Futo admitted that his dream was to become one of the king's Elites, a special troop of highly proficient and deadly warriors that performed important covert and political tasks. He said that it is a long way, but that their paths will converge quickly enough in the next annual army selection, since that is the best way to get noticed and advance quickly. They both cheered each other on and fortified their friendship with a promise that they will both give it their all to become a conscript.

A few days later, Yajiro's companions were waiting for him at the shack as usual when suddenly a group of ominously-looking characters left the main road and started approaching. Futo pushed Dachi into a bush,

commanding him not to come out no matter what happens. The three newcomers stopped, and the middle one asked Futo, who had just picked up his bow, whether he lived in that shack.

- “And what if I did.”, he responded, trying to look intimidating.

- “We have a gift for the lad who lives here.”, the man grinned menacingly.

- “Who sent you? I don’t need any gifts! You better leave now!”, the large boy stood up, drawing his bow.

The man scoffed and whispered something, making the other two spread out. Then, he started speaking fairly to the archer, trying to keep his attention until the others circle him. But Futo moved to the side, trying to keep them all in sight, shouting that they should leave immediately. Suddenly, one of the men shrieked loudly, while the other one threw a knife. The large boy managed to release his arrow into the middle one, while the other two jumped and stabbed him several times. Then they picked up their pierced companion and left in a hurry.

All this time Dachi was upside-down in the bush, trying to free himself, and he only heard the sound of what had happened. When he rolled out, it was a sore sight to see. Futo was lying in a pool of his own blood, while the men were running away in the distance. The young boy shook and called out to his companion, but he never moved.

Yajiro found him crying over the dead body. He asked him what had happened, but Dachi was wailing and couldn’t utter anything. He asked him several times, never getting a response, and then slapped the boy’s face. The boy turned around, seeing the contorted face of his friend barely resemble him. Through the tears, he looked like a demon, with deadly, piercing, evil eyes. Never removing his gaze from Futo, Yajiro listened to Dachi’s tale, and then left.

Two days later, the young boy found his companion sitting in an alley, looking weak and emaciated. He tried to talk to him, but the archer didn’t note him, always staring at the same spot on the ground. Finally, Dachi slapped him and told the story about how he and the band of children buried Futo, while he was who knows where. He then dragged him to the orphanage, where the old woman fed him, and later they went to the grave. It was in a fair-looking meadow, in the part of the forest where they used to train. Yajiro apologized to his friend, but added that he will find out the culprits and get

revenge. Saying it, he looked at Futo's name scribbled on one of the stones, as if making the promise to him. To his surprise, Dachi hotheadedly agreed, and promised that he will do anything to achieve their goal. They agreed that their next step should be gathering information from people they know and trust. They glanced once more at the grave, and then left.

Their determination soon grew into frustration as they couldn't get any leads on who might have been responsible for the terrible deed. Until one day, having finished his work really late, Dachi miraculously saw one of the men from that day, going into the pub. He quickly found one of the street children, telling him to never lose sight of the man if he leaves the pub, and then darted to the place where Yashiro trained to tell him the news. He couldn't run anymore or his heart would explode, so he was very slow to come back to town. His companion and the street boy were already waiting, and informed him that the man was still inside. Dachi gave the boy half a coin and told him to leave.

It was already getting dark when the man came out of the pub. The young scholar identified him immediately, and started shaking. After some debate, Yajiro commanded his friend to go home and act as if nothing was out of the ordinary. Reluctantly the boy agreed and left.

The man stumbled across the streets until he felt himself getting pushed into the dark space between some houses. Yajiro, already grown quite a bit from his diet, had no issues beating on a drunk man, until he revealed his employer. Apparently, it was a servant who worked in the castle-like mansion on a hill.

Suddenly, there was a commotion and a lantern was being carried over by the town guards. Yajiro had to think quickly, so he started yelling for help as he stabbed the man in the neck repeatedly, holding his mouth shut. He smeared some of his blood on himself to appear to be hurt as well. When the crowd came near, he explained that he was attacked by the ruffian and had to kill him or he himself would become a victim. One of the guards identified the dead man as a known thief, so he gave some coins to the boy, who thanked them and left. When he got far enough, he looked for a horse trough, and cleaned the knife that he was hiding under his clothes. Futo's knife glistened in the moonlight as it was dripping with a mixture of water and blood.

The following morning Dachi came to the shack, and wanted to know all that happened. Yajiro, who had not gotten any sleep, told the story as he fingered his knife, not blinking even once. His friend gave him a piece of bread, promising that he will ask around, and have a solution by the end of the day.

The older boy stayed in his corner until Dachi came back in the late afternoon. He said that the mansion belongs to a powerful man, but that he was probably not the one who ordered the murder. Apparently, the man has a son, who is trying to portray himself as a great archer, and who occasionally comes to the main square to flaunt his supposed skill.

- "I will cut his heart out, only to see if he has one!", Yajiro jumped, gripping Futo's knife.

But Dachi calmed him down, and suggested they first investigate covertly, lest their target gets suspicious.

They agreed to bring last night's unexpected earnings to the old woman in the orphanage, and have a nourishing meal to keep their strength.

That night they traveled to the mansion. Dachi helped his friend scale the wall, and made sure to distract any guards that might come near, by throwing stones in the opposite direction. Stepping off the top of the young boy's head, Yajiro pivoted over the stone wall and dropped into the bush on the other side. He tried to get into the house, but it was impossible because of all the guards. Nevertheless, he found his way to the servant's shacks at the back. Some of them had gathered around a small fire, trying to warm themselves. Their gossip revealed that the "young master", as they called the boastful son of the landlord, will be going on one of his usual hunts with the bow and arrow, on the day of the full moon - ten days from then. At that, the drunkards started laughing and snickering, while the other servants and maids fell silent. Then they changed the topic, and all were merry again, and talked for some time until retiring to their shacks.

Yajiro felt like he had heard enough, and that he would probably not get any better clues by continuing to sneak around the premises. He scaled a tree that grew near the wall, and managed to get on top and over it. He collected Dachi, and told him what he had discovered.

The following days, Yajiro spent scouting the forest areas that looked like probable destinations for the hunt, and started training on a new, stiffer, bow that he had crafted for himself, which could shoot at a very long range. Stringing it took much effort and strength, and he only managed to do it with Dachi's help and the leverage of two stumps. His young companion tried to gather information any way he could - using his connections among the grownups, utilizing the street boys, and even by bribing scoundrels.

After talking to a friend of the mansion's stable boy, he learned many new details about the forthcoming hunt of the young master. Yajiro wasted no time getting to the forest area where he would lay the trap, and examining everything meticulously, lest anything goes amiss. He found a hard-to-reach hillock that oversees a large part of the forest. It was a grand place for letting arrows fly inconspicuously.

But reaching or leaving the place would not be easy if there were a lot of guards, and even in the mansion grounds, several times Yajiro was close to being discovered. So he decided that he also has to train his sneaking skills, along with his longbow technique. When Dachi was not available, he would try sneaking up on rabbits, and when they started to fly, he would use his longbow and try to catch them. The kills did not look pretty, so he brought them to the old woman before his friend came home. They would have a rich, meaty lunch, and then would go to a large waterfall on the other side of the forest, and Dachi would throw targets into the water on top, while the archer tried to hit them mid-fall from a long distance. It was very hard to hit any, but he felt like he was getting better by the end. Time was getting away from them, so they practiced until the evening of last day with great focus and determination.

With the first rays of light, the following morning, Yajiro set out to take his position on top of the hillock. When he came near, he noticed some mounted guards already waiting, and servants setting up a tent. That meant he had to scale the steepest slope. It was wet with dew, and slippery, so he used two arrows as holds to drag himself up. Once there, he arranged his bow and arrows for quick access, and waited.

Some time later, the boastful young man arrived, being escorted by several guards. The other huntsmen were already waiting for him with reports, having previously scouted the area for tracks. They soon all left, and

Yajiro thought he missed his chance for the moment. But before he could decide on what to do next, the young hunter returned. Leaving his horse by the tent, he went in search of a particular maid, who had gone to get some water from the nearby creek, which was on the other side of the hillock. She had tried to hide herself, but the young man found her and suddenly became violent.

Not having a clear view of his target, and being afraid that he might hit the maid, he descended down the slope on his rear. He grumbled about his delusion that he might get a sure hit from such a long range.

Reaching the bottom, he noticed that several guards were very near, and he had to use his sneaking and distraction skills to finally get near the creek where the young hunter was already on top of the maid, who was resisting with all her might. Seeing his target's face, Yajiro once again became enraged. Not minding any danger, he stood up from behind a bush and called out. The two stopped fighting for a moment, and before the maid realized what had happened, her master's body was already flying backward, with an arrow having penetrated his whole skull through the eye-hole. The body convulsed for a few moments before going limp. The maid almost seemed to relish the sight, showing a weird smile coming off her face. Suddenly she turned around, and saw Yajiro standing there. Still standing behind his bush, having forgotten to hide in his weird mixture of emotions, he saw the woman bowing to him in appreciation. Suddenly, snapping back to reality, and realizing what had transpired, he dropped back into the thicket and ran away as fast and as he could.

In the distance, he heard a woman's shriek, followed by trampling of hooves and hounds barking. Jumping into the creek, he floated downstream to clear his track and evade the pursuers.

...

Things got back to normal after that. Dachi was working on becoming a scribe, and Yajiro toiled in the smithy to become tall and strong. A lot of time had passed since the two companions visited the grave of their friend. One afternoon they found it again. It was overgrown with grass, and a few flowers had sprung up beside the inscribed stone. They spoke to it as if Futo was there, listening. Dachi mentioned that he will soon get a better scribe position, and Yajiro told the whole story about how he passed the recruitment

test and how he had become a conscript.

The sun was shining hotly over the training grounds. The instructor had just shown a few archery techniques and asked for volunteers who would try it out. Yajiro stepped to the front.

- “Aren’t you the recruit who almost cut that poor dog in half in spear training?”, the man asked, making the other recruits smirk.

- “I... I tripped!”, blushed the young bowman.

After being told to come up, and displaying supreme marksmanship, everyone was left in awe.

- “You may be bad with arms lad, but seeing your stance, I immediately knew that you had skill.”, said the instructor. “I will keep an eye on you. Make sure you don’t fail the arms combat test. It would be a shame.”

Yajiro’s skill attracted many people who would ask him for help and advice, and he was very popular. Others, on the other hand, had growing feelings of jealousy, which they would show in sword and spear training. In one such session, a particularly wicked fellow tried to target the archer’s hand, until he finally managed to hurt it. This was bad for Yajiro because getting injured would not excuse him from the tests, and his chances of becoming anything but a mere foot-soldier would be diminished. It meant he had to grit his teeth and pretend everything was in order.

But it wasn’t. He tried to nurse his hand and swelling with various bands of cloth, pretending it is just a thing of precaution. He managed to get through the daily routines, until one day, another young man hit his hand lightly, and saw him writhe in pain for a moment.

- “Ha! I knew it was broken. I’ve been watching you tending your hand for days.”, the training partner smirked.

- “And?!”, the archer gave him a piercing look.

- “I mean, it would be a real shame if the instructors found out you had such a big injury. Perhaps you wouldn’t even be allowed to attend the testing.”

- “If I don’t take the tests, then neither will you!”, Yajiro growled, clutching the wooden sword with his good hand.

The young man backed off for a moment and told his agitated training partner that he would only like to issue a challenge. To prove that he is the better bowman, as everyone seems to think otherwise. They agreed to meet in

a secluded corner of the training grounds just before dusk, with two witnesses and two lookouts who would make sure they would not get caught by the instructors.

Yajiro's hand shook each time he pulled the bow, and he was in great pain. They went for several rounds shooting at a target, whose red center was already getting unrecognizable. The sun had already set when the final arrow hit. The challenger had just missed the center, handing the victory to the hurt archer. The defeat was graciously accepted, and they all retired for the night.

Next morning, the young man was once again assigned as Yajiro's training partner. He revealed that he asked the instructor for permission to tutor the young archer in order to prepare him for the tests.

And so the days passed, and Yajiro became even more liked and respected. The young conscripts grew closer and started taking care of each other. All knew that they had to work together in order to get good scores. On the very day, they made sure to take it easy on the archer, and only attack him from his good side.

The final test, however, was the archery test. And Yajiro was given a very stiff bow. The pain in his hand made it impossible to pull far enough to be precise. The instructor said he will have to give him a bad score, despite knowing that he can do better. The archer objected that the bow was too stiff, and that he wanted another, but the man kept saying that any other bow that they had was simply not able to shoot the targets at that range. Fuming with rage, Yajiro was about to step forward and do - even he knew not what - to the instructor, when suddenly a black arrow with red and green feathers hit the ground between them. It came from one of the towers of the nearby barracks. Looking at it, Yajiro saw a squire, wearing the same colors as the arrow, coming out at the ground level and running towards them. He ordered Yajiro to give him his bad hand. The archer's heart dropped, but seeing no malice in the newcomer's eyes, he gave a deep sigh, and relented. The man removed all the bandages and inspected the hand thoroughly. "Good, it is probably not broken.", he said relieved, and then handed to Yajiro a beautifully carved black compound bow. "My lord lends you his bow, as it might suit you better than your current one. But first, let me re-do your bandages."

Yajiro thanked the squire and then proceeded to hit all targets. Turning around, he gave the bow back to the squire and expressed his deepest thanks

and appreciation to his lord.

- “The hardest part is yet to come.”, the squire smiled and left.

The lord was looking from a window, and Yajiro made a deep bow. The instructor told him he had great luck, getting noticed by one of the king’s best.

Next day, he was informed that he would be transferred to the fortress where the best recruits train to become part of one of the king’s elite troops. Returning from the morning training and briefing, he found a hard-leather gauntlet used to take pressure off an injured arm, and accelerate healing.

Having arrived at the fort, the new recruits had barely time to settle in before having to suffer hard training and further selections. They were the best of the best, and it was expected from them to perform on that level in order to get a chance to enter the highest ranks of king's forces.

Contemplating how he never thought to get this far, and how Futo made him realize what he also wanted to become an elite archer, Yajiro was suddenly pulled back to reality by an instructor hitting him in the shin. The man commanded everyone to pay attention. “I don’t believe those donkeys in the recruitment grounds that you boys are any good. I will test each one of you myself. And you better show some skill or I will have you walk back there to the other failures!”, he yelled while getting in people’s faces. Then he calmed down, and took them to a separated training area. On the way there, he added: “We have such high standards because any indecisiveness or lack of skill can get you killed or jeopardize the mission.”, and looked sorrowful for a moment, like a different person.

Yajiro passed the selection easily, but he was impressed with the mechanical technology the fortress had. There were targets that could move and pop up, and there was a wide selection of bows. One of the instructors taught him to shoot several arrows at once, and he passed his days training his body and practicing the bow.

There were also training missions in the field, and often the recruits would be taken to the forest for survival training and to simulate real-life situations and infiltration tactics. The young archer was getting ever closer to his goal. He was the best Bowman in his group, and already attended some training excursions led by one of the elites. He occasionally wrote to his friend Dachi, who had become a scribe, and could finally help out with the

orphanage. He figured out where the rabbits went, once he caught the old woman skinning one she bought. Things finally looked up, and the old companions were content with their current lives.

The young bowman was in the middle of training when he heard someone call his name from the fort entrance. The instructor asked what the ruckus was, and a guard came running and explained that there was a man at the gate who refuses to leave until he may talk with a recruit called Yajiro. Despite it being against the rules, an exception was made for the archer who will very likely soon become an elite. They were allowed to talk in private just inside the gate because recruits were absolutely forbidden to leave the grounds unless instructed to.

The man introduced himself as one of the scribes who worked under the old scholar. He was sent by him to urgently, and by any means inform Yajiro that his young companion Dachi was taken away by ruffians. They left a message: "Tell his archer friend that the costly life he took wills for another life to be taken. He may choose whose life it will be. He has ten days to surrender himself in exchange for his little friend's freedom."

Yajiro became frantic, and grabbing the man, started to further question him. Barely wrestling out of the madman's grip, the scribe told him to hurry because all this transpired more than a week ago. Looking back at his training group, who were already waiting, having finished the running exercise, the archer became pale. He rushed towards them and animated everyone, to the instructor's surprise and delight, to finish the morning training as fast as they could.

As soon as they did, he asked his most trusted companions to skip their meal and rest in order to help him escape the fort. Despite difficulties in luring away instructors and guards, and scaling the wall, they managed to get him over and drop him into a bush below. Yajiro only paused for a moment, waiting for his bow and quiver to be thrown also, and then ran as fast as his legs could take him. To overtake the scribe and question him some more, before diverging from his path, and going straight towards the mansion.

Once there, he barged through the servant's gate at the back. Finding himself on the other side of the area with the shacks, he asked the amazed maids where Dachi was. But before anyone could answer, a guard came with a challenge. Yajiro rushed him before he could draw a weapon, and they

rolled to the ground. Taking out an arrow from his quiver, the archer put it to his opponent's eye, commanding him to reveal where his friend is being held. The relenting guard soon found himself unconscious, as a firmly planted fist hit him on the chin. Having now learned where he needs to go, Yajiro went around the corner of mansion and, after hitting two more guards over the head, he entered the basement.

The very cell where Dachi was held was not guarded, and the keys hung on a side-wall. Yajiro found his friend beat-up and unable to walk.

- "I knew you would come.", the boy whispered

- "I'm so sorry I didn't come sooner!", he held him close.

Suddenly, there were sounds of commotion, and it was high time for an escape. Yajiro put Dachi on his back, and started running towards the exit. Several guards appeared, but soon they were limping away with arrows sticking out of their legs. Swiftly they were out, but already more guards were coming from the cellar, having entered from the other side. Yajiro pushed over a barrel in hopes to create obstructions, when his young friend saw a maid he knew beckoning to them from a bush. He told the archer to follow her, as she was an ally and a friend of the young woman he had saved in the forest that day who, refusing to reveal her savior's appearance until the last, came to an unhappy end. They were rushed through a lover's hole in the wall behind the bush, and found themselves in a field.

There was a rain of arrows, and trample of hooves being heard at their back. The forest was their only hope. Sounds of their pursuers grew louder when they suddenly came to a creek. Yajiro looked around for a moment, and then said goodbye to Dachi, stripping him of his shirt and swinging him onto a small grassy platform under an overhanging erosion of dirt. He then tied the shirt around his neck, ran to the side, and waited for the pursuers to catch sight of him so he can lead them away.

Now he was alone, and much faster. He ran like a deer through the forest, with the wind in his ears, and his hair flowing graciously. He ran for a long time, shooting his arrows from time to time. But the pursuers were relentless and eventually they caught up, cornering him near a cliff.

The guards surrounded him on their horses, and then the lord of the manor arrived and descended from his horse. "Do not come near!", Yajiro shouted, but the man laughed because he knew that the young man was out of arrows. A bow was given to the man, and aiming it at the young archer, he

shot an arrow into his arm. “Now you will suffer for killing my son. I will empty the whole quiver before I allow you to die!”, he shouted while drawing another arrow menacingly.

Yajiro knew this was his only chance to survive, so he waited for the last moment before evading the shot. He rolled towards the arrow, picked it up and released it at the same time the lord released his third one. One arrow grazed its target, while the other found its way through the throat. Everyone was dumbfounded at the sight of their master choking on his own blood, and Yajiro managed to slip away in the confusion.

He used some rocks to help him snap off the arrow embedded into his arm, before he heard again - a loud clamor and trampling of hooves. The hunt was on again.

The bowman once again started running as fast as he could, and soon found himself near the town. To his misfortune, he jumped out of the forest directly in front of a group of guards going towards their posts. They ceased him for questioning, when the pursuers suddenly appeared. They demanded the young man be handed over for immediate punishment, but the guards stubbornly insisted that the town official should cast a judgment.

Having arrived at the official’s house, everyone’s eager anticipation of his verdict was diminished when it was revealed that the man is drunk and in no condition to do any judging. Despite vocal protests from the angry mob, Yajiro was put into a cell for the time being, and his wound was cleaned and mended.

Next morning, the official listened to all opposing stories and decided that the young archer was to be promptly put to death for killing a local lord and his son. The decapitation was supposed to be held in the afternoon at the main square. The mob left satisfied, and the murderer was put back into his cell.

The long hours passed quickly for Yajiro, who was occupied by constant contemplation, and soon he found himself on a wooden stage, looking onto an old blood-stained chopping block.

Suddenly, a man in a green cape rode his horse into the square, shouting for the proceedings to stop, while creating a path through the mob. Jumping onto the stage, he identified himself to the official as one of the king’s elites, showing his blazonry and adornments as proof of his identity. Explaining that

this is a matter of grave importance, with the prisoner being a spy who had vital information about the enemy, he commanded the guards to tie the archer onto his horse. They did so, and he left, seeing the bloodthirsty congregation slowly dispersing behind him in discontentment.

When they were far enough from the town, the horse-rider untied Yajiro, and told him to hold onto him, as they are expected in a remote location in a few hours. The young archer was suspicious, but trusting his savior not to have bad intentions, he obeyed and held on tightly. And so they rode, fast as the wind, with the horse barely ever slowing down.

- ACT 2 -

A full moon rose slowly above a solitary hillock, while the surrounding forest echoed the gallop of a single horse. The sound grew quieter as it approached the rarely-traveled crossroads on the crest. As the horse stopped, Yajiro jumped off and took a few steps back. But before he could interrogate his savior, two dark figures came out of the bushes - one small and thin and the other large and strong.

- "What's that thing behind you?", asked the large man

- "I brought you a package, as I promised.", the elite smiled.

- "You already unpacked it! Darn. I was hoping to do it myself.", the small man lumped around, juggling a knife.

At this point, being equally amazed and perplexed, the young archer demanded an explanation, and the elite turned to him.

- "I heard you are good with the bow."

- "What of it?"

- "Look, I am in need of people with skill, and people I can trust. You are welcome to travel with us for a while until both we and you can decide whether you are such a person."

- "I can take care of myself.", the archer responded, trying to get out of the present situation where he is on other people's power.

- "You are an outlaw now, boy. Having made such a ruckus in town, and killed several people... Are you sure you can manage alone in the forest without any weapons or food, or shelter, or friend, so near the area where you are hunted?", the large man sighed while gathering the horses that had also come out of the bush.

- "I know all about living in the forest.", the young man murmured and then paused for a moment. "Are you bandits?", he asked.

- "Yes.", the large man laughed, "Something like that."

- "I need your skill boy. I need your bow in order to achieve my goal. You will hear our stories when the time is ripe. Until then, accompany us for a while, and when you feel ready, pledge yourself to me and these people, your destined comrades."

Feeling the sincerity, the boy said: "I pledge myself to you."

The elite started saying that he doesn't have to do it immediately, but he was

interrupted by the thin man telling Yajiro that he had to kneel while saying it. Slightly annoyed and embarrassed, Yajiro knelt, and everyone started laughing.

- "Stop being so serious.", the man laughed, and patted the boy on the back. The others threw some armor and clothes at him. The thin man introduced himself as Kitso, and gave him one of his bows. The large man said his name was Buto, and he gave him a small knife.

- "And my name is Ryo. But you may call me sir... or boss.", said the leader, and the others fell to the floor laughing.

Kitso went with the leader into the forest to gather some things, while Buto helped the young archer put on his new thick-leather armor. It was the same color as the glove which he still wore on his wrist. The large man helped him on his black work-horse, which was not very fast, but could bare the rider more easily than other horses.

When the others came back, they loaded everything onto the three animals, and started their journey through paths and roads overgrown with grass. The moonlight illuminated their way as it were day.

Just as they were at the crest of a mountain-path, the new day's sun slowly crept up behind the distant peaks. Seeing the boy, who was holding onto him, looking back towards the forests they had just left, Buto told him: "Don't worry, kid. We will be your family from now on. The boss, being himself an outcast, took the chance to try and save you when I told him about the ruckus in town. You owe your life to him, we all do, never forget that."

Looking onto the forthcoming area, shrouded in mist and blackness, the leader undid his beautifully embroidered green cape and turned it inside out, now showing only a plain straw-color. The others did the same with their, more ordinary, green capes. Yajiro, just having noticed everyone wearing the colors of king's best, asked once again whether they are elites or not. No one answered, and a glum atmosphere filled the air. Finally, the silence was broken by Ryo, who forced a smile for the young archer: "We used to be, but unfortunately we weren't good enough to stay in the group. Please do not tell anyone. No one likes losers, and we might get self-conscious and embarrassed. Ha ha."

The thin man blew his nose, as he took the lead, saying that it is useless dwelling on the past. Yajiro asked no more questions, seeing that it is a heavy subject, and soon a sleepy daze overcame him. They went down into the

valley, with the sun shining on their face the whole way.

Having descended from the mountain, they took a sharp turn into the nearby forest. Soon they found themselves in a beautiful meadow, with a creek flowing near a hillock at the far end. They set up a camp nearby, watering their horses and leaving them to graze freely, as Yajiro went to catch some food. Kitso was supposed to go with him, but he said that he had confidence in the young archer. In truth he didn't, and he just wanted to spy on him and evaluate the level of his skill, being himself a master hunter.

Some distance from the camp, Yajiro spotted a rabbit. Trying to get into a better spot behind a bush, he suddenly heard the sound of rustled leaves and squealing behind him. It was a boar, getting ready to rush him. He jumped to the side and into a roll, leaving his bow on the ground. The boar lifted up the bow with its tusks and was now carrying it on its head. With all the arrows also spilled, the only weapon the young archer had left was a small knife. The boar charged again, and he jumped to the side once more, trying to get the bow off of the animal's head. But it was too fast. Finding himself between thickets on all sides, Yajiro had no choice but to try and jump high and over the boar. He twisted in the air, and managed to stick his knife into the animal, barely avoiding the deadly kick from its rear legs. It started to limp, and on the next rush, the archer managed to wrestle the bow off of it, and shot two of the scattered arrows quickly into the animal's lungs. Seeing the animal growing more and more sluggish, the archer just waited for it to lie down so he can fetch his companions to help carry the meat.

At that moment, Kitso jumped out of a bush, and commended the young archer on his grand kill. The boar suddenly got a second wind, and it charged the newcomer with all its strength. The thin man's easygoing countenance grew stern for a moment, and he released a quick arrow into its eye-socket and the brain, making the animal drop dead immediately. Then Kitso became merry again and started making jokes, lamenting the wasted eye. He then gave his large knife to Yajiro, telling him that it will serve him better than his small one for gutting the animal. They carved up the boar and took the large pieces of meat, carrying them on their backs, while leaving the bad parts and bones.

The two companions were getting along and got to better know each other on their way back. Suddenly, Kitso dropped down on his knee, and

motioned to Yajiro to shoot an animal that was rustling behind a tree. The young archer put down the meat, and pulled his bow. “Now!”, the thin man shouted, seeing the brown thing appearing. Startled by the chaotic yell, Yajiro released the arrow.

A howl could be heard behind the tree, followed by a never-ending onset of curses. It was Buto, once peacefully collecting mushrooms, now with an arrow stuck in his cape, and the arrow having scraped his buttocks slightly. Kitso was laughing on the ground uncontrollably while Yajiro apologized profusely. The large man said not to worry, as he knew it was one of the usual antics of his other companion.

Seeing the meat and perking up, Buto picked it up swiftly and brought it to the camp. Soon, they were having a feast, and with the large man’s stomach getting more full, all grudges were soon forgotten. It was a sight, seeing him eat. Smacking his lips coated in grease and juices, and licking each of his fingers, he held his belly each time he laughed, as if protecting it from rupturing. Kitso pulled out a wine-skin and everyone in turn squirted some of the precious drink into their mouths. Having become more friendly with his new companions, Yajiro suddenly remembered how he used to be as merry with Dachi, and became gloomy and thoughtful. After a while, the talk shifted to the event of the rescue of the young archer and his backstory.

- “Why me? Why did he save me?”, Yajiro asked his two merry companions gloomily, while the leader was tending his horse.

Kitso, cutting a piece of meat from the fire, turned suddenly to the boss and yelled: “Hey Ryo, why did you save the kid?”

- “I heard he is a good hunter. I thought he would procure meat and cook for us.”, he laughed

- “The best hunter he is! Today he caught a boar, and a bear!”, the thin man laughed, pointing at Buto, who was not amused, his rear still stinging.

- “Either way,”, the large man said, “his cooking is much better than yours ever was.”

- “It hasn’t stopped you from always eating half the food, you tub of lard!”

- “It’s not fat, it is pure muscle!”

With the two men bickering, Yajiro stood up from the fire and confided to the leader that he is worried about his friend back in town. Ryo said it was understandable, but it was no option for them to go back, or spare a horse. Seeing Yajiro starting to shake from all his mixed emotions, he added that

they are heading to a certain town, and that they will stay there five days from then.

- “Whenever Kitso comes to a town, he spends most of his time in the pubs.”, he added.

Yajiro understood that he was given permission to leave. He took the bow with him and some other minor things, promising to bring them back. With the two companions still quarreling, he grabbed the rest of the meat, and ran away with the whole skewer, holding it like a sword. He filled a leather in the creek, and, skipping over some stones, crossed it and disappeared into the forest.

Having finally reached the mountain, Yajiro rested for a moment and ate some meat before attempting the steep ascent. Being on foot, he thought it would be faster if he took the path straight up instead of the winding road. He reached the top around dusk and had some more meat and water.

The great round moon made it easy to find the path, and the archer was slowly walking along it, when suddenly he saw a tall figure on a white horse. He was clad in bright colors and carried a spear. Being in the middle of a grass plane with no bushes and trees growing wide apart, noticing he had been spotted, Yajiro didn't attempt to hide himself. The man came closer and asked the young man whether he had seen three men with green capes pass through here recently. Yajiro said no, and tried to move on, when the man spoke again:

- “That's a nice little knife you have there. I knew someone with a similar one. Was it a gift from a friend?”, said the man condescendingly.

- “Yes.”, the archer answered.

- “Is your supposed friend in that direction?”, the man smiled, pointing down the path Yajiro just came from.

- “N-no.”, the young man stuttered.

Now the man grew impatient. He swung his spear, and hit the archer over the shoulder saying he doesn't like liars. Yajiro grabbed his bow and an arrow, but before he could draw it, the man was already off the horse and beating on him. He left the archer in the grass, with scattered broken arrows all around.

The man was already riding away, when he suddenly had to move aside to evade an arrow that Yajiro let loose, having sharpened it with his small knife. He turned his horse and proceeded to explain to the archer, in a

patronizing tone, how his technique is flawed because his sliding of the foot when getting into a stance reveals to the enemy that he is about to shoot. Then he rode away, and Yajiro stood defeated in the middle of the path, pondering how he could get completely dominated by the mysterious figure.

It was painful to move his bruised body and swollen face, so Yajiro spent the morning of the following day making a fire and cooling himself in a pond he found. He warmed the boar meat and ate some before continuing his journey slightly refreshed. He traveled until nightfall, when he couldn't go on because the overhanging clouds obscured the moon and all the land was dark. Once again, he gathered some dry wood, and ignited a spark with his tinderbox. The night was cold, so the warmth soothed him. He thought about his friend, and hoped he was alright. He slept the whole night through.

Next morning, he hurried to the main road so he could cross it before anyone saw him. Having finally arrived, and there only being a solitary cart in the distance, he crossed into the forest that would lead him to the town. He already traveled for a few minutes when a thought came into his mind. He returned to the main road and hid inside a bush. When the solitary donkey cart came near, he jumped out: "Master Shono!" - "Yajiro, my boy!", the man exclaimed with delight. They talked for a moment, and the young archer took a seat next to the merchant. Shono listened carefully to all the stories, and decided to help as best he could.

Before arriving to the town gates, Yajiro was given an old hooded cloak to hide his face under. The first place they went was to the old scholar's house. The man was distraught, realizing who they were, and rushed them in quickly. He said that he has been searching for Dachi, but had no news of him. He even promised a reward to the street children for any information. Yajiro told the part of the story where he left him hidden near the creek, and suggested they rush there as quickly as they can.

While the merchant was busy unburdening the mules, the archer spotted one of the street children looking intently in their direction. Finally, the boy crossed the street and spoke: "You are Yajiro, correct? Searching for Dachi, right?". But before the surprise of his identity having been revealed set in, the child continued: "I know a fellow who has seen him yesterday. I can take you

to him.”. They agreed to wait in the scholar’s house until the boy returned. Yajiro trusted him to not reveal them, as he remembered him belonging to Futo’s group, such a long time ago.

A few hours later, the boy returned and told Yajiro to follow him quickly, as the man with the information was not likely to wait for long. They rushed quickly through the town, over fences and through yards, until they found themselves in a closed-off alley between two buildings.

The boy turned around and smiled menacingly, while a man stepped into the exit to the main road, obstructing an escape. The man said he knew where Dachi is, and he can take the archer to him. But only if he let himself get tied up and becoming a prisoner. Yajiro grabbed his bow, but at that moment, he was pushed from behind by the boy, and the man managed to wrestle it from him. Cutting the bowstring and throwing a rope in front of the archer’s feet, he said that there is no escape, and he should come peacefully. The boy said that Dachi was better off without such an unreliable companion, and that exchanging himself for his freedom would be the least that he could do. Yajiro got enraged and kicked him to the ground. The man then entered the alley, holding a knife and a wooden stick, hoping to beat some sense into the archer. The young man managed to evade most of the attacks, but some blunt strikes hit him in places where he was already hurt. Gritting his teeth, he found an opening, and managed to kick the man’s chin and throw him to the ground. Taking his knife, he put it to the man’s throat and commanded that he reveal Dachi’s location. The man whined and winced while explaining how he and his companion, who used to work at the lord’s mansion, found the young scribe in the forest, and decided to sell him through the steward to the angry mob from that night. Having learned the location of their hiding place, Yajiro knocked the man out and tied him with the rope. Turning to the boy crying on the floor, he threw the knife into the ground next to his face in an intimidating fashion. He crouched over him and asked him what his problem was. The boy turned around and started shouting that it was Yajiro’s fault that Futo was dead, and that he hates him for that. The archer pulled the knife out of the ground and, collecting his scattered arrows and the un-stringed bow, he left.

Finding the solitary hut at the edge of the forest was not hard. After knocking on the door and no one answering, he put all his bulk against the

door and managed to pry it open. What he saw was an empty room, with a man jumping out of the window. He overtook him easily because the man was carrying a pouch in front of him. Tackling him to the ground, it took just a few punches to find out that he had just sold Dachi to a slaver, realizing that an educated scribe would pay more than handing him over to the manor guards. Tying his hands and feet with the remaining rope he carried from the alley, and relieving him of his burden of pouched coins, Yajiro left to try and overtake the slaver.

It took him an hour before he caught up to a man on a horse, walking a tied up young man behind. He shouted and waved to him, and the man stopped. Yajiro explained the situation and proposed to give the slaver his pouch in exchange for his friend. The man said he would need to get more coins than he paid, for it to make it worth his while. Handing the pouch to the man and asking him to count the missing amount, Yajiro looked for an opportunity to get close enough to strike with his knife if the situation forced it. Noticing at the archer's menacing stare, and his tattered, muddy clothes, the man said that there was a slightly larger amount of coins in the pouch than he had payed, and he released his slave and left. Trying to hold back their tears, the friends embraced and exchanged vows of love and friendship.

When they returned to town it was already afternoon. They sneaked into the old scholar's house, and he received them amicably. He ordered a servant to run to the town square and fetch the merchant, who was finishing up some business. Showering them with supplies, and writing a personal recommendation for Dachi, the old scholar followed the cart to the bridge before he said his farewells. Hidden below their cloaks, the two young men and the old merchant set off towards a far-away town.

The boys were so glad to be together once more. They jested and talked like in the old days. But all the fun made the archer remember his new companions, the pledge he had made, and that he was still a wanted man, only to be a burden to his friends. This made him sad and thoughtful, and at a major crossing, he announced that it is high time that he departed. Dachi was heartbroken, but Yajiro promised to come and visit him some day when it is safer. The scholar's recommendation would enable him to get appointed as a scribe, and Shono would arrange his lodgings. Before leaving, the archer took some string from the merchant and fixed his bow. It was a sad parting, but rescuing his friend and ensuring his safety, gave Yajiro the piece of mind he

needed to continue on his journey and do the things that he knew he must do.

Getting off the main road and into the forest, the young archer put only a short distance behind him before his weary body told him that it is time to set up a fire for the night. He found a good place and, making himself a soft bed out of fir branches and eating some of his provisions, he fell into a deep sleep. In the morning, feeling rejuvenated, he continued towards the mountain he had to pass over. It took him a whole day before he found another major road, leading to the town where his companions waited. Walking along the road, being somewhat sure that no one will recognize him, he took off his cloak, and started asking carts for a ride. He thought it prudent and amusing to give a false name and his reasons for traveling to his helpers. To one of them he said that he is visiting his dying grandmother, and the man helped him with all his heart to persuade another cart, which was faster and tried to overtake them, to take the boy along.

Skipping from cart to cart, Yajiro finally found himself at the agreed-upon town just before sundown. Descending from the final cart with more provisions and good wishes than he had hoped for, he immediately set out to find the local taverns. Going from the largest to the shabbiest one, he finally found the person he had been searching for. In front of a shack that sells cheap drinks, there was Kitso sitting on the ground and sleeping. After waking him up and greeting him, Yajiro had to hold him back from entering the shack he had supposedly been thrown out of. Leaning on the archer, the thin man lead him out of town and into a forest nearby, where Buto and Ryo made a camp. They all greeted the young man amicably, and offered him some meat. He declined, saying he was full, and shared with them some of his provisions, many of which were sweet and tasty or useful for a long journey. The large man mentioned a bet, requesting his winnings from Kitso. The thin man tried to weasel out by claiming they never shook on it. When the two started bickering again, the leader approached Yajiro: "I never doubted your coming back to us. Now sit and tell me everything that happened.". And so the companions spent the night telling stories and joking around. With his belly completely full, and people around him to watch his back, Yajiro finally had some recuperative sleep that healed his bruised body and soul.

Having set off, they traveled for a few days before arriving to a house on top of a hillock in a solitary part of a valley between some mountains. They made a camp nearby, and the leader asked everyone to not follow him no matter what happens. He unfastened his sword and put it on top of his cape that he had neatly folded. After he left, Yajiro couldn't contain his curiosity.

- "Why did he take his cape off?", he asked

- "It's not his.", Kitso answered with a frown

- "What do you mean?"

- "Well, I guess he wouldn't mind too much if we told you the story.", said Buto and proceeded to explain how Ryo was a prodigy in the elite circles and he was favored by one of their best leaders. Having been selected for a special mission of escorting a spy, the two set off. But only the young elite returned, saying that they were attacked and everyone was killed. For his cowardice he was banished, but some leaders wanted him tortured and interrogated, thinking that Ryo had been compromised and joined the enemy. Having heard this, Kitso informed the young elite immediately. Utilizing Buto's power, they managed to push their way out of the camp before they were challenged by some of the more serious elites.

- "So, the point to take from this story is that I saved everyone.", said the thin man, bumping his chest proudly.

- "You wouldn't be there to do it if it weren't for him.", Buto scolded him, "Neither would I. It was the least we could do, and it was the best course for us."

- "But whose house is this? Why are we here?", asked Yajiro.

- "This house belongs to the master of our leader's master - the elite leader that died on that mission.", said the large man.

At that moment, Ryo came back and threw himself next to the fire, sighing with relief: "Huaaa, the old master wasn't so scary as I was lead to believe."

- "Did you really believe he eats children and punishes any transgression by chopping off the person's finger?", asked Kitso, rolling hiy eyes.

- "You never know. I'm just glad all my fingers are still attached.", Ryo said with a large smile.

He brought a pouch with him filled with dried fruit and other sweets, and a large wine-skin. Buto and Yajiro caught a rabbit and collected some

mushrooms, and the companions had a small feast.

After traveling a few more days, they slowly entered a dangerous area of the kingdom known for bandits and treachery. Being hunted and banished, their ultimate goal was to cross the border and find a place to settle. A cloudy dark night overtook them, and they reluctantly had to set up a camp in a vulnerable part of the woods. No one really slept soundly, so when the fire attracted a bandit, who decided to steal a one of the horses, they were all on top of him immediately and gave him a grand beating before he managed to escape and limp back into the forest. The whole situation made Ryo laugh, and he said: "I think we might stay a little longer."

- "What? Here?", asked Kitso.

- "Why not. There is no law that can reach us here. And with skilled fellows roaming around, we can make our own elite group with me as the boss."

- "You never even intended on crossing the border, have you?", said Buto shaking his head, while the leader just laughed and took a gulp of wine.

Setting out the following day, they aimed to cross a nearby mountain range when, some time after midday, the companions got swarmed by a band of bandits. The captain of the bandits told them to surrender or die.

- "The chance to make a name for ourselves has come sooner than I thought.", said Ryo and winked at his companions before charging the man. A lot of blood might have been spilled, had the overwhelming number of bandits not managed to scare the horses, making them throw off their riders. Everyone except Buto was beaten, tied, and rushed off. Only the large man, fighting waves of enemies with his bare hands, and throwing them in all directions, stood firm until the bandits gave up and ran away. Exhausted, he fell to his knees, and catching some air, he shouted: "Yari, damn you! You have been trailing us like a rat for days, and you couldn't condescend to come and help!"

A bush rustled and a tall man in a white cloak appeared. He was holding a spear.

- "My mission is not to help you, but to track you and bring back news. Besides, you were clearly outnumbered, and they clearly only intended to capture you. Frankly, it was stupid not just coming along."

- "What?", the large man scratched his bruised head

- “Buto, you were always a dimwit. Haven’t you noticed how everyone attacking you only used blunt weapons? They may be bandits, but even they have proper tools for combat. You could have seen them if you looked.” The large man pondered for a bit, and then asked the man with the spear to help him follow the trail. Yari said he was loath to do it, but it was his mission either way. He called his white horse from the thicket and mounted it, telling Buto that the animal’s delicate frame couldn’t support his fat bulk. The large man grumbled and turned around to lead the way.

Crossing several hillocks and a creek, the bandits and their prisoners were getting ever closer to their camp.

- “You should have just come along, there were too many of us.”, said the captain to Ryo as they were walking.

- “I intended to meet your leader as the victor, defeating his soldiers, and bringing them back.”, said the elite confidently

- “I don’t know whether you are brave or just crazy. But I can see why our boss wants to meet you.”

- “How does he know of us?”

- “The man you beat up the other night. He was one of his better men. He said that your group of four is worth twenty men.”

- “Ha! He is right. Even more.”, Ryo grinned and winked at the annoyed Kitso.

- “I am doubtful.”, the bandit shook his head, “I think you are crazy, having charged at me.”

- “You think? I saw through your empty threat immediately. If you wanted to kill us, you could have tried without revealing yourselves. But trailing us clumsily for some time, trying to surround us, and then threatening us with blunt weapons instead of arrows. We were obviously to be taken alive.”

- “You are an interesting man.”, the bandit murmured, scratching his beard thoughtfully.

Meanwhile, the two unlikely companions - Buto and the man with the spear - were having their own conversation.

- “He had always been favored for some reason, and he dares to come back alive, having both failed the mission and getting the master killed.”, Yari fumed.

- “Do you really think Ryo would ever do anything less but his best?”, asked the large man, slightly annoyed.
- “You think too highly of him. Besides, his story was full of holes, and he ran away like a thief, not waiting for an official declaration of banishment like a man.”
- “He would never run away if his life was not in immediate danger. That is why we helped him escape.”
- “What danger? And why did you two eggheads ruin your career by assisting him?”

Then Buto proceeded to tell the whole story about how Kitso overheard a secret ploy to declare Ryo a spy and lock him away, and how they helped him escape. Yari scoffed at the tale, but said nothing to counter the argument.

Walking in silence for some time, the rider noticed a bandit in the distance, and tapping the large man on the shoulder with his spear, motioned towards the target. Leaving the horse, they flanked the bandit and had him surrounded swiftly and without much effort. The man was part of the group they were trailing, having fallen behind from the injuries Buto gave him. Being afraid of the large man, he fell to his knees and told them everything they wanted to know. Yari wanted to hit the bandit over the head and make him unconscious, but Buto thought it would suffice to command the scared man, under threat of death, to find another way of life. The sobbing bandit gladly accepted the gracious offer, and swiftly limped away in the opposite direction.

Arriving at the bandit camp, the companions were put in a hole covered by wooden bars. They were informed that the leader was currently away, but that he will return in a few days. The bandit captain made it a habit to come at night and talk to Ryo about various things. The elite knew that his loyalties and resolutions were being probed and evaluated, and he knew to say all the right things, while at the same time not committing to any particular course of action. He asked the captain for some food and provisions, and the man brought them despite the danger. Over some stale bread and dried meat, Ryo comforted his companions and outlined to them several plans and courses of action depending on the situation. Thus they spent three nights.

When the bandit leader finally arrived he was angry and distraught,

pushing everyone around and shouting in a drunken stupor. The captain wanted to wait for him to cool down, but one of the other bandits informed him that one of his best men was found a few days earlier at the bottom of a cliff. It was the one the companions beat up a few days ago, and the bandit boss was told that he got disoriented from his injuries and fell. This situation went against everyone's plans, as the man commanded that the prisoners be thrown off the cliff in retaliation.

At that moment, from a nearby thicket, out jumped Yari and Buto, one shouting and wielding his spear valiantly, while the other rushed towards the holes with the prisoners. But at that moment, utter chaos ensued, as the bandit captain gave a sign to his faction to attack the other bandits, and released the elite and his companions, shoving weapons into their hands. The prisoners already knew their task and they dispatched their targets easily. Ryo hurried to the confused rescuers and gave them instructions and commands on how to handle the coup. Soon, the bandit boss was killed, all of the opposing faction removed, and the captain became the new leader. Everyone cheered, even the neutrals, for fear of coming to a similarly untimely end. Ryo and all of his companions were welcomed amicably, and a great feast was held in their honor. It was the way of the bandits.

The following morning, the new bandit leader sent for the elite to tell him about a problem they were having. He explained to him the bandit hierarchy, and how their group had an assigned area in the territory of one of the major bandit leaders. A new group challenged them for their area, but the territory boss ordered them to settle it in single combat between two representatives.

- "So you need a champion? What if I volunteered?", said Ryo confidently.

- "My friend, I was hoping for you to say that. You are young and trained in combat, while our band is mostly drunkards and rejects.", the bandit smiled

- "Is the other group also such?"

- "No, unfortunately. They are a group of former army men who left another bandit group in hopes to start their own. I hate to admit, but the only way we could have defeat them was with superior numbers. This option is now gone."

- "What happens if we lose?"

- "The men may choose to join the other group and submit to them, losing

their rank. Or they may leave and search for another bandit group, but that usually ends up in death or getting everything but their loincloths stolen.”, the man shook his head.

And so it was agreed that the elite would act as the band’s champion. Having heard this, Yari packed up, and mounted his horse, saying that his mission is over since everyone decided to become a bandit and die like a dog. They parted in the middle of a wide grassy plane, and saying to Ryo that he hated him, the man with the spear left. Kitso turned his horse around, and Buto followed, With Yajiro sitting behind him. But before they would put their steeds into a gallop, their leader shouted at them to halt. Being protected from spying ears by the open field, he guided his horse between them.

- “You have followed me unconditionally and without question until now. I promise I will give you an explanation when the time comes. Until then just know that, even though we may find ourselves in weird and dangerous situations, it is all part of a grander plan. Please continue to support me. I will not be able to do it without you.”, the elite said and turned his head because his voice broke.

- “You stopped us for this? What if my stew boils over back at the camp and the bandits eat it?”, said Kitso, pretending to be annoyed, and punching Ryo in the shoulder.

- “Don’t go soft on us now.”, said Buto, patting him on the back while Yajiro gave a determined nod.

The leader looked at the horizon for a moment, and then came behind his companions swiftly. Overtaking them, he shouted: “Let’s save the stew!”, and they rushed their steeds back to the bandit camp.

The following day, the fight was held on the edge of the bandit’s territory. It was supposed to be a fight to the death, but Ryo used his skill to disarm his opponent, twisting his hand until the man yielded. The opposing group grumbled that the fight was not being conducted properly, but after the bandit boss offered to have his champion kill the overpowered man, they accepted defeat and went away. A large feast was held in Ryo’s honor and he became the hero of the bandits.

Soon, the leader of the territory heard of the champion’s exploits and invited him and his companions into his own group of more skilled bandits.

They lead several successful raids, without any casualties on either side, and rose through the ranks. Ryo became one of the leader's guards and accompanied him to several meetings between territory leaders. There he learned the sad history of the bandits - them being remnants of an army sent into certain death, retreating and making the best of a bad situation. They couldn't come home or they would be executed and their families denied any support from the king. At first they were content with just hunting for sustenance, but as their number grew, and more dubious characters and rejects of society entered their ranks, various factions arose which started pestering and raiding nearby villages. As word got out, more and more banished men, criminals, and soldiers from the opposing side joined the numerous factions and groups. There was an inner struggle for power, and after a lot of battles, a hierarchy was established, territories were assigned, and strict rules were put in place to keep everyone in line.

Now, the major point of conflict was the fact that some factions have been making large problems for the people with frequent raids. The ones opposing such careless action pointed out that it might attract the interest of the count's private forces. The other side scoffed and said that united, they could take on the count's army, and that he wouldn't dare stand in their way.

Trying to devise a plan on how to gain power and notoriety within the bandit hierarchy, Ryo arranged for his companions to infiltrate several factions he disliked. He thought it prudent to do it early and clear any bandit's suspicions by acting out a public quarrel with his friends. Many moons went by and it was hard for everyone. Especially Yajiro, whose bow skills often put him in dangerous rearguard positions in raids.

There was also a redheaded young man who was sent to spy on the elite. After getting beat up the first few times, Ryo felt bad for him and invited him for a meal. The boy introduced himself as Aki, working for the same territory leader that Yajiro was sent to - the worst of the lot. Next few times when the elite noticed the spy, he just told him to come out and join him. After that, Aki would not even try to hide, but joined his new friend whenever he was sent to gather information. He would complain about being sent on spying missions when he was actually a better soldier. He revealed a lot about his boss, and in one heated rant, he mentioned that he would like him dead. This sounded great to Ryo, but he didn't trust the redheaded boy

yet. So he managed to get in contact with Kitso and had him spy on the young man several times. Once, Aki was grumbling about the boss, and one other bandit heard him and wanted to betray him. Luckily, he disappeared just in the nick of time, and the young redhead thought it was very good fortune. Reporting back, the thin man revealed that the boy was not an elaborate double-spy, but just plain naive. It took some time putting all pieces into place and gaining favor with the head leader, but eventually everything was ready and the grand scheme was about to be executed at the next faction meeting.

It was still night when Yajiro sneaked out of his camp. He had to put some distance behind him before morning. Avoiding sentries and guards, he climbed an old horse he hid in a thicket, and rode it to the meeting point. All the leaders were to arrive in the afternoon, so he wanted to breach the perimeter before it was tightly secured. Arriving there, he spent a long time sneaking about and avoiding guards and bandits before he finally took his position. He put his bow beside him and meticulously arranged the arrows. Being fully alert and conscious of his surroundings, he slowly ate a piece of dried meat.

The faction leaders eventually started arriving and the meeting was about to commence. In the tent, there were Ryo, Aki and Buto with their respective bandit leaders, and while their duties differed, their mission was the same. The discussions started and soon escalated into a heated debate. Just as the main boss gave a speech, the elite gave a sign to the redheaded boy to prick his master with a knife, making him jump and appear as if he gave a sign. At that moment, Ryo jumped in front of the main leader, taking Yajiro's arrow into his chest. Another leader of a chaotic faction was grabbed by Buto, revealing that the man was wearing a hidden knife and had a scroll outlining a plot against the life of the head boss. On that scroll was the name of yet another leader who, as it turned out, was already being investigated by the guards after a thin shifty man put them on the trail. The faction leaders were swiftly executed, and Ryo miraculously recovered - the arrow not having pierced his thick-leather armor.

The plan was a complete success. The elite was given command of the faction most compromised, and thus put a halt to frivolous and unnecessarily bloody raids. The other two leaders were replaced by more measured men.

The companions slowly regrouped and became Ryo's body-guards. The bandit activity was slowed down for the moment, and the people rejoiced.

The sun was shining bright over the open field at the edge of the bandit area. Yajiro was sitting on a horse of his own, despite still being new to riding. It was laden with many spoils and the young man's clothes were adorned with various trinkets. He desired for the longest time to see his friend Dachi again, and now, having grown a full beard and looking completely different than the boy that left his town as a murderer, the time was ripe to start a new life. Having gotten the directions to the town where the young scribe was driven to by the old merchant, Yajiro said his goodbyes to his new friends and companions. Buto shed a tear, saying he will miss him, while Kitso told him to just go and have the sentimentalities done with. Ryo gave him his deepest thanks and told him he will always be welcome within his group. Aki just waved.

And so the young archer parted from his companions to begin a new chapter in his life, hopefully one of happiness and normality.

- ACT 3 -

Night had fallen over a peaceful little quarry village, located on the slopes of a mountain splitting two bandit territories. The dim moonlight illuminated the scattered shadows of the surrounding trees, making the path just visible enough for a person without a lantern to pass.

On a hillock overhung by the towering mass of the cliffs, two figures stood waiting for the shadowy form to find his way out of the village. Buto and Kitso were bickering silently when Aki finally made it up. They greeted each other amicably.

- “The load will be moved tomorrow at midday. Using the path down yonder.”, said the redheaded young man, pointing into the distance.

- “How many guards?”, asked the thin man

- “I have seen it thrice now, and never were there less than four or more than six mounted horsemen watching over it in secret.”

- “They do not ride alongside?”

- “It is, after all, made to look like a villager’s carriage to avert the interest of bandits. If anyone were to protect it visibly, it would attract attention.”

- “That is good. It will make it easier to dispatch the guards in secret by hiding some archers along the forest paths.”

- “It would be better to capture them alive and take their horses. Dropping them to the ground should be enough to daze them, so that two men can tie them up.”, said the large man, rubbing his chin.

- “The boss will make the decision. We will need archers regardless, lest someone manages to escape.”, Kitso retorted.

- “I will join you once it is safe to leave. Until then, farewell.”, said Aki and took his leave.

The two companions squabbled all the way back to the camp. There Ryo waited for them, to finish up the plan they had been working on for some time. Being the faction leader it was hard for him to leave his post for long periods of time because the bandits would try to usurp it. But finally managing to find a strong and respectable man to take his place in resolving small matters, he was now free for a short while to focus completely on his true mission. It came to his attention that a small quarry village, having riches

which would make it prime target for raids, would for some reason never get attacked. Neither the bandit leaders under his command, nor the ones from the other faction's territory would ever lead an attack in that direction. Dismissing it as luck at first, being in a unique location with difficult access, Ryo later discovered that there was a reason behind it all. The bandit leaders were avoiding it intentionally. Not only were they being bribed by someone, but they appeared to also have given them their loyalty. They were also one of the most stubborn bands who were extremely allegiant to their late faction leader, and difficult to control.

Trying to get to the bottom of it all, the elite devised a plan to capture one of the loads of precious metals and gemstones that was being regularly taken from the village to a secret location. He figured the mystery would resolve itself if he did the one thing others were so suspiciously avoiding.

The following morning, Kitso and Buto hid their best men along the forest paths and gave them directions for different scenarios. Ryo waited a bit further to intercept the carriage or any fleeing guards. Finally, just after midday, the first horseman appeared in the vanguard. All the men, hidden in bushes and trees, held their breath as he was going past them. But everything went according to plan and, as soon as the last of the guards passed the concealed bandits, the trap was sprung and all were caught. The driver tried to rush the carriage, but his animals were stopped and calmed before they could gather any speed.

Back at the camp, the guards and driver were interrogated, and they revealed that the load was supposed to be taken to the old ruins near the cliff, where they would be transferred to another carriage and taken away. Ryo immediately devised a plan and sent Buto and Kitso on a mission.

The large man rushed the animals as best he could to get to the old ruins before dusk, stopping the carriage just before the destination so Kitso can hide below it. Arriving at the cliff, Buto was greeted by angry guards who immediately started questioning him. He explained that they had been attacked, and the driver - his master - was killed, while the other men fell one by one in the rearguard. The wooden case filled with riches was carried to the other cart, and the driver was given some coins. Buto made a diversion and kept everyone's attention by recounting the tale of his epic escape, while Kitso had to figure out how to conceal himself on the other carriage, which

had a completely flat bottom. Luckily, there were some other wooden cases as well, all covered with a large piece of cloth, so he sneaked inside and didn't move a muscle until they were near their destination.

Peeking out from below the cloth, he waited until the guard in the rear got distracted and strayed a bit to the front. He quickly slid to the edge of the carriage and, making sure no one can see him, dropped silently onto his feet and behind the nearest bush.

In front of him, he saw a small fortress with a castle at its center. The outer perimeter was made of wooden logs, so scaling it was no problem for a skilled spy like Kitso. The inner pit and the second wall was much more harder to get over, and also there were people walking around. But finally, he managed to get into the castle, and there he learned something remarkable. The commander of the count's army was secretly gathering riches and metals in order to buy and produce weapons and armor, with which he would then outfit the bandits.

Eventually, the commander ordered his attendants to serve some drinks to the captains that he had been talking to. He was a big man, wearing thick metal armor, and one could hear him rising out of his seat and walking to the door. Hearing how he invited one of his captains to the other room, Kitso decided to exit through the window and scale the castle wall so he could hear the conversation. Luckily, there was a sort of a ledge on the outside, so it was not difficult holding on while moving towards the next window. Disregarding the danger of possibly being seen from below, Kitso clambered into position. He listened for a while, when there was a knock on the door, and the conversation suddenly stopped. There was an angry shout and the sound of armored boots coming nearer, before a heavy hand picked him up by the neck and pulled him in through the window. The commander started beating on him and questioning him, when suddenly a general commotion erupted in the fortress. One of the tents caught fire, and everyone was trying to extinguish it before it spread to the armory. Kitso took that moment of confusion to pivot through the window and let himself hang off of it before he slid down the wall and pushed himself off into a nearby bush. The fall left him bruised and hurt, but he had to get moving. Suddenly, an arrow with familiarly shaped feathers struck the ground beside him. Looking into the direction where it came from, he saw a shadowy figure motioning him towards a hole in the

outer wall behind a secluded tent. Kitso climbed over the spiked logs and the ditch and ran to the outer wall as fast as he could. The mysterious man had already disappeared, so he jumped through the hole and escaped into the forest.

Appearing at the bandit camp two days later, he was showered with food and drink as he told the story to his companions. Sitting in Ryo's tent, they discussed the matter late into the night, trying to deduce the reason why the rowdy bandit groups were being backed by the army which should be trying to constrain their activities.

Next morning, a bandit rushed into their tent, trying to warn them of imminent danger, but just as he spoke, a blade pierced him through from behind. A man clad in new shining mail entered and informed them that they are surrounded by dozens of archers and warriors. Ryo exited the tent without his weapons and, seeing that there is no chance of escape, he told his companions to submit as well.

Buto's piercing stare was met with shamed glances of men looking at the ground. The bandits knew they owed much to their leader, but their way of life made them harbor no emotions for friends when there are riches involved.

The companions were tied up, and cloth bags were put over their heads, making them gasp for air as they were loaded up into a carriage and laid next to each other. Finally, they arrived to their destination - the fortress Kitso had escaped from recently.

Almost a fortnight had gone, and the companions were already used to daily beatings and stale moldy bread as their nourishment. The commander interrogated the thin man several times, making his bruised body blue and red with injuries. Buto was hard to handle, so they just kept him locked up in the cell with the thickest bars. Aki was left alone for the most part, being in the same cell where Ryo used to be. For several days now, there had been no news of their leader, who was frequently taken to the torture room. Several guards have mentioned the count's invitation for the king's elites to attend a feast, and then collect their banished comrades. Many days have passed since then.

One morning, however, there was screaming and a commotion. Guards

rushed to and fro, and even the commander descended to the dungeons. There was angry yelling and the clamor of armor. Kitso looked through the bars in his door and asked the leader of the fortress what the reason for the uproar was, but the heavy man kicked at the door and told him that if he keeps asking questions, he might soon find out himself. With the guards going up and down the hallway, it so chanced that one of them leaned on the spy's door, who took no great effort in procuring a blade for himself unnoticed.

When most of the guards were gone, Kitso lured the nearest one by pretending to want to bribe him. The man acted interested, planning to just steal any valuables that he was offered, but instead of getting precious metals, he got a blade through the bottom of his skull. Hanging there on a sideways bar of the cell door, with the knife point protruding through his mouth, the man's key ring was quickly found and the spy went free. Taking the guard's sword, and tossing the keys into Buto's cell, he killed his way into the torture room.

Inside, Ryo's limp body hung from a ceiling chain which was tied around his wrists. His naked torso was bruised and his legs clearly crushed. The numerous wounds inflicted with sharp objects had stopped bleeding. A touch to his cold body made it clear that he was dead.

Buto and Aki just arriving to the sight made their blood run cold. Kitso passed them without a word, gripping the bloody hilt of his sword as he took some armor off the dead guards and put it on. He didn't wait for others to join him. He had only one thing in his mind - carving the heart out of the commander's living chest. He used all his skill to swiftly and efficiently kill all the guards standing in his way. Pretending to be a guard himself, he deceived the others before murdering them. The other two, having outfitted and armed themselves as well, just had to follow the trail of dead bodies through the castle halls before they caught up to their companion. Being stopped by the more senior guards, he was glad to get some reinforcements. Buto carved through them, wielding a massive long-sword he found displayed on one of the walls, while Aki just followed with a short-sword, finishing up any dazed enemies.

Finally, they made their way into the main hall, where the commander and his captains waited prepared. Buto rushed in first, getting shot by a few crossbow darts before decapitating the archers in one stroke. Enraged, he wielded his weapon, tossing the captains around to the sides, where his

companions moved in to stab them.

When all of them were dealt with, the commander entered the fray. Buto made a few dents in the man's thick armor, but none seemed to bother him overmuch. The fight lasted a long time, and the companions were bloody and beaten. They would have certainly lost if the large companion, feeling that his strength was waning, hadn't made a desperate last effort and used his bulk to grip the commander and impair his movement. Kitso used the chance to lounge forward and ram his sword and knife into the small exposed area below each arm of the struggling man, incapacitating him utterly. Buto rolled over in pain as the spy furiously kicked the commander's helmet off of his head. Using every torture method he could think of at that moment, Kitso maimed the man until it was obvious that he would never reveal the grand scheme and the reasons they were captured. Infuriated by the commander's tenacity, the spy entered a state of rage and started beating on the man's head until it was as disfigured and bloody as his fist.

Suddenly, an arrow hit the thin man, pushing him and toppling him to the ground. The elites had arrived. Their leader lowered his bow and commanded them to surrender. There were around ten of them and each possessed a radiating aura of power and competence. In the meantime, Aki was bringing parchments and scrolls to Buto for reading, and they found a string of letters proving that the plot to outfit groups of bandits ran much deeper and many important persons were involved. Sharing their findings with the others, many people got confused. The elite leader demanded the letters be handed over to them, but Aki yelled out that he doesn't trust them because Ryo didn't seem to. He stood up and said he will deliver the letters to the king himself. The elite leader laughed and took an arrow out of his quiver. But at that moment, a man appeared at the entrance, saying that he will help him. It was Furi, the allegedly deceased elite leader, and Ryo's mentor. He explained that he suspected there was a spy among them, and that is why he decided to ask his pupil to play a coward and make them believe he is dead. He ordered Yari and the archer who helped Yajiro, to stand their ground and not let anyone follow him and Aki until they are long gone. He explained that the plot runs much deeper and it is a matter of grave importance. In his hand he held another set of letters that showed the whole picture - the count helping bandits become a nuisance, so he can request military aid from the king, and take over the forces to make a pincer attack

together with the enemy kingdom. Everyone stood amazed as Aki and Furi left. Yari told those peers he trusts to tend the wounds of the fallen and check if anyone still lives.

The elite leader and the young redhead rode quietly side by side for a long time, until the elder broke the silence.

- "It is unfortunate, what happened to Ryo. He always tried to take everything one step further. The idiot. Becoming a bandit warlord was never part of the plan.", he said.

- "He always spoke very highly of you. I was lucky to join his group. From the first day, I saw that he was special. You must be very special too.", Aki said thoughtfully.

- "No, not anymore. All of this could have been prevented if I hadn't been so blind to the signs. Lately, I've been spreading misfortune to all people around me. Better watch out.", the elite sighed and proposed they stop at a creek to feed and water the horses.

Seeing that Aki wouldn't dismount, Furi realized that the boy had just been through an onslaught and had received many injuries. The man pulled him off the horse and tended to his wounds as best he could, using pieces of cloth and healing herbs he found nearby.

As soon as the horses were ready, the elite helped the redheaded young man get into the saddle.

- "We need to get moving. Our enemies are numerous, and the way will be less treacherous if we are in front of them.", Furi said gravely.

Riding until dusk, they came to a steep rocky path that traversed the mountain range and led out of the count's territory. The elite stopped, and looked around nervously for a long time before Aki asked him what the matter was.

- "The moon will not show its face this night, and taking this path blindly would be too dangerous for the horses. We must surrender our advantage and take the long way around the mountains."

- "Can't we just wait for the morning?", asked the boy

- "If we are overtaken while scaling the mountain, it would mean certain capture or death. No, we have to take the long way.", said the man, ripping away some cloth off his green cloak.

He walked a short way up the path and stuck it on a sharp rock, making sure to leave a lot of disturbed dirt. Then, the elite came down and led the horses onto the grass, making sure he covered up any prints leading anywhere other than the mountain path. Having done all this, he jumped onto his steed, and led Aki into the forest. After a short while, the thicket opened up into a clear and level forest, and they rushed their horses as far as they could before a dark, cloudy night overtook them. They made no fire for fear of being noticed. Collecting some fir branches and leaves, the young man fell asleep the moment he lay down.

In the morning they continued their journey, trying to shake off the stiffness implanted on them by the last night's chill. For two days they traveled through the forests in solitude, avoiding all the main paths and crossroads, until they finally reached a bridge.

It was a rope bridge, barely wide enough for two people to stand abreast, and the animals only slowly and reluctantly crossed it. Just as they were in the middle, a hooded figure, covered in thick-leather armor with metal plates, appeared on the other side.

- "I have been expecting you, Furi! You made me wait for a long time!", the man laughed maniacally, and pulled out an axe.

Taking a swing at the ropes, the crazed man tried to cut off the bridge, but before he could swing a second time, the elite had already jumped over his mount's head and rushed him. All the shaking made the horses agitated, and Aki had to dismount and calm them for a moment before they would allow him to slowly lead them forward. The men on the other side had disengaged and started discussing something. The boy didn't hear what the others were talking about, but when he managed to get across, Furi tossed his cape and his ring to him, and told him to use his horse.

- "Let me help you! We can beat him together!", Aki yelled in disbelief.

- "This is how it has to be.", the elite answered, and commanded him to go. The redheaded young man mounted Furi's mighty steed and rode away, trying to ignore the sounds of weapons clashing behind him.

Next morning, Aki was woken up by his own horse. He must have followed him, he thought. But then it came into his mind that it also could have been sent away by the elite, smacked on the rear to prevent his enemy

from using the animal. The young man ate some provisions and continued on his way with new determination. He used his experience to traverse difficult forest paths, and he frequently switched horses to allow them to recuperate.

Getting nearer to the king's territory, he often had to come out onto main roads and ask people for directions. It took him a good while, but eventually, he found himself before the king's castle. He put on the elite's cape and, taking the letters out of his satchel and putting them together with his own, he confidently strolled through the gate and towards the main building. Before the guards had a chance to halt him, the boy commanded them to get their captain and to escort him to the king.

Explaining that he has important news pertaining to the security of the whole kingdom, and presenting his tokens of the elites, the captain lead Aki to the king and his ministers. Being awestruck at the first, the boy couldn't find the right words, but then he knelt, and took the parchments out of his shirt.

- "Lord, many of your most faithful servants have given their lives to uncover a plot to seize your forces and start a war. Here are the letters as proof.", he said reverently.

A grand commotion ensued, and some of the ministers were apprehended and taken to the dungeons for questioning. A few days later, the count of the bandit territory was deposed and executed, together with his commander, who had barely been kept alive up to that moment. Ryo and Buto were given royal funerals, and the stories of their exploits became legendary among the elites. Furi was never seen again, but Aki believed that he was still alive. The redheaded young man became an elite after all spies and suspects were purged from the order. Kitso was offered a leadership position, but he would rather have his freedom and continue being a spy. The chatter in the fort said that the companions prevented a war, but some of the older elites maintained that the war had just been postponed.