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About This Edition

This book is a simplified English adaptation created for extensive reading practice.
The text was translated from Japanese into English and simplified using ChatGPT for intermediate English learners as part of an educational project.

Target reading level: CEFR A2-B1

The adaptation aims to improve readability while preserving the narrative content and spirit of the original work.

Source Text

Original work: Miyamoto Musashi (宮本武蔵)
Author: Yoshikawa Eiji (吉川英治)

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Yoshikawa Eiji, *Musashi: An Epic Novel of the Samurai Era [Miyamoto Musashi]* (Simplified Edition, Adapted and Simplified from Japanese by ChatGPT)

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Book 1: Earth

Part 1

Musashi lay still among the dead men on the field of Sekigahara. Rain fell hard on his face, on the mud, and on the bodies around him. He did not know if he was alive or already close to death. His body would not move well, and he thought that bullets had gone into him somewhere. He opened his mouth and drank the rain as it ran down his nose. For a moment, he thought, This may be the last water of my life.

The battle was over, and his side had lost. The great fight that was supposed to change the world had ended in only half a day. Men had come with big hopes, proud words, and dreams of honor, but now they were only broken bodies under the wet sky. Musashi thought of his home village and of his older sister. He did not even feel deep sadness then. Death seemed too near and too large for simple feeling.

Then he heard a voice from among the bodies. Someone lifted his head and called, “Takezo!” Musashi turned and saw Matahachi, his friend from the same village. Both boys were only seventeen. They had run away together, joined the war together, and come to this field with the same wild hope of becoming great men. Now they lay in the same mud, half dead and still breathing.

Matahachi asked if Musashi was alive. Musashi shouted back that he would not die so easily, and that Matahachi must not die either. Matahachi crawled toward him and caught his hand. He said they should run, but Musashi pulled him down and told him to stay flat on the ground. At once the earth began to shake. A line of horses and armored men rushed over the field with terrible speed, shouting as they came. Matahachi tried to rise in fear, but Musashi dragged him down again and saved him.

The horses leaped over them and thundered past. Mud flew. Spears flashed. Heavy hooves struck the ground so close that it seemed the boys would be crushed at any moment. But the troop passed on, and the two friends still lived. After that

they hid for two days in the wet valleys near Mount Ibuki. They ate raw chestnuts and grass and waited like hunted animals while the victors searched the land for the men who had escaped from the losing army.

On the night of September seventeenth, under a cold bright moon, Musashi helped Matahachi walk down from the hills. Matahachi was badly sick, and his face was pale like the moon above them. Musashi himself was weak and in pain, but he carried much of his friend's weight and kept telling him to hold on. They knew it was dangerous to go near the villages. The roads were surely watched, and the winners would still be hunting men from the defeated side. But Matahachi was suffering so much that he said he did not care even if he was caught.

As they walked, Musashi spoke about why he had come to the war. He had believed that battle would open the road to a new life. He thought that if he fought bravely and won honor, he could return home in glory and silence all the people who looked down on him. Matahachi said he had dreamed in the same way. Yet nothing had gone as they wished. They had not become real samurai. They had done rough work, cut grass, and carried out low tasks, and at last they had been thrown into ruin with the rest of the losing side.

Matahachi grew weaker as they crossed the open land. In a shaking voice, he spoke of Otsu, the girl promised to him in marriage. He said that if he died, Musashi must take care of her for the rest of his life. Musashi grew angry and told him not to speak like a dying man. He said that a sick stomach was not enough to kill a person, and that they would find a farmhouse, medicine, and a place to rest. Yet the night around them gave little hope. The field was still full of bodies, and the smell of death and wet grass lay heavy under the moon.

Then they saw something strange. Between the dead men, a small figure moved quickly and hid again. At first Musashi thought it might be a wild fighter or a thief. But when he looked carefully, he saw that it was only a young girl, no more than thirteen or fourteen. She wore torn clothes, but there was still something fine and bright about her dress. She crouched among the dead like a small animal and watched them with sharp, shining eyes.

Musashi shouted to her, but she fled at once. As she ran, they heard a sweet

bell-like sound, perhaps from something tied to her clothes. Matahachi shivered and said she might be a spirit of the battlefield. Musashi laughed that away, though the sight of the girl stayed strongly in his mind. He thought that if she had gone that way, there must be houses nearby. So the two boys followed the path between the low hills and at last saw a light in the distance.

They walked a long way toward it and came to a lonely house with an old gate and a closed main door. The place did not look like an ordinary farmhouse. Musashi knocked and asked for help. He said that his companion was sick and that they would not cause trouble. For a while there was no answer. Then the girl's voice came from inside. She had seen through them at once. She said they were fugitives from Sekigahara, and that anyone who hid them would be punished.

Musashi answered honestly that they had served in the defeated army and begged only for medicine. The girl seemed to think for a moment and went away. Soon another voice came from a window, the voice of a woman. She had been watching them from inside. She told the girl, whose name was Akemi, to open the door and let them in. These two were only common foot soldiers, she said, and no one would trouble much over such men. For the first time since the battle, Musashi felt that the night might not end in death.

Part 2

Musashi and Matahachi were hidden in a woodshed beside the house. Every day they took medicine, ate soft rice porridge, and tried to heal their bodies. Matahachi had a bad stomach, and Musashi washed the deep wound in his thigh again and again. They did not know what kind of house this really was, but they were grateful to be alive. The woman who had let them in was young for a widow, and the girl Akemi moved quickly and quietly like a small bell in the dark.

Akemi came often with food and medicine. She warned them not to speak loudly and not to show their faces outside. She said that great lords from the losing side were still being hunted, and the officers in the area were strict. Even common foot soldiers could bring trouble to anyone who hid them. When Matahachi tried

to keep her there and ask questions, she answered only a little. She said she was fifteen, said her father was gone, and said that the house made moxa from mugwort and sold it in Tarui.

Matahachi did not believe everything she said. He still remembered the small girl moving among the dead men at Sekigahara, and he wanted to know what she had been doing there. When he asked directly, Akemi at once shut the door and ran away. The little bell at her clothes rang again as she went back to the main house. After that, the question stayed in Musashi's mind too. Yet both boys were too weak to do more than rest and wait.

Time passed, and their strength slowly returned. Musashi's body healed fast, like the body of a strong young horse, and Matahachi too was soon tired of the dark woodshed. He began to spend more and more time in the main house, laughing by the fire with Oko and Akemi. He sang comic songs, joked, and drank, and sometimes he did not sleep in the shed at all. Musashi warned him that they were still fugitives, but Matahachi said that hiding too carefully was more dangerous than acting natural.

At first Musashi stayed apart, but he too grew tired of the damp dark place. When he stepped outside after many days and saw the blue sky again, he stretched his back and felt life return to him. He told Matahachi that they should soon go home. Matahachi answered that the roads were still watched and that Oko and Akemi both said it was safer to remain until winter. In the end Musashi gave way, and from that day he too came into the main house.

Oko seemed pleased to have them there. She joked that either Matahachi or Musashi should marry Akemi and stay forever. The words made the young men uneasy, and Oko enjoyed that. She liked bright clothes, evening baths, makeup, and drink, and she made Akemi live in the same way. The house became noisy and warm, but there was something false in that warmth. Musashi felt it without fully understanding it.

One day Musashi went into the hills with Akemi to gather mushrooms. She knew the mountain well and laughed when he picked the wrong ones. She threw away the red and dangerous mushrooms from his basket and proudly showed him

the good ones. Then, on the slope, a large rough man came toward them. He was dressed like a beast of the hills, with a long sword and a cruel face, and Akemi turned pale the moment she saw him.

The man spoke to her as if he owned the land. He said her mother had been earning money in secret and warned that he would soon come to collect his share. He also said that he knew Akemi had been going to the battlefield at Sekigahara. After he left, Musashi asked who he was. Akemi said he was Tsujikaze of Fuwa village, a wild fighter, and then, trembling, she clung to Musashi and begged him not to tell anyone what she was about to say. She confessed that on the night they first saw her, she had been taking money and objects from the dead soldiers on the field.

Akemi told him more as they sat in the grass before sunset. The story of the moxa business was only half true. Her father had been the chief of a band of wild fighters, and after he was killed, her mother had kept living in luxury. To keep that life, mother and daughter took things from the dead after battle and sold them. Akemi was afraid because men like Tsujikaze protected their own ground and punished anyone who entered it. Musashi looked at her small body and her sharp eyes and felt both pity and pain, because she had been taught from childhood that this cruel work was natural.

When they returned home, Oko saw them walking close together and shouted at Akemi in a hard voice Musashi had not heard before. The next day, after learning more about Tsujikaze, she became suddenly anxious and ordered both young men to help her hide her things. From shelves, drawers, and the storehouse they brought out many objects taken from war: short swords, spearheads, armor pieces, prayer beads, banners, and even a fine saddle. Musashi understood then what kind of life had supported this house. At the very end Oko brought out a heavy black wooden sword, and when Musashi asked for it, she smiled and let him keep it.

Part 3

That night Oko came softly to where Musashi slept. She blew out the small light and moved close to him in the dark. At first he thought a thief was trying to steal the black wooden sword he held in his arms, and he seized her hard. When she cried out, he understood who she was and let her go at once. But she did not leave. In a low voice she told him that he surely knew how she felt about him, and she tried to draw him near.

Musashi was more frightened by this than he had been on the battlefield. He shrank back into the corner and begged her to return to her own room. He said that if she did not go, he would call Matahachi. Oko's breathing grew sharp in the dark, and her anger rose with her shame. At that very moment fists began beating on the outer door, and rough voices shouted to be let in. Akemi woke, Matahachi came out in alarm, and a voice from outside said that Tsujikaze himself had come.

Tsujikaze Tenma and several of his men entered the house in a rush. They searched everywhere, kicking through rooms and store places, while Tenma sat by the fire and watched. He spoke to Oko with false calm and cruel pride. He said that he knew she had been taking things from the battlefield and selling them, and that she should be grateful he had come kindly. When Oko answered with hate and said that everyone knew he had killed her husband, his face darkened at once.

At a word from Tenma, one of his men struck the ceiling with a spear shaft, and the hidden plunder came crashing down. Armor pieces, weapons, and stolen objects fell into the room and proved everything. Then Tenma ordered his men to drag Oko out and punish her as an example. But when the men reached the next room, they stopped. Musashi was there with the black wooden sword held low and ready, and Matahachi stood beside him with a drawn blade, waiting in silence for anyone foolish enough to step inside.

Tenma understood that two young fighters had been hidden in the house. He tried threats, but neither Musashi nor Matahachi answered him. Then one of the men disturbed the fire, smoke rose through the room, and in that dark confusion Tenma leaped forward himself. Matahachi struck first, but Tenma moved too fast and slipped past the blow. At the same instant Musashi swung at his legs with the heavy black wooden sword, and the force of the strike broke Tenma's attack and

drove him back. Tenma fled out into the night, and Musashi, wild with battle joy, ran after him at once.

Musashi chased him across the dark field like a hunting beast. He shouted for Tenma not to run, and his whole body burned with fierce delight. Soon he caught him, and the black wooden sword came down with terrible force. Tenma fell, and Musashi struck again until the man could never rise. When he returned to the house, he did not think of the killing as anything great. To him it had been only the end of a fight that had begun the moment the enemy entered the house.

Yet Oko was not glad in the way Matahachi had expected. The next day she sat in heavy thought and explained that Tenma had a more dangerous younger brother named Kohei, a man far worse than the one Musashi had killed. She said revenge would come, and when it came this house would not stand. Musashi and Matahachi lay in the dry grass and talked it over like boys again. They decided that the time had come to return home. Matahachi shouted that now he suddenly wanted to see Otsu's face, and Musashi agreed that they should leave the women of this house behind.

But that night there was too much drink, too much false laughter, and too much bitterness hidden under it. Oko painted her face more carefully than usual, leaned against Matahachi, and made a show of turning away from Musashi. Musashi slept where he was, and when he woke late the next morning, the house was empty. Oko was gone, Akemi was gone, and Matahachi was gone with them. Near the kitchen threshold lay only Oko's red comb. Musashi picked it up, smelled the sweet scent still left on it, and understood at once that his friend had been carried away by desire and weakness. He threw the comb down in anger and thought, not first of himself, but of Otsu waiting far away in the village.

Part 4

Musashi sat for a long time in the kitchen after Oko, Akemi, and Matahachi had gone. The red comb lay in his hand, and when he lifted it and smelled it, the sweet scent brought back the dark moment when Oko had come to him at night.

Then he understood the weakness that had pulled Matahachi away. He struck the comb down in anger and called his friend a fool. Yet even in his anger, he did not first think of the loss to himself, but of Otsu in the home village, still waiting with a faithful heart for the man who had now left her.

Then the story moved far away from the lonely house in Ibuki to the mountain roads of Harima and Mimasaka. From Tatsunokuchi the road ran through mountain after mountain, over passes and along deep valleys, until travelers looked down and saw at last the settlement near Miyamoto village. It was spring now. In the temple of Shippoji, people were preparing for the Flower Hall festival of the Buddha's birthday, and the village had begun to feel bright again. Yet under that brightness, grief and bitterness had already entered the life of Otsu.

Otsu had once believed completely in Matahachi. To hear that he had died in battle would have been terrible enough, but she received something else instead. A letter came that broke her trust more deeply than death would have done, a cold letter that cut her away and cast her aside. She had served Matahachi's family, bowed before his fierce mother Osugi, and waited with all the patience of a promised bride. Now she no longer knew on whom she could depend or why she should go on living.

In those dark days, the one light near her was Takuan, the young monk from Tajima. He was not gentle in the quiet way of kind old priests. He laughed loudly, teased, argued, and spoke truths that hurt before they healed. Yet he made Otsu laugh too, even when she had been close to tearing apart the cloth she had woven for Matahachi and dying beside it. Because of Takuan's strange warmth, she could still move, still work, and still remain in the world.

On the day before the festival, Otsu remembered that she had to gather flowers for the Flower Hall and prepare sweet tea for the ceremony. She went out with a basket and a sickle, and Takuan followed her in a foolish wrapping cloth because he had almost no proper clothes. Otsu told him not to come, for people would laugh, and he answered that people laugh at truth only because truth is simple. The two went together anyway, and for a little while her sorrow became

lighter. In that mountain spring, with the work of flowers before her, she felt again how young she still was.

The next day the temple filled with worshipers. Takuan stood near the Flower Hall and shouted that rich people should leave plenty of money if they wanted their suffering made lighter. On the other side sat Otsu, writing the old protective verse again and again on colored paper for the visitors. Her hand grew tired, but she kept writing while watching Takuan make jokes, confuse the crowd, and somehow guide them all at once. The village people laughed, prayed, pushed forward, and forgot for a few hours the hard things that lay behind their daily lives.

Yet when the noise grew less, Otsu's pain returned. She spoke of Matahachi with shame and anger, saying that she must one day find him and say everything in her heart, and that she must also speak to the woman Oko who had taken him away. Takuan answered that perhaps she was lucky to be cast off before marriage, for a man with such a wandering heart would only have wounded her later and more deeply. Otsu could not accept such calm wisdom. She bit her sleeve and wept, and Takuan looked at her with sudden seriousness, as if he saw that the rough winds of life had finally reached even her.

Soon another burden fell on them. Takuan had made a bold promise that he would capture Musashi within three days, and if he failed he would hang himself from the tall cedar. Otsu could hardly believe such madness. Yet Takuan, as always, seemed strangely at peace, sitting by the fire at night and speaking as if courage alone could move the world. Otsu feared for him, feared for Musashi, and feared for herself as well, because she could feel that her life had already begun to turn toward both of those men in ways she could no longer stop.

Part 5

While Takuan and Otsu waited in the mountains and spoke beside the fire, Musashi was hiding not far away in the hills above Miyamoto. For four days he had lived like a wild animal among trees, rocks, and dry grass. From there he could look down and see the village, the temple roofs, and even the house where

his sister lived. Yet he could not go near any of them. Every path below seemed full of eyes, and every eye seemed ready to hate him.

He had already tried once to move among people. On the day of the Flower Hall festival he slipped into the crowd just to see Otsu's face, but when she called his name aloud, he understood at once that danger had come too close. If he stayed, she too might be punished, so he vanished before anyone could seize him. Later that night he crept toward his sister's house, hoping at least to speak with her in secret. But men from Himeji were already watching, and he had to run again without saying even one word.

The thing Musashi could not understand was not the danger itself, but the deep fear and hatred around his name. When the villagers saw his shadow, they fled as if they had seen a wolf. When they guessed where he might hide, they joined together and searched the mountains. Even the paths near Shippoji were watched, and armed men waited below for a chance to capture him. Alone in the hills, Musashi began to feel that the whole village had turned into one hard wall against him.

At last he caught a charcoal burner on a mountain path. The man saw Musashi and tried to flee at once, and that alone made Musashi furious. He leaped on him, dragged him back, and demanded to know why everyone ran from him in terror. The poor man shook so badly that he could hardly speak, but Musashi forced him to answer one question after another. Yes, armed men were waiting below. Yes, the temple was watched. Yes, the villagers were still hunting him in the mountains every day.

Then Musashi asked the one thing that lay deepest in his heart. He asked about his sister Ogin. The charcoal burner hesitated, and Musashi's anger rose again. At last the man gave him the truth he had been avoiding: Ogin had been seized and treated as if she were part of Musashi's crime. She had been held under guard so that he might show himself, and everyone expected he would come for her sooner or later. When Musashi heard this, the blood rushed through him, and all thought left his head except one thought alone: he had to reach her at once.

He came down on the guard place like a storm. With a heavy post in his

hands, he smashed through the closed front and shouted for his sister. Chickens flew screaming to the roofs, men ran in fear, and the whole place shook with the force of his rage. Musashi searched room after room and called for Ogin until his voice broke. He found only a frightened servant and struck terror into him with one blow and one question. Where was Ogin now, and if the man lied, Musashi swore he would kill him where he stood.

The answer cut him in a new way. Ogin was no longer there. By order of the domain, she had already been taken away toward Himeji two days before. For a heartbeat Musashi stood still, unable to believe it. Then arrows began to fall around him, and men closed in from every side. He threw one body at the others, leaped back behind the building, and measured the space before him with one hard glance. He understood that if he remained even a moment longer, he would die without helping anyone.

So he fled again. He sprang over the barrier like a bird, and a gun fired behind him with a great crash that shook the valley. Stones rolled under his feet as he rushed down the slope, and the sound of pursuit followed him into the dark. He had come to save his sister and had learned only that she was farther away than before. Now the mountain, the village, the temple, Otsu, Ogin, and even his own name all seemed to close in around him, and he ran deeper into the night with rage, grief, and confusion burning together inside him.

Part 6

Back in the village, people no longer spoke of Musashi as if he were only a foolish wild boy. They spoke of him like a thing of danger that must be cut down before it grew worse. Osugi, Matahachi’s mother, wanted blood for blood and shame for shame. Otsu heard the hard voices around her and felt more and more alone, because even while others cursed Musashi, her own heart could not hate him in the same simple way. Takuan saw this clearly, and when the officers pressed for a quick end, he gave his reckless promise that within three days he would bring Musashi in, or hang himself from the great cedar.

Otsu could not rest after hearing that promise. She went with Takuan into the hills, and for three days the two of them stayed in the mountain country where Musashi was believed to hide. By day they slept in a hollow place among the rocks, and by night they sat near a small fire. Takuan still did not seem to search in any ordinary way, and this made Otsu more uneasy with each passing hour. He spoke as if a man might be found not by chasing his feet, but by waiting where his heart would finally come.

On the third night Otsu's fear became sharp. She said again that dawn would come soon and that the promised time would end with it. Takuan only answered that worry would not make the mountain smaller. He then began, almost playfully, to ask about the flute Otsu kept hidden in her sash, the old flute that had been left with her when she was abandoned as a baby. At first she would not let him touch it. To her, it was not only a thing of music, but the one faint line that still tied her to the unknown people who had given her life.

Takuan spoke of the flute with unusual care. He said that a fine instrument could carry the heart of the one who had chosen it, and that this old one seemed to come from people of feeling and refinement. Otsu listened, and because his words touched the deepest lonely place in her, tears rose before she could stop them. At last she placed the flute in his hands, and then took it back when he asked, not that he might play it, but that she herself should do so. She raised it slowly to her lips, and in the dim mountain night the sound began.

The music did not come out like a performance for others. It was closer to a cry that had learned how to move through breath. The notes rose softly, then bent and trembled, and the sorrow inside them grew so deep that even Takuan fell silent and let the fire burn low between them. Otsu's whole life seemed to enter the sound: the pain of being left, the shame of being cast aside by Matahachi, the fear of tomorrow, and the pure hope she still had not killed in herself. Then, from the dark grass beyond the fire, there came a small movement, as if some listening animal had drawn too near.

Takuan lifted his head and calmly called out to the darkness, saying that the person hiding there should come closer to the warmth. Otsu turned, saw the

shadow of a man, and with a cry threw the flute toward him. The figure moved, and in the next instant Musashi stood there. His body was thin from hunger, his hair rough, his face cut down by wind and sleeplessness, but his eyes still burned with the same fierce life. Otsu could not speak. Takuan, however, spoke as if an expected guest had finally arrived and told Musashi to sit by the fire and eat.

At first Musashi remained watchful, like a wolf that has come near men only because winter has left it no strength. But hunger conquered pride. He took the food Otsu handed him and ate with a force that showed how near his body had come to breaking. After the meal, warmth returned to his face a little, and he thanked her in a voice far gentler than the village would have believed possible. Then he asked why Otsu and Takuan had come so deep into the hills and why they had kept a fire there night after night.

Otsu trembled and could not answer him at once. It was Takuan who spoke plainly. He said that they had come to capture him. Musashi did not leap up in surprise. He only lowered his head and looked from one to the other, as if measuring what kind of trap this was. Takuan leaned toward him and said that if Musashi must be bound, then it was better to be bound by his rope than by the cruel hands waiting below in the village. At that, Musashi's whole face hardened again, and he shook his head with sudden fury, refusing even before the rest of Takuan's words were said.

Part 7

Musashi shook his head with all the force left in him and said that he would never let himself be tied like an animal. Takuan did not answer with anger. He spoke in an even voice and asked whether Musashi truly believed he could win against the law of the lord, the hatred of the village, and the confusion inside his own heart. Musashi tried to answer with rage, but the words broke apart in his mouth. At last he said what he had not wanted to say even to himself: he had already lost.

Takuan then struck the deepest place in him. He asked what would happen

to Ogin, Musashi's sister, who was already suffering because of him. He also asked what Musashi meant to do with the name of his dead father and the house into which he had been born. Musashi covered his face with his dark hands and said he did not know. His wild strength had not left his body, but his spirit had reached a wall that force alone could not break. Even Otsu, sitting beside the fire, could feel that the fight inside him had changed.

Takuan went on and spoke not only of law, but of life. He told Musashi that dying in anger was easy, but living and changing were harder. He said that a man who still had life in him should not throw it away only because the world had become hard and ugly. Musashi listened in silence, breathing heavily, and the firelight showed pain in his face that was worse than hunger. He was no longer speaking like a beast in a trap. He was listening like a wounded young man who had suddenly heard that another road might still exist.

Otsu could bear no more. Hearing Musashi's pain and Takuan's hard truth together, she bent her head and wept. Takuan saw her tears and said, almost sadly, that even a girl as clean and simple as Otsu had now been struck by the rough winds of fate. Those words made her cry with still deeper shame and sorrow. The mountain night, the fire, and the three silent hearts beside it seemed to draw into one knot that none of them could easily cut.

Before dawn, Musashi gave way. He did not yield because fear had made him small, but because some new thought had entered him through pain. Takuan bound him with a rope of the law, as he had called it, and led him down from the hills. When they reached the village, people came out in wonder and excitement. Some stared as if a monster had been caught, and some praised Takuan as if he had done a miracle, but Takuan waved their worship away and said that what had won was not his greatness, but the order of the world itself.

Then the crowd began to shout for Musashi's death. Voices rose from every side, calling him a curse on the village and saying that such a man should not be left alive. Osugi pushed forward with a stick in her hand and struck him across the face again and again, crying that a simple death was too good for him. Musashi did not answer her. The same boy who had once broken doors and rushed through

armed men now stood bound and silent, taking the blows while the whole village watched.

Takuan would not hand him over to the crowd. He had already demanded the right to decide Musashi's treatment, and he kept that right firmly in his own hands. Instead of killing him at once, the men hauled Musashi up into the great old cedar near the temple and tied him high among the branches. There he hung in wind and sun like a warning sign for all to see. The villagers thought it a fine punishment, and Osugi came to stare upward with cruel satisfaction, asking each morning whether he was still alive.

Takuan came and spoke to him below the tree. He mocked him, but not in the empty way of a cruel man. He told Musashi to rage more, to shake the tree harder, to show the strength of his life fully instead of hiding it inside private anger. Musashi shouted down that he would wear through the rope, drop to the ground, and kill him, and Takuan answered that such anger was still too small, because it was only personal anger. A true man, he said, must learn a wider anger and a wider purpose than wounded pride.

Otsu heard those voices and came secretly to the cedar. She pressed her wet face against the rough bark and looked up toward the branches where Musashi was tied. Until then, she had been carried along by the words of the village and by the fear around his name. But now, hearing his fierce voice from the tree and remembering the way he had let Takuan bind him, she began to see him differently. He no longer seemed like a dark beast hunted by all. He seemed brave, proud, wounded, and painfully human.

As she stood there, her heart changed completely. She felt that the life in Musashi's body had somehow passed into the great cedar itself, and that the tree, the wind, and the bound man high above her were joined in one living force. Tears ran down her face and into the bark as she held the trunk and wept. Takuan told her not to waste her tears on a man who might die there, but she could not move. Then the wind rose in the branches, and large drops of rain began to fall through the dark. Takuan covered himself and ran toward the temple, but Otsu remained below the tree as the sudden storm broke over them all.

Part 8

The storm came down in full force over the temple hill. Rain struck the cedar, the roof, and the ground with one fierce sound, and the white darkness of the downpour swallowed everything around it. Otsu did not run after Takuan at once. She stayed below the great tree, clinging to its rough trunk and looking up through the rain as if the man tied high above were part of the cedar itself. In her heart something had changed so completely that she could no longer stand among the villagers and think of Musashi as they did. Now she felt only pity, fear, and a deep, painful love that had no safe place to go.

At last she rushed to Takuan's room and begged him to save Musashi. She folded her hands, cried aloud, and said that he could do anything he liked to her if only he would spare that man's life. The rain beat against the shutters, and even the sound of her weeping seemed to be struck down by the storm. Takuan sat like a stone image for a long time with his eyes shut. When he finally opened them, he told her only to go to bed, saying that rainwater itself was poison to a weak body.

But Otsu would not give up. When he shut the storm doors against her, she crawled beneath the floor and stayed under the place where he lay. From there she kept pleading, calling him heartless and asking whether blood truly flowed in his body. She said it was the one prayer of her life and that she would never stop asking. At last Takuan lost his temper and shouted for the temple men, saying there was a thief under his room. Even then she had to be dragged away only because others came, not because her own will had broken.

The next morning the sky was bright and hard after the storm. Osugi came early, tapping her stick along the path as if she were on her way to some pleasant show. She asked whether Musashi was still alive, and when Takuan answered that a man would not die from one night of rain, she looked up at the cedar with narrow shining eyes. She was almost disappointed that the crows still kept their distance from his face. Then she asked after Otsu, speaking of her as if the girl were already part of her house, and after getting an answer that pleased her, she went away

again with ugly satisfaction.

Otsu, however, had fallen ill. The temple people had forced her indoors in the middle of the storm, and after being scolded by the abbot she had taken fever and could not rise. Her room stayed shut the whole day, and medicine and thin rice gruel were carried in to her. Takuan also remained mostly inside. Only once did he open the shutters to shout at village boys who had come to throw stones up into the branches of the cedar. After that the temple buildings were quiet again, while the bound man remained above them all in the strong spring light.

Night came clear and calm, unlike the night before. When the temple had grown silent and the moon stood bright again, Takuan put on his sandals and went out alone. He stood below the great cedar and called Musashi's name into the darkness. For a moment the high branches moved and drops of water fell in silver lines. Then Musashi answered with a roar full of life, shouting back at the monk with all the old force still in him. Takuan had heard what he wanted to hear. The body tied to the tree was worn, but the spirit inside it had not yet gone weak.

Takuan did not pity him in any soft and easy way. He called upward in that half-mocking voice of his and spoke as if he were trying to strike sparks from stone. Musashi answered with anger, but behind the anger was something darker now, the pressure of a mind forced too long into stillness. Hanging there through sun, wind, and rain, he had been left alone not only with pain, but with thought. The monk seemed to know that this was the true struggle, deeper than rope or hunger, and he pressed on without mercy.

Below them the temple slept, and in another room Otsu burned with fever. Osugi dreamed of punishment, the villagers dreamed of safety, and only Takuan stood wakeful between life and death, watching the man in the tree. The air after rain was clean, and the cedar rose black against the moon like a pillar joining earth and sky. Bound there above human noise, Musashi could no longer escape by running. He had entered another kind of battle now, one fought not with hands or weapons, but with the thing inside him that had never yet learned how to bow, think, and change.

Part 9

After Takuan’s footsteps went away, Musashi stopped shouting. The wind kept moving through the cedar, and the small stars above him looked cold and far beyond all human help. Little by little he let go of both the wish to live and the wish to die. His body had become only pain, hunger, rope, and wood, and his mind was sinking into a dark still place. Then, from below, he heard a faint sound against the trunk, and someone began to climb.

The climber was Otsu. She was no good at climbing trees, and she slipped again and again, tearing the skin of her hands against the bark. But she did not stop, and at last she reached the lower branches and came higher. When she reached him, she was breathing hard and shaking, yet her voice was clear. She told him to escape with her, said that she could no longer remain in that village, and asked whether he would accept the help she offered with her whole life. Musashi, who had refused others, answered at once that she must cut the rope, and when she did, both of them lost their footing and fell together from the tree.

Musashi somehow found himself standing after the fall, though his body was still half dead from hanging so long. At his feet Otsu was twisting in pain, and he bent at once to lift her. She said she hurt all over but could still walk, and he answered that he too knew only one thing clearly, that he was still alive. There was no time to think further. If anyone saw them there, both would surely die, so Otsu began to limp forward, and Musashi followed her into the last deep hours of the night.

They walked slowly and silently, like two broken creatures moving through frost. By the time the east began to whiten over Harima Bay, they had reached the top of Nakayama Pass. Musashi looked around in dull surprise and asked where they were, as if he could hardly believe his own feet had carried him so far. Otsu untied the small bundle on her back and gave him rice cakes made from rice flour. Only then did he remember how hungry he was, for he had taken almost nothing into his body for two full days and nights.

In the pale light of morning, the world looked almost peaceful. The hills, the

road, and the far white sky did not show the danger that still followed behind them. Musashi ate, and the food went into him like something returning to an empty house. Otsu watched him with quiet joy, though her own face had begun to lose color. The cold rain of the earlier storm had entered too deeply into her body, and the strain of the night was now beginning to rise in her as fever.

By the time they reached a roadside tea house, Otsu's strength was nearly gone. She had held herself upright only by will, and now that will was failing. The people there saw that she was a young traveler in trouble and could not turn her away. What had first seemed only a chill soon grew worse, and the tea-house family moved her into a small back room to lie down. Musashi, who could break doors and fight armed men, could do almost nothing here except watch helplessly as the heat climbed in her body.

While Otsu lay ill, the village behind them burst into anger. Osugi took a short sword and set out like an old commander, and relatives, farmers, and servants gathered around her with sticks and bamboo spears. They rushed toward Nakayama Pass, but they had already lost too much time. At the border the officials stopped them, saying that a band could not simply march across the line in pursuit. Osugi and the others argued fiercely and begged to pass, but rule was rule, and the delay burned them with helpless rage.

As they turned and argued on the road, they met the tea-house owner hurrying toward Tatsuno to fetch a doctor. Osugi questioned him at once. The man answered that the sick person was not his wife or child, but a young female traveler who had fallen ill after resting at the front of the shop. He said she was about seventeen and from Miyamoto village. At once Osugi and her kinsman understood. Their breathing grew hard, and without wasting another moment they sent the tea-house man on toward the doctor and hurried back.

So the danger that Musashi and Otsu had escaped on the mountain was already closing around them again in another form. In the back room of the tea house, Otsu burned with fever from the rain-soaked night, while outside the road carried old hate, suspicion, and pursuit straight toward her door. Musashi had won back the ground beneath his feet and tasted food again, but peace had not come

with either of those things. Before the day had fully settled, the past was already following them down the road.

Part 10

Otsu’s fever rose through the day and into the night. The tea-house people did what they could for her, though she was only a traveler who had stopped there by chance. They laid her in a small back room, covered her, and sent for a doctor from Tatsuno. Musashi stayed near her bed as long as he could. He had no skill with medicine, no calm words, and no way to fight against a sickness that entered from cold, rain, and exhaustion. He could only watch her face burn red and hear her breathing grow rough and uneven.

Outside, the road still carried danger. Osugi and the others had failed to cross the border in a body, but their anger had not cooled. When they met the tea-house owner on his way to fetch the doctor and learned that a young woman of Otsu’s age lay sick inside, their suspicion hardened at once. Even if law blocked their first chase, chance had shown them the right direction again. Musashi understood that if he remained where he was, the sickness of one woman would soon become the death of both.

Yet leaving her felt like tearing flesh from bone. Otsu had climbed the cedar for him, had fallen from it with him, had crossed the mountain in pain beside him, and had fed him when he was almost empty of life. Now she lay helpless because she had chosen him over the safety of the village. Musashi sat beside her with his rough hands on his knees and looked at her face for a long time. In battle he had often moved without thought, but here he thought too much, and every thought struck him like a blow.

When the fever eased for a short time and Otsu opened her eyes, he spoke to her quietly. He said that he could not stay and bring more danger into the room where she lay. He also said that he had one duty still burning in him, to find out what had become of his sister. Otsu listened through weakness and nodded, though tears gathered at the corners of her eyes. They agreed that if life did not

break them apart completely, they would meet again in the Himeji area, at Hanadabashi, where roads and hearts might cross more safely than in the village that had cast them both out.

The promise was small in sound, but great in weight. Otsu could not rise to follow him, and Musashi could not kneel like a gentle man and say all that might have been said. Their bond had been made in hunger, storm, rope, and flight, not in an easy room. So the promise itself had to carry what they could not speak. Before dawn, while the tea-house family moved softly and the doctor had not yet returned, Musashi went out alone. He did not wake her again. He looked once toward the back room, fixed the place in his heart, and then went down the road toward Himeji.

After that, Otsu drifted in and out of fever. Sometimes she thought she still heard the mountain wind in the cedar branches. Sometimes she felt the shock of the fall all over again and tried to rise, only to sink back into the bedding. The tea-house woman pressed wet cloths to her and told her to be still. When Otsu asked in a weak voice where the tall man had gone, the answer came gently: he had left before the house woke. Otsu bit her lip and turned her face away, not in anger, but because she understood too well why he had done it.

Musashi, meanwhile, moved toward Himeji with a heart that had grown strangely divided. One part of him was still the rough youth who could smash through doors and live by force alone. Another part had begun to listen to harder words: that blind rage was no true strength, that life was a jewel, and that a man must become more than the wild fear he carried inside him. Those broken teachings, once thrown at him by Takuan, now returned again and again as he walked. He did not yet know how to live by them, but he could no longer forget them.

So he entered the roads around Himeji not as a victor, nor as a beast fully at war with the world, but as something weaker and more human than before. Hunger, weariness, guilt, and hope had all softened him in ways battle never had. He still wanted to know the truth about Ogin. He still meant to keep faith with Otsu at Hanadabashi. But he was beginning, though dimly, to understand that strength

alone would not carry him where he needed to go. The next stage of his life would not begin with a shout, a sword, or a broken gate. It would begin with waiting.

Part 11

Himeji lay before Musashi, but he did not enter it as a free man of the town. He stayed at the edge of the castle city, near Hanadabashi, waiting below the bridge and sometimes standing on it to look both ways along the road. Seven days had already passed since he and Otsu had parted. She had said she would wait there a hundred days, even a thousand days, if she had to. Yet she did not come, and every day made the silence heavier.

He watched every face that crossed the bridge. Women with baskets, men leading horses, children running with dust on their feet, merchants with goods on their backs, all passed before him and went on. Each time a woman's sleeve moved in the wind, his heart rose for a moment and then fell again. He did not know that Otsu had been delayed by illness and by other hands stronger than her own. So he could only stand there and think that either danger had stopped her, or fate had turned her away from him once more.

Waiting was harder for him than fighting. On a battlefield, or in the hills, or with a weapon in his hand, his body always knew what to do next. But under the bridge there was only running water, road dust, and time. He had already lost his friend, lost his place in the village, lost the right even to go openly to his sister, and now it seemed he might lose Otsu too without even hearing her voice. The river moved on beneath the bridge, but he himself could do nothing except remain.

In the end, the days at Hanadabashi did not open into reunion. Instead, Musashi was brought within the power of men greater than the village officials who had hunted him before. When he was seen in the presence of Lord Ikeda Terumasa, he wore a new black cotton robe and sat with his hands on his knees and his eyes lowered. The lord asked if he was the man called Shinmen Musashi. Musashi answered clearly that he was. Then Terumasa reminded him that the Shinmen line had once been tied to this very castle and that his coming there was

therefore not without meaning.

Those words struck Musashi more deeply than open blame. He could bear hatred from villagers and blows from old Osugi, but when the lord spoke of his house and his ancestors, shame rose in him like heat. He felt that he himself was the one who had stained that name. Terumasa then changed his tone and said plainly that Musashi's deeds had been lawless and serious. Musashi did not argue. He only bowed his head lower and waited to hear the punishment.

But the matter did not rest with the lord alone. Takuan stood there too, and he reminded Terumasa that one of the lord's own men, Aoki Danzaemon, had already promised that if Musashi were taken, his treatment would be left in Takuan's hands. Terumasa answered that he had checked the truth of that matter and found the stories to agree. A promise made by his retainer must be treated as his own promise, he said, so the right to decide Musashi's fate no longer belonged simply to him. Then Takuan gave his request: he did not ask for death, but for a high room in the castle keep, where Musashi could be shut away until Takuan himself judged otherwise. Terumasa laughed and agreed.

The scene around them was strange in its calm. Takuan spoke with the lord not as a trembling priest before power, but as an old Zen friend who could joke even in the middle of judgment. Terumasa, small in body but large in presence, turned away at last and invited Takuan to tea later, boasting that his skill had improved. The monk mocked him lightly, and the lord disappeared into the inner rooms while the great White Heron Castle seemed to grow even larger around the short figure that moved through it. Musashi, who had spent so long in dirt, fear, and flight, had now been placed inside a different kind of power, one harder to strike and impossible to flee by force alone.

The room chosen for him was high in the keep, a place called the unopened room. It was dark there at all times. There was no real sense of days, no sound of ordinary life, no spring or autumn, no village noise, and no road outside. Only one lamp burned, and in that thin light his face looked pale and hollow. It was deep winter then, and the beams above him and the boards under him were cold as ice. Even his breath could be seen in the air before the lamp.

On the desk before him lay a copy of Sun Tzu. Musashi bent over it and read aloud again and again when he found words that struck him. No sword hung at his side. No enemy stood before him. No friend answered him. There were only books, darkness, cold, and the sound of his own voice returning to him in the silence. Yet in that hard room, where time itself seemed to stop, another battle had begun, one deeper than flight, rage, or hunger, and Musashi had no choice now but to face it.

Part 12

In the dark room high inside White Heron Castle, Musashi lost all measure of ordinary time. There was no sound of market streets, no village talk, no clear passing of seasons, and almost no mark of day except the small lamp before him. When winter deepened, the beams and floor grew as cold as ice, and his breath turned white in the thin light. Yet he did not lie there in emptiness. On the desk before him lay open pages of Sun Tzu, and when a line struck his mind, he read it aloud again and again until the words seemed to enter his bones.

Around him books rose in piles like low walls. There were Chinese books, Japanese books, Zen books, books of history, and more besides, all borrowed from the domain library for his use. When Takuan had shut him into that room, he had not done so only to punish him. He had told Musashi to think of the chamber as a mother’s womb and to prepare there for a new birth. Takuan said that the room could be only darkness if Musashi chose darkness, but if he opened his mind, it could become a storehouse of light.

Those words did not bloom in him at once. At first there was only strain, silence, and the long ache of a body forced into stillness. But the books slowly changed the shape of his days. When his eyes grew tired, he washed them with water from the bowl beside him and trimmed the lamp wick when it burned low. Then he bent again over the pages, reading not as a boy trying to appear clever, but as a starving man takes food. The strength that had once rushed only into his arms and legs began, little by little, to move inward and deepen.

Seasons passed above him while he hardly knew their names. He only guessed at winter from the bitter cold and at spring from a softer air moving through the cracks. At last, when swallows returned to nest in the openings high in the keep, it became clear that this was the spring of the third year. Musashi had lived there so long that he had almost ceased to think in counts of days. The wild youth who had once broken through doors and fled across mountains had been held still long enough to begin hearing another law inside himself.

Then the confinement came to an end. Before Lord Terumasa, Musashi no longer stood as a hunted beast, but as a man who could bow and listen. The lord granted him clothes and travel money and said that wherever he might go, he must not forget the land of his birth or the line from which he came. From then on, he was to bear the name of his village openly. He was to call himself Miyamoto.

Takuan stood at his side and carried the change still further. He said that the old reading of Takezo should be left behind, and that from that day the name should be read Musashi. It was, he said, the first day of a new birth into the world of light, and it was fitting that all should become new with it. Terumasa was pleased with the name and praised it aloud. Musashi bowed deeply, accepted it with his whole body, and felt that the man rising there was not exactly the same one who had first entered the dark room.

There was wine, laughter, and even Takuan’s strange dancing before they finally left the castle. But beneath the lightness of that hour lay something grave and lasting. The next day Musashi stepped out of White Heron Castle with Takuan, not toward comfort, but toward wandering, training, and a harder life chosen by his own will. He had not become complete, and no book had solved everything within him. Yet he had come out alive from darkness with a new name, a clearer road, and a heart that at last knew it must be forged, not merely unleashed.

Part 13

When Musashi came out from White Heron Castle with his new name, he did not walk at once toward some great road of glory. He went instead to

Hanadabashi and waited there. Day after day he stood by the bridge, looked down the road, and searched every passing face. Seven days passed in that way. He had known battle, hunger, rope, and darkness, but this waiting was harder than any of them.

He had believed that Otsu would come if life allowed it. She had crossed the mountain with him, fallen from the cedar with him, and stayed true even when the whole village had turned against him. Yet the bridge remained empty of her. Men and women crossed, carts rolled by, children shouted, and the river went on below, but not one step belonged to the person he watched for. As the days passed, Musashi began to understand that a promise may be true in the heart and still be broken by the world.

In those same days he also understood something else. The Otsu who loved him had come out of innocence, pain, and faith. But the life before him now was not a life in which he could simply stop, take her hand, and become a husband at once. He had only just come out of darkness. He still had to travel, train, and build a self that was not ruled by rage, hunger, or blind pride. If he took Otsu beside him now, he might only drag her into another long suffering.

So he waited until the truth became clear inside him. He did not stop caring for her. That was exactly why he could not remain. Love, in that moment, was not a hand held tightly, but a hand drawn back in pain. Musashi stood on the bridge, looked down the road one last time, and knew that he had already chosen.

Before leaving, he bent over the bridge rail and carved a few words there with his short sword. He did not write a long excuse. He did not dress his heart in fine language. He left only the plain words that came from the deepest place in him: “Forgive me.” Then he turned away from Hanadabashi and began to walk. The bridge, the river, and the road behind him remained still in the morning light.

After he had gone, Otsu came at last. She had not forgotten. She had not changed her promise. She had simply been delayed by illness, by human hands, and by the rough movement of the world. When she reached Hanadabashi and found Musashi gone, her heart broke open in silence. Then she saw the words he had cut there for her, and that pain became sharper still, because it proved that he

had truly been there and had truly gone by his own will.

So the Earth volume did not end with easy union. It ended with parting. Musashi went forward into wandering, into training, and into the hard making of his new life. Otsu remained behind with love that had nowhere to rest, except in waiting and memory. The bridge held between them only a few cut words, but those words were enough to carry all the sorrow of their unfinished bond.

Musashi did not look back again. The boy called Takezo had vanished into battle, rage, flight, shame, and darkness. The man now walking away from Hanadabashi was still incomplete, still wounded, and still far from the end of his path, but he had at last begun to choose his road knowingly. With that, the first great stage of his life closed, not in triumph, but in separation, resolve, and sorrow.

Book 2: Water

Part 1

People in Kyoto said the wars were over, but they did not believe peace would last. The city had light again in its streets, and shops were busy, yet fear still lived under the skin of daily life. Everyone remembered how quickly fire and steel could return. Men said, “Today we drink, because tomorrow may already be dark.” So the city laughed, sang, and spent money with a kind of hurry that did not come from joy alone.

It was the tenth year of Keichō, five years after the battle of Sekigahara. Tokugawa Ieyasu had stepped down from the office of shogun, and his son Hidetada now held that place. People in Kyoto talked of Hidetada’s coming visit and the city looked lively on the surface. But Osaka Castle still stood, and Hideyori of the Toyotomi house still lived there with gold, walls, and old honor around his name. Because of that, many people thought the next war was only waiting for its time.

At evening, when lamps began to shine, young swordsmen came out from the Yoshioka school near the crossing at Nishinotōin and Shijō. The gate was old and grand, and its sign still carried the proud name of Yoshioka Kenpō, though the board had already grown dark with age. Students poured out with wooden swords, real spears, and long blades at their sides. They looked like men who would be first to rush toward blood when the country burned again. Eight or nine of them gathered around a tall man they called “Young Master,” and their voices rose at once with loud talk and easy laughter.

“Not the same house as last night,” one said. “The women there looked only at you and not at us.” Another answered, “Tonight we go somewhere new, somewhere no one knows our faces.” They walked toward the bright quarter by the Kamo River, where new little houses stood on land that had once been empty after war. Fresh curtains hung over doors, shamisens sounded here and there, and painted women called to passersby from the shadows. At the center of the group

walked Yoshioka Seijūrō, heir to the famous school, wearing a dark brown robe with his family crest.

He was handsome, tall, and dressed with care, but he was not a hard man inside. He had grown up as the son of a rich and famous father, with comfort all around him and little knowledge of the rough bottom of life. When he saw the pleasure quarter ahead, he said to Gion Tōji, “Buy me a hat. I do not want people turning to look and saying, ‘There goes the eldest son of Yoshioka Kenpō.’” Tōji laughed and flattered him as one of the others ran to fetch a woven hat. When the hat came, Seijūrō placed it low over his face and asked, “Now no one will know me, will they?”

But the women noticed him at once. They leaned from doorways and lattice windows and called, “Handsome sir, come here,” and, “Let us see the face under that hat.” Seijūrō tried to look calm, yet their voices pleased him more and more. One woman cried out, “Young master from Shijō, hiding your face will not help. I know you.” Seijūrō stopped at once, secretly delighted, and asked, “Tōji, how could she know me?” Tōji, who understood him very well, made a little show of surprise and told the others, “This is strange indeed. Perhaps our young master already knows this lady well.” The men shouted and laughed, and the woman explained that his robe was the new fashion known even there as “Yoshioka color,” while the crest on it gave him away completely.

Before Seijūrō could answer, the woman reached out through the lattice and caught his sleeve. “Now you must come in,” Tōji said. “There is no other way.” So Seijūrō, embarrassed but willing, let himself be pulled inside with the rest. The room was cheap and badly decorated, though the men hardly cared. They shouted for sake, food, and women, and soon the place was full of rough voices, thrown cups, songs beaten out on plates and brazier rims, and the foolish pride of half-drunk warriors. One older disciple danced with a broom over his shoulder, and the others roared with laughter.

Seijūrō did not enjoy it. The noise was too wild, too dirty, and too empty for him. Then one drunken disciple began to boast, “Except for our Yoshioka school, there is not a single man in the land who truly understands the sword.” Another

man, sitting near Seijūrō and hiccupping from drink, suddenly laughed and answered, “That is nonsense. Even here in Kyoto there are other strong schools, and beyond Kyoto there are many more. This is not the age of the old master any longer. If you think the Yoshioka name alone still makes you first in the world, you are mistaken.”

The room went still for a moment, then turned hot with anger. One man pushed the speaker in the chest and shouted, “You insult our school!” The other replied, “I do not insult it. I warn you. There are too many men here who praise too easily and think too highly of themselves.” The two were pulled apart by Tōji and an older disciple named Ueda Ryōhei, yet the wound had already been made. The proud boaster shouted more loudly than before, and the honest drunk began to weep, saying, “I speak for the good of the school. Too many flattering fools will ruin the name of the old master.” Women fled the room, bottles rolled, and one man bent over the veranda trying not to vomit.

Tōji bent close to Seijūrō and whispered, “This is no fun for you, is it?” Seijūrō answered, “Do these men truly enjoy this?” Tōji smiled and said, “For them, yes. But you should go somewhere quieter.” At once Seijūrō said, almost with relief, “I want to go to the house from last night.” Tōji nodded. “Yomogi no Ryō. I knew from the first that was the place you wanted. That is why I brought the others here first. If this whole crowd had followed us there, it would have been a mess.” Seijūrō rose quietly and said, “Then let us slip away and leave the rest to Ueda.”

Tōji answered, “Go outside and wait. I will come after I pretend to step out for the toilet.” Seijūrō moved carefully through the confusion and vanished from the room. Behind him the shouting still rose and fell like foolish waves, but ahead of him waited a different house, a quieter house, and a night that would lead him farther into weakness.

Part 2

At Yomogi no Ryō, Oko stood on her toes under the eaves, trying to hang a

small lantern again after the wind had blown out its light. She was no young woman, yet the white of her arms and the looseness of her washed hair still caught the eye in the soft air of a late winter evening. A faint smell of plum drifted through the dark. Someone spoke behind her, and she turned at once with a smile, thinking it was Seijūrō. But it was Tōji, not the young master, and he quickly took the lantern and fixed it in place for her.

Men who were lazy and harsh in their own homes often became strangely busy and kind in such houses, and Tōji was one of them. He adjusted the lantern again, opened things with his own hands, and fussed as if he belonged there. Then Seijūrō came in and sat down with relief. “This place is better,” he said at once. “It is quiet here.” Tōji hurried to open the shutters toward the narrow veranda, and below it the water of the Takase River moved with a small, cold sound through the night.

South of the little bridge at Sanjō, the temple grounds spread dark and wide, and beyond them lay empty places that still carried the memory of old cruelty and death. But inside the room Seijūrō wanted only comfort. Tōji muttered that the house was too quiet and asked why no women had yet come, then wandered into the inner passage to hurry them along. There he met Akemi, a slight young woman carrying a tray, little bells tied at her sleeves ringing when she moved. She told him not to make her spill the tea, but Tōji only laughed and teased her, saying that her beloved Seijūrō had arrived and she ought to come quickly.

Akemi answered him with light, quick words and slipped into the room. Seijūrō, who had been pretending not to notice anything, turned red when he saw her. She offered him tobacco in a fine pipe and asked if he smoked. He said tobacco was forbidden these days, but when she answered that many men still used it in secret, he agreed to try. She filled the pipe with her white fingers and held it out to him, and when he drew on it and coughed at the sharp taste, she laughed softly.

He looked at her more carefully then. She seemed younger than she was, almost like a girl of sixteen, with a small body and a shy brightness in her eyes. When he asked where Tōji had gone, Akemi said he was probably in her mother’s

room again. At once Seijūrō began to speak in an easy, foolish way. He said Tōji must be in love with Oko, and perhaps Oko felt the same. Then he added that it made a fine pair, Tōji with Oko, and he himself with Akemi.

As he said this, he laid his hand over hers. Akemi pulled her hand away at once and gave him a look that was not playful now. Seijūrō, instead of drawing back, suddenly grew bolder. He caught her as she half rose to leave and pulled her close, asking where she thought she was going. Akemi struggled and said she only wanted to bring sake, but Seijūrō pressed against her and told her that Oko and Tōji were probably busy talking happily in another room. Then Akemi, truly frightened, cried out loudly for her mother.

Seijūrō let her go at once. Akemi fled with the bells at her sleeves ringing like a small bird's wings. From somewhere deeper in the house there came a burst of laughter, and Seijūrō stood there feeling foolish, angry, and bitter all at once. He muttered that he was leaving and strode into the passage with a face dark from wounded pride. Oko saw him, hurried to stop him, and called Tōji to help. They soothed him, brought him back, placed him in the room again, and soon there was sake before him.

Oko tried to please him, Tōji sat near him, and Akemi was brought back as well. Seeing Seijūrō silent and unhappy, Akemi lowered her face and gave a little smile. Oko told her to pour for him, and Akemi did so. They spoke of her looks, and when Oko said she was already twenty-one, Seijūrō could hardly believe it. She looked so small and fresh that he said she seemed hardly more than sixteen or seventeen. Akemi brightened at this and said she would be glad to stay sixteen forever, because something good had happened to her at that age.

When Tōji asked what that good thing had been, she said no more than that it had happened in the year of the battle of Sekigahara. Oko cut her off sharply and ordered her to fetch her shamisen. Akemi did not answer back. She simply brought the instrument and began to play, less as if she meant to entertain them than as if she were touching some private memory of her own. She sang sad lines about clouds, tears, darkness, and a heart led astray, and the room grew softer and stranger around the sound.

Seijūrō had been sitting with his head bent in silence, but something in him changed again. He suddenly lifted a cup toward Akemi and told her to drink with him. She took the cup without shame, drained it, and handed it back at once. He stared at her. Her body looked like that of a young girl, her face still held the shyness of one not yet worn by men, and yet the sake seemed to vanish into her without touching her. Oko laughed and said there was no use trying to make Akemi drunk, because she could drink endlessly and never lose her head.

Seijūrō only became more intent. Again and again he poured for her, and she kept accepting. Tōji began to worry and told him he was drinking too much himself, but Seijūrō said it did not matter. Before long he declared that he might not go home that night at all. Oko answered at once that he was welcome to stay, not only one night but many if he wished, and she threw a look toward Akemi as she spoke. Tōji caught that glance and understood where things were moving.

He drew Oko quietly into another room and spoke to her in a low voice. This had gone too far, he said, and now there was no choice but to settle matters somehow. Seijūrō's desire for Akemi was plain, and only the mother's decision mattered. Then he spoke more plainly still, asking what amount of money would satisfy her. Oko did not answer at once. She touched her painted cheek and thought. Tōji pressed harder, telling her this was no bad chance. The Yoshioka house was rich, the son of such a house was still unmarried, and whatever happened, Akemi's future need not be poor.

Oko said she thought it might indeed be a good thing. Tōji, growing shameless in the dark, reached for her shoulder and asked whether the two young people should be allowed to stay together that very night. But just then a noise came from the next room beyond the closed sliding door. Tōji jerked back and asked in surprise if there was another guest there. Oko only nodded. Then she leaned close and whispered that they would speak later. Both of them returned as if nothing had happened.

By then Seijūrō was already stretched out in drunken sleep. Tōji went to lie down in another room, but he did not truly sleep. He kept waiting for some sound from the inner rooms, some sign that the house had carried out what he and Oko

had just discussed. Yet the night passed in deep silence. No rustle of silk came. No footsteps approached. Dawn spread slowly over the river, and still the inner part of the house lay quiet.

Tōji rose late and with a foolish look on his face. Seijūrō was already awake and drinking again in the room by the water. Oko and Akemi were both fresh and clear-eyed, as if nothing at all had happened in the night. They were talking happily about going to see the women's kabuki on the riverbank at Shijō. Seijūrō, still heavy from drink and confusion, promised to take them. He ordered sake and food to be prepared for the outing, and at once Oko spoke of heating bath water while Akemi clapped like a child with delight.

That morning the only ones who seemed full of life were the mother and daughter. They moved about the house busily, pleased and excited, while Seijūrō sat drinking and Tōji carried the sour feeling of failure inside him. Nothing had happened as he expected, yet the matter had not ended. The house still held more than one shadow, and behind its soft voices and painted smiles another life lay hidden within it.

Part 3

Okuni's dancing had become the newest excitement in Kyoto. On the riverbank at Shijō, many women now copied her style and set up their own stages, each trying to seem more fresh, more elegant, or more daring than the others. Some even used men's stage names and dressed in men's clothes when they performed. The city talked of little else, and Oko and Akemi were full of joy because they were going there. But while they carefully dressed and painted their faces, Seijūrō's mood sank again.

He sat by the river room and felt tired in body and spirit. The sake from the night before still lay heavily in him, and now that morning pleasure had turned into waiting, he began to want to go home. Tōji too had lost his easy tone. What had happened in the night, and what had not happened, still clung to him in an ugly way. When Seijūrō said, "Shall we go back?" Tōji quickly answered that it

was too late for that now.

“After making them so happy, how can you say that?” he said. “They will be angry.” Then he rose and went to hurry the women, thinking only of getting the outing started. He looked into one room and then another, but they were not there. At last he slid open the door of a dim, unpleasant little room that got almost no light.

There a young rōnin lay stretched on the floor, dirty and half drunk, his sword guard pushing up from his sash, his feet turned carelessly toward the door. He looked about twenty-two or twenty-three, with the rough clothes and fallen air of a man who had gone badly wrong. The smell of sake rose from him. Tōji said politely that he had not known there was another guest. The man barked back at once, “I am no guest.”

Tōji had already decided this was a man best left alone, but as he moved away the fellow suddenly sat up and shouted after him to close the door. Tōji obeyed, and almost at once Oko appeared nearby, dressed so richly that she seemed another person. Her face was thick with paint, and she spoke to the man as if scolding a spoiled child. Behind her stood Akemi, smiling lightly, and she asked, “Matahachi, won’t you come too? We are going to see the dancing.”

The man twisted his mouth and spat out his answer. He said no husband in the world would follow behind the customer who followed behind his wife. Oko stopped at once and turned sharply on him. “What did you say?” she demanded. Matahachi glared back with the anger of a man who had lost everything except his hurt pride. He called himself her husband and acted as if that still gave him some right to speak.

Oko’s patience ended there. She told him that if he wanted to speak like a husband, he ought to behave like one. Since they had left Ōmi, she said, he had not earned even a single coin. He drank, wandered, complained, and lived by the work of her hands and Akemi’s. Matahachi answered that he had said many times he would carry stones or timber and work like any laborer, but she herself had refused such a life because she wanted better food and better rooms.

He cried out that they should leave this dirty trade and live honestly, even if

he had to sweat under heavy loads to feed them. Oko laughed bitterly at that. If he wanted such a life, she said, then he should leave alone and go live it by himself. She told him he was only a country man from Sakushū, and that such rough work suited him far better than this house. Then, with tears of anger in her eyes, she said he was free to go whenever he pleased.

Oko turned away, and Akemi followed her. Matahachi kept staring after them long after they had gone from the doorway. Then tears began to fall from him, one after another, onto the mats. He thought of the day after Sekigahara when he had been taken in and hidden at Oko's house on Mount Ibuki. At that time it had seemed like kindness and good fortune, but now he felt that he had merely become a prisoner by another road.

He thought it might have been better to be taken openly by enemies than to live this half-life in shame, feeding on another person's desire and pity. He cursed himself and asked again and again why he had not gone back then. Why had he not returned to his own village of Miyamoto? Why had he not gone back to Otsū, to his mother, to the temple bell, the river, the flowers on the bank, and the people who had once cared for him? He struck his own head with his fists and called himself a fool.

Soon he heard cheerful voices outside the room. Oko, Akemi, Seijūrō, and Tōji were leaving the house together. Their feet and laughter passed just beyond the thin window, and he could hear Akemi talking of the sounds of the kabuki music in the distance. He could also hear how lively Oko sounded, and how lightly Tōji moved beside her. When Akemi turned back to call to him, Oko quickly pulled her along, and the little group went on in bright spring air while he remained in the dark.

Matahachi watched them through the window with hard, burning eyes. After they were gone, he dropped down again into the silent room and began cursing himself with real hatred. "What is this?" he thought. "If that woman says go, then go. Why stay here grinding your teeth in a house like this? I am only twenty-two. I am still young." He said the words aloud, as if saying them could make them true.

Yet even while he spoke, he felt his own weakness. He knew this life was ugly. He knew it had made him smaller, softer, and more confused. He knew that the right answer was to stand up, walk out, and begin again somewhere under the open sky. But knowledge alone did not move his feet.

Day after day he lived under jealousy, shame, and drink. At night, the very woman who insulted him in daylight seemed to change into another being, and that strange sweetness bound him again. He hated her, hated himself, and still could not leave. So he sat there alone in the empty house, with spring outside the walls and darkness inside his heart.

Part 4

Yet when the moment truly came, Matahachi still did not have the courage to go out and carry stones or timber in some place where Oko and Akemi might see him. Five years of such living had already sunk deep into his body. He wore silk now, knew one kind of sake from another, and no longer looked or felt like the plain, strong village youth he had once been. Since he had fallen into this twisted life while still very young, his spirit had changed before it had fully grown. The open, manly force that should have filled his youth had shrunk, bent inward, and turned sour.

Even so, he told himself again and again that this day would be different. He struck himself with anger and said, “No more. I am leaving.” The house was empty, so there was no one to stop him and no one to laugh at him. He fastened on the long sword that, for all his weakness, he had never quite let go of. Then he bit his lip and said, “I am a man too.”

He could have walked proudly out through the front, but habit ruled him even now. He slipped out by the kitchen door in dirty sandals, as if he were doing something shameful. Once outside, he stopped at once in the pale wind of early spring. His eyes moved without focus, and his feet would not go on. “Where do I go?” he thought. The world outside seemed suddenly wide and empty like a rough sea, and he knew almost nothing of it.

Then another thought struck him, and he turned back like a dog that has forgotten a bone. He crawled in through the kitchen again and muttered, “I need money.” In Oko’s room he searched boxes, drawers, and stands, pulling things open wildly, but he found no coins. Oko was too careful for that. At last he sank down among her scattered clothes, beaten and tired, while the smell of rich cloth and cosmetics rose around him. He imagined her now at the riverbank with Tōji, sitting close beside him and smiling.

“Wicked woman,” he whispered, but the real pain came from another place. The person he could not forget was not Oko at all, but Otsū, the girl he had left behind in his home village. The more time passed, the more clearly he understood the clean and faithful heart of the girl who had once said she would wait for him. He felt he should put his hands together and beg her forgiveness. But he had no right now to go before her face. Worst of all, he remembered how he himself had once told Oko about Otsū, and how Oko, though smiling at the time, had later forced him in a jealous quarrel to write a letter of separation and had even added her own shameless words before sending it away.

“What does Otsū think of me now?” he muttered again and again. In his mind he saw her eyes full of hurt. He saw the village of Miyamoto under the touch of spring, the river, the hills, the temple, his mother, the familiar people, all of them warm. He thought of the earth itself there, kind and soft under the feet. “I can never step on that ground again,” he said, and then his anger turned wildly. He seized Oko’s clothes from their chest, tore them, and kicked them around the room like a madman.

Just then someone called at the front entrance. A voice said politely that he had come from the Yoshioka house and asked whether the young master Seijūrō and Gion Tōji were there. Matahachi shouted back that he knew nothing. But the man outside would not leave. He said the matter was serious, that it touched the honor of the Yoshioka name, and that a wandering swordsman from Tajima, named Miyamoto Musashi, had come to the dojo, defeated every disciple who stood before him, and now refused to move until Seijūrō returned. At the name “Miyamoto,” Matahachi jerked upright as if someone had struck him.

At the Yoshioka house, meanwhile, the evening had become a dark and bitter one. No disciple went home. Men stood in groups under the heavy air of the dojo or sat in rooms without speaking, each face hard with shame, grief, or anger. Whenever there was a sound at the gate, people rose and asked, “Has the young master come back?” But each time the answer was no, and the silence grew deeper. Even when a lamp was lit before the household shrine, it seemed to give not living light, but the weak glow of a funeral fire.

Some of the older men were forced to think of things they had not wished to see before. In the days of the dead master Yoshioka Kenpō, the school had risen through true effort. Kenpō had begun as a dyer, studied many forms of swordsmanship, built his own school, and won real honor under the Ashikaga house. But his sons had inherited not only training, but wealth, fame, a great house, and a name already bright in the city. Too many disciples now followed that name, not the living strength behind it. Too much comfort had gathered inside the walls while the world outside had changed.

For years the Yoshioka school had shone in Kyoto by appearance, numbers, and old reputation. But outside those white walls, new fighters and new schools had been rising all over the land. While the men of the dojo boasted, enjoyed themselves, and trusted too easily in past glory, the age had moved on. This evening, for the first time, they were forced to wake from that pride. Their disgrace had not come at the hands of some famous master. It had come from an unknown country swordsman named Miyamoto Musashi.

Earlier that day, Musashi had appeared at the gate and asked, very simply, to meet Yoshioka Seijūrō. The men who heard of him first laughed. The servant described a great rough youth, perhaps twenty-one or twenty-two, nearly six feet tall, with tangled red-brown hair tied carelessly back, dirty clothes dark with weather and travel, and a paper-net travel bundle across his back. He looked like a young bull pulled from the dark. When they asked what school he came from, the answer only amused them more. He had learned some staff work from his father as a child, he said, questioned many passing swordsmen in his village, spent three years in study, then one year alone in the mountains, taking trees and

mountain spirits as his teachers, and now hoped one day to found a school of his own.

That reply made the men roar. They mocked his dream of becoming another founder like old Kenpō and joked about whether anyone should prepare to claim his dead body afterward. Even then Musashi answered with plain calm. If he died, he said, they might throw him on Toribeyama or into the Kamo River with the trash; he would not complain. Such fearless simplicity only made them more eager to amuse themselves. Someone said, “Let him in,” and the others agreed, thinking they would break an arm or leg and throw him back into the street.

But the first man who stood against him lost not merely honor, but nearly his hand. Musashi’s wooden sword crushed and tore through the body with terrible force. One after another the disciples rushed in, and one after another they were broken, beaten down, or left bleeding on the floor. The room grew full of danger, blood, and real fear. At last they could do nothing but place Musashi in a separate room and send riders flying in search of Seijūrō, while doctors were called for the injured. By the time Seijūrō and Tōji finally came back, two men were already dead, and the wounded were striking the mats with their fists, crying out for only one thing: that the young master must avenge them and not let Musashi leave alive.

Part 5

When Seijūrō finally returned with Tōji, both of them looked as if cold water had been poured over their heads. The news inside the house was worse than shame alone. Two men were already dead. Others lay in pain, their arms and legs broken under the blows of Musashi’s wooden sword. Tōji pushed his way forward with his usual hard manner and demanded to know what had happened, but one of the younger disciples turned on him with burning eyes and answered that he had no right to speak so proudly after leading the young master about in pleasure and waste.

Angry words flew back at once. One man cried that such a day had never come while old Kenpō was alive. Another shouted that the dead master’s spirit

must be weeping in the family altar room. Tōji answered with force, but the mood of the house had changed too much for his voice to rule it. In the next room the wounded men began to groan and strike the mats, calling out that Seijūrō must avenge them. They did not speak like calm disciples now. They spoke like men half mad with pain and shame.

Their cry moved through the whole house. Every face tightened. For people of that age, shame was not a light thing. It was as heavy as life itself. Men could die with it more easily than live under it. That feeling had long held society together even where law and power still remained rough and incomplete. So when the first shock passed, the whole Yoshioka house rose again under one thought only: the shame of the school must be washed away.

They gathered around Seijūrō in the dojo. But Seijūrō himself was not filled with battle fire. The weariness of the night before still hung in his face, and under it there was something darker. He asked where the rōnin was. Someone pointed toward a small room near the study, where Musashi had been left waiting until the young master returned. Seijūrō took up a wooden sword, tied back his sleeves, and walked to the raised master's place in the dojo.

"Bring him," he said.

Several men answered at once and moved quickly toward the garden side of the house. But before they reached the room, Tōji and a few of the older men caught at their sleeves and stopped them. At once several little groups formed in the dark. Heads bent close together. Low voices rose and fell. There was argument, fear, and hurried judgment in those whispers. Seijūrō could not hear their words, but he could feel their meaning. The older men were not thinking only of revenge. They were thinking of danger.

It was simple enough to say that Seijūrō must fight. But what if he failed? Unknown or not, this Musashi had already killed two men and crippled others. If Seijūrō fell too, the Yoshioka house itself would break. Some thought of Denshichirō, Seijūrō's younger brother, whose natural gift many secretly rated higher. But Denshichirō was away from home. So the men who cared most for the house began to choose another road, one that would not risk their young master

before the eyes of all.

Tōji came close and spoke into Seijūrō's ear. The words were soft, but they struck like dirt thrown into the face. Seijūrō understood at once. "A trick?" he said sharply. "A secret attack?" Tōji tried to quiet him with his eyes. Seijūrō answered that if many men struck one unknown swordsman in the dark, then his own name would be stained. People would say he had feared a country fighter and hidden behind numbers. Tōji did not yield. He said Musashi was not a worthy enemy for Seijūrō's own hand. The important thing was only this: Musashi must not leave alive and carry the Yoshioka disgrace into the streets of Kyoto.

While they spoke, the room quietly emptied. More than half the men were already gone, slipping into the garden, around the veranda, and toward the back gate like thin smoke. Tōji suddenly blew out the lamp near Seijūrō and tightened his clothing for action. Seijūrō remained seated for a moment in the dark. Somewhere inside him there was relief. He could not deny it. Yet it was not relief he could accept with pride. It only showed him too clearly what he had become since his father died and his training had softened.

Soon he was alone in the dojo. The whole house seemed cold and hollow. Outside, no voices rose. No sandals sounded. It was as if everyone had vanished into the earth. At last Seijūrō could not bear sitting still. He rose and looked from a window. Only one room still showed light. That was the room where Musashi waited.

The lamp inside that room flickered now and then. All around it, in the garden, beneath the veranda, near the study, and along the dark passages, men crept close with swords drawn low. They held their breath and listened with their whole bodies. Tōji himself began to feel uncertain. If Musashi had truly been as strong as the day's fighting showed, then how could he fail to sense so many men coming toward him? A swordsman who wished to live by the sword should have felt such danger before it touched the walls.

At first they thought he must be asleep. But that did not feel right either. Perhaps, they thought, he had known all along and was only waiting in silence, ready to rise the instant anyone entered. The longer they listened, the stiffer they

became. Their own killing spirit turned against them. Each man wanted another to be first. A throat clicked in the dark. Someone shifted one foot. No one wished to step into that light.

At last Tōji called through the next wall in a calm voice, “Master Miyamoto, forgive the wait. We would like to speak with you now.” There was no answer. The room stayed completely still. Tōji threw a quick look to the others, then kicked the sliding door hard at the waist.

The door burst open.

Yet even then the first men did not leap in. Their bodies pulled back before their minds did. Other doors around the room flew open almost at the same time, and men rushed toward the light from every side. Then someone cried out, “He is not here!” The bedding was there. The brazier was there. The tea that had been brought for him had grown cold and stood untouched. Only Musashi was gone.

Some cursed the guards. Others swore he had not passed them. One man pointed at last into a cupboard space where a section of the floor had been broken away. From there Musashi had slipped out below. The moment they understood, courage came back all at once. What had looked like dark stillness now seemed only weakness. “He is running!” they cried. “He cannot be far. Chase him!”

They burst through the gates and scattered into the streets. Very soon someone shouted that he had been seen. A figure had flashed from beside the front wall and cut across the road toward a narrow lane. Men ran after it wildly. Near the burned land by Kūyadō and Honganji’s old ditch, they finally caught him and threw him down. Blows rained on him at once, fists and feet together, and the man let out a great cry as he twisted under them.

Then suddenly he rose with such force that several of the men holding him were thrown aside. For a moment it looked as if the fighting would break open again. But someone arriving late shouted, “Stop! Stop! It is the wrong man!” Others stared, blinked, and then drew back. Tōji pushed forward, looked closely, and recognized him. This was the rough fellow from the back of Yomogi no Ryō, the man Oko kept in her house, not Musashi at all.

They asked what such a man had been doing standing near the Yoshioka gate

and looking inside. Tōji answered that there was no time to waste on him. Musashi had escaped, and every moment mattered. The men ran off again in search of an inn or hiding place. Matahachi stayed where he was for a moment, head down beside the dark ditch, straightening his ruined clothes and broken hair.

Then, thinking quickly, he called after the last man and asked a question. How old had this Musashi been? About his own age, came the answer. Was he from Miyamoto village in Sakushū? Yes. Was his name written with the same character as Takezō? The man asked sharply why he cared, but Matahachi said it was nothing. The man warned him not to linger again where such trouble could fall on him, then ran off into the night.

Left alone, Matahachi walked slowly along the ditch with no clear road before him. Now and then he looked up at the stars and stopped. “So it was true,” he thought. “He has changed his name to Musashi and gone out to train himself.” He kicked stones as he walked, and in each stone he seemed to see the face of his old friend. He knew he ought to go to him at once. Yet shame rose in him like a wall. If he met Musashi now, he would only be seen in his ruin.

“The timing is bad,” he muttered to himself. “I still have some pride. I do not want him to look down on me.” But he also knew that if the Yoshioka men found Musashi first, danger would come quickly. So he walked on under the stars, torn between fear, pride, and the wish to warn the one man he could no longer face as an equal.

Part 6

Matahachi walked on beside the dark ditch and could not settle his own heart. He knew now that Takezō of Miyamoto village had become Miyamoto Musashi and had gone out into the world to train himself. He also knew that the Yoshioka men would hunt Musashi if they found him. More than once he thought he ought to run through the night and warn his old friend. But each time that thought rose, another rose against it, and that second thought was shame.

“The time is bad,” he told himself. “I cannot meet him now.” He kicked

stones as he walked, and each stone seemed to carry Musashi's face for a moment before it rolled away. Pride still lived in him, even after all his weakness, and he could not bear the idea of standing before Musashi in such a ruined state. Yet as he went on slowly under the stars, his heart stayed divided. He wanted to hide from Musashi, and at the same time he wanted to save him.

The next turn of the story lay far from that dark ditch. Along a stony slope in Kyoto, shabby roofs stood in a crooked row like bad teeth, their eaves green with moss. The smell of dried fish being cooked drifted through the noon air. Suddenly, from one poor house, a woman's sharp voice burst out, cursing a drunken husband who had left his wife and children hungry. A plate flew into the street and shattered white on the stones, and then a man around fifty tumbled out after it as if the house itself had thrown him away.

The man's wife sprang out behind him barefoot, her hair loose, her chest half open, wild with anger. She caught him by the topknot, beat him, clawed at him, and shouted for all the street to hear. A child inside cried as if its little body were on fire, a dog yelped, and neighbors came running to stop the fight. Musashi turned his head and watched with a dry smile from under his hat. But he had not truly been watching that house. For some time already he had been standing before the workshop next to it, lost like a child in wonder.

Inside that workshop two potters were at work. One bent over the wheel, shaping wet clay with both hands, while the other used blade and scraper with a calm skill that seemed to waste no breath and no motion. Musashi had forgotten everything else while looking at them. The broken plate, the angry wife, the thrown-out husband, the crying child, even the shouting in the street had only briefly touched him. His eyes went back at once to the turning clay and the hands that controlled it.

The two craftsmen did not look up. They kept working as if there were no swordsman at the doorway and no noise in the street at all. That silence struck Musashi deeply. Here too, he felt, was a kind of path. The hands were plain hands, the clothes were workmen's clothes, the place smelled of earth and smoke, yet the men before him had entered something so fully that the world could not easily

pull them out of it. Musashi stood there taking that lesson into himself without giving it a name.

At last he moved on. He climbed farther through the city and came toward Kiyomizu, where people crowded the ways and voices rose from every side. At one place he stopped before an old hanging board and stood looking up at the two large characters written on it. Some sedan-chair bearers who had noticed him began to laugh and say, “Look at him, staring at a signboard.” Their laughter was ugly, but Musashi held back his temper. There was no use shouting at such men, and he kept his eyes lifted a little longer.

Then the mood around him shifted. The bearers suddenly stopped laughing and began whispering that someone important had arrived. Musashi looked around and saw that the place near the west gate of Kiyomizu had filled with people before he knew it. Pilgrims, monks, sellers, idle watchers, all had gathered in widening circles, each person waiting for something to happen. Into that crowd there came the sound of strong feet and loud calls, and soon a sedan appeared.

On the back of one bearer rode an old woman who looked to be about sixty, lively and sharp even in age. Behind her walked another old figure, a country samurai already well past fifty, not impressive in outward form, yet stubborn in the way he held himself. The old woman waved one hand impatiently and called that the men need not carry her any farther. The crowd opened for her at once, and the bearers set her down.

Musashi did not yet know what shape the trouble would take, but he understood at once that it was moving toward him. The old woman’s eyes were full of purpose before her feet had even touched the ground. The old samurai behind her looked worn by years, yet he too had come for something more than a temple visit. Around them the crowd pressed inward with hungry curiosity. Musashi stood where he was, silent beneath his hat, and waited for the next blow to fall.

Part 7

The old woman jumped lightly down from the bearer's back, though her age should have made such a movement difficult. Behind her came the old samurai, less lively in body but still dressed with the stiff care of a man who had come out to stake what remained of his honor. Musashi knew them both the moment he saw their faces. The old woman was Osugi, Matahachi's mother, and the other was Gon, the uncle from his home place. They had crossed a long road to reach him, and now they had found him by chance before the west gate of Kiyomizu.

The bearers crowded around them eagerly, half servants and half supporters. "There he is," they said. "Do not rush. The fellow has a hard face." People in the crowd looked from the bent old pair to the large young swordsman standing silent under his hat, and at once pity flowed the wrong way. Age, weakness, and loud suffering won hearts faster than youth and silence. The noise around Musashi thickened like muddy water.

Osugi and Gon moved nearer with their hands on their sword hilts. Their sandals, leggings, clothing, and tied-up baggage all showed that they had made ready for a journey from which they might not return. Looking at them, even the careless in the crowd began to understand that these two had not come only to threaten. They had brought their old bodies all the way from distant Sakushū to settle something that had burned in them for years.

Before they spoke, Osugi turned toward the temple side and joined her hands in prayer. Gon, copying her devotion, joined his hands as well. The sight was so earnest that it became almost foolish, and some in the crowd gave little laughs. At once one of the bearers shouted back at them, asking what was so funny. Another raised his voice and explained the whole story as if he himself had lived it from the beginning.

He said that this old gentlewoman had come all the way from Sakushū to kill the rogue who had stolen away her son's promised bride and brought shame on her family. She had been visiting Kiyomizu day after day, he said, and this day was already the fiftieth or more. By chance she had seen the very man on Chawan-zaka and followed him here. Another bearer cried that any true-hearted person must bow his head before such spirit. A third shouted that if the young rōnin dared

strike down an old woman, then all of them would jump in at once on her side.

The crowd loved that speech. At once men began saying that the old should be protected, that the weak must be helped, and that a young wandering swordsman should know better than to draw steel on age. Some had no idea what the truth of the matter was. It did not matter. They had been given a story simple enough to enjoy, and now they wrapped themselves in the warm righteousness of it.

Osugi stepped forward again and shouted at Musashi by his new name. She told him that changing his name had not hidden him from heaven. The same sky shone over every road he could run upon. Then she demanded that he either take her head cleanly or lose his own life before all present. Gon too lifted his cracked old voice and cried that though he was aged, he had not grown so weak as to fall behind a mere village youth. He drew his blade and told Musashi to prepare.

Musashi did not answer. He stood with the stillness of a post, his face emptied of expression. That silence only angered Osugi more. She cried that he was afraid, then darted sideways and tried to rush in on him from an angle. But her old foot caught on a stone, and she pitched forward hard, falling almost at Musashi's feet with both hands to the ground and her sword flying from her grip.

A great cry burst from the crowd. "He will kill her!" some shouted. "Help her, quickly!" Even Gon lost himself for a moment and could only stare at Musashi's face, trying to read whether death was about to fall. But Osugi was tough. She snatched up her sword, scrambled back to Gon's side, and set herself again to face Musashi as if nothing had happened. Then she screamed at Gon too, asking whether his blade was only for show and whether he had forgotten how to cut.

Until then Musashi had said nothing. Now, for the first time, his voice came out large and clear. "I have not," he said, and then he changed the words like a hammer strike, "I do not." He meant that he had no wish, no right, and no sword within him for such a thing. He began to walk forward at once, not as a man rushing to battle, but as one stepping out of an ugly dream. Osugi and Gon sprang apart in fear, thinking he was about to strike, yet he only passed between the

spaces their frightened bodies had opened.

“Where are you going, Musashi?” they cried. “Stop! Do not run!” Again he said, “I do not,” and kept walking. The answer struck them harder than a blow, because it denied the whole shape of the scene they had built. He would not fight them. He would not even defend himself in the manner they demanded. He refused the crowd’s play, their pity, their anger, their idea of justice, and their desire for blood.

For a moment no one moved. The crowd had wanted a clean pattern: old virtue, young guilt, challenge, clash, and perhaps a fall. Musashi had broken that pattern by refusing to be the beast they had called forth. Some cursed him for cowardice. Some said he was wise. Others only stared after his broad back as he went down through the broken noise of the gathered people. Behind him, Osugi’s rage shook in the air, while Gon, still holding his sword, looked smaller than before.

Musashi did not turn his head. Inside him there was pain, but not the pain of fear. Those two figures behind him belonged to the village he had left, to the tangle of old promises, old mistakes, and old names that still clung to his steps no matter how far he walked. Yet if he had drawn on them, even once, then something in him would have gone backward instead of forward. So he left the shouts behind him and walked on under the crowded spring sky, bearing the insult in silence rather than cut down age with his hand.

Part 8

Musashi went down from Kiyomizu without looking back. The shouting of Osugi and Gon still followed him for a while, but it grew thin as he moved farther down the slope and into the common streets. People turned to look at him here and there, for the story had already begun to spread in broken pieces. Some said he was cruel, some said he was wise, and some only laughed that he had walked away from two old people with drawn swords. Musashi heard enough to know that the city would not keep the truth clean.

By the time evening came, he had reached a rough part of town where poor lodgings stood close together and smoke hung low over the roofs. He took a room in a cheap inn, not because he liked such places, but because they asked few questions. The boards were thin, the bedding was poor, and the people in the house had the worn faces of those who lived by small coins. Yet the place gave him what he needed most, which was a corner where he could sit still and think. He had borne shame that day without drawing his sword, but that did not mean the shame had not entered him.

In that neighborhood, however, silence did not last long. Men in the street had already heard of the young swordsman from Kiyomizu who had not fought an old woman. They laughed over cups and said, “He is weak.” Others repeated the tale and made it uglier. The one person who could not bear those words was a dark, restless boy who came and went about the inn like a small wild thing. His name was Jōtarō.

He was rough-haired, sharp-eyed, and full of quick movement. He had the smell of dust and street life on him, yet there was nothing dull about him. Before long he had entered Musashi’s room as if he belonged there and had begun to question him with the boldness of a child who had never learned proper distance. Musashi, instead of driving him out, watched him with amusement. There was something in the boy that stirred him, perhaps because Jōtarō was still more boy than servant, and because Musashi himself had known too little warmth in his own childhood.

Jōtarō busied himself with the little things of the room. He knew how to warm sake by setting the jar into hot ash, and after a while he told Musashi it was ready. Then he asked if Musashi liked drink. Musashi answered that he did. The boy said that liking and having were different things, and if a man was poor, he could not drink much. From there his talk jumped quickly to famous swordsmen, to great stipends, to long trains of servants, and to the grand names of men who had found high place under powerful lords.

“If men of the sword can become rich like that,” Jōtarō asked, “why are you so poor?” Musashi answered, “Because I am still studying.” The boy thought

about that and asked another question at once. “Then when do you become great? When do you walk with many followers and horses?” Musashi laughed a little and said he did not think he would ever become such a lordly man. Jōtarō stared at him and then, with the direct cruelty of children, asked, “Are you weak?”

Musashi did not hide behind a proud answer. He said that the people of Kiyomizu were surely calling him weak, since he had walked away. Jōtarō grew angry at once, not with Musashi, but with the people outside. He said the whole neighborhood was now saying that the young warrior in the cheap inn was weak, and that hearing it made him furious. Musashi laughed again and told him it was no great matter, since the insult was not aimed at the boy himself. But Jōtarō leaned forward and begged him almost in tears to let him become his disciple.

Musashi did not answer lightly. Instead he turned the talk and asked where the boy came from. Jōtarō said he was from Himeji in Harima. Musashi, hearing from the boy’s speech that he was from nearby country, asked what his father had been. Jōtarō at once lifted his face proudly and said his father had been a samurai. When Musashi pressed further and asked the name, the boy replied that it was Aoki Tanzaemon, a man who had once held five hundred koku.

That name struck Musashi in a place deeper than surprise. The father had fallen, Jōtarō went on, when the boy was only six. Poverty had followed. They had come to Kyoto, and things had grown worse and worse. In the end, the father had left the boy in the care of a drinking house and had himself entered a temple of wandering monks. Jōtarō told this story with the roughness of one used to hardship, but the wish beneath it was plain. He wanted to become a samurai again, and he believed that the surest road was skill with the sword.

“Please,” he said, “make me your disciple. I will do anything.” He looked at Musashi with a stubborn, pleading gaze that did not know how to retreat. Musashi saw in him not only a street boy, but a lonely child looking for a place to put his heart. There was something painful in that, because Musashi knew well enough what it meant to grow without the warm order of a true home. Yet he could not simply take the boy away without asking whether there was any person who still had a claim over him.

So he told Jōtarō that he had a father and also a master in the house where he worked, and that he must first get their agreement. The boy, hearing that, ran off at once as if the matter were already half settled. Musashi may have thought that would end it, or at least delay it. But by the next day Jōtarō was back again, carrying proof that he had done exactly as told. The owner of the house had sent him away with laughter, saying that no proper school would accept such a brat, and that the weak young swordsman in the cheap inn would suit him well as a master and might at least use him as a baggage carrier.

Jōtarō repeated all this without shame, and even showed the wooden sword the owner had given him as a parting gift. Then he proudly displayed a hat he had taken from the cheap inn when the old keeper was not there. Musashi saw at once that it was not really a hat at all, but a signboard with the word for cheap lodging written across it. Jōtarō only said that writing did not matter, because it would keep off rain. Musashi could not help laughing. The boy had already arranged the whole thing in his own heart. Master and disciple, journey and road, had all become fixed facts to him.

At last Musashi gave way. He thought of the father's fall, of the strange tie of fate that had put this child before him, and of the possibility that guiding the boy might itself be part of his own road. Once Jōtarō felt safe in that answer, he suddenly remembered something else. He dug into his clothes and produced a letter. It was one of the replies Musashi had been waiting for. He had also carried Musashi's words toward Matahachi, though he had not met the man himself and had only left the message behind.

Musashi praised him warmly for this work and told him to go downstairs, eat, and wash. Jōtarō, black with dust and his hair standing like a kappa's, looked ready to fall asleep where he sat. Yet even then his eyes shone with a new brightness. For the first time in a long while, he belonged to someone by his own choice. And for Musashi, who had walked that day away from insult and old hatred, the boy's presence in the poor room brought another kind of weight, but also another kind of warmth.

Part 9

Jōtarō came back from washing and eating with more life in him than before. The dust had been rubbed off his face, but his hair still stood up wildly, and his eyes still burned with the same eager light. In a poor lodging house like that, everyone soon knew everyone else's business. The women downstairs laughed at him, fed him, and asked question after question about the large young swordsman upstairs. Jōtarō, pleased to be noticed, began already to act like a real disciple.

Musashi opened the reply from the Yoshioka house in silence. Jōtarō watched him from the side, trying to read the meaning from his face. The letter was not simple. It did not say, "Come now and fight." It did not say, "We admit defeat." Instead it held back, covered itself with proper words, and tried to keep the Yoshioka honor standing while time was gained. Musashi read it through once, then a second time, and a dry smile moved slightly at the corner of his mouth.

He understood well enough what stood behind such a letter. The Yoshioka men could not forget their shame, but they also did not wish to rush blindly again into disaster. So they answered with politeness and distance, hoping to push the matter forward into another season and another meeting. Musashi did not grow angry. In a way, he respected the caution more than foolish pride. Yet he would not let the matter sink into vague words and empty delay.

He asked for writing things and began at once to compose a reply. Jōtarō sat nearby, knees drawn up, watching every movement as if sword training itself had begun. Musashi wrote calmly, but the calm was not weakness. He said that he too would continue his training, and that within a year he meant to polish his dull blade more sharply. He also made clear, without loud boasting, that the next meeting should not end in the same shame that had already touched the Yoshioka gate.

When he finished, he signed it with care and addressed it plainly to Seijūrō and the others of the Yoshioka house. Then he handed the letter to Jōtarō and told him that this one must not simply be thrown inside the gate. He was to go properly to the entrance, give it to the right hands, and behave like a disciple carrying his

master’s word. Jōtarō nodded hard and said he understood. The task pleased him because it made him feel that his place beside Musashi had become real.

Then Musashi spoke of the second errand. He said that the drunk man who had written to him the night before was an old friend named Hon’iden Matahachi. If Jōtarō found him, he was to say only this: from the first day to the seventh day of the coming New Year, Musashi would wait every morning at Gojō Bridge, and if Matahachi still had any wish to meet, he should come there one morning during that time. Jōtarō asked how he was supposed to find such a man. Musashi laughed a little and said that since the letter had come by way of Yoshioka people, the best road was to ask among them.

Jōtarō went off gladly with both errands in his head. Musashi remained in the upper room and lay with one arm under his head, staring at the dim boards above him. His thoughts were no longer on the Yoshioka letter alone. Hōzōin men in Nara were said to be waiting for him as well, and his road could not remain inside Kyoto much longer. Yet even when he thought of coming fights, his mind returned now and then to the craftsmen he had seen, and to the old lesson that force by itself was never enough.

The lodging house itself had begun to grow warm around him. There was the wife of the sweet-maker downstairs, always busy and kindly. There was also a young widow from a Kanze family, who lived there with quiet manners and a child’s sadness hidden under a calm face. A little girl called Kocha moved in and out like a small bird, and Jōtarō quickly became close to her. Wherever there were stairs, boxes, old things, or hidden corners, those two could somehow be found together.

One day Jōtarō got hold of a strange laughing mask that clearly meant a great deal to the young widow. Instead of returning it at once, he danced about with it over his head and shouted that it had been given to him. The widow ran after him, laughing and protesting at the same time, while Musashi, seeing that the thing was no common play object, told the boy sharply to stop. But children, once lifted by joy, do not stop simply because they are told. Jōtarō ran down the stairs with the mask hidden in his clothes.

After a while he came back more slowly and thrust the mask up first from the stair mouth to frighten Musashi. For an instant even Musashi's body tightened. Then he saw what had struck him. It was not mere ugliness in the face of the mask. It was the strength inside it, the life of the hand that had carved it, the force of an artist who had put spirit into wood. Musashi looked at it longer than a child's trick deserved, and his eyes grew thoughtful again.

The next morning Jōtarō returned from his errand black with road dust and white with dry dirt in his hair. He gave Musashi the answer from the Yoshioka house and also reported that he had not found Matahachi himself, though he had left the message carefully with people in the house where the man was said to be. Musashi praised him warmly and told him to wash and eat again. Jōtarō, who had half fallen across the floor from tiredness, looked ready to sleep where he sat.

Yet the poor lodging house did not stay quiet for long. Rumors moved faster than feet, and the city already knew that Musashi had answered the Yoshioka house and was still in Kyoto. It was also known that his name had reached Nara and the Hōzōin men there. The young widow downstairs and the others in the house had shown him real kindness, and because of that Musashi began to feel more uneasy, not less. A man could carry danger with him like mud on his sandals.

At last he decided he must not stay and wait for trouble to fall on those who had given him shelter. He tied up his travel bundle, took his hat, and thanked the women again and again for their care. The young widow followed him outside with eyes that seemed almost wet and asked whether he truly had to go. Musashi answered that if he stayed until night, harm would surely come to the house, and he could not repay kindness with disaster. Kocha stood apart, quiet for once, while Jōtarō looked less cheerful than usual and gripped his wooden sword.

He was still only a boy, and much of the world's truth had not yet entered him. In Kyoto he had already heard many people say that Musashi was weak. Now he heard too that fierce Hōzōin men might be waiting ahead. That rumor put a strange heaviness into him, and though he tried to stand proudly, something close to fear touched his young face. Musashi saw it, but he did not speak soft words to cover the road. Master and disciple stepped out together, leaving the poor lodging

house behind them, and turned their feet toward Nara.

Part 10

The road sloped down through Daigo, and before long the crossing at Rokujizō came into sight below them. Spring had not yet fully opened, but the air was softer than before, and the dust of the road rose gently around their sandals. Musashi had walked for some time in silence, and Jōtarō, feeling that silence, did not chatter as much as usual. Then, quite suddenly, Musashi stopped and said, “Jōtarō, I want to ask something of you. Will you do it?” The boy looked up at once, sensing that this was no small matter.

“What is it, uncle?” he asked, still using the old word that had not yet left his mouth. Musashi said, “I want you to go back to Kyoto.” At once the light went out of the boy’s face. He asked how far back, and when Musashi answered, “To the Yoshioka school in Shijō,” Jōtarō lowered his head and began kicking at stones with the tip of his sandal. Musashi asked him quietly whether he disliked the errand.

Jōtarō shook his head, but not in a clear way. “It is not that,” he said at last. “But you mean to leave me behind again, do you not?” The words struck Musashi more sharply than if the boy had accused him in anger. He felt shame rise in him because such doubt had not come from nowhere. It had been taught by his own conduct. So he bent a little, looked straight at Jōtarō, and said, “No. A warrior does not lie. Forgive what happened before.”

That answer seemed to steady the boy. He did not smile, but he lifted his head again and said, “Then I will go.” At the tea house by the crossroads they sat down together and took a simple meal. Tea was brought, and they ate the food they carried without speaking much. While Jōtarō was busy with the rice, Musashi borrowed writing things and began to compose a letter with strong, plain strokes. The letter was addressed to Yoshioka Seijūrō.

In it he wrote that he had heard the Yoshioka house had been seeking his whereabouts. He said that he was already on the road to Yamato and meant to

spend about a year in further training through Yamato, Iga, Ise, and other places, and that he would not change that plan. Yet he also wrote that he regretted not meeting Seijūrō face to face at the earlier visit, and because of that he promised firmly that in the first or second month of the coming spring he would return and visit again. There was no loud challenge in the letter, but there was no retreat in it either. It gave distance, and at the same time it fixed the future.

When the writing was done, Musashi folded the letter carefully and handed it to Jōtarō. He told him to deliver it properly into the hands of the Yoshioka people and not merely throw it at the gate like a mischievous child. Then he gave the boy one more instruction. If by chance he heard anything of Hon'iden Matahachi, he was to pass on word that Musashi was alive and on the road, nothing more and nothing less unless the chance was safe. Jōtarō listened with serious eyes and tucked the letter into his clothes as if carrying a treasure.

Then came the moment of parting, and it was not easy for either of them. Jōtarō tried to act bravely, but again and again he looked up as if he wished to ask for another promise. Musashi did not give one. He only said, "Do the errand well, and then follow the road after me." The boy nodded. After a moment he turned and began trotting back toward Kyoto, small but stubborn, his wooden sword at his side and the road dust rising behind his feet.

Musashi stood where he was and watched until the boy had grown very small. There was warmth in his chest, but there was also relief. A child's loyalty could soften the heart in dangerous ways, and Musashi knew that the road he sought could not always be walked in company. Still, when Jōtarō finally vanished in the folds of the road, the world grew wider and more empty again. Musashi took up his own bundle and turned toward Yamato alone.

He crossed the border of the capital's world and went on through country that seemed quieter and older. The farther he walked, the more the noise of Kyoto fell away from him. Thoughts came back that he had not finished. He remembered the potters' hands, the old woman at Kiyomizu, the Yoshioka disgrace, and the strange lesson of not drawing the blade when the blade could easily have been drawn. Each memory pushed against the others, and he felt that he had not yet

brought his own strength into one form.

By the time the road opened toward Nara, evening light had already begun to thin. The land there did not feel like Kyoto. It carried another kind of age, older, quieter, and somehow sterner. Temples stood with long memories in their wood, and even the open ground seemed to keep stories under it. Musashi entered that old place not as a tourist or pilgrim, but as a man stepping into another testing ground. The name of Hōzōin was already before him in his thoughts.

He did not hurry directly to the temple school. That was not his way. First he wanted to breathe the place, to look, to feel what kind of life moved under the name. In streets and along temple roads he saw priests, servants, travelers, deer moving without fear, and fighters too, some of them carrying themselves with the calm pride of men who trusted their own training. The city did not glitter, but it had depth. Musashi felt at once that the strength gathered here might differ greatly from the loud strength of Kyoto.

Night drew down, and he found humble shelter without speaking much of who he was. The house that received him was plain. The food was plain. The people looked at him once or twice with curiosity, then let him be. That was enough. He washed the road dust from his face and arms, sat quietly, and listened to the sounds of Nara settling into darkness.

In that quiet he felt again how far he still had to go. He had defeated many men with force, but force alone now seemed less and less like the heart of the matter. There were schools everywhere, famous names everywhere, yet what he sought was not only victory over other hands. It was something that could not be held in boasting, nor bought by stipend, nor inherited by a son because of a father’s fame. In Nara, he felt, that question would be pressed on him more sharply.

So he slept lightly and rose early. Before the day had fully opened, he was already moving through the streets toward the quarter where the Hōzōin name was strongest. He did not know yet whether he would meet welcome, warning, contempt, or steel. But he knew he had come to the right place. Somewhere ahead of him, under the old sky of Nara, the next gate of his training was waiting.

Part 11

Singing a little song she had learned from Okuni's dancing, Akemi went down behind the house and threw cloth into the water of the Takase River. When she pulled one piece back, fallen petals came turning in with it. The afternoon was soft, and she was in a light mood. Then a voice came from the bank above her and said, "Auntie, you sing well." Akemi turned at once and saw a small boy with a long wooden sword at his side and a large hat on his back, standing there with round, lively eyes.

She frowned and said that she was no auntie, but a young woman. The boy quickly changed his word and called her "young lady," yet he did not stop staring at her with bold curiosity. Akemi told him he was still only a little fellow and had no business teasing women already. The boy answered that he had only spoken because he wanted to ask something. While they spoke, one cloth slipped away in the current, and the boy ran after it, pulling it back with the help of his long wooden sword.

That small service softened her at once. She thanked him and asked what he wanted. The boy said he was looking for a place called Yomogi no Ryō. Akemi answered that he had found it already, because this was her house. He told her that he had been searching for some time. Then she asked where he had come from, and he gave one of those answers that explained nothing at all. She laughed and said he was a strange child.

When she asked his business, the boy said he had come looking for a man named Hon'iden Matahachi. He had been told at the Yoshioka house that this was the place to ask. Akemi's face changed a little, but she answered that Matahachi was no longer there. The boy called her a liar at once, and she said that Matahachi had once lived there, but had left. When he asked where the man had gone, she said she did not know, and that even her mother did not know, because he had run away from the house.

The boy looked troubled then, as if his road had suddenly ended in mud. Akemi asked whose errand he was carrying. He answered proudly that he had

come for his master. When she asked the master's name, he said, "Miyamoto Musashi." That name struck her like a hand laid on the heart. She asked if he had brought a letter, but he said no, only a spoken message. She studied him more closely and saw that he was no liar, only an odd and honest little creature.

So she told him that if Matahachi ever came back, she could pass on the message herself. The boy thought for a moment and agreed. Then he repeated Musashi's words carefully. He said that Musashi wished very much to meet Matahachi. From the first day of the new year to the seventh day, every morning, Musashi would wait on Gojō Bridge. If Matahachi still wished to meet, he was to come one of those mornings. Akemi listened and then burst into sudden laughter.

The message was so patient, so strange, and so unlike the hurried ways of common men that she could not help it. The boy swelled with anger and called her a fool, offended that someone could laugh when he had come so seriously. At once Akemi stopped laughing and begged pardon. She promised him she would remember every word and tell Matahachi if Matahachi appeared. Then, because the name still burned in her mind, she asked again, "What was that master's name?"

The boy answered with irritation, "Miyamoto Musashi." When she asked how the name was written, he picked up a little stick and drew the characters in the river sand. Akemi looked down at them and went very still. She said that the same characters might also be read Takezō. The boy argued that the reading was Musashi, but by then Akemi was already far away in memory. She lifted her eyes slowly and began asking questions in a changed voice.

Was this man from the Yoshino district of Mimasaka? Yes, the boy said, from Miyamoto village. Was he tall and strongly built, with hair he did not shave in the usual way? Yes, the boy said again, surprised at how much she knew. Then Akemi remembered aloud that long ago he had once suffered from a swelling on his head, and because of the mark it left, he had let his hair grow rather than shave it clean. The boy stared at her and asked when she had known such things.

She answered only that it had been five years ago, in the autumn after Sekigahara. But inside, much more moved than those few words showed. She knew now that this Musashi was indeed the same Takezō she had once seen.

Beside the men who came and went through the teahouses, bright with money and empty with vanity, the memory of that rough young man had stayed in her heart like something true. Seeing Matahachi sink lower and lower had only made that old impression stronger. In secret she had long believed that she had chosen rightly in her heart.

The boy, whose business was finished, began to hurry away. Akemi suddenly caught his hand and asked his name. He answered that he was called Jōtarō. She corrected herself then and called Musashi "Musashi-sama," because the boy had sharply insisted on it. When she asked where Musashi was staying, Jōtarō answered that such a man had no house and was living on the road in training. At last he said that if anyone wanted to find him now, the place to ask was Hōzōin in Nara.

Akemi was still holding his hand when Oko's voice came sharply from a window behind them. Her mother called down, asking why she was wasting time talking to some ragged brat instead of finishing her work. Akemi answered back more boldly than usual, saying that the boy had come on a matter concerning Matahachi and that she was only explaining things. Oko's face appeared at the window, hard and irritated. She said that Matahachi was no longer one of the house and that there was no reason to hear messages meant for such a man.

Jōtarō muttered under his breath that he was not some beggar's child. Oko, still watching closely, ordered Akemi inside and said the rest of the washing could be left to a servant girl. She reminded Akemi that she needed to bathe and dress properly, because Seijūrō might come at any time. Akemi answered with sudden bitterness that if Seijūrō lost interest in her, she would be glad of it. Then she ran inside with anger on her face, and Oko's face vanished from the window as well.

Left alone, Jōtarō looked up at the closed window and muttered that the woman was a strange old creature with white powder on her face. At once the window flew open again, and Oko shouted at him to repeat himself. He took to his heels, but not quickly enough. A pan of thin, dirty water came flying out and poured down over his head and shoulders. He shook himself like a little dog, pulled leaves from his collar, and ran off along the bank singing a mocking song

at the top of his voice.

Yet his day did not end there. He still had to go on to Nara and find Musashi again. Before long he caught hold of the back of an ox cart loaded with gift rice for Kōfukuji and made himself a seat upon it. The road through Yamato lay open, peaceful, and full of spring. Tea bushes, opening cherry trees, farmers bending over fields, women washing greens in the river, all passed before his eyes like a moving picture. To a boy, the simple joy of riding forward on something larger than himself was enough to fill the heart.

He sang, dozed, watched, and sang again. Every sound by the roadside became part of the adventure. A rooster crying somewhere, a child falling in the road, a horse coming from the other side, a leaf to blow between the lips like a whistle, all of it delighted him. By the time he reached Nara, he was tired but proud. He had carried his master's words safely, and now he wanted only to find Musashi and stand near him again.

Musashi, meanwhile, had already entered Nara alone. He asked people for Hōzōin, and everyone knew the name at once. Yet when he reached the district called Abura-saka, he found not a gate clearly marked Hōzōin, but temples, old ground, dark cedars, and many traces of forgotten ages. He even came before one gate whose name looked almost the same, only to find that it was another temple entirely. The place felt old and deep, and even in daylight the woods held a stern quietness.

So the master and the boy moved toward the same city by different roads, each thinking of the other. Akemi stayed behind by the Takase River with a face still warm from memory. In Kyoto, the message for Matahachi had been left, and a different message had entered one more heart. In Nara, under the old trees and the long shadow of Hōzōin, another testing ground was waiting.

Part 12

Musashi did not go first to the gate of Hōzōin. After walking the streets of Nara and feeling the old weight of the place, he found shelter in a modest inn kept

by a young widow. The house was not rich, but it was neat, and its quiet had a human warmth that many grander places did not have. The woman who received him was careful in her speech and calm in her movements. She looked like someone who had learned to keep fear hidden because there was no one else to carry it for her.

Before long Musashi understood why she was so glad to take in a strong traveler. Nara, she said, was no peaceful holy town beneath its temple roofs. Since Sekigahara, too many rōnin had drifted in and settled there like bad water. Cheap eating houses and painted women had multiplied around them, but the worst of those men were not satisfied with drink alone. They had begun to roam at night in groups, making sport of widows and weak households, calling such cruelty a "widow visit."

The widow spoke of these things without loud complaint, yet her face changed while she spoke. In every province, she said, long years of war had left broken men moving without place or discipline. Theft, threats, and ugly night-play had spread from town to town. Nara was no exception, and the local officers had trouble keeping order. Musashi listened, then gave a short, dry smile and said, "So a traveler like me becomes a charm against evil." The widow laughed a little and admitted that this was not far from the truth.

Musashi did not pretend offense. He had lived too long on roads not to understand what fear did to ordinary households. He told her that while he was under that roof, she might sleep with an easier heart. Then he added that a young companion of his would likely come searching for him, and that something should be placed outside as a sign. The widow agreed at once and wrote on a scrap of paper, in plain black strokes, "Miyamoto-sama is staying here." She fixed it by the entrance with almost the same seriousness with which another person might hang a sacred charm.

The day passed, but Jōtarō did not come. Musashi sat upstairs and watched the light change beyond the room while the old town breathed around him. A little girl named Kocha moved in and out of the house, half servant and half child, lively, sharp, and not at all shy before strangers. Musashi found himself watching the

quiet patterns of the house with unusual care. It was not because he wished to settle there, but because even such passing peace showed him how much the world of war had damaged.

At length the widow brought him more than food. She brought conversation, local rumor, and the shape of Nara as it now stood. The name of Hōzōin was not lightly spoken. Men who knew anything of arms lowered their voices when they came near that subject, and even in common talk there was a feeling that the spear-house of Nara did not stand on the same level as ordinary schools. Musashi did not boast before her, but inside him that only sharpened the line of his thought. He had not come to Yamato to circle small names.

The next day three martial men came to the inn and asked to see him. They were civil in form, but not soft. Their clothes, weapons, and bearing showed that they had not come out of idle curiosity. News had spread, and Musashi's presence in Nara was already known among people whose notice mattered. The widow, though careful to behave properly, could not entirely hide her uneasiness as she led them in.

Musashi received them without rising too quickly and without false pride. The men looked at him openly, as fighters do when they wish to know what sort of body stands before them. He returned the same look. Their speech was correct, and they said they had come because they had heard of him and wished to pay respects. Yet under those words he felt the true thing: measurement. His name had reached them, and now they had come to lay eyes on the man behind it.

The meeting did not turn immediately into challenge. That made it more serious, not less. Men who rushed at once to hot words were often shallow. These men spoke with a surface calm that suggested deeper purpose. Musashi answered them in the same way, and the room held a stillness that was sharper than noise. When they had gone, the widow looked as though she wished to ask many questions, but did not dare.

Jōtarō arrived only after all this, road-dirty and bright-eyed, having finally traced the paper sign at the gate. His first joy at finding Musashi quickly turned into another kind of life, because Kocha was there. The two children fell into

quarrel and friendship at once, as children often do. They glared, mocked, and ran about the place with the boldness of small creatures who do not yet know how near danger may stand to a room. Musashi, after the tension of the visitors, almost welcomed the rough noise.

Yet the peace did not last. Kocha let slip some local talk, and Jōtarō heard again that people still called his master weak because of Kiyomizu. The boy's face changed instantly. He spoke of Musashi with wild praise, saying no weak man could be what his master was. Kocha laughed and answered that in these parts there was no greater master than the lord they served, and that Jōtarō was making himself foolish with boasting. Before anyone could stop him, he struck her.

The matter ended without deep anger, but it showed Musashi what lived in the boy. Jōtarō's love was fierce, simple, and dangerous because it could not yet carry silence. Musashi scolded him and ordered him to wash, though the boy muttered that he hated hot water and would rather throw himself into a river. Even in that mood, Musashi liked him. The child's stubbornness had roots in sincerity, and that was not a small thing.

Still, the inn could not remain a place of safety for long. Musashi knew that once his name had drawn armed visitors, worse things might follow after dark. A private roof could become a battlefield because of him, and that was not kindness repaid, but kindness betrayed. The young widow, perhaps sensing this thought before he spoke it, said she did not mind the risk. Musashi shook his head. To accept shelter was one thing; to let harm fall on the house was another.

So he made ready to leave. He thanked the widow again and again for her care, and Jōtarō, suddenly less proud than before, bowed his head and called her "auntie" in a voice that held more feeling than his rough manners usually showed. The woman's eyes seemed almost wet, but she did not try to stop them. She knew the kind of guest Musashi was. Such men did not stay. They passed through lives like wind through reeds, leaving a movement behind them and then silence.

They stepped out of Nara town together, master and boy, and the houses slowly fell behind. The road toward Hannya field opened ahead between old trees and the slopes of spring ground. Jōtarō walked close, though he tried to hide it,

and Musashi could feel the boy's uneasiness. The name of Hōzōin had already reached him as something heavy and dangerous. Musashi, without turning his head, spoke in his usual calm voice of birdsong and mountain air, as if they were going only on a pleasant walk. But both of them knew that the next gate had now come very near.

Part 13

The road toward Hannya Field opened wide and lonely under the pale spring sky. Old trees stood here and there like watchers, and the ground seemed to hold a silence different from the silence of common roads. Jōtarō walked close behind Musashi now, speaking less than before. Even he could feel that they were nearing a place where names had weight. Musashi did not hurry. He looked from side to side, not only with the eyes of a traveler, but with the eyes of a man trying to read the spirit of a school before he stepped inside it.

The Hōzōin grounds did not meet him with noise, challenge, or proud display. That itself made a strong impression. The air was still, the buildings plain, and the discipline of the place could be felt more than seen. Musashi asked his way, and before long he was led not to a loud training yard, but toward an older, quieter presence. There he came into the company of an aged monk whose back was bent, whose face was sharp, and whose eyes were bright enough to make a younger man stiffen without knowing why.

That old monk was not, in fact, of Hōzōin itself, though he lived in the neighboring temple and had long stood close to the spear-house. His name was Nikkan. Before Musashi had fully settled his knees, he felt something difficult and unpleasant. It was not fear in the ordinary sense. It was the feeling that another person had already looked through him. Musashi, who had overpowered many men with force, suddenly found himself sitting like a junior before a senior.

He thanked the old monk for receiving him and asked who he was. Nikkan answered that he was the head of the temple behind Hōzōin, an old friend of the former master In'ei. Because In'ei had practiced the spear, Nikkan had practiced

it too for a time, though later he had chosen not to touch such things with his hands any more. When Musashi asked whether the present head, Inshun, had learned from him, Nikkan said that this was more or less true. The world, he said, had turned the name of Hōzōin into something strange and famous, and since people insisted such skill should not be lost, he had passed what he knew to Inshun alone.

Musashi then said plainly that since he had come so far, he hoped to remain somewhere in a corner of the place until Inshun returned, and to see the Hōzōin spear with his own eyes. Nikkan did not like those words. “Give up such useless ideas,” he said. Musashi asked why. Nikkan replied that Musashi had already seen enough of the Hōzōin spear in the technique of Agon that day. If he wished to know more than that, then he need only look, not at another spear, but at Nikkan himself.

The old monk thrust his face a little forward and told Musashi to look into his eyes. There was no shout in him, no boast, no quick anger. Yet the words struck harder than rough speech. Musashi understood then that the old man was not talking merely of weapon skill. The thing before him was a depth of spirit, a settled center, something not shaken by movement, pride, or youth. He felt with painful clarity that before even exchanging many words, he had already lost ground.

Still, Nikkan did not drive him away. Instead he had a meal brought. He filled a bowl high with rice and offered Musashi tea poured over it. He also set out slices of melon pickle and said that this was a custom of the place for travelers and trainees. The pickle, he added almost lightly, was called Hōzōin pickle, because purple herb and red pepper were placed inside the melon and gave it a little special taste. Musashi took up his chopsticks and began to eat.

Yet even over such simple food the strange tension did not leave him. He felt again the shining pressure of Nikkan’s eyes. He almost thought that if he bit down carelessly on the pickle, a fist might suddenly fly, or some hidden spear might fall from above. It was absurd, and yet it was real. That was how deeply the old monk’s presence had entered him. When Nikkan asked whether he wanted more, Musashi answered that he had received enough. When the old monk asked how

the pickle had tasted, Musashi answered politely that it had been excellent, though in truth he could remember only the sharp heat of pepper on his tongue.

At last he rose, bowed, and left the place. The path through the dark cedar grove swallowed him little by little. Deer startled at his steps and flashed away like quick shadows. Then, in the lonely path, he began speaking to himself. “I lost,” he said. “I was beaten.” The words came again and again. He knew very well that in sheer strength he had not been thrown down. If it had come only to force, he might have stood as strongly as before. Yet he had come away from Hōzōin carrying the feeling of defeat.

“In strength I am the stronger,” he thought, “and still I leave as the one who has lost.” That truth bit into him more deeply than any wound. He had spent years hardening his body, widening his reach, trusting the direct power of his hands. But now he had met something that did not yield to that. The old monk had not needed to rise or display skill. He had only looked, spoken a few words, and fed him tea-rice. Yet Musashi had come away shaken in the core.

Jōtarō did not understand all of this, but he could feel the heaviness in his master. He stayed quiet, which for him was rare. The two moved through the evening woods and back toward shelter, with the deer slipping away from their footsteps and the smell of cedar hanging in the air. Musashi’s silence was not the silence of rest. It was the silence of a man whose road had suddenly grown more difficult. The next enemy he had found was not standing outside him with a weapon. It was standing inside his own idea of strength.

By the time they reached lodging again, night had almost closed around Nara. A lamp burned dimly, and human voices seemed thin after the deep quiet of the grove. Musashi sat down, but the room did not calm him. Nikkan’s eyes stayed before him. Agon’s spear stayed before him. Even the bowl of tea-rice remained in memory like part of a lesson he had not yet fully understood. The boy beside him was tired from the road, yet Musashi himself could not rest.

So the day ended not in victory, not in challenge answered, but in a wound to pride. For another man, that might have meant retreat. For Musashi, it meant that the path had only become more serious. The Hōzōin name had not been empty.

Its spear was real, but what stood behind it was greater still. And because he had felt that defeat so sharply, he could not possibly turn away from it now.

Part 14

That night in Nara, Musashi did not sleep well. Again and again he saw the bent back of the old monk, heard the plain words over the bowl of tea-rice, and felt the bitter truth that he had been beaten without a blow. The room where he lay was quiet, but his mind was not quiet. Outside, the old town rested under temple roofs and dark trees, yet even there unrest moved like bad wind. The widow who had given him shelter had already told him that many masterless men were rotting in Nara, and that their cruelty had become part of the town's night.

There were too many ruined fighters in the land now, men left over from the great battles, men who had lost their place but not their violence. In Nara they gathered around bad houses and made sport of the weak. They called their raids on helpless homes "widow visits," as if ugliness could become wit by a change of name. Musashi understood then why the young widow had been so quick to welcome a strong traveler under her roof. To her, a swordsman was not only a guest, but a charm against the dark.

He stayed there still, because Jōtarō had not yet come. The widow put a paper by the entrance to guide the boy, and before long the whole little house knew that Miyamoto Musashi was lodging inside. Jōtarō arrived at last, dirty from the road and happy to have found him, and the place briefly warmed again with childish noise. Yet Musashi could feel something tightening around him. Nara was not the sort of town where a man could hide his name for long, and he knew that eyes had begun turning his way.

The next movements were quiet on the surface. Men came, looked, measured, and went. Nothing was said plainly enough to be called a challenge, yet Musashi understood that his presence had already entered the thinking of Hōzōin and of others besides Hōzōin. Around such famous ground, there were always men who wished to use another person's strength for their own ends. Some hated Hōzōin,

some hated Musashi, and some only wanted to watch strong hands tear one another open. In such air, an honest meeting rarely remained simple.

Musashi and Jōtarō went out from town and moved toward Hannya Field. The place lay broad and lonely, with a hush over it that did not feel empty but waiting. Even the grass and the shallow ground there seemed ready for violence. Jōtarō kept close to Musashi, though he tried to act bold. The boy had grown used to his master's road, but some places speak even to children, and Hannya Field spoke of death.

Before long the waiting shape of the thing became clear. Rough men, masterless men, the kind who lived off threat and dirty pride, gathered in numbers there. Their faces showed that they did not stand before Musashi as true seekers of the Way. They had come with hatred already in them. Musashi did not yet know how all the lines had been tied together, but he understood that he had stepped into a net. He also understood that the net could no longer be avoided.

Then steel and killing spirit rose together. The field broke open into struggle, and Musashi entered it as he always did when the last line had been crossed, with his whole body gathered into the sword. There are fights where men still keep some thought for their own lives, and there are fights where thought burns away and only action remains. This became the second kind. Jōtarō clung near him as long as he could, then lost all sense of order in the whirl of men, cries, and flashing edges.

Musashi cut his road through that storm as if he were forcing a way through thorns and fire together. Around him were not one or two proper opponents, but a pack. They wanted him buried under number, confusion, and blind attack. Yet that only made him more terrible. The strength that had once depended too heavily on force alone had not disappeared. It was still there, and in the field it burst out with the heat of a beast that will not be taken alive.

Then, at the very height of that struggle, the shape of the battle changed all at once. The spears that should have come toward Musashi turned in another direction. The monks and fighting men of Hōzōin, who until then seemed part of the danger closing around him, suddenly reversed themselves and struck into the

rōnin. There was no mercy in it. One after another the masterless men went down under hard, trained spear-work, and the field became not a duel-ground but a slaughter place.

The change was so complete that for a moment Musashi could not understand what his eyes were seeing. The men who had seemed allies of the rōnin now killed them without pause. Bodies fell through the grass and into the shallows, and soon no road of escape remained. It was a clean destruction, terrible because it was done without confusion once the order was given. When the killing stopped, the field stood under a silence heavier than the noise that had gone before.

Musashi remained standing with his sword still hard in his hand. The heat of battle had not yet left his flesh, but something else entered him now, something colder. Seeing such slaughter by other hands, he suddenly felt again how human he himself still was. Jōtarō was clutching at him and crying openly, and Musashi only then became fully aware that the boy had lived through it. Around them lay the dead, and already crows were gathering above, though none had yet dared come down.

Into that strange stillness came a tall, fair-faced monk with grave courtesy. He approached Musashi, bowed, and named himself as Hōzōin Inshun. He spoke not like a victor boasting after a trap, but like a man meeting another man properly at last. Musashi, who had gone there expecting open trial, could only look at him and listen. The question in his mind was larger now than victory or loss. Why had Hōzōin turned its spear not against him, but against the rōnin?

The answer did not come at once from Inshun alone. Later, beside a fire where blood was being washed from spearheads with strips of cloth, the old monk Nikkan spoke more freely. Nara, he said, had become foul with these masterless men. They had spread lies, stirred anger, and even tried to turn Musashi’s strength against Hōzōin for their own revenge. Since they could not beat Musashi openly, they had hoped Hōzōin would do it for them. But Nikkan had seen through them.

So the old monk had chosen to make use of the trap instead of merely escape it. Let them gather, he had thought. Let them show themselves. Then, at the right moment, Hōzōin would sweep them away in one stroke and clean the town. The

magistrate would be glad, the monks would be glad, and the crows of Hannya Field would be glad too. Nikkan even laughed at the harshness of it, as if the whole bloody thing had been only the clearing of rotten weeds from a garden.

Hearing this, Musashi's face changed little, but inside him much moved. He had come to Nara thinking mainly of his own path, his own testing, his own growth against the famous spear of Hōzōin. Yet here he had been used as one piece in a wider design. It did not humiliate him exactly, but it forced him to see once more that strength in the world did not move only in straight lines. Men of depth looked farther than the next blow.

Jōtarō, however, took the matter in the simple way of a boy. Once he understood that Musashi had not been betrayed by Hōzōin after all, his fear vanished like smoke in the wind. Delighted by the thought that the wicked men had been swept away, he ran about in wild relief. The laughing mask he had once stolen and played with appeared again over his face, and with his wooden sword in hand he danced among the bodies and the crows, crying out that a great cleaning had been done. It was terrible and childish at once.

Musashi watched him, then looked back over the dead field and up into the dim sky where the crows circled lower. The day had not given him the kind of victory he once might have desired. It had given him something harder. He had seen the force of his own sword, the force of Hōzōin's spear, and beyond both of them the force of strategy, judgment, and timing. The road ahead had not grown simpler. It had only become deeper, darker, and more real.

Part 15

Jōtarō's delight did not end when Nichikan finished explaining the matter. The boy's fear had been blown away so suddenly that his whole body seemed too small to hold his relief. He ran through the field in foolish joy, shouting that a great cleaning had been done. Somewhere he found the laughing mask again, pulled it over his face, drew his wooden sword, and began to dance among the bodies and the flapping crows. It was childish, terrible, and almost pure at the

same time, because in him there was still no deep line between death, noise, play, and victory.

Nichikan watched the wild little dance without surprise. Then, in a sing-song voice that sounded half like mockery and half like sutra, he spoke to the crows circling and dropping nearer. He told them that Nara was not the only place that needed cleaning, that now and then all the world needed a great sweeping, the burning of fallen leaves, the deep fall of snow, the cutting away of what had rotted so that spring could rise fresh below it. He even called the feast below a banquet for them, red drink and human eyes for soup. Musashi listened, and in that strange field, with smoke, blood, and wings all around, Nichikan's old voice sounded neither mad nor gentle, but like something that had stepped out of nature itself.

At last the old monk called sharply to Jōtarō. "Boy, stop that madness and gather stones," he said. Jōtarō at once obeyed and ran about picking up little stones from the ground. When he brought them back in both hands, Nichikan wrote the sacred words of the Lotus Sutra on them one by one. Then he told the boy to cast them over the dead. Jōtarō did so, flinging them across the field while Nichikan stood with sleeves joined, chanting softly.

The act was simple, but it settled something in the place. It did not wash away the blood, and it did not make the dead less dead. Yet after the stones had fallen and the chant had ended, the field felt less abandoned to beasts and chance. Nichikan then said, as lightly as if he had finished some common task in a garden, that it was enough, and that Musashi and the boy should go on their road while he himself returned to Nara. With that, he turned his bent back and began walking away.

Musashi stood still for a moment and watched him go. There was no time to give proper thanks, and there had been no place to make any promise of meeting again. The old man's back looked small, almost poor, yet everything in it carried a freedom and completeness Musashi could not ignore. Suddenly he ran after him with long steps and called out, "Master, you have forgotten something." Nichikan stopped and turned a little, asking what it was he had left behind.

Musashi struck the hilt of his sword and bowed his head. He said that meeting

such a man in a world where true meetings were rare could not be allowed to end like this. Since they had come face to face by heaven's will, he begged for one stroke of instruction. Nichikan threw back a dry, toothless laugh that sounded like dead wood knocking in the wind. Then he said the thing Musashi least wished and most needed to hear.

"Still you do not understand?" he said. "What I can teach you is only this: you are too strong." He did not praise the strength. He did not admire it. He said that if Musashi went on carrying that force with pride, he would not live to be thirty. Even today, he said, Musashi had almost thrown away his life. Then he asked what sort of man Musashi meant to become if he kept driving himself forward on that single thought.

Musashi could not answer. Nichikan went on and said that even in the field that day, Musashi's actions had been far from complete. Youth might excuse some of it, but youth did not change the truth. To mistake raw power for the Way of arms was a deep error. As for Nichikan himself, he said, even he was not yet fit to speak grandly of true mastery. If Musashi wanted to know what such mastery might mean, he should walk farther and look toward men older and deeper than either of them.

Then Nichikan named them. He said that among his seniors stood Yagyū Sekishūsai, and above even that line stood Kamiizumi Ise-no-kami. He told Musashi to walk the same road those men had walked and then see what he learned of himself. The names struck Musashi with more force than a blow. He lowered his eyes, and while he stood there taking those words into his body, the old monk fell silent. A moment later Musashi looked up, and Nichikan was already gone.

The field seemed larger after that. Jōtarō came back to Musashi's side, still hot from play and fright together, but even the boy felt that something important had passed. Musashi did not speak for a while. The crows dropped thickly now onto the bodies, and the field no longer belonged to men. They turned their feet away from it and began walking, master and disciple, under the dimming sky.

On the road back, Musashi's thoughts would not settle. "Too strong," he

repeated inwardly. Never before had that word sounded like blame. Strength had been what he trusted, what he built, what had brought him through danger again and again. Yet from Nikkan's eyes at the meal, from the field at Hannya, and now from this last rebuke, he had learned that strength alone could also blind, narrow, and shorten a life. The thought cut more deeply than any spear point.

At the inn, when night came down again, he sat in silence and let the lamp burn low. Books, arguments, clever teachings, all such things seemed worthless before the real weight of what had been shown to him. A swordsman, he thought, could grow timid not only by fear, but by half-learning the hearts and movements of others while still lacking a true center in himself. Perhaps even Nichikan, if struck without warning by blind force, might prove no more than a fragile old body. But that thought itself felt poor the moment it rose, because it missed the very thing Nichikan had tried to show him.

So Musashi did not comfort himself with easy answers. He let the wound remain open in him. Somewhere ahead, beyond Nara and beyond Hōzōin, stood the road of Yagyū Sekishūsai and men still greater in depth than those he had already met. Musashi knew now that he would not be able to turn away from that road. Whatever waited there would not flatter him, and that was exactly why he had to go.

Part 16

Days passed after Hannya Field, and Musashi did not hurry on at once. He had been told to look farther than Hōzōin, and the name now burning in him was Yagyū Sekishūsai. So he moved toward the Yagyū country and stayed for a time at a large roadside inn on the Iga road. It was the only inn of real size in that place, always busy with travelers, horses, and men going toward Kasagi, Jōruri-ji, and the hills beyond. In front of it, packhorses stood tied in rows, and the water in the stream outside often turned white with rice-washing.

A girl named Kocha moved about the inn like a little red mark in the brown and gray of the place. She wore work clothes like a boy's, but the red at her belt

showed she was a girl, and she stood before Musashi with no fear at all. When he came back to his room after walking, she would ask at once where he had gone and tell him to take a bath as if she owned the house. Jōtarō hated this ordering almost as much as he hated hot water. Yet Musashi, who disliked bathing almost as much, only laughed and said the boy and he were alike in that way.

Jōtarō and Kocha fought in small ways every day. She served food without speaking to him when she was angry, and he sat with his face turned aside, still swollen with pride from their last quarrel. But beneath that, the two children were already tied together by daily life. Musashi watched them while he ate and sometimes smiled without meaning to. Still, his own mind was elsewhere. He had carried a new burden inside him ever since Nichikan's words.

What he wanted now was too large for an ordinary wandering swordsman. Even he knew that. Yet the wish would not leave him, and so he remained at that inn day after day instead of pressing quickly on. He wanted to meet the great old man of Yagyū, Sekishūsai Muneyoshi, and not merely bow before him from a safe distance. In the hottest part of his young ambition, he wanted more than meeting. He wanted to stand before that famous old dragon and test himself with one real stroke.

He knew well enough how foolish that would sound to others. Sekishūsai was no common old master sitting in a poor hut for anyone to visit. He was the founding elder of a strong house, a man whose son served the Tokugawa power, and whose family stood in a bright, rising place in the new age. The Yagyū name had men, walls, rank, and order around it. A lonely traveler with a bundle on his back could not simply walk in and ask for a match. But knowing this did not cool Musashi. It only made the wish sharper.

One day, while he was still staying there and thinking over the problem again and again, an unexpected visitor came. It was Yamazoe Danpachi, a man who had once shown him rough manners at Hōzōin. This time Danpachi was all politeness, too polite in fact, and Musashi saw at once that fear had softened him. The man bowed, apologized for the past, and asked in a careful voice which road Musashi meant to take from there.

Musashi answered that he planned to pass through Iga and then on into Ise. Danpachi said that Yagyū Valley lay not far from the road, four leagues to Ō-Yagyū and then another stretch to Ko-Yagyū. He spoke of the Yagyū house, of Sekishūsai now living more quietly, almost like a man of tea, while Munenori served far away in Edo. Then he added that if Musashi truly wished to come near that house, he might help a little. In Tsukigase, he said, there was an old armorer who had ties with the Yagyū family, and an introduction through such a man might open one small door.

Musashi listened more closely than his face showed. Danpachi, careful all through their walk, kept a little to Musashi's left, as if he did not wish to come too near the stronger side of the man beside him. That did not escape Musashi. Yet the road itself mattered more than Danpachi's fear. Even a small path toward Sekishūsai was better than standing still and burning in hope.

After that, Musashi and Jōtarō began to walk more often through the land around Yagyū. They went around the outside of Ko-Yagyū, looked over the shape of the valley, and tried to read the place as one reads an opponent's body before a fight. Stone walls, the lie of the hills, roads, streams, and the ways in and out of the settlement all entered Musashi's eye. While they were there, a mounted retainer passed and looked back with a quick smile at Jōtarō. The boy called him Shōda Kizaemon and said the man had once been kind to him on the road.

Musashi asked how a child like Jōtarō had come to know a Yagyū retainer. The boy answered simply that on an earlier journey the man had walked with him and with a woman for part of the way, until they came near the Kizugawa ferry. Musashi asked no more just then, but he kept the name and the chance meeting in mind. In a place like that, every name might later matter. When he had seen enough for the day, he turned back toward the inn.

Kocha met them almost as soon as they entered. "Where have you been?" she asked, standing stiff in the doorway as if she meant to guard the room itself. Before Musashi could answer, she said he must bathe at once. Jōtarō growled that he hated baths and would rather jump into a river the next day, and Musashi answered that he was much the same. But they were both dusty from the road, and

the child would not let them alone until they gave way in some form.

That evening, when the meal was set out, Jōtarō still looked half angry and Kocha still spoke little to him. Musashi ate quietly while the children glared at each other over trays and bowls. Yet even in that ordinary little war of theirs, his thought kept turning inward to the same great question. How could he come near such a high man? How could he reach Sekishūsai, speak with him, and if heaven allowed, strike at him once and learn the truth of himself?

As he sat there, his eyes fell on a white peony branch lying in the room. Kocha had brought it, proud of its beauty, and had spoken of it as if it were something almost holy. Musashi first admired the flower itself, then slowly bent his attention to the cut end of the branch. The more he looked, the more the flower ceased to be only a flower for him. It became another object of study, another sign, another problem of form and force.

Kocha went to fetch water for a vase, and when she returned she tried to place the branch in it. At once she could feel that it did not sit right. Musashi said the branch was too long and told her to hold it upright, as if it were still standing and blooming from the ground. She obeyed, though she did not understand him. Then, to shorten it, Musashi drew his sword and cut.

The cut was far too large and terrible for such a tender flower. Kocha gave a sharp cry, threw the peony from her hands, and burst into frightened tears. To a child’s eyes, Musashi had not trimmed a stem, but struck as if he meant to cut down an enemy. He looked at the fallen flower, at the weeping girl, and at the steel still in his hand. Once more the same truth returned to him from another side. He was indeed too strong, and because of that, even his hand over a flower could become a kind of violence.

Part 17

Kocha cried so hard that the whole room seemed to shake with it. To her eyes, Musashi had not trimmed a flower at all. He had attacked it. The white peony lay on the floor, and the sword in his hand still held the large, fearful force of a blow

meant for a living enemy. Musashi looked from the flower to the child and understood at once why she had been frightened. Even over a branch in bloom, his hand had moved too greatly, too violently, too much like a weapon that knew only one answer.

That small scene stayed in him. Since Nichikan had said, “You are too strong,” the same truth now came toward him from every side. It was in the old monk’s eyes, in the slaughter at Hannya Field, and now in the tears of a child over a peony. Musashi picked up the fallen branch and looked at the cut again, not with pride in the sharpness, but with a kind of shame. Strength was not wrong in itself. But if it entered every act, even where gentleness was needed, then something in it was still crude.

Kocha did not calm quickly. She moved away from him with wide eyes, and though she remained in the room, she no longer spoke with her usual bold little voice. Jōtarō, seeing all this, laughed at first, then stopped when he noticed that Musashi was not laughing. There was a silence after that, and the room, though it still held the sweet smell of the flower, felt changed. At last Musashi sheathed his sword and said quietly that he had frightened her without meaning to. The child did not answer, but her crying slowly weakened into little breaths.

That same evening another movement began. Shōda Kizaemon, the Yagyū retainer whom Jōtarō had once met on the road, did not forget what he had seen in that inn. The story of the flower, strange as it was, fitted into other things already stirring inside the Yagyū house. There was curiosity about this rough young swordsman who had come out of nowhere, spoken boldly of Sekishūsai, and walked about the valley with the eyes of a man measuring a fortress. In such a place, no gesture remained only a private gesture for long.

Before long, a formal message came. Musashi was invited into the Yagyū house, not to meet Sekishūsai himself, but to visit and speak with the senior disciples. The message passed through proper hands, and there was enough courtesy in it to make refusal impossible. Musashi understood at once that this was not simple kindness. Men were drawing him inward a little way so that they might see him better. Yet he welcomed even that much. Any road toward

Sekishūsai was worth stepping on.

On the night appointed, he went. The outer walls of the Yagyū place rose dark and heavy under the trees, and only a square of light showed from within. Musashi presented the written word he had received from Shōda Kizaemon, and the guard at the gate, already prepared, led him inward without delay. They did not bring him through a coarse warrior's yard full of noise. Instead they led him toward the Shinkage Hall, and the farther he went, the more deeply he felt the house itself.

Books lined the walls in room after room along the passage. This was not merely a family of fighters. Learning lived here too. The floors were clean, the lamps quiet, the manner of the men who passed him controlled but not stiff. Musashi noticed everything. A house could be known from the place where a man removed his sandals, and this house told him much before a sword had even been touched. There was power here, but it was held within order.

He was shown into a broad room with no tatami mats. A round seat had been laid ready for him by a pillar. A short lamp burned nearby, and beyond it the garden lay dim under wisteria and the first voices of frogs in the water. As he settled there, leaning slightly against the post, he felt the blood in him grow hot again. He had not come only to be looked at. Under his calm face, his fighting spirit boiled almost painfully. "What is Yagyū," he thought, "and what am I? Let us see."

Then the four senior disciples came in. One by one they took their places with a courtesy that never fell into warmth. At first glance they seemed surprised by how young Musashi was. Then they looked again and saw the large frame, the strong bones, the steadiness in his eyes and his movements. For a moment they could not entirely hide their respect. Yet as the talk and the drinking moved on, another thought began to shape itself in them.

Musashi was rough. It showed not in cowardice or looseness, but in the handling of cup and chopsticks, in the unpolished way he sat, in the great plainness of his body and manners. He did not know the fine turns of house conversation. He drank only three or four cups, yet his face flushed as if copper had been heated, and once or twice he touched it with an awkwardness that made

the four men smile. To them, he began to look not like a polished master from the capital, but like a strong wild student from the mountains.

They questioned him carefully. One of them asked what he had meant earlier, through Shōda, by his talk of “feeling.” If he had truly sensed something in the Yagyū way before even meeting it, then what exactly was that feeling? Another added that the hall they sat in had been built for Kamiizumi Ise-no-kami himself when the great master stayed in the castle, and so no place could be more fitting for hearing Musashi’s ideas. Their words were smooth, but beneath them there was a wish to press him, expose him, and measure how far his thought could really go.

Musashi did not answer like a lecturer. “It is difficult,” he said. “Feeling is only feeling. There is no other way to explain it.” They pressed him again, smiling in the manner of men who enjoy making another speak past his comfort. Then Musashi lifted his head and answered more sharply. If they wished to see what he meant with their eyes, he said, then they should take up swords and test him. That was the only true explanation he had to offer.

The words tightened the room at once. They had meant to try him, but perhaps more with talk than with steel. Musashi, however, could not endure remaining only half inside the matter. He wanted a path. He wanted a chance. Above all, he wanted Sekishūsai. If there was any way at all to draw nearer to that old dragon, it might begin by striking sparks here among the four men before him. Already in his heart he imagined the greater thing beyond them: to stand before the famous elder and make him kneel beneath one clean victory, to place one great star of triumph upon his own name.

Yet the four men did not yield him that road so quickly. They continued to test him with eyes, with words, with the shape of the room and the quiet of the house itself. The more Musashi sat there, the more strongly he felt both attraction and resistance. Yagyū was not like the loud places he had already passed through. Here he could not simply smash his way into meaning by force alone. The house surrounded him with refinement, memory, and a long history that no single challenge could break open in one moment.

Even so, the night had not become harmless. Under the courtesy, sharp edges had begun to show. Each side was now looking for the first real opening. Musashi understood that the four senior disciples had not invited him only to honor him. They wished to know what kind of creature had come wandering to their valley. And Musashi, flushed with drink, ambition, and impatience, wished to use them as stepping stones toward a still greater meeting. So they sat facing one another in the lamp-lit hall, each group hiding steel inside calm words, while outside the frogs kept calling from the water under the dark spring garden.

Part 18

The four senior men of Yagyū kept their manners smooth, but they did not stop testing Musashi. They poured sake, smiled, and asked their questions as if this were only a night of calm talk. One of them explained that the peony branch Musashi had admired earlier had been cut by the old lord Sekishūsai himself. Musashi struck his knee and said that now the clean cut made sense. The men then asked him again what he meant by the “feeling” he had spoken of before, the feeling by which he claimed to know something of Yagyū without yet entering it fully.

Musashi did not know how to make such a thing small and clear in words. He said only that a feeling was a feeling, and that he could explain no better than that. If they wished to see it with their own eyes, he said, then they should take swords and test him. The four men smiled at this, but none took the bait. They had their own pride, and they also had more self-control than the loud fighters Musashi had already met elsewhere. Musashi, however, had already fixed his hope on one thing only: he must somehow get close enough to draw out Sekishūsai.

So he tried another road. He became a little more rough, a little more sharp in speech, and let some harsh opinions show themselves on purpose. He hoped that one of the four would grow angry and that anger would open a door to greater action. But the Yagyū men were not so easy to move. They let his roughness pass, or they answered with laughter so calm that the edge fell away from it. That calm

made Musashi feel more trapped, not less.

Time slipped on. Food was brought, simple barley rice and soup after the sake, and still no road opened. The four men moved their round cushions into easier places and sat in different ways, folding their knees or crossing their legs as if the night had grown fully relaxed. Musashi alone stayed by the corner pillar and grew quieter and darker inside. “If I leave tonight without seeing him,” he thought, “then I may never come this near Sekishūsai again.” The thought burned in him like a live coal.

Then one of the men suddenly lifted his head. “Tarō is barking,” he said. “That is not an ordinary bark.” The others listened too. From the direction of the inner grounds, a dog was indeed barking in a fierce and broken way. Someone explained that Tarō was a black dog much loved by the absent lord Munenori and also carefully watched by his own attendants. Because the house was large, such things were not treated lightly. The men rose one after another and stepped out toward the dark.

Musashi followed, though not too close. Lamps moved through the garden paths, and voices began to gather in one place. There, under a veranda and among the shadows of the yard, stood Jōtarō with wild hair and bright eyes, while the black dog lay dead. The boy had not stumbled into the thing by accident. Some days earlier that dog had scratched his face when he came on an errand, and Jōtarō had carried the insult in his young heart like a blood debt. Tonight he had searched for the animal, found it sleeping beneath the floor, called it out to fair battle like a true enemy, and beaten it to death with his wooden sword.

To Jōtarō this was not wickedness, but honor. Face wounds were shame to a samurai, and he believed he had done exactly what a proud boy ought to do. He said so with a red face and fierce honesty while the dog’s keepers stared at him in disbelief and rage. But the matter was not small in that house. This was no common dog. It belonged to high hands and high favor, and men were employed to care for it. That meant the killing could not simply be laughed away as a child’s foolishness.

One of the attendants seized Jōtarō by the collar and struck him hard,

shouting that if he had killed a dog, then he would be beaten to death in the dog's place. Jōtarō did not bend. Even when another blow landed against his ear, he only shouted back that he had taken revenge in proper combat and that grown men ought to understand such reason. The others around them did not smile. Some looked troubled, but no one stepped in. In that silence Jōtarō was already half condemned.

Musashi had watched without speaking until then. But when he saw the boy being dragged like an animal and heard that they meant to club him down like one, he moved. He picked up the fallen wooden sword in one hand and turned toward the men with his face grown hard. He said that the fault of a servant was the fault of the master, and that whatever punishment was due could fall upon him instead. Yet, he added at once, neither he nor the boy could accept being beaten to death like dogs with sticks. If punishment must come, then he would meet it with the sword in hand.

That was no apology. It was a challenge. The Yagyū men felt it at once. Had Musashi bent low, begged pardon, and tried to calm the house, perhaps the moment might still have been smoothed over. But his nature would not choose that road. He seemed almost to prefer the knot becoming tighter. The four senior disciples drew back a little and watched him with sharpened eyes, now truly angry. Before them stood not a guest who had lost his way, but a dangerous man who was ready to turn disorder into combat.

When one of the retainers moved again toward Jōtarō, Musashi acted first. With sudden force he flung the boy's small body straight into the chest of the nearest armed man. Jōtarō flew like something thrown by thunder and struck so hard that the man crashed backward and fell as if a beam had been dropped. At the same time Musashi turned, raised his right arm high over the hilt still resting in the scabbard, and faced the others. The change was so quick and so complete that even the seasoned men of Yagyū felt their bodies shift before thought had caught up.

Kimura Sukekurō came first with his point steady and low. Musashi did not yet draw. He stood with one shoulder shown, all his force gathered into the waiting

hand at the hilt, and his eyes shone white in the dark like two hard stones. Breath by breath the air tightened. The others already knew this was no ordinary wild traveler. Then, without another word, the men of Yagyū closed around him together, blades rising into a circle under the night, and the quiet house gave way at last to steel.

Part 19

The ring of men tightened under the night lamps, but Musashi did not rush blindly into it. For a breath or two he still held himself as if he were only watching, and that made the others angrier. Jōtarō, however, had already thrown himself like a wild animal at the man who tried to kill him. The boy's wooden sword had flown from his hand, so he used his teeth and nails instead, biting at the man's belt and tearing at his clothes with the whole rage of a child who believed he was right. Then another club rose behind him, aimed down at his back.

That was the moment when Musashi moved. Until then he had stood with his arms folded, as cold as if the whole thing did not concern him. But now his arms came free in one quick motion, and the air changed around him. He stepped in before the second blow could fall cleanly, and what followed was so fast that the men nearest him could not fully see it. A cry broke out, a body lurched aside, and Jōtarō was no longer alone beneath the clubs.

The servants and fighters of the Yagyū house had meant to crush the matter at once, like breaking a troublesome cur with sticks. Instead they found themselves facing a man whose whole body seemed to leap into combat as if battle were his natural air. Musashi did not waste words. He drove them back with the hard force of his hands and sword, and even in the half-dark his movement had something fierce and terrible in it. The room, the veranda, and the yard all seemed too small for the heat he brought into them.

Men shouted from different sides. Some cried to seize Jōtarō first, others cried to strike down Musashi before he could fully draw. The confusion helped him. He flung Jōtarō out of the nearest danger, forced one man backward into

another, and broke the line before it could become firm. The boy, though half mad with pain and fury, understood enough to keep low and follow close when Musashi gave him the chance. So master and disciple tore themselves out of the center of the yard and into the night beyond the lamps.

Behind them, voices rose through the Yagyū house. Feet thundered over boards and along paths. Men were already calling for weapons, for lanterns, for pursuit. Musashi did not stop to measure who followed or how many. He only moved on through garden, passage, shadow, and outer ground, with Jōtarō clinging to his wake. More than once steel flashed near them, and more than once Musashi turned sharply enough to make those flashes leap back into caution.

At last they broke free of the close buildings and dark walls. The night of Yagyū Valley opened around them, not quiet now, but full of scattered alarm. Somewhere behind, a bell or clapper sounded. Dogs barked. Men called to one another from one side of the grounds to another. Jōtarō was breathing like a creature hunted by wolves, but Musashi's body still burned too strongly for weariness. The fighting spirit that had found no proper road inside the house now poured through him without rest.

He did not at once flee far away. That was not what his mind wanted. What he wanted, more fiercely than before, was Sekishūsai. The whole ugly struggle of the night had only made the old man's absence more painful to him. He had come to Yagyū to stand before the true master, not to trade blows with servants and retainers in darkness. As he moved through the valley, his eyes searched not only for escape, but for the one place where the old dragon might truly be found.

"Stay behind me," he told Jōtarō once, and the boy obeyed as well as he could. They passed through stretches of dark ground, around walls, beside groves, over slopes, and through places where the earth itself seemed trained and kept, like part of a great hidden house. Musashi felt that somewhere near him Sekishūsai must be sleeping or waking, reading or sitting, breathing the same night air while lesser men cut at shadows below. The thought drove him onward like fire under the ribs.

Again and again he searched with his eyes and his whole body. "Come out,"

he thought. “Come out, the one fit to face me.” He would have welcomed not only Sekishūsai, but any true opponent in whom that old greatness lived. If a ghost, a demon, or some mountain spirit had stepped into his path and named itself the elder master, he might almost have accepted the meeting. Such was the fullness of battle desire in him that night.

So he walked on like a man possessed. The darkness around Yagyū did not cool him. The spring air did not cool him. His limbs were filled with force, and that force needed an answer. Jōtarō, stumbling after him, could hardly understand what his master was seeking, only that the search had gone beyond ordinary danger. To the boy, the whole valley had become one large enemy house. To Musashi, it had become something stranger: a maze whose center still kept refusing him.

At last he came down toward a gentler slope on the southeast side of the castle land. There the shape of the place changed. The trees were neatly kept, the grass and undergrowth carefully tended, and a quiet human order lay over everything. It did not feel like the rough outer grounds of warriors. It felt like a hidden dwelling for one who had stepped away from noise. Then Musashi saw a gate.

It was a simple gate with a thatched roof in the style of a tea man rather than a soldier. Vines clung to the timbers, and inside, beyond the fence, bamboo rose in a faint silver darkness. A narrow path went up through it as if leading not to a fortress, but to a hermitage. The moment Musashi saw it, he knew that this was no common house. “This must be it,” he thought. “This must be where the old man lives.”

His first impulse was to break through the fence at once and go in by force. His whole night had prepared him for that kind of action. But as he stood by the gate, something in the place itself touched him. The cleanliness of the entrance, the quiet fallen blossoms of deutzia lying white around it, the stillness of the bamboo and the faint sense of the master who lived within, all of it worked against the violence in him. He became aware of his own disordered hair, his dusty clothes, the roughness of his breath, and the ugliness of arriving like a beast at the door of

such a man.

“No,” he told himself. “There is no need to rush now.” The truth was that he had grown tired as well. Once the first heat of the fighting left him, he felt the weight in his body from the whole night. If he were to meet Sekishūsai at last, then perhaps it should not be as a creature bursting through a fence in blind heat. Better to wait for morning, when someone must come to open the gate. If they still refused him then, he could choose another road afterward.

So he sat down under the eaves of the gate. Jōtarō, who had followed him even here, settled near him at last, worn out and silent. Musashi leaned his back against a post, and for the first time since the fighting began, the fire in his body eased a little. Above them the stars were very quiet. Whenever the wind moved, the white blossoms near the gate stirred softly in the dark.

There, before the hidden dwelling of the man he had come so far to see, Musashi let his eyes close. The night had given him no true meeting, only confusion, blood, anger, and the hard lesson that lesser walls must often be passed before one reaches the center. Yet now the center seemed close. With that thought in him, and with the still gate before him, he fell asleep where he sat, like a traveler who had at last reached the right door.

Part 20

A cold drop of dew fell on the back of Musashi’s neck, and he opened his eyes. Without knowing when it had happened, he had slept deeply through the rest of the night. Now morning had come in full brightness. The cries of many bush warblers poured into his ears from every side, and the fresh wind of dawn seemed to wash his head clean. After the wild heat of the night, he felt as if he had been born again into a new world.

He rubbed his eyes and looked up. The sun, red and strong, was climbing above the mountain lines of Iga and Yamato. Rest had quickly filled his body again with force, and as soon as that force met the sun, ambition woke in him once more. His arms and legs wanted movement, and the great wish that had driven

him through the night began to stir again. Yet before he could act, he remembered hunger, and after hunger he remembered Jōtarō. He wondered only lightly where the boy had gone, because he trusted that no great harm would come to him.

A stream ran from higher up inside the gate, circling through the bamboo and under the fence before dropping toward the valley below. Musashi bent there, washed his face, and drank deeply. The water was so clear and so delicious that he cried out without meaning to. He thought that perhaps Sekishūsai had chosen this place partly for that very spring. Then he took out his dirty cloth, washed it too, and cleaned himself as well as he could, wiping his neck, scraping the dirt from under his nails, and smoothing down his hair with the small tool from his sword.

He was going, after all, to meet not only a famous master, but one of the great men of the age. Compared with such a person, he knew very well that he was no more than a nameless wanderer under heaven. That made proper appearance a matter not of vanity, but of respect. When he had put his body in better order, he straightened his collar and felt his mind settle as well. Then, calm and ready at last, he stepped toward the gate with the quiet dignity of a guest who wished to announce himself properly.

But before his hand reached the wood, he noticed writing on the two gateposts. It was a couplet cut into the wood and colored at the bottom with blue. He stopped and read it slowly. One side said, “Sir, do not wonder that I like to keep the mountain gate closed against official business.” The other said, “This mountain has nothing of value, only the clear song of warblers in the fields.”

Musashi stood there for a long time after reading it. The warblers were still singing over his head, and now the words on the gate seemed to rise into life around him. If this poem stood at the entrance, then surely it showed the heart of the man who lived within. Musashi read it again and again inside his mind. Because he had risen that morning in a clear and respectful state, he understood it at once in a way he could not have understood it in the madness of the night.

He saw then that Sekishūsai was not closing his gate only to wandering swordsmen. He was turning away from all worldly fame, from official duty, from

profit, from praise, and from the restless desire of other men as well as his own. The old master had not hidden himself there out of pride, but because he had returned toward simplicity and nature. Thinking of that, Musashi felt his own head lower without command. The idea of breaking in or forcing a meeting now seemed shameful to him. If there had been no poem at the gate, he thought, he might have made himself ridiculous before a man far above him.

Just then he heard quick footsteps from the slope inside the gate. Small birds leaped from branch to branch at the sound. Musashi looked through a gap and froze. A young woman was running down the path from the hermitage. In one instant he knew her. It was Otsū.

His heart broke into confusion at once. He remembered the flute of the night before, and now all the feelings he had pressed down came alive together. He wanted to meet her, and at the same time he felt he must not. The beat of his heart ran through him like a storm. For all his force and will, he was still only a young man before a woman he knew loved him deeply. “What shall I do?” he thought, unable to decide even while she came nearer.

Otsū reached the lower part of the path and stopped. Her face was bright, lively, full of expectation, as if she believed some good thing was near. She looked here and there as though searching for someone and then called up the slope, “Jōtarō! Jōtarō!” The moment Musashi heard that name and saw her so clearly before him, he lost all courage. Like a guilty boy, he slipped back into the cover of the trees and hid himself.

A little later Jōtarō answered from the bamboo above and came running down to her. He had strayed after a pheasant, he said, and Otsū scolded him gently that finding birds was less important than finding his master. They began talking of the night before, of how Jōtarō had rushed to her in panic to beg help when Musashi’s life seemed in danger, and of how her flute had been heard by Musashi during the struggle. Their words reached Musashi clearly where he stood hidden, and each word only made the knot inside him tighter.

He saw Otsū more closely then than he had for a long time. She had changed. The lonely girl he had known at Shippoji, with her quiet sadness and uncertain

eyes, was gone. In her place stood a young woman made healthy and bright by hardship, devotion, and the strength of her own feeling. Her cheeks were alive with color, and her whole body held the shine of youth. Musashi stared in wonder. He wanted to step out, confess everything, tell her that the cold words he had left before were false, and answer her deep loyalty with his own hidden desire.

Again and again he thought of doing it. He imagined finding some quiet place where no one watched, taking her hands, asking forgiveness, wiping away her tears, and showing openly the passion he had kept under iron control. Yet at the same time another voice inside him cursed him for weakness. One part of him called, “Otsū,” while another struck back, “Fool.” He stayed where he was, divided against himself, and the struggle was so hard that he almost trembled.

Otsū, knowing nothing of this, came farther out through the gate. Then she turned and called Jōtarō again because he had stopped to pick something up. It was a cloth lying near the entrance, still wet as though just washed. Jōtarō held it up and at once recognized it as Musashi’s. It was enough. Otsū looked around wildly, and at that very moment Musashi, who could bear no more, moved. The trees flashed, dew scattered in the light, and Otsū caught a glimpse of someone running.

She gave a cry and ran at once, leaving Jōtarō behind. Jōtarō shouted that it could not be Musashi, because no true master would run from them, yet Otsū did not stop. She had seen enough. She called Musashi’s name over and over as she ran, and at last Jōtarō, frightened by her desperation, ran too and shouted with all the strength in his lungs. They burst through the trees, over a low rise, and out toward a back road that led from Tsukigase toward Iga. There, far away already, they saw a figure running without once looking back.

Both of them chased him with their full strength. Their cries ran down the slope, over the open ground, and into the folds of the mountain. But Musashi did not turn. The farther he went, the smaller he became, until at last he disappeared into the valley land ahead. Jōtarō stamped, screamed, and wept like a child thrown away. Otsū leaned against a walnut tree and cried in another manner, quieter but no less broken. She could not understand how even now, after all she had endured

for him, she still could not make him stop and face her.

While they stood there in grief and anger together, a monk came walking down from the hills as lightly as if he had stepped out of the clouds. When he passed the walnut tree and turned at the sound of Otsū's sobbing, both of them looked up. Otsū's swollen eyes opened wide in surprise. "Takuan!" she cried. To her, the sight of him in that lonely place felt like a sudden light breaking into darkness. And for Takuan, who had come to Yagyū because of a letter from Sekishūsai and because he suspected that the young woman there might be Otsū, the meeting was not heaven's miracle, but still painful in its timing, because Musashi had fled only moments before.

Part 21

Takuan stood before Otsū and Jōtarō with a face that mixed kindness and annoyance in equal measure. He had come to Yagyū because Sekishūsai had written to him, and because he had guessed that the young woman staying there might indeed be Otsū. But now he had arrived one moment too late. Musashi had already fled. Otsū, still leaning against the walnut tree, tried to master her tears, while Jōtarō stamped on the ground in anger and shouted that his master had run away like a strange man with a broken head.

Takuan listened to the boy's wild words and then turned back to Otsū. He asked gently, though not softly, whether she had now seen enough. A person who runs even from a woman's faithful heart, he said, cannot be caught by chasing. Otsū answered at once that she was not suffering in this way because she found any pleasure in it. Her face was wet, but her voice held more strength than before. She was not a girl asking for comfort. She was a woman speaking from deep pain.

Takuan said that he did not deny her pain, but pain alone did not make the road right. Musashi, he said, was still the sort of man who could turn away even from what he himself most wanted. If that was so, then how would pursuit help her? Otsū answered that men who had lived long in temples or books did not really know the heart of a woman. Takuan laughed dryly and admitted that women were

indeed difficult for him. But he did not step aside. He had not come there to watch her throw herself deeper into sorrow without speaking once in warning.

Otsū grew impatient and called Jōtarō to come with her. She turned as if she would simply leave Takuan standing there and take the next road down from the hills. The monk let her go a few steps, then called after her and asked whether she truly meant to depart without even saying farewell to Sekishūsai, who had given her shelter. Otsū stopped and answered that she had not meant to burden the old master so long in the first place, and that she would make her farewell in her heart from where she stood. She had already decided to go.

Takuan came nearer and tried another road. He told her to think again. The land of Yagyū, he said, was not a bad place. It was peaceful, honest, and full of clear streams and clean hills. A woman like her need not throw herself back into the bloody roads of the world. She could remain there, hidden from rough men and rough times, and live as quietly as one of the warblers singing around them. Otsū laughed very lightly at that and thanked him for his kindness, but it was the laugh of someone who has already refused inwardly.

Seeing that, Takuan sighed. He said that the road she wanted to follow was a road of darkness, a road of blind desire without end. Otsū repeated the word “darkness” as if tasting it. Takuan went on and said that she had been raised near temples and should know what it meant to wander in endless attachment. But Otsū answered with simple force that for her there had never been any bright road from the beginning. Her life had already been tied to this path long ago. She had not chosen it recently out of whim.

Takuan, still hoping, caught her by the hand. He said he would speak for her to Sekishūsai and arrange a settled life. She could remain in the little Yagyū castle town, choose a good husband, bear children, and live the life that women were made to live. Such a life, he said, would make the land itself stronger, and it might bring her more real happiness than the suffering she now called love. Otsū listened respectfully, but when she answered, her refusal was clear. She understood his goodwill, she said, yet her heart would not obey it.

Takuan then tried to pull Jōtarō into his side of the argument. He told the boy

to come along too. Jōtarō shook his head at once and said he would not. To him there was no bright road or dark road, only his master's road. He had already fixed himself to Musashi too deeply to be drawn off by quiet living or careful advice. Then, almost in the same breath, he remembered the mask he had dropped somewhere near the path and ran off to fetch it, leaving the two older figures alone again.

Otsū remained standing as if between two roads that no feet could truly separate. Takuan spoke to her still, not now as a scolding monk, but almost as an old friend. He told her again and again that danger lay ahead, that a woman's happiness was not contained in one man alone, and that the road she wanted might destroy her long before it brought her close to what she sought. But none of it moved her. Her heart had already gone too far to be called back by wisdom.

Then Jōtarō came running back down the slope with the mask over his face. It was the madwoman's mask, and for one instant, seeing it there against the light, Takuan felt a chill run through him. It seemed to him that he had been shown the distant face of Otsū herself after long years of wandering in blind attachment. He did not say this aloud. He only stared for a moment, then lowered his eyes. Otsū, now ready to go, stepped back from him and gave a final bow.

Jōtarō tugged at her sleeve and urged her to hurry. Takuan lifted his eyes toward the drifting clouds and said bitterly that perhaps even the Buddha had been right when he said women were hard to save. Otsū answered that she would pray from there toward Sekishūsai's dwelling and asked Takuan to offer her thanks and farewell to the old master. Takuan muttered that he himself was beginning to look like a foolish monk, always meeting people on the road who seemed eager for hell and pain rather than peace. Yet even then his voice softened.

He told Otsū that if ever she began to drown in the six dark roads of suffering, she must remember his name and call for him. She must not forget it. Then, with the half-angry tenderness that was his own way, he said he would let her go as far as she could go and see what became of it. Otsū bowed once more. Jōtarō, still close beside her, looked from one face to the other with bright, stubborn eyes. Then the two of them turned and went down the mountain path together, leaving

Takuan alone under the day sky of Yagyū, watching them go with pity, helplessness, and a monk’s bitter love for souls that would not be saved by easy roads.

Book 3: Fire

Part 1

The river of Yodo flowed past Fushimi Castle and then went on toward Osaka. News also moved like that water. A small change in Kyoto was soon heard in Osaka, and a rumor from Osaka quickly reached the castle town of Fushimi. The land was between two powers. In Osaka, Hideyori and Lady Yodo still showed the old pride of the Toyotomi house. In Fushimi, Tokugawa Ieyasu was building a new order after the war. These two worlds were mixed together in boats on the river, in the clothes of men and women on the road, in the songs people sang, and in the faces of masterless samurai who looked for work.

So people talked. “What will happen now?” one man asked. “What do you mean?” another answered. “I mean the country.” A third man laughed and said the world was always changing and had never stayed still, not for a single day. Then another lowered his voice and asked whether there would be war again. No one said yes with confidence, but no one truly believed peace would last. Even common men knew that Osaka was gathering rōnin, and that the Tokugawa side was also buying guns and powder. Yet the great lords still joined families by marriage, and such things were beyond the understanding of ordinary people.

The heat was cruel. Autumn had already come by the calendar, but the stones still burned as if summer had not moved at all. The water looked hot enough to boil. The willow trees near the bridge hung in pale, tired lines. A single cicada flew wildly across the river and struck the town houses as if it had lost its mind. Barges loaded with stone were tied above and below the bridge. Stone was everywhere. There was stone on the river, stone on the bank, and stone waiting for walls that had not yet risen.

The repair of Fushimi Castle had pulled the whole place into motion. It was not only because Ieyasu stayed there. Castle building itself was part of Tokugawa rule. It gave work to the poor, drained money and strength from the great lords, and kept allies and rivals equally busy. Everywhere in the land great building

works had begun. In places like Edo, Nagoya, Sunpu, Hikone, Kameyama, and Ōtsu, men cut wood, moved earth, and dragged stones. In Fushimi alone, nearly a thousand laborers came to earn their daily food. With them came sellers, gamblers, loose women, flies, noise, and the strong smell of sweat.

The townspeople called it prosperity. They praised the government because coins moved from hand to hand. Shopkeepers watched the times with sharp eyes and thought first of profit. If war came, some said, money would move even faster. They did not truly think about the country or about peace. Men who lived from one meal to the next had little room for such thoughts. When they finished their noon rice, they only wished for evening to come quickly. If war came, many felt their lives could hardly become worse than they already were.

At noon a country girl came among the laborers with a basket of watermelons. She called out in a tired but practiced voice, moving from group to group. Men gambling in the shade bought two. Others shouted back that they had no money, or joked that they would eat if she gave the fruit for free. Most only laughed. Then one young stone-hauler, sitting alone between two great rocks with his knees drawn up, slowly lifted his eyes. He had a thin face, hollow cheeks, and skin burned dark by sun. He looked as if the flesh had been taken from him by heat, work, and bad luck. That man was Hon’iden Matahachi.

He counted a few dirty coins in his palm and bought one watermelon. Yet when he held it, he did not eat. He bent forward, spat into the grass, and let the fruit roll from his knees. He stared at it without desire. His eyes were dull and empty, and his shoulders moved sharply each time he breathed. In his mind he saw only two faces that filled him with bitter anger. One was Oko, white-faced and clever. The other was his old friend Takezō, who was now known as Miyamoto Musashi. If not for the battle of Sekigahara, he thought, and if not for Oko’s temptation after that, his life would not have become this ruined thing.

He imagined his home village. He imagined himself still there as head of the Hon’iden house. He imagined taking a good wife, earning respect, and living the life that should have been his. Then his mind turned, as it often did, to Otsū. Was she angry with him? Did she still remember him? During the years he had lived

idly with Oko, his heart had slowly gone back to Otsū. After Oko had pushed him out, he thought of Otsū even more. Then he had heard that the promising swordsman called Miyamoto Musashi was none other than his old companion. That news had burned him. He had sworn to stop drinking, stop wasting himself, and become a man again.

So he had come to this work site and given his body to stone, rope, sun, and dust. He had told himself that he was still only twenty-two, that he still had time, that in ten years he could rise and shame both Musashi and Oko. But ten years suddenly felt too long. Otsū would be over thirty by then. Could he expect her to wait? No, he thought. Five years, maybe six at most. In that time he must build himself up, return home, beg forgiveness, and bring Otsū back as his wife. The thought gave a little light to his tired eyes. Yet even as that light came, his body shook with weakness.

One of the other laborers came over and mocked him. Matahachi forced a smile and said the heat had struck him too hard. He asked leave to rest a while after noon. The man laughed at his weakness, asked why he had bought a watermelon he could not eat, and then shouted to the others that Matahachi was treating them. The melon was smashed against a stone. At once the men gathered like ants and grabbed the red, wet pieces with eager hands. Then the overseers shouted. The break was over. Samurai with whips stepped out from the shade, the smell of sweat rose again, and huge stones began to move on rollers beneath the pull of thick ropes.

The workers sang as they pulled. Their song rose under the burning sky, rough and heavy, made for bodies that had to move together. Once, such songs had grown naturally from the people, bright and strong under the rule of Taikō Hideyoshi. Now the times felt different. The world was harder, tighter, more watchful. Matahachi pressed his hands to his head. The song seemed to buzz around him like flies. He thought with sudden despair that five years of this life would change nothing. One day’s wage fed one day’s stomach. One missed day meant hunger. He bent over and spat again. When he raised his face at last, he noticed that someone new had come and was standing a little apart.

It was a tall young man wearing a rough hat pulled low over his brow. A travel cloth was tied at his waist, and in his hand he half-opened an iron fan against the sun. He was not looking at the workers. He was studying the castle, the ground, and the lines of the works with deep attention, as if measuring them with his eyes. He stood still in the cruel heat while everything around him groaned, shouted, and dragged stone. Matahachi looked at him only for a moment, then lowered his eyes again. But something in the man's calm, dangerous stillness did not fit the place, and it stayed in his mind.

Part 2

The tall traveler suddenly sat down in front of a wide flat stone, as if he had found a desk waiting for him there. He blew the hot dust from its surface, and even the line of ants on it flew away with the sand. Then he rested both elbows on the stone and looked out again at the castle works. The sun was cruel, the stones gave back hard light, and the grass itself seemed to breathe heat into his face, but he did not move. He seemed to see something in the ground, the walls, and the shape of the place that no other man there could see.

Matahachi paid little attention at first. His head still hurt, and his stomach still turned. Yet the traveler heard his rough breathing and called to him in a calm voice, "Stone-hauler, what is wrong with you?" Matahachi answered weakly that the heat had struck him and that he still felt like vomiting. The man came over at once, opened a small medicine case, and dropped a black pill into Matahachi's mouth. "It will cure you soon," he said. Then he added, "If anyone comes near me, call out, or throw a small stone. Do not forget."

After that, the traveler returned to the flat stone and at once took out writing tools and a small notebook. He bent over it in deep concentration. Through the edge of his hat Matahachi could see his eyes moving again and again from the castle to the outer grounds, then to the hills behind, then to the river and the towers. It was clear now that the man was not simply looking. He was drawing a careful map of the castle, inside and out, even the weak points and the lines from which

the place could be watched.

Matahachi understood that the work was dangerous, but his body was too dull and sick to act quickly. Then he saw a half-armored official come up behind the traveler without a sound. The man stood there watching until the traveler happened to lift his face. At once the official reached for the notebook. The traveler leaped up in anger and shouted, “What are you doing?” The official answered only, “Show it to me. This is my duty.” The traveler snapped back, “No. You would not understand it even if you saw it.”

They struggled over the notebook, and the paper tore in two between them. The official demanded that the stranger come to the magistrate for questioning, saying that many spies wandered around under the name of warrior training. The traveler answered that he was only studying castles and roads for his own learning. The official would not listen. He ordered him to walk. The traveler stood still like a rock and said with cold contempt, “You are used to frightening common men with that face and voice. Try it on me.”

When the official drew his iron staff and threatened to bind him, the traveler moved. He stepped in so fast that Matahachi barely saw it. In the next instant he had seized the man by the neck and belt and thrown him against the corner of a huge stone. The body broke like the watermelon the workers had smashed a little earlier. Blood and crushed flesh flew across the ground. Matahachi covered his face in horror, but the traveler himself stayed almost perfectly calm.

He gathered the torn scraps of his drawing, found his fallen hat, and put it back on as if nothing great had happened. Only then did Matahachi truly see his face. It was young, perhaps not yet thirty, but terrible. One side of his jaw had been cut away long ago, and old sword scars marked his ear, his hand, and likely the rest of his body as well. He looked like a man who had lived through killing and had learned not to tremble after it. Even Matahachi, who was not brave, could feel the power in him like a hot wind.

Then the man ran. He moved so suddenly and so lightly that the laborers near him did not even understand what had happened. But there were watchers on high platforms above the works, and they cried out at once. Soldiers and workers

rushed toward the outer gate in a great black mass, shouting that a spy from Osaka had been found. The traveler almost passed through, but the gate guards, already warned, caught his legs with a long forked pole and dragged him down. When more men threw themselves on him, he changed like a wild beast.

He tore the weapon from one man, struck others down, and then drew a huge sword from his side. It was heavy like a field sword, not the kind ordinary men wore every day. He raised it above his head and glared so fiercely that even the crowd opened before him for a moment. He charged into the gap, cutting his way forward. But the workers and soldiers would not meet him in close combat for long. They scattered, then attacked from a distance with a rain of stones.

The sky seemed full of flying rock. “Kill him!” they shouted. “Crush him!” The men who threw them were not heroes. Many were laborers who hated wandering swordsmen, seeing them as proud, useless men who lived off the world and looked down on those who worked with their hands. Again and again the traveler rushed at them, and again and again they broke apart and struck from every side. At last numbers, wounds, and stones brought him down.

Soon after, the wide work site returned to its usual shape. Men pulled stone, cut stone, carried earth, and shouted as before, as if such violence were only another passing noise of the day. Matahachi, half-sick and half-dreaming, was ordered to sit near the fallen stranger and watch him until a higher official came. The body lay bound with thick rope to a great stone. Blood dried in the hair. Flies gathered. Ants moved over the hands and legs. Matahachi looked at him and thought how foolish the road of the swordsman seemed. “Better to rise in a wiser way,” he told himself. “Even if I shame Musashi one day, I will not die like this.”

Then the dead man moved. First a hand twitched. Then the bound body pushed itself up from the earth. Matahachi jumped back with wide eyes and no voice at all. The stranger’s lips were black and dry, and no clear words could come from them, only broken sounds like a split flute. Yet he dragged himself forward with such terrible force that even the huge stone tied behind him moved over the ground. It was like seeing a spirit or some dying beast from a dark story.

At last the man’s red eyes fixed on Matahachi, and from his ruined throat

came something like a plea. Matahachi could not understand the words, but he felt that the dying man was trying to entrust him with something. Then the head dropped, and this time life truly left the body. Evening was coming. The castle was fading into dusk, and the first lights of Fushimi began to shine. Thinking that the stranger must have meant him to return some keepsake to his home, Matahachi took the travel bundle and the medicine case from the corpse and hid them in his robe. When he heard officials coming, fear struck him. Bent low, he slipped from shadow to shadow among the stones and ran away like a field mouse into the falling dark.

Part 3

The next morning the fields were gray under a low sky. The cool air felt like the first real breath of autumn, and dew lay on everything that could hold it. In the broken kitchen, where one door had already fallen down, clear fox tracks showed in the dirt. Even after sunrise, little wild creatures still moved through the empty house as if it belonged to them. It was a lonely place, half-rotten and half-open to the field.

A komusō monk woke there shivering. He sat upright on the wide kitchen floor, wrapped in his dirty robes, and muttered, “Ah, it is cold.” He had come back at dawn, worn out from wandering the fields all night with his flute in his hand, and had dropped down there without even thinking. His robe and scarf were wet with dew and covered with burrs and grass seeds. The weather had changed so sharply from the burning heat of the day before that he sneezed hard and rubbed his nose, his thin mustache catching a little moisture, though he did not even bother to wipe it away.

Then he remembered the cloudy rice wine left from the night before. Saying to himself that there should still be some, he rose and went through the ruined house toward the room with the hearth. In daylight the empty place seemed even larger and more desolate than it had in the dark. He looked for the wine jar where he thought he had left it, grew uneasy when he did not see it, and then found it

lying on its side beside the hearth. But the jar was empty, and next to it another man lay sleeping with his arm under his head, snoring so deeply that he looked dead to the world.

The monk stared down and at once understood. This stranger had drunk the wine. Then he saw that the rice left in the pot for his morning meal was also gone, every grain of it, and the matter became more than an annoyance. For a poor wandering man, this was food for the day, not a small thing that could be laughed away. His face changed, and he kicked the sleeper hard.

Matahachi rolled, lifted his head, and blinked stupidly. Before he could truly wake, the monk kicked him again. Matahachi came up in anger at once and demanded to know why he had been kicked. The monk shouted back, “Why? You ask why? Who gave you leave to eat the rice and drink the wine in this house?” Matahachi, still thick with sleep, asked if the food had belonged to him. “Of course it did,” the monk cried. “You speak of it lightly, but I live one day at a time. One day of flute and begging brings only a little rice and one poor measure of cloudy wine. You have eaten my life for today. Give it back.”

Matahachi answered with contempt. He said it was shameful to make so much noise over a little cold rice from the bottom of a pot and hardly a cup of cheap wine. But the monk only became fiercer and said again that even leftovers were one day’s food, one day’s life. Then he seized Matahachi by the wrist and cried that he would not let him go without payment. Matahachi shook him off at once and grabbed the monk by the collar, meaning to throw him down and end the matter with force.

Yet the monk, thin as a hungry stray cat, was not weak in the way his body suggested. He clung with surprising skill and firmness. Instead of going down, he used Matahachi’s strength against him and sent him crashing back through the next room. The old walls were rotten, and earth from them broke over Matahachi as he fell. Spitting mud and rage, Matahachi sprang up, drew his sword, and rushed at him.

The monk met the blade only with his bamboo flute. It was pitiful to see at first. He was already short of breath, his shoulders rising and falling sharply, and

his face had the look of a man close to panic. Matahachi, younger and stronger, drove him from one side of the room to the other and gave him no time to rest. The monk dodged, stumbled, leaped, and cried out in strange broken sounds, but still he did not take the blow. He slipped about the ruined house like a desperate animal that knew every opening where death might miss.

In the end, Matahachi's pride betrayed him. The monk sprang out toward the garden like a cat, and Matahachi rushed after him across the broken veranda. The board beneath him, weakened by rain and age, split at once. One leg went through, and he crashed down on his back. That instant the monk came flying back, seized him by the chest, and beat his face again and again with both fists, striking his cheeks, temples, and brow until Matahachi thought his head would burst. Trapped by his broken footing, he could barely defend himself.

Then small gold and silver pieces spilled from Matahachi's robe. They scattered over the floor with bright, hard sounds each time another blow landed. The monk froze. Matahachi tore free and jumped back, holding his swollen face, while the monk stared at the fallen coins as if he had seen something terrible. Matahachi, still trembling with rage, shouted that if the beggar wanted money so badly, he could take it. He boasted that he had more than enough and that the monk was a starving fool to fight over scraps when real money lay before him. He demanded that the monk come forward now and repay the blows with his own head.

But the monk did not answer. When Matahachi looked again, he found him bent low with his face against the veranda boards, weeping. At first Matahachi thought it was some trick to move him to pity after greed had been exposed. Yet the monk was not acting toward Matahachi at all. He was scolding himself in a voice full of misery, calling himself miserable, foolish, and lost. He struck his own head against a black pillar and cried that a man who had taken up the flute to drive out greed, desire, delusion, and attachment had disgraced himself by fighting like a beast over cold rice and sour wine, and with a youth young enough to be his son.

Again and again he beat his head against the wood. The blows he gave himself were more savage than the ones he had given Matahachi. Blood began to

come from his forehead, and at last Matahachi, astonished and half sorry, caught his arm and told him to stop. The monk answered that he was not ill, only disgusted with his own body and mind. He said it would almost be better to kill such a body and throw it out for crows, except that even to die while still so stupid seemed hateful to him. He was a strange man, burning with shame not because he had been poor, but because poverty had shown him the weakness he thought he should already have conquered.

Moved in spite of himself, Matahachi gathered up the scattered coins and tried to press some into the monk's hand. He said, "I was at fault too. Take this and let the matter end." But the monk drew back sharply as if the money itself were dirty. "I do not want it," he said. "I do not want money." That refusal surprised Matahachi more than anything before it. He muttered that the fellow must be mad. The monk only answered quietly that perhaps he was not so very strange after all.

Then Matahachi noticed something in the man's speech and asked whether he was from the west, because a touch of Harima speech came into his words. The monk said he was from Himeji. Matahachi answered that he himself was from Mimasaka, from Yoshino village. At once the monk raised his eyes with new attention and said he knew that region, for long ago he had served at the checkpoint in Hinagura. He even began to say that he had once been a samurai, an Aoki—, but suddenly stopped, ashamed of what he had become. Turning away, he called his own words a lie and said only, "I will go into town and play." Then he left the ruined house and walked out alone into the gray morning field.

Part 4

After the komusō left, Matahachi could not stop thinking about the dead man's money. The more he told himself that it was not his, the more strongly it pulled at his mind. At last he began to excuse himself. If he was truly carrying the dead man's things back to the right place, then he needed travel money, and taking a little from the purse could not be such a great sin. Once he accepted that thought,

his heart became lighter. In truth, it became lighter because he had already started spending the money bit by bit. He also had the sword license scroll that named Sasaki Kojirō, but from that alone he still could not tell where Kojirō came from or what kind of man he had been. He asked at inns, tea shops, and roadside places about Kanemaki Jisai, the master named in the scroll, yet almost no one knew the name.

At last one samurai told him that Jisai, if still alive, must be very old, and that a man called Tomita Mondo in Osaka Castle might know more. That sounded uncertain, but Matahachi was already heading for Osaka, so he went on and made inquiries there. When he reached a good inn in the city, he heard that such a man had once taught swordsmanship in the castle but had gone back to Echizen years before. Another person advised him to look instead for Itō Ittōsai, who had also trained under Kanemaki Jisai, but that search also led nowhere. So at last Matahachi threw the matter aside in irritation. He told himself that he was in no need to hurry and that the dead man's past could wait. Yet while he said that, he went on using the money and carrying the scroll close to his body. Little by little, the weight of duty changed into the feeling that fortune had fallen into his hands.

Osaka stirred the old hunger in him again. Everywhere he heard that rōnin were welcome there, that men were being quietly gathered, and that famous warriors such as Gotō Matabei, Sanada Yukimura, Akashi Kamon, and Chōsokabe Morichika were tied in one way or another to the Toyotomi side. As he listened, his lost ambition woke up. He felt almost as he had felt long ago, when he and Takezō had run toward Sekigahara with wild dreams in their young heads. The money in his purse was slowly shrinking, but his body had recovered, and every morning seemed full of new promise. He bought a good pair of swords, then bought better clothes, and rented a small room behind a harness maker's house near the moat. He ate out, wandered where he liked, and searched for the vine by which a man could climb into service. Even his discipline, he thought, was now much better than before, though in truth he was already beginning to slide again.

By the last month of the year, a large open lot in the city became one of his favorite places. There were cheap shows there, rough fences of straw matting,

drums and gongs, food sellers, women painted too white, and idle men who still found time to crowd around such sights in the busy season. One day a sake seller thanked Matahachi again and again, saying that because a hard-looking samurai like him had been there when a fight broke out, the fighters had not smashed his poor stall. The man brought him hot sake and even extra food without being asked. Matahachi sat in a red glow of drink and watched the winter crowd. Then he noticed, with mild surprise, that he had started drinking again, though he had once sworn off sake when he began hauling stone. Just as he thought that, a ragged rōnin with a long sword and dirty clothes sat down beside him and asked for hot sake in a loud, easy voice. Matahachi shared his cup, and the stranger drank with such pleasure and force that he seemed made of pure appetite.

The man called himself Akakabe Yasoma, a former retainer of the Gamō house. Whether all his stories were true or not, he told them with full confidence. He spoke of famous men as if they were old companions, mocked Ieyasu, praised the strength still living in Osaka, and then suddenly asked Matahachi which side he would join if war broke out again. Matahachi, warmed by drink and eager to sound bold, answered at once, “Osaka.” Yasoma stood up with his cup and cried out in delight as though he had found a brother. Then, when he asked Matahachi’s name and house, Matahachi felt the old fear of being small and worthless. Out of that fear, and helped by the wine, a lie came to his lips more smoothly than truth had ever come.

He said that Kanemaki Jisai was his master. He said that Itō Ittōsai was his elder brother in training. Then, going even further, he gave the name of the dead man and said, “I am Sasaki Kojirō.” The effect was immediate. Yasoma dropped to the ground and bowed in apology for his earlier roughness, saying that he had long heard of such a swordsman and had failed to recognize him. Matahachi was startled, yet also deeply relieved. In that moment a fast, dark thought flashed through him. The real Sasaki Kojirō was dead, crushed and stoned at Fushimi, and no one but he knew what name that dead man had truly carried. If so, why should he not become Sasaki Kojirō himself?

Once that thought took root, he stopped resisting it. Yasoma grew eager and

said he could introduce such a man to Susukida Kanesuke, one of the strong men now rising in Osaka. Matahachi answered with modest words but inwardly let himself become the false name more and more. The two men left the open lot together, and Matahachi paid not only his own bill but Yasoma's as well. Yasoma then led him to a rough pleasure quarter by the dark canals, a place full of cheap lights, painted women, bad smells, and fallen lives. Yasoma explained the place proudly, saying that many women there had once come from better houses and better times. Matahachi, who had spent years in Oko's shadow, found the low, bright, shameless world strangely pleasing. They drank, stayed the night, and by the next day Yasoma was still full of talk while Matahachi, tired and softened by wine and women, followed his lead.

At last, near evening, Yasoma brought him to the moat below a great house and said that Susukida's residence was there. The cold from the water cut through their drink at once, and the heavy walls and gate stirred Matahachi's hopes more strongly than ever. He imagined himself one day entering such a place with retainers behind him and horses before him. Yasoma said he would speak for him, but such things could not be done empty-handed. He called it a recommendation gift, the sort of money all men in the world accepted. Matahachi took out the leather purse that held what remained of the dead man's treasure. It had already fallen to less than half, and now he emptied almost all of the rest into Yasoma's hand. Yasoma said it was enough, tucked it away quickly, and started forward, while Matahachi, suddenly touched by a thin thread of unease, hurried after him toward the dark gate.

Part 5

Matahachi stood for a while in the cold near the moat after Akakabe Yasoma disappeared through the gate. The grand walls, the dark water, and the heavy roofs around him seemed to promise a new life. He imagined Yasoma speaking for him inside, imagined Susukida Kanesuke nodding, imagined himself already half accepted into a warrior house. So that night he went back full of restless hope and

did not sleep well. In his mind, rank, salary, armor, and horses came and went until dawn.

The next day he went early to the open lot where they had agreed to meet. The winter wind was sharp, but the place was crowded as before with sellers, performers, idlers, and men with no steady place in the world. He watched every face and told himself Yasoma must only be late. He waited until the shadows grew long, yet Yasoma did not come. Even then Matahachi did not let himself suspect the truth. He returned the next day with the same hope.

On the second day he waited again on the sake seller’s bench, looking over the crowd again and again. When evening came and still there was no sign of Yasoma, shame and uneasiness began to press into him. On the third day the sake seller, who had been watching him in silence, finally asked whom he was waiting for. Matahachi explained the matter honestly, saying that he had entrusted money to a rōnin named Akakabe Yasoma, who had promised to carry a gift and recommendation fee to Susukida and bring back an answer about service. The old seller stared at him with something like pity. Then he said bluntly that Yasoma would never come back.

Matahachi went cold and asked why. The old man answered that the open lot was full of such flies, men who lived by clinging to the simple and the hopeful. He said he had nearly warned Matahachi before, but feared trouble afterward and had thought any man should see the danger in Yasoma’s face for himself. Hearing this, Matahachi did not first feel shame. He felt the blow of loss, the crushing of hope, and the hot rise of anger so sharp that his body shook. The sake seller, perhaps feeling a little sorry for him, said that Yasoma sometimes showed himself in the gambling place behind the illusion tents when he had fresh money in hand.

Matahachi sprang up and went at once to the part of the lot where the illusion shows stood. Flags snapped in the wind above the enclosures, and wooden signs boasted of famous masters of strange arts. Music of a doubtful kind mixed with shouted calls and applause from inside. He went around to a rear entrance and found his way into the gambling place hidden behind the show. A ring of hard-eyed drifters sat there under the open sky, throwing coins and watching one

another with hungry suspicion.

When Matahachi asked whether Akakabe Yasoma was there, they stared at him as if measuring his worth. One of them offered him a place in the circle, but when Matahachi said he had not come to gamble, their faces hardened at once. They told him that a man had no business entering such a place without playing or paying. Someone demanded a fee for looking in. Another accused him of coming to steal if he found a chance. Matahachi, already burning with loss and humiliation, laid his hand on his sword and tried to frighten them with a grand name.

He declared himself to be Sasaki Kojirō, thinking the name would make them step back. Instead, they laughed. One man turned his back in mockery and called to the others to come hear a fine performance. Rage blinded Matahachi. He struck from behind and cut the man across the buttocks, then fled before the whole pack could fall on him together. Shouts burst up behind him, and he pushed his way into the thickest crowd he could find, seeing danger in every face.

In that panic he threw a coin and slipped into a different show, one that promised a tiger brought back from Korea by Katō Kiyomasa. Inside, the famous beast turned out to be nothing more than a tiger skin stretched on boards. Yet no one seemed angry. The visitors stood there admiring it with simple wonder, saying how large it was, as if the skin itself were enough. Matahachi was glad of the dim light and the press of people. He stayed near the tiger skin simply to hide and let time pass.

Then disaster came from behind him in a very ordinary voice. An old woman complained that the tiger was already dead and that they had been tricked by the showman’s words. Beside her stood an elderly samurai she called Gon-uncle. Matahachi knew them before he fully saw them. It was Osugi, his mother, and Gon-uncle from home. His whole body tightened. Without thinking, he shrank his shoulders and tried to slide away through the crowd, but Gon-uncle suddenly cried out, “Matahachi!” and pointed.

Matahachi ran. He crashed through the people at the exit, hardly seeing where he was going. Behind him he heard his mother’s feet, heard Gon-uncle

shouting, and then heard something worse than either. Osugi screamed, “Thief! Thief!” Her cry turned the whole street against him at once. Shopmen snatched up poles, passersby struck at him, and men closed around him like dogs around a hunted thing. Hands, feet, and curses fell on him from every side until he staggered and could no longer protect himself.

But when Osugi reached him, she did not thank the crowd. She drove them back in fury and shouted that he was no thief but her own son. She scolded the townsmen for daring to kick a samurai’s child and declared that she had called out only to stop him from running farther. Then she seized him by the collar and dragged him away from the road into the dark grounds of a shrine or town grove nearby. There, under the dim light of a standing lamp, she turned on him with all the force of years. She struck him, shook him, and demanded to know how he had dared flee from his own mother.

Matahachi could only cry out for mercy and say that shame had made him run. He covered his face like a child and said he had had no courage to return home after all that had happened. Osugi wept and raged at the same time. She called him hateful, precious, shameless, and foolish, sometimes in the same breath. Gon-uncle tried to soften her, but she would not hear him. At last she forced Matahachi to sit properly before her and ordered him to tell everything from the battle of Sekigahara onward, hiding nothing.

Once he began, the story came out of him almost by itself. He spoke of fleeing the battlefield with Takezō, of hiding in the Ibuki region, of falling in with Oko, and of wasting years in idleness and bitterness. He confessed enough of his life to make himself seem small even in his own ears. Strangely, after speaking, he felt a little lighter, as if some rotten burden had been pushed from his stomach. But then Osugi asked the question he feared most. “And now,” she said, “how do you live? Have you taken service anywhere, or do you still drift like a useless man?”

Matahachi answered carelessly at first and nearly trapped himself. Then, desperate to recover some honor in her eyes, he said he made a living by swordsmanship. Osugi brightened at once, pleased to hear of anything that

sounded like family blood and proper warrior training. Gon-uncle also nodded with relief. Seeing that, Matahachi went a step farther. He took out the license scroll from his robe, carefully hiding the place where another name stood, and held it open in the lamp light. “Look,” he said. “You may stop worrying now.” Osugi leaned toward it with wet, eager eyes, and in that moment Matahachi felt the lie closing around him more tightly than ever.

Part 6

Osugi reached out eagerly for the license, but Matahachi did not place it in her hand. He only opened it enough for her to see, keeping control of it himself. At once the old woman nodded again and again with shining eyes. She said to Gon-uncle that they had worried for nothing and that her son had become a fine man after all. She praised him greedily, saying that even as a child he had been cleverer and more promising than Takezō. Hearing such words, Matahachi felt both comfort and pain. He knew the paper was not his, yet he also felt a sweet relief in being admired again.

Then, as he started to roll the document back up, the last line showed for a moment in the shrine lamp. Osugi caught sight of the name and stopped him at once. “Wait,” she said. “Why does it say Sasaki Kojirō there?” Matahachi’s heart gave a hard jump, but he answered quickly that it was only a false name, a name he had used in shame because he had not wanted to stain the Hon’iden family with the bad life he had been living. Osugi accepted this almost at once. To her, it sounded not suspicious but noble. She said that such a feeling proved his good spirit and that she was glad to see he still thought of the house and its honor.

Once she believed him, she began speaking with even greater warmth. She said he knew nothing of what had happened in Miyamoto village after he left, and that he must listen carefully now. So there in the dim grove she told him everything from her own side, and as she told it, the story naturally grew larger and harder. She spoke of the family name, of insult, of how she and Gon-uncle had been driven to leave home and wander from place to place, and of how they

had searched year after year for Otsū and Musashi. She did not mean to lie, but grief and pride colored everything she said. Again and again she wiped her nose and eyes and continued.

Matahachi sat with his head lowered and listened like a dutiful son. Outwardly he was gentle and quiet. Yet the point that struck him most was not his mother's talk about family honor or samurai pride. It was one single thing that he had never heard before. Otsū, she said, had changed her heart. Otsū had given him up. Otsū had gone after Musashi. When this first reached him, Matahachi lifted his face sharply and asked whether it was really true.

Osugi took his sudden color and agitation as proof that her scolding had finally awakened true manly spirit in him. She answered at once that if he doubted her, he could ask Gon-uncle too. Otsū, she said, had looked down on him and gone after Takezō of her own will. Or, if one wished to think even worse of it, Musashi had known Matahachi would not return soon and had tricked Otsū away. Gon-uncle supported her, saying that after the two had escaped together with Otsū's help, no decent bond between them could be expected. Hearing this, Matahachi could not remain calm. He had already carried resentment against Musashi for a long time. Now jealousy and humiliation gave that old resentment a new, hotter shape.

Osugi saw the change in his face and pressed harder still. She said he must understand now why she and Gon-uncle had left their home and worn out their old bodies on the road. Until she took the heads of the two enemies, Musashi who had stolen her son's bride and Otsū who had shamed the Hon'iden house, she could not show her face to the family tablets or to the people of the village. Matahachi answered that he understood. She asked whether he thought he could now return home as he was. He said no, never. She told him then to kill the enemies. He said yes. She snapped that his answer lacked spirit and asked whether he thought himself unable to kill Musashi. He denied it at once.

Gon-uncle added his own encouragement. He said he too would stand beside Matahachi, and Osugi cried that she herself would do the same. Together, she said, they would carry home the two heads as a gift to their village. After that,

Matahachi would take a proper wife, continue the Hon'iden line, and raise the family honor higher than any other house nearby. She begged him to speak with more force, and at last he did what was easiest in that moment. He bowed his head and said yes to all of it. He let them believe he had truly sworn to kill Musashi and Otsū.

Yet in his heart the vow did not take shape in the same way as in theirs. Osugi thought first of name and face and revenge before the village. Gon-uncle thought of old loyalties and proper order. Matahachi thought first of Otsū. If she had really changed and followed Musashi, then the deepest wound was not the family insult but the personal one. He saw in his mind the years he had wasted, the life he had lost, and the friend who had gone forward while he had fallen. Under his mother's fierce voice, those thoughts thickened into something dark and bitter. His obedience that night was real enough on the surface, but what moved beneath it was injured pride.

Time passed, and because the year was near its end, he remained with the two old people instead of leaving them at once. He had suggested that the three of them should separate and each search on his own, since walking together gained them little. But Osugi would not hear of it. The New Year was close, she said, and mother and son had not shared holiday wine together in a long time. No one knew which meeting might be the last in this uncertain world. At least for this one New Year, she said, they should remain together. Matahachi could not refuse that without seeming cold even to himself.

So the days went by in an unhappy way. He told himself he would leave on the first or second day of the year, but until then he must endure them. Both Osugi and Gon-uncle had become deeply religious in old age, or perhaps simply more afraid of death. Whenever they came to a shrine or temple, they stopped. They offered coins. They stood long in prayer. They bowed and muttered and asked blessings for their revenge, their road, and their family line. That day at Sumiyoshi Shrine they had nearly spent the whole day doing nothing else.

The place itself was grand enough to interest any visitor. Osugi admired the sacred orange tree and repeated the old tale that it had once been the first tribute

from across the sea. Gon-uncle admired the shrine horse and joked that it would win first place even in the races at Kamo. They peered at signboards, laughed at one another, and moved slowly from one thing to the next with the endless patience of the old. While they did so, Matahachi sat for a time under the kagura hall, resting apart from them with a swollen face and a swollen spirit. When Osugi noticed he was missing, she raised her hand and called him back in an impatient voice, telling him not to go toward the great torii but toward the tall lantern instead.

He came slowly, dragging his feet and puffing out his cheeks like a sulking child. To him, trailing this old woman and old man from one holy place to another was almost unbearable. If it had been a matter of a few days only, he might have laughed it off. But to think that the journey might go on like this until the day they happened to meet Musashi and kill him made his whole future seem dull and heavy. Still, he had agreed to remain with them through the New Year, and so he could only follow.

Osugi, watching his slow steps, scolded him for making others wait. Matahachi answered back under his breath that they were the ones always delaying everything. She snapped that when men entered a sacred place, it was only natural to worship the gods. Her voice was sharp, his was sullen, and Gon-uncle moved between them with weak attempts at peace. Then, with no real choice of his own, Matahachi fell in behind them once more and went on through the fading winter light, bound not by love or faith, but by fatigue, habit, and the dark thought of revenge that now walked beside him like a second shadow.

Part 7

Osugi did not soften at all when Matahachi answered back. She said that when a man entered a holy place, he should bow before the gods before he complained of his tired feet. Matahachi muttered that they stopped at every shrine and temple they saw and spent whole days doing nothing. Gon-uncle tried to laugh and make peace between them, but the laugh was weak and thin. The three of them moved on again, not in harmony, but because none of them had another path

at that moment.

The winter day had already begun to lean toward evening. The cold light over Sumiyoshi grew pale, and the air from the shore was damp and sharp. Osugi still looked here and there with the restless eyes of old age, eager to see every sacred object before she left. Gon-uncle followed her, speaking now of horses, now of old stories, now of things written on signboards. Matahachi followed behind them like a man tied by an invisible rope.

He thought again that three people walking together like this could do nothing useful. If he were alone, he told himself, he could move faster, ask sharper questions, and perhaps truly search for Musashi. With these two old people beside him, every road became slow, heavy, and full of delay. Yet even while he thought that, he could not pull himself free. His mother's grief, her anger, and her fierce love had wrapped around him again, and he had not yet found the strength to cut through them.

At last they came out where the shrine grounds opened toward the shore. The sea looked dull under the winter sky, and the wet sand held a weak light of its own. There were scattered people there, some walking, some looking out at the water, and some bending to gather small things from the beach. The wind carried mixed sounds, the sea, the voices of strangers, and the cry of birds. Matahachi had no desire to look at any of it, but Osugi and Gon-uncle slowed again.

Then something changed in the sound of the shore. It was small at first, only the sharp turn of a few voices, but in a moment more people began running toward one place near the water. Men shouted to one another. Someone pointed. Fishermen who had been nearby threw down what they held and rushed straight into the surf. The three travelers stopped at once and stared, and then, drawn like everyone else, moved toward the crowd.

By the time they reached it, two bodies had already been pulled from the water. One was Gon-uncle. The other was a young woman in fine dress, her hair torn and her painted face still strangely bright under the wetness. Gon-uncle's hand was fixed hard in her sash, as if even death had not opened his grip. The old man lay with no breath in him, and the girl lay as still as if she too had gone

beyond calling.

The people around them began speaking all at once. Some said the young woman was the same one they had seen earlier on the beach, picking up shells. Others said she had come from one of the inns. No one seemed fully sure how the two had ended in the water together. But all could see that the old man had reached her somehow and held on to her with his whole strength. Whether he had gone in to save her or had been dragged in with her, only the sea had seen clearly.

Osugi fell beside Gon-uncle and pressed her face to his ear. She cried his name again and again, not with anger now, but with the helpless voice of a woman who knew she was already losing him. Fishermen and bystanders worked over both bodies. They pushed at the stomach, struck the back, turned the head, and called for space. Matahachi stood frozen, his face dull and empty, while others did the work of the living.

Then several men from an inn came running up, and with them came Yoshioka Seijūrō. The moment he saw the young woman, he went white and stopped as if someone had struck him in the chest. “Akemi,” he said, and the name came out of him almost against his will. Yet even in that shock he looked around quickly, as if he feared the eyes of the crowd as much as he feared death itself. He admitted that she was with him, but his whole body seemed to shrink from the shame of the scene.

The fishermen told him not to stand there and ask useless questions, but to help if he wanted her to live. They kept working over both bodies. Soon water came from the girl, and her breath returned in a rough, weak way. At once Seijūrō called to the inn men, had her lifted up, and took her away as quickly as he could, almost like a man escaping from witnesses. He did not stay beside the old retainer who still lay on the sand. He had room in himself only for the woman he feared to lose and the disgrace he wished to hide.

Osugi did not even look after him. She remained bent over Gon-uncle, still calling him back. But the old man did not open his eyes again. He had been an old body already, and there had been drink in him too. The fishermen, after doing what they could, finally stepped back and said there was no hope. The words were

simple, but they struck Osugi as if they had cut away the ground beneath her.

Matahachi watched his mother's grief with a strange, divided heart. He did not love Gon-uncle deeply, but the old man had belonged to the world that still tied him to home, duty, and the past. Now that man was gone. What remained was only Osugi, fiercer than before, older than before, and more alone than before. Matahachi understood at once that this death would not soften her. It would harden everything in her still more.

Evening fell more quickly after that. The beach darkened, the wind grew colder, and the people drifted away once the excitement was over. To them it had been one more sad thing seen by the shore. To Osugi it was the loss of the last old companion who had shared her road. She began to weep again, then suddenly bit back the sound as if grief itself were too weak a use of her breath. Even in sorrow she was already turning toward anger.

She looked up at Matahachi with red eyes and a face made sharp by tears, wind, and hate. He saw at once that from this moment she would cling to him more tightly than before. He was now her son, her remaining arm, and the hand by which she still hoped to strike Musashi and Otsū. The thought made him tired down to the bone. Yet he said nothing, because he had no words that could free him.

So the winter shore, the dark sea, the dead old man, and the half-living girl all sank together into the same bitter evening. Matahachi stood there between the past and the road ahead and felt no strength in either direction. Gon-uncle's body was taken up. Osugi's crying rose and broke and rose again. And in the deepening cold, what had begun as a family search now felt more than ever like a curse that would not let him go.

Part 8

Seijūrō brought Akemi back to the inn as quickly as he could. He did not want the people on the shore to keep looking at him, and he did not want their talk to spread. Men from the inn carried her inside and laid her down in a room, while

Seijūrō stood near with a pale face and uneasy hands. He had seen her pulled from the water, half dead, with an old man's hand still fixed in her sash. That sight would not leave his mind.

Akemi had breathed again, but she had not returned to herself. Her body was hot, and her words came out in broken cries and fevered fragments. Sometimes she pushed at the air as if fighting off some horror that still stood before her. Sometimes she cried out in hate and fear, telling someone to go away. The sound of her voice, coming again and again through the sliding screens, unsettled Seijūrō more deeply than open blame from any living man could have done.

He had not thought himself weak. He was the head of a famous school, a man looked at by pupils and strangers alike. Yet now, sitting alone by the winter hearth in that inn, he felt his strength running out of him. Akemi's fevered voice kept breaking through the stillness like blows on thin wood. He could not quiet her, and he could not quiet himself either. Even the warm room seemed to hold no peace.

Before the disaster on the shore, the day had already been difficult for him. Akemi had gone walking near the beach, lively in her usual way on the surface, yet carrying hidden pain that he had not understood. She had spoken of a strange shell called the forget-shell, one that, people said, could make a person forget sorrow if hidden in the sleeve or sash. Seijūrō had laughed at the old tale. But Akemi had answered with unusual seriousness that she wanted to forget everything, because what she could not forget was making both her nights and her days painful.

Even then he had not truly entered her heart. He had treated her words lightly, as if they belonged to a girl's passing mood. Soon after, one of his men from the inn had found her and brought her back. Seijūrō had scolded her for wandering in the cold and told her she was no longer a child. She had answered with the half-playful, half-bitter manner that often hid her real feelings. Yet beneath it all there had been a trouble in her that he had not stopped to face.

Now the trouble had taken the shape of fever, broken sleep, and wild words behind a screen. Seijūrō sat by the brazier and listened. He could no longer protect

himself with easy talk or good looks or the habits of a man who had always been admired. The room had become narrow and unpleasant to him. The very sound of the wind outside seemed to press him harder into his own thoughts.

It was in that state that Ueda Ryōhei arrived. He came in travel dress, mud on him, and the look of a man who had ridden fast and far for urgent business. Seijūrō knew him at once as one of the senior Yoshioka men left at the dōjō in Kyoto. Seeing him there, Seijūrō first felt suspicion, then concern. Matters serious enough to pull Ueda from Kyoto at the end of the year could not be small.

Ueda bowed and said there had indeed been trouble. The senior pupils and old disciples had sent him at once, and he must speak before anything else. Yet before Seijūrō could answer, Akemi cried out again from behind the screen, not like a woman in quiet illness, but like someone still trapped in a nightmare. Ueda started and asked what that voice meant. Seijūrō, ashamed and irritated, said only that Akemi had taken a fever after falling ill by the sea and that there was no need to speak of her now.

Then Ueda drew out a letter he had kept close against his body. He said the matter could not wait. The Yoshioka house, he told Seijūrō, had already taken the message with the greatest seriousness. A man who had once been mocked as a rude young wanderer had not forgotten. He had now sent formal word and called on the old promise to be fulfilled. Ueda urged Seijūrō to read at once.

For a little while Seijūrō only looked at the folded paper lying before him. He did not reach for it. It was not that the letter itself frightened him like a magical thing. Rather, his spirit had grown weak at exactly the wrong time. Akemi's broken voice behind the screen had already shaken the samurai firmness that usually remained in him, and the letter waited like the second blow after the first. At last, because Ueda stood there watching, he took it in hand and opened it.

The message from Musashi was simple and direct. He asked after Seijūrō's health, then said that because of their old agreement he now presented this letter. He wrote that both sides had surely trained further since they last met, and that he wished only to settle the old matter. He asked where, when, and at what hour Seijūrō would grant him a meeting. He added that an answer should be posted by

the seventh day of the New Year near Gojō Bridge.

Nothing in the wording was loud, but it struck hard. This was not a joke, and it was not a boast shouted by a fool in a street. It was a clear demand to decide honor by the sword, fully and to the end. Ueda and the others in Kyoto had already understood that. They knew that once such a letter had come, the Yoshioka house and Musashi stood in open conflict, whether Seijūrō wished it or not. A duel now meant life or death, not a show of skill.

Seijūrō's fingers trembled a little as he finished reading. He folded the paper, pushed it into his robe, and rose almost at once. He said only, "I am returning at once." He called the inn people, gave them money, and told them to keep Akemi there for the time being. Their faces showed that they did not like the burden, but the money and his rank were enough to force agreement.

In truth, Seijūrō wanted to escape that room as much as he wanted to answer Musashi. The fevered girl behind the screen, the bad smell of fear and sickness, the shame of the shore, and the hard letter in his sleeve had all become too much for one place and one night. He borrowed a horse, prepared himself in haste, and left as if running from something that had already entered his house. Behind him Akemi still drifted in fever, calling through broken sleep, while before him the road to Kyoto opened into a colder and more dangerous future.

Part 9

Seijūrō left the inn in haste, almost like a man running away from a bad dream. Akemi's fevered cries still followed him in memory, and Musashi's letter felt hard and cold in his sleeve. Ueda Ryōhei rode with him, and other men came after them through the winter night. Frost light lay over the road, and the river shone pale beside them. They spoke little, because each man knew that the old promise had now become a real danger. Seijūrō sat straight on the horse, but his mind was not steady.

Earlier that same cold season, another strange thing had been moving toward Osaka by water. On a large boat under the dim winter sun, a young man with a

broad body, a smooth boyish face, and a very long sword had drawn many eyes. The sword stood high over his shoulder like a pole. It was long, straight, and fine, with the look of a weapon made for war and not for common street use. He also had a small monkey with him, and now and then he picked through the little creature's hair with calm fingers, as if he had no other care in the world. Men on the boat looked at him, then at the sword, and wondered who he might be.

One of those men was Gion Tōji, a Yoshioka follower. He had grown tired of travel and tired of his own thoughts, and the sight of the sword pulled him like a toy before a child. He came nearer and began with easy questions. Was the young man going on to Osaka? Did he have family there? Was he from Awa? The answers were short and gave little away. At last Tōji turned to the sword itself, praised it, and said that such a blade was rare even in Kyoto.

That pleased the young man at once. He said the sword was an old thing from his house and that he meant to have it changed in Osaka into a weapon for daily wear. Tōji laughed and said it was too long for that. The youth answered simply that it was three shaku long, as if that settled everything. Tōji then warned him in a half-kind, half-mocking way that men often carried long swords only for show and then had to throw them over the shoulder when real danger came. The young man smiled with a small dimple and said that if a man could not truly use such a blade, there was no point in carrying it.

Tōji, now wanting to put him in his place, said that talk was cheap. The young man answered that he would show what he could do, and he stood up in the middle of the boat with the long sword still on his back. Then, with a perfectly serious face, he called out, "Master Tōji, Master Tōji," and when the man looked over, he said, "Please call one of those sea birds down before me. If you do, I will cut as many as you like." It was a clean insult, given in the shape of a joke. Tōji reddened at once and said that anyone could cut a bird if it came near enough. The youth answered, "The sea is wide, and the sword is only three shaku. What does not come near me cannot be cut."

Tōji stepped forward in anger and demanded that the boy stop playing with words and apologize. The youth replied that if he were going to apologize, he

would not have taken a stance at all. Then he added, with that same bright, smooth calm, that if birds were no good, he would cut something else instead. “What?” Tōji shouted. “Your head,” the youth answered. “It is better than killing a bird that has done no wrong.” Before Tōji could do more than pull his neck in, the young man’s arm sprang. The long sword came out with such speed that it seemed no more than a streak of light.

Tōji staggered back and clutched his neck, but his head was still there. The youth only said, “Do you understand now?” and walked away among the bundles on the boat. A moment later Tōji looked down and saw a small brush-like thing on the boards. It was his own topknot. His hair was already loosening and falling around his face. The shame of that cut went deeper than a wound. Rage rose in him at once, and when he saw the youth standing with his back turned and looking around as if he had dropped something, Tōji thought he had found his chance.

He crept forward and struck. But his sword hit only stone with a hard sound. In the same instant the youth had slipped aside, and the force of Tōji’s own blow nearly threw him to destruction. The boy with the long sword did not waste time cutting down the man at his feet. Instead, using the turn of his body, he drove sideways into another attacker. A death cry rose at once. In a moment fear broke the order of the Yoshioka men, yet their shame pushed them on, and from boat to shore the quarrel became open battle.

On the bank the young man stood with his long sword in hand and called out that if these were truly Yoshioka men, he would gladly meet them. He said that before he had spared a topknot, but perhaps that had not been enough for them, and perhaps it had not been enough for him either. Then he warned them that this “drying pole” sword would be used roughly now. The first man who came in died so quickly that the others lost the shape of their attack at once. A group is weak when fear enters it, and the youth, growing larger and fiercer with each movement, struck another man down and drove the rest back. They changed shape and tried to circle him, but he saw through them faster than they could think.

Some ran. Once they ran, the fight changed into something crueler. The youth chased them over the Kema embankment with the long sword shining and shouted

after them, “Is this the secret of the Yoshioka school, to run away?” He mocked them, saying that if they fled, he would make all the land laugh at Kyoto’s famous school. Those were words no swordsman could bear. Yet fear had gone deeper than pride. They only ran harder, and he came after them like a strong wind.

Ueda Ryōhei, seeing their panic, lost patience and stepped out alone to stop the youth. He set himself low and struck upward with all his force when the running figure came near. But the cut rose only through empty air. The youth had already turned in the space above him, and the answer came so sharply that Ryōhei was blown from the embankment and rolled down into the frozen field. When he climbed back up, breathless and shaken, he saw the long sword cutting into the Yoshioka men again and driving straight toward Seijūrō’s horse. Until then Seijūrō had believed the matter would end before it reached him. Now the danger was suddenly his own.

Yet when the long sword finally came near, Seijūrō did not panic. He had enough training and enough calm left in him to receive the danger without losing his center. He checked the force before it broke him, and in that near clash he saw the attacker clearly. At the same time he heard enough to know a name that had reached him before through another master. So instead of answering only with anger, he spoke sharply and called the youth by the name “Kishiryū Sasaki Kojirō.” The words cut through the heat of battle better than steel. The youth stopped in surprise and stared.

Seijūrō then said plainly that he was indeed Yoshioka Seijūrō, but that he had no wish to cross blades without cause. He asked why things had been brought to such a point and told the young man to lower the sword first. When Kojirō heard his own full name spoken again and learned that Seijūrō knew it from Itō Ittōsai, his anger changed at once into wonder and interest. The two men spoke further, and what had been a killing fight became a meeting. Behind them, the disciples, who had been full of fear, felt relief at last. They now understood that this rough, broad-shouldered youth with the monkey and the “drying pole” sword was no common boaster, but the gifted Sasaki Kojirō whom even great men had praised. At the old landing place, with dead men already stiffening in the frost, Seijūrō

invited him to come and stay at the Yoshioka dōjō in Kyoto, and Kojirō, whistling for his little monkey as if nothing strange had happened, listened with bright new eyes.

Part 10

For a few moments after the clash, no one around them knew how to breathe in the old way. Men who had expected to seize a noisy young traveler had instead seen the Yoshioka side broken, shamed, and nearly cut apart by a single sword. Seijūrō stood facing the youth and held the field together by calm alone. Kojirō, still large with the heat of battle, kept his long sword ready, but his eyes had changed. The moment his name had been spoken correctly, something harder than anger had entered him. Surprise, pride, and curiosity had all risen together.

Seijūrō did not waste that opening. He said again that he was indeed Yoshioka Seijūrō and that he had no wish to trade blows without purpose. If Kojirō was truly the Sasaki of Iwakuni, the man praised again and again by Itō Ittōsai, then it would be foolish to go on in blind rage. Kojirō asked at once how Seijūrō knew him. Seijūrō answered that until not long before, Ittōsai had been staying near Shirakawa, and that he himself had often visited him there and had also welcomed him at the Yoshioka place in Kyōto. At that, Kojirō's fierce face loosened into a bright, pleased look, and the little dimple appeared again in his cheek.

"Then we are not complete strangers," he said in effect, and the edge in his voice softened. Seijūrō agreed and told him that Ittōsai had often spoken of him with open praise. He had called him the young wonder of Iwakuni, a man with rare eyes and a rare hand, a youth likely to grow into something that others could not easily measure. Kojirō listened to these words openly. He was not the kind of man to hide delight when his name was praised. Rather, he seemed to think praise natural if it came from a master great enough to deserve speaking.

Behind them, the disciples felt their fear turning into relief little by little. A short while before, they had thought they might all be killed or driven into a deeper

disgrace than the loss of a topknot. Now, following the two young men at a safer distance, they watched them with uncertain respect. It was still hard for them to believe that the broad-shouldered youth with the childish forelock and the monkey was the very Sasaki Kojirō whom Ittōsai had praised as a prodigy. Yet once the name was known, everything that had looked only rough or strange in him began to look uncommon.

Their minds turned back to what they had just seen. Tōji's cut topknot. The long sword flashing out like a piece of light. The terrible ease with which one man had scattered many. Ueda Ryōhei and the others, who had escaped that long blade only by luck, now looked at Kojirō's back with coldness in their bellies. A little earlier they had treated him as some country hothead who carried a sword too long for his own good. Now they understood that their own eyes had been poor, and that their school's pride had nearly been smashed by their own shallow judgment.

They came at last to the old landing place at Kema. There the bodies of the men who had died under the "Drying Pole" were already stiff in the winter air. The sight would have troubled many men, but Kojirō gave it almost no more attention than he would have given broken branches after a storm. Seijūrō ordered three men to remain and take care of the dead. Ueda went after the horses that had run off in confusion. Kojirō, meanwhile, stood whistling over and over for his monkey, as if that small creature's safety mattered more to him at the moment than the dead and wounded men around him.

The monkey came at the sound, springing from somewhere out of sight to his shoulder. Kojirō received it with easy affection, touching it lightly as though nothing terrible had passed. Seijūrō then repeated his invitation and said with real warmth that Kojirō must come to the Yoshioka dōjō in Shijō and stay there for a time. Such a meeting, he said, should not end out on a riverbank among blood and frost. A man praised by Ittōsai should be welcomed properly. To make the invitation even plainer, Seijūrō offered his own horse.

Kojirō shook his head and refused. Whether from pride, habit, or some odd personal rule, he would not simply take another man's mount and ride before him. There was something boyish in the refusal, yet also something stubbornly self-

willed. He was willing to accept regard, praise, and lodging, but not the posture of a dependent guest too quickly. Seijūrō did not press him harshly. He saw already that Kojirō's nature was not one to be bent by ordinary politeness.

As they went on, talking more freely now, Seijūrō drew from Kojirō the shape of his recent wandering. Kojirō had come by way of Awa and Osaka, carrying the great sword because he meant to have it worked on, though even in its present form it suited him too well to seem unfinished. He spoke of the weapon without false modesty. To him the sword was not merely steel but a line of intention, an extension of his own temper. He used its great length not like a burden, but like a man who had found exactly the measure that matched his body and his daring.

Seijūrō, walking beside him, felt more than once the strange double movement of attraction and caution. Kojirō was plainly gifted. He was young, full of animal force, pleased by danger, and quick to laughter even beside death. Such a man could delight a house for a season, or break it open from within. Yet because Seijūrō himself was young and proud, this danger did not wholly repel him. On the contrary, he felt drawn to it, perhaps because he believed he could master it, perhaps because his own spirit was tired and wanted some fresh brightness near it.

The disciples behind them did not share that ease. Some resented the honor already being shown to the youth who had just killed their fellows. Some feared what it would mean to bring such a man into the dōjō. Some, remembering how close his blade had come, were simply grateful to still be alive. None of them, however, dared speak against Seijūrō while Kojirō walked there in full strength. The very sight of the long sword on his shoulder kept their tongues from becoming bold.

Kojirō himself seemed not to care what place he was entering, so long as it promised life, movement, and men worth measuring. He was delighted by being known through Ittōsai, delighted by the invitation, and delighted too, perhaps, by the thought that the famous Yoshioka school had first met him through blood and confusion rather than ceremony. He laughed once or twice in a way that made the

others uneasy, as if the whole day had entertained him. The monkey sat on his shoulder, his long sword rose above him like a pole, and the winter road to Kyōto opened ahead.

So what had begun as insult and near-massacre ended in an odd fellowship. Seijūrō went back toward Kyōto with Musashi's challenge still waiting before him, yet now another force had joined his orbit. Kojirō, who had come out of nowhere with a monkey and a sword longer than sense, was no longer a passing traveler on a boat. He was moving now toward the Yoshioka house itself. And though no one there yet knew how deeply he would affect the days ahead, more than one man already felt that once such a person stepped across a gate, the air inside could never remain quite the same.

Part 11

In the old days, when men spoke of great swordsmen in the eastern provinces, they named Tsukahara Bokuden and Kamiizumi Ise-no-kami. In the western lands, they answered those names with the Yoshioka house in Kyōto and the Yagyū house in Yamato. Yet in Ise too there had been a strong line of swordsmanship. People in that country still liked to talk about Kitabatake Tomonori of Kuwana, who had received a deep teaching from Bokuden and had left behind both good rule and a martial name. Such stories were always waiting for travelers in that region, and though they were a kind of local pride, they were still better to hear than empty boasting.

A traveler riding a hired horse toward Tarusaka Hill listened to such talk with patient nods. The road ran from Kuwana through the cold brightness of late year, and the wind from Nako Bay cut sharply enough to sting the skin. Yet the rider was dressed in a shamefully thin way for the season. Under a sleeveless coat he wore only light clothes, and everything on him looked worn, dark, and weather-beaten. His hat was old enough to be thrown away by any man with a coin in his purse, and his hair was rough and tangled like a bird's nest.

The horse driver had almost regretted taking such a passenger at all. He had

feared from the start that a man who looked so poor and wild might not pay his fare. Still, the rider had said little, only answering with low sounds while staring toward the distance. When the driver warned him that by the time they reached Unrin-in village it would be full dark, the man only nodded again. At last the driver, made curious by silence, asked what business could lead anyone into such a remote mountain place.

"I am going to visit a man," the traveler answered. The driver asked what sort of man could live in a village of woodcutters and farmers. The answer came simply. He had heard in Kuwana that there was a master of the chain-and-sickle there. "Ah," said the driver at once, "you mean Shishido Baiken." The traveler repeated the name to himself and nodded. When the driver then said that Baiken was only a blacksmith who used that weapon, and that in Matsusaka there was a more famous master named Mikogami Tenzen, the rider showed that he already knew the name and asked no more. That man was Musashi.

The truth of his condition could be seen when he got down to eat at a roadside stand in Yokkaichi. One foot was bound with cloth, and when he walked he limped slightly. The wound in the sole had become infected. In the confusion at Narumi harbor he had stepped on a board with an upright nail, and since the day before the wound had grown hot and swollen. Now even the top of the foot had puffed up badly. Yet he did not think of it as mere bad luck. He treated even a nail as an enemy and asked himself whether this defeat had come because his eyes had been empty and his body had not been fully awake.

He judged himself with severity. If his awareness had truly filled his whole body, he thought, the instant the point of the nail touched the sole of his sandal, the body should have known and lifted clear. That it had not done so proved that his sword, his mind, and his flesh still failed to act as one. This angered him more than the pain itself. Still, he could not say that the months since he left Yagyū in late spring had been wasted. He had passed through Iga, Ōmi, Mino, Owari, and now Ise, searching with burning eyes for the truth of the sword.

Yet what he found again and again was not the thing he sought. He had met many fighters, and among them were men of real name and skill, but most were

only masters of technique. They handled the sword well, but did not touch what lay deeper than technique. The thing he wanted could not be found lying in a town or hidden in a valley like a lost tool. And from that came another thought that troubled him often. The world was full of human beings, yet true human beings were hard to find.

Whenever he felt that, Takuan rose in his memory. Musashi had not forgotten the monk who had once shaken and wounded his whole being more deeply than any blade. Even now he sometimes felt pain in both arms from the memory of hanging high in the cedar. He imagined, not in hatred but in fierce ambition, that one day he would surpass Takuan by the sword just as Takuan had tried to rise by Zen. He imagined tying Takuan high in a tree and calling up to him from below with some truth of his own. In that foolish dream there was both gratitude and challenge. Yet as soon as he dreamed it, the dream bent and weakened, because he knew too well how far he still was from such a height.

The more he thought of Takuan and of men like Yagyū Sekishūsai, the more ashamed he became of speaking too soon about “the Way” or “truth.” The world, which had once seemed small and full of worthless men, had suddenly become large and severe. So he had thrown himself not into arguments but into practice. He entered mountains, lived harshly, fasted, exposed himself to water and cold, and came back to human roads with scratches, bruises, hollow cheeks, rough hair, and a will sharpened by hardship. Each time he came down from the hills, he searched again for someone worth meeting. Baiken was only the next such test before the New Year meeting in Kyōto.

By the time he reached the village deep in the mountains, night had fully come. Snow shone on the high ridges around them, and no light could be seen in the dark except one or two faint lamps. Musashi paid the driver and said he might return. But the driver protested that at such an hour, from such a place, there was nowhere to go. Better to stay under the eaves of the house they were seeking and go back after dawn, when he might find another fare on the road. Musashi agreed, and together they followed the sound of cloth being beaten in the night until they came to a blackened smith’s house with scrap metal piled under the eaves.

Inside, the forge still held red fire, though no work was being done. A woman sat with her back to the flame, beating cloth for night work. The driver greeted her, warmed himself shamelessly by the fire, and explained that a traveler had come from far away to visit her husband. She looked Musashi over with the cool annoyance of a woman used to wandering swordsmen and told him first to shut the door because cold wind would give the child a chill. Musashi bowed and did as he was told. Then he sat by the forge and looked about. On the wall hung several chain-and-sickle weapons. At once his eyes sharpened.

The woman, who had first seemed merely bold and rough, soon showed a sharper edge. She said that Musashi had come, like so many others, only to vomit blood under her husband's hands, but that by good fortune for him, her husband was away on a journey. When Musashi asked where he had gone, she laughed at him for not knowing the name of Arakida in Ise. She then lay down beside her nursing child and began singing a country lullaby as if the guest no longer existed. Musashi, forced to swallow his annoyance, asked permission to examine one of the weapons on the wall. She gave only a half-sleeping sound of consent.

He took one down and studied it with care. The weapon looked simple at first, almost no more than a stick with a chain and iron weight. But from a groove in the shaft he drew the hidden sickle blade, and its usefulness became clear at once. He tried a stance, imagining an enemy before him. Then the woman rose, came over, and said with open scorn that if he held it that way, any swordsman would cut him down at once. She snatched it from him and showed the proper form. In that instant Musashi's eyes widened. The same woman who had seemed only heavy and careless while nursing her child now became beautiful, severe, and exact. Even the way she stood carried force. On the blue-dark blade the words "Shishido Yae-gaki style" could be read.

The form vanished as quickly as it had appeared. She put the weapon back and returned to her work as if nothing of value had happened. Musashi regretted that he had not held the image longer in his mind. If the wife had such knowledge, what then of the husband? Yet he was not there. Later, when Musashi pursued the matter to Arakida's house near the shrine, he learned that no Shishido Baiken was

staying there at all. Then the swelling in his foot grew worse, and he had to stop at an inn in Yamada. For a day he soaked the wound in warm bean-curd mash as the inn people advised, but the foot only swelled more. It became heavy as timber and burned with heat under the blankets.

Lying there for four days, he reflected bitterly that illness too was an enemy. Since childhood he had almost never been laid down by sickness. Now this one wound was holding him still while the year ran toward its end. His letter had already gone ahead to the Yoshioka house. He had no right, no wish, and no pride enough to say later that he had been delayed by a foot. Looking out from the window, he stared every day at the distant peak of Washi-ga-take, sharp above the other hills like a blade. The mountain seemed to mock him. At last the pain and shame became too much. He threw off the covers, sat up against the agony, and shouted for the inn servant to come at once. He ordered the bill, a lunch to carry, roasted rice, and three strong pairs of sandals. He was leaving, no matter what his foot said.

Part 12

Musashi could no longer bear the bed in the inn. The pain in his swollen foot had become like fire shut inside flesh, and each hour of lying still made him feel smaller, weaker, and more ashamed. He called sharply for the servant, beat the mat with his fist when no one came fast enough, and ordered the bill, a lunch to carry, roasted rice, and three strong pairs of sandals. To anyone else it would have seemed madness to travel in such a state. To Musashi, staying where he was had already become a worse kind of defeat.

He went out into the roads of Ise with one foot bound thick as a bundle. Every step felt as if he were pressing the sole into melted iron. The pain shot up from the bottom of the foot into his eyes, and sweat rose across his forehead though the air was cold. Yet the suffering had one good effect. All weak softness left him. Sweet smells, warm bedding, and any thought not tied to effort fell from him at once, and his mind returned to its usual hard shape.

The road through Furuichi was still loud with its tea houses and women calling to travelers. White faces leaned out from cheap booths both day and night, and the place seemed to have no clear line between trade, pleasure, and rest. Musashi passed through it without stopping. His face, his limp, and the strange force in him were enough to keep idle words from settling on him for long. He was heading elsewhere, into a region where common voices grew thin.

When he crossed the Isuzu River and stepped into the sacred grounds of the Inner Shrine, his mind changed at once. The grass, the trees, the dark trunks, even the sounds of birds seemed different there, as if the place had a life not touched by ordinary human dirt. The deeper he went, the more strongly he felt that he had entered a realm where pride, noise, and ambition were laid bare. Still he forced himself on, dragging the swollen foot through the cold. At last, near Kazenomiya, the pain broke through even his stubborn will, and he fell at the root of a great cedar, clutching the leg in both hands.

For a long time he lay there like a stone. Inside the body, the infected place beat like a hot hammer. Outside, the night of the twelfth month drove cold into his skin again and again. He half lost consciousness, then rose back into it, unable even to explain to himself why he had leapt from the inn bed into such suffering. But the answer was already there in the way his spirit stayed stretched tight while his flesh wavered.

Then through the dark wind in the cedars he heard music. It was not the sound of the world he had just left behind. He caught the notes of old court instruments, the breath of flute and reed, and beyond them the soft singing of young girls. The sound came from the Children’s Hall, where pure maidens of the shrine practiced sacred music. Musashi bit his lip, pulled himself upright against the wall, and moved sideways like a crab, holding to the earth because he could not yet trust the leg.

When he reached the back of the hall, he looked in and saw no one in the rear passage. That made the next act easier for him. He untied his swords and travel bundle and hung them together on a peg under the eaves, leaving himself empty-handed. Then, with only the pain, the night, and his own body left to him,

he went off limping into the dark. He was stripping life down to the point where it could no longer lie to him.

Some distance away, on the rocks of the Isuzu, he broke the skin of ice and poured the freezing water over himself. A naked man in such winter water would have looked mad to anyone who saw him, but there was no room in him then for any witness. He bathed again and again until the blood in his limbs felt like iron and steam seemed to rise from the contest between cold outside and heat within. The sacred spring did not make his wound vanish. What it did was clear away the softness that illness had begun to lay over his heart.

After that he returned toward the mountain side. From the inn room he had long looked at Washi-ga-take and come at last to feel that the mountain itself mocked him. In his mind it had taken the shape of Yagyū Sekishūsai, huge, calm, and unshaken, standing above him while he lay crippled below. So he had decided that before he could go on to Kyōto, before he could answer the Yoshioka house, he must trample that height underfoot. If he could not do even that with his own body in rebellion, what right had he to speak of victory?

He left his belongings behind for that reason. Then he made for the ravine above the First Rapids of the Isuzu, where even fish were said not to go farther. Rocks, rushing water, and walls of stone shut the way to ordinary men. Beyond them rose a cliff that seemed fit only for monkeys or mountain spirits. Musashi looked at it, fixed his mind, and began to climb. He took the vines in both hands and went upward foot by foot, as if some force larger than a single man’s strength were drawing him toward the sky.

When he reached the upper ledge, he shouted once into the night. Below him the white line of the river and even the shore of Futami lay far away. Ahead, through the dark growth and cold air, rose the harsh body of Washi-ga-take itself. He moved toward it with one thought fixed in him, that this mountain was Sekishūsai made into stone and height. The climb from there became still wilder. He clung to bare rock, searched with his damaged foot for places to stand, and drove himself upward while the mountain watched in silence.

Such effort could not have been done by a mild wish. Every step was a

contest between surrender and command. He climbed with the infected foot, with the blood beating hot from the cold water, and with the stubborn need to prove something to himself that words could never prove. White cloud wrapped him and drifted away again. At last, the instant he felt he had truly stepped onto the summit, the cord of will snapped and he fell full length upon the top of the mountain.

There, half senseless, he entered a strange peace. His body was drenched, pressed close to the earth, and yet felt lighter and lighter, as though the mountain and the man had joined in some silent act beyond pain. When he raised his head again, morning light had come clear and sharp. He spread his thick arms upward and cried out that there was nothing above him now, that he was standing on the eagle peak itself. Then he looked down at the two feet that had brought him there, and saw blue pus flowing from the swollen one onto the clean height. In that pure morning air, even that foul human matter seemed to him not shameful, but the broken seal of a grief and pride that had finally burst open.

Part 13

In the Children's Hall at Ise, the young shrine maidens lived in a clean and quiet order. The youngest were only girls, and the oldest were still little more than girls. When they served in sacred dance, they wore white silk and red skirts, but in ordinary hours they dressed in simpler working clothes and carried books to the school of the priest Arakida. Their mornings were filled with service, study, and small daily tasks. So when they found a bundle and a pair of swords hanging inside the rear gate one winter morning, the whole group stopped in alarm.

"Whose are they?" one girl asked. Another said at once that they must belong to a samurai, but that answer only made the thing more troubling. No one knew how such objects had come there in the night, and no one wished to touch them. They stood around the swords as though a thief in a cowhide might suddenly wake beside them. At last one of the younger girls ran to call Otsū, who had been teaching flute there.

Otsū opened her window and listened calmly to the frightened report. She

told the girls not to waste time and said that if they were afraid to carry the things, she herself would bring them to Arakida. By the time she came outside, the girls had all gone on to their lessons, and only an old kitchen woman and one sick maiden remained in the quiet place. Otsū asked whether either of them knew the owner, but neither had any idea. So she took down the heavy pair of swords and the rough warrior's bundle tied to them.

The weight surprised her. She nearly let the swords slip from her hands and wondered how men could carry such things at their waists as if they were nothing. She said she would take them to Arakida's house and stepped out with them in both arms. Otsū and Jōtarō had already spent about two months in Ise. After searching through Iga, Ōmi, Mino, and other roads for Musashi, they had finally been forced by winter to stop for a while. Arakida had then heard of her skill with the flute and asked her to teach the maidens of the hall, and because she also wished to learn the old sacred music kept there, she had accepted.

Jōtarō could not live with the maidens, of course, so he had been given rough work in the sacred grounds and slept at night in a wood shed belonging to Arakida. As Otsū carried the swords through the winter grove, she saw smoke rising in the thin woods and thought of him at once. That alone made a smile rise for a moment to her face. The wild boy who had once been all noise and impatience had lately begun to obey her more often and even work seriously. Thinking of that softened her for a little while.

Then she heard sharp cracking sounds like wood being broken and called out, "Jōtarō!" His answer came back at once, full of his usual energy, and soon he ran to her. She found him in work clothes, but with a wooden sword in hand. He said he had been practicing alone against trees. Otsū scolded him at once and told him that these sacred grounds stood for purity and peace, and that even the signboards forbade harm to the trees and living things there. Jōtarō answered that he knew the rules, but then asked why such an important place was being left in such poor condition.

Once he began, he spoke more sharply than his age suggested. He pointed out storm-broken trees left where they fell, roofs damaged by birds and rain, bent

lanterns, and neglected shrines. He said that lords built shining castles and fine houses for themselves, yet left the holy place of the nation half forgotten. Otsū, hearing him, suddenly laughed and lifted her white chin. She said his speech sounded exactly like something he had heard from Arakida in a lecture. Jōtarō was caught at once, and she said that, yes, she too had heard those words before.

Still, she admitted that Arakida was right. She then repeated, in her own way, how ages of war and selfish power had left even the great shrine uncared for, and how men fought for themselves while forgetting what had formed the heart of the land. Jōtarō listened, then accused her in turn of borrowing Arakida's thoughts just as he had. Otsū pretended to strike him but could not, because the heavy swords were still in both her hands. Then Jōtarō suddenly noticed them and came closer. He said they were large and heavy and wanted to touch them, but Otsū warned him not to, since they belonged to someone else.

At that moment a young shrine maiden came running and called, "Teacher, teacher, the priest wishes to see you." The word struck Jōtarō oddly. For an instant he looked all around the winter grove as if he had heard the voice of his true teacher, Musashi, and not a child calling to Otsū. When Otsū asked what was wrong, he answered sadly that hearing the word "teacher" had made him think of Musashi. The same thought passed into Otsū like a knife. She had not forgotten him for even a day, but when another person spoke his name or stirred his memory, the pain became sharper than before.

She went on walking in silence after that. In her arms lay the rough bundle and the heavy swords, but she did not know whose they were. She did not understand that the sweat-stained cloth smelled of Musashi's body or that the swords she held had hung at his side. Her whole heart was too full of him in another way. When she remembered him, she felt again the same restless pain that had driven her across province after province. She wanted, more than anything, simply to place her face against his chest and weep.

Jōtarō ran after her and tugged at her sleeve, asking whether she was angry. Otsū answered softly that it was not his fault and that the crying mood had merely returned to her. She told him to go back and work hard while she answered

Arakida's call. Then she entered the priest's school, where many local children came each day to study old learning that few people now valued. Arakida believed that if the people forgot the spirit of the land, no amount of power in warriors or rulers could truly make the country great. He had spent years teaching such things with patience, even while the times went another way.

When Otsū entered, he first noticed the swords she still carried and asked about them. She explained how they had been found at the hall. Arakida looked troubled and said that perhaps they belonged to some suspicious person, but that was not the main matter for which he had called her. Then he spoke plainly, though not cruelly. Some local men, he said, had begun to complain that it was improper for a woman who was no longer a pure maiden to live among the shrine girls. Otsū's eyes filled with tears at once, not because the words were untrue in the world's eyes, but because they were so painful to hear aloud.

Arakida did not seem to feel the full sharpness of that wound, yet he was not unkind. He only said that with the New Year near, it might be best for her to end her teaching there and leave the hall. Otsū answered at once that she had never meant to stay long and that, if her presence caused trouble, she would leave that very day. Arakida felt some pity then and tried to soften the matter. But the decision had already settled in her heart. The road, the cold, and uncertainty were easier for her to bear than that quiet shame.

While they spoke, Jōtarō had slipped to the edge of the room like a shadow. When he heard that they were leaving Ise, he was delighted at once. He whispered that he had already grown tired of sweeping the grounds and was ready for the road again. Otsū, though hurt, could not help feeling a little movement in herself too. If they were leaving, then they would again be searching for Musashi. So in that winter place, with the unknown swords still newly found and the quiet life at the hall already ending, Otsū turned once more toward travel, longing, and the uncertain road ahead.

Part 14

After leaving the shrine country behind him, Musashi returned to the chain-and-sickle master's house. His body was leaner now, and his foot, though not perfect, obeyed him again. The mountain and the cold water had burned away the weakness that had troubled him. He came not as a sick traveler looking for shelter, but as a man who had decided to test both himself and another master. The black forge stood where it had stood before, half workshop and half poor farmhouse, with iron scraps under the eaves and smoke clinging to the roof.

The woman of the house received him with the same rough manner as before. She was not a woman who bowed sweetly to wandering swordsmen, and she did not waste soft words on guests. Yet she let him stay, and Musashi sat again near the forge, taking in the smell of iron, ash, and country life. Before long the husband returned. This was Shishido Baiken, a broad and forceful man, proud in bearing, and plainly pleased by his own strength. In one hand he had brought a little windmill toy for his child, and the sight of him smiling at the baby made a strange contrast with the hard weapon-master Musashi had come to meet.

The child was everything to that household for a while. Husband and wife spoke only of the baby, of where Baiken had been, of what he had brought home, and of small family matters that had nothing to do with the guest. Musashi sat by the fire and watched without complaint. At last food was remembered, and Baiken called out that the young warrior should also be fed. Even then the woman was not warm toward him. She said he had once come when the husband was away and had slept by the forge like any other rough traveler.

Baiken then called Musashi over and offered him drink. Musashi accepted one cup out of courtesy, though the country liquor was sour and poor. Baiken asked his age. Musashi answered that he would be twenty-two in the new year. Then Baiken asked where he came from, and when Musashi answered, "Mimasaka," the older man looked at him much more sharply than before. It was only for a moment, but it was enough to show that some thought had awakened behind his eyes.

Baiken kept his voice friendly. He said that earlier Musashi had wished to hear more about the chain-and-sickle, and that such matters were best spoken of

over drink. When Musashi tried to begin eating instead, Baiken stopped him and insisted on more sake. He even sent a man called Iwakō to borrow another full measure of wine. Then, cup after cup, he spoke with eager pride about the advantages of the weapon. A sword gave the enemy time to guard, he said, but the chain-and-sickle confused the eye, seized the opponent's blade, and struck before defense could settle.

Sitting there by the fire, Baiken demonstrated with his hands. He showed how the sickle received, how the weight returned, how the chain could wrap a sword arm or drag a weapon away, and how a man using ordinary steel could be broken before he understood the line of attack. Musashi listened closely and asked questions in a simple, respectful way. He looked like a serious young man learning from an older master, and Baiken seemed delighted by the chance to teach. Yet beneath the talk, each of them was weighing the other.

While the liquor went round, Musashi made what seemed to be an easy mistake. He spoke of old times, of Sekigahara, and of the name by which he had once been called. He did not know, or seemed not to know, that Baiken had another past hidden under the name Shishido. But Baiken understood at once. Long before this forge and this household life, he had been Tsujikaze Kōhei, a wild man from the Yasu River country. And the man before him, who spoke so openly, was the same Takezō, now Miyamoto Musashi, who had killed his brother Tsujikaze Tenma years before. Baiken let none of this appear fully on his face. He only drank more and watched the youth before him with growing certainty.

Musashi also understood that something had changed. The warmth around the fire did not leave, but it became too deliberate. The drink came too quickly. The friendliness pressed too hard. Men were moving outside the house more than such a place required. Still, Musashi did not rise in alarm. He allowed himself to be shown to bedding and lay down in the dark house while the family settled around him. Above his face hung the little windmill Baiken had brought home for the child. The smell of milk still clung to the quilt, and in that warm, close darkness memories of his own dead mother and father rose in him without warning.

He lay there neither fully sleeping nor fully awake. Then the windmill stirred. At first it seemed nothing. A toy made to turn had turned. But Musashi did not dismiss it. He listened, and soon he understood. Somewhere a door was opening softly, then closing again. Each slight movement of air passed through the house and touched the hanging toy, making its colored wings tremble, spin, stop, and turn again. The windmill had become a silent sign. It told him that men were moving in and out around the house.

At once his body became fully alert under the covers. He reached down little by little and found his sandals with his hands. Without raising the quilt, he slipped them in under the bedding one by one. More sounds came, small and careful, from outside and within. Men were taking their places around him. He had to choose at once whether to wait for the attack or move first. Then the windmill began to spin hard and fast, shining in the unsteady firelight like some strange flower of magic, and Musashi knew the moment had come.

Through the hanging cloth at the room's edge, two men crept in on their knees. One held a drawn sword, and another carried a plain spear. Behind them came Baiken himself, with sickle in one hand and weight in the other. The three men fixed their eyes on the swollen bedding and listened to the false breathing within it. Then, all at once, they moved. One kicked away the pillow. Another dropped into position with the spear. Baiken drew back the weighted chain and shouted for Musashi to wake.

But the quilt answered nothing. They struck, thrust, shouted, and tore at it, yet there was no man inside. When the bedding was thrown open, it held only the shape of a body, not the body itself. In the same instant Baiken noticed the windmill spinning wildly before him and understood what it meant. A back door stood open to the night. Cold air came in sharp as needles. Outside, the men who had been posted there still crouched uselessly near the eaves, and Baiken roared at them in fury that the youth had already passed out through the dark.

After the failure, rage gave way to bitterness and then to drink again. Baiken and his helpers sat over the late wine and cursed Musashi as a hateful young devil. Yet even in anger Baiken admitted that he himself had not been careful enough.

He said that he had feared to handle the matter alone, because the man who had lodged there that night was no common boy. At seventeen he had already killed Tsujikaze Tenma, and Baiken had not wanted to risk a direct mistake. Now he regretted gathering help and noise around a task that perhaps should have been done by his own hand.

Outside the house, Musashi had not gone far at first. He remained in the winter dark, listening to the angry voices and measuring what sort of man Baiken truly was. The contest, he judged, was already settled. He had come for knowledge and for testing, and he had gotten both. Baiken was dangerous, clever, and full of old hatred, but the fight between them had already ended in Musashi's favor. Still, if he left the man alive, Baiken would surely try again one day. From the point of simple safety, it would be best to kill him now while he slept.

So Musashi went back in silence and entered the house once more. Baiken, heavy with drink and sleep, lay snoring in the dark. Musashi took one of the chain-and-sickle weapons from the wall and drew out the pale curved blade. He wrapped the edge in wet paper and laid it lightly at Baiken's neck, ready to cut if he chose. Then he stopped. He looked again at the windmill above, at the smell of milk in the bedding, and at the poor but living warmth of that household. He thought that if he killed this father in his sleep, the child's grief would one day turn like that little wheel and come back into the world as yet another revenge.

The thought of his own parents came over him strongly then, and with it a strange softness. He had killed Tenma for reason and in the fierce blood of a different time. This would be something else. There was no gain in it now. Quietly he withdrew the blade, left Baiken to his sleep, and opened the shutter without a sound. In his heart he gave a silent farewell, thanking the household for its shelter and wishing them a peaceful sleep until morning. Then he stepped out into the dark before dawn and continued on his road alone, leaving the windmill still and the house unbroken behind him.

Part 15

For the first few days, the journey had felt fresh and almost joyful. Even tired legs did not seem like a burden yet. Though Otsū and Jōtarō had slept late the night before at the fork near Seki, they were on the road again before the morning mist had lifted. By the time they reached the slope near Fudesute-yama and the place called Four Teahouses, the sun was just rising behind them. They stopped and turned to look. The great red disk climbed slowly into the pale sky, and for a little while both of them forgot all trouble and only stood in the cold light.

Otsū's face was bright in that moment. The red of dawn touched her cheeks, and her heart too seemed to open a little. Jōtarō proudly said that they were the first travelers on the road that morning. Otsū laughed and asked what glory there was in being first on a road. But the boy insisted that it felt different. To walk before all others, he said, was like walking in one's own land, while going after tired horses and dusty carriers felt small and dull.

Otsū played along with him. She picked up a piece of bamboo by the roadside and, like a servant clearing the way for a lord, cried out in a joking voice for those below to step aside. It would have remained harmless fun, but someone actually opened a door at one of the teahouses and looked out. Otsū turned red at once and ran forward in embarrassment. Jōtarō chased after her, calling that she must not leave her lord behind or she would be punished. She told him sharply to stop his foolish games, but he only laughed harder.

Soon the laughter shifted to another desire. Jōtarō said he was hungry already and wanted to eat half the rice balls meant for noon. Otsū scolded him that they had barely walked two miles. He replied that he used more strength than she did because he never rode in a mountain palanquin or on a hired horse. When she reminded him that she had ridden only because they had hurried the evening before, the boy quickly changed his tone and declared that if there must be riding, then it should be his turn today. He had long wanted to feel a horse under him and begged with such force that Otsū, though she called him troublesome, nearly gave in.

Before she had fully agreed, Jōtarō had already raced back toward the teahouse. There he shouted for a horse at such volume that the old keeper came

out half angry and half amused. The boy argued boldly, joked rudely, and asked the price all the way to Minakuchi, even adding that if the rate were cheap enough, he might ride as far as Kusatsu. The old man said the horse tied outside was not a common pack animal for hire, and the quarrel might have gone further if Otsū had not arrived. Her speech was calm and respectful, and at once the keeper's tone changed. Since there was no handler, he said, she must pay first and send the horse back from Minakuchi or Kusatsu with someone returning the other way.

Jōtarō at once claimed victory and demanded to be lifted onto the horse. Otsū warned him that the animal was old and that his seat was unsteady, but the boy felt only joy. Once on the back, he looked down at the road with the proud face of a small general on parade. Otsū took the bridle and started forward on foot, while he told her grandly to walk on before him. They had not gone a hundred paces when a voice cried out behind them through the heavy mist.

At first neither knew whether the call was meant for them. Then a figure came rushing from the whiteness so quickly that it seemed to form itself out of the fog. Soon they could see him clearly. He was a frightening man, with a long field sword at his side, a chain-and-sickle thrust at the front of his belt, and eyes that looked hot with violence and lack of sleep. He reached them in only moments, snatched the bridle from Otsū's hand, and shouted for Jōtarō to get down.

The man named himself as Shishido Baiken and said he had come from near Seki in urgent pursuit of Miyamoto Musashi. Musashi, he declared, had fled before dawn, and he must be caught before he passed the Yasu River in Ōmi. Sweat shone on Baiken's thick neck even in that cruel morning cold, and every word came out hard with breathless force. When Otsū heard Musashi's name, the blood left her face. Jōtarō too shook with shock. But from that very shock both of them understood the same thing. This man must not be allowed to ride after Musashi.

Jōtarō answered first. He clung to the mane and cried that the horse was theirs and would not be given up. Otsū, though pale, found courage at once and said the same with greater calm. Baiken, she said, might be in haste, but they too were travelers with urgent business, and he had no right to seize what another had

honestly hired. The boy backed her fiercely, and the strange pair, woman and child together, stood against a grown fighter with a murderer's face. Baiken stared at them in disbelief, then in rising fury.

He shouted and leaped for Jōtarō's leg, meaning to snatch him from the saddle like an insect. The boy forgot all about the wooden sword at his waist and, in blind rage, spat full in Baiken's face again and again. Otsū, seeing what would happen if Baiken gained control of the horse, understood with terrible clarity that even if this cost her safety, Musashi must be given more distance. She thrust both hands against Baiken's chest with all her strength. The move startled him for an instant, and in that same instant her hand seized the hilt of his great sword.

Baiken roared and grabbed at her wrist. But because the blade had already begun to leave the scabbard, his hand struck the edge instead. Two fingers sprang away in blood. He jerked back with a cry, and that very movement pulled more of the sword free for Otsū. She no longer felt fear in the ordinary way. The long heavy blade flashed in her hands, and she swung it wildly at him. Baiken dodged, but Otsū, unable to control so great a weapon, lost balance and struck not the man but the horse.

The old horse screamed like a creature stabbed with fire. Blood burst from its hindquarters, and it rose in panic. Baiken, lunging to recover his sword, and Otsū, still holding it in both hands, were both flung aside by the animal's rear kick. Then the horse, mad with pain, bolted straight down the road as if the wind itself had taken shape in a beast. Jōtarō, still on its back, was no rider at all now but a small body locked to flying terror. Baiken stumbled after it for two steps and knew at once he could never catch it on foot.

When he turned back, Otsū too had vanished from the road. His sword lay thrown beside a red pine root, and below the road he saw farm roofs and a steep slope. He snatched up the weapon and rushed down like a madman. Otsū had indeed been tossed over the edge and had fled toward a deep cedar valley where snow still lay in the shadows. Baiken found her again descending the sharp slope like a hunted bird. He called out that she was trapped, and when he reached close enough, his left hand almost caught her hair.

Otsū clung to a root above a terrible drop. Below her, between dark rock and snow, a blue winter stream could be seen running far beneath. Baiken did not mean to kill her at once. By then he understood she had some connection to Musashi, and such a person might be used as bait or forced to speak. Otsū, looking down at the gulf and then up into the man's huge burning eyes, felt death near enough to touch. Yet even in that instant, faster than fear, her heart filled with thoughts of where Musashi might now be, and whether these few lost moments had been enough to save him.

Then voices came from above. Baiken's companions had arrived on the road and shouted that Four Teahouses had confirmed Musashi's passing before dawn. If they moved fast, they said, he could still be cut off near Yasu River. Baiken hesitated only briefly. The road after Musashi burned in him more strongly than anything else, yet he could not simply let Otsū go. He called the men down, gave them a quick explanation, and ordered them to bind her and drag her after them later. Then, with a final warning, he ran off by a mountain path like a monkey crossing the face of the slope, heading ahead by a shorter route.

Meanwhile the wounded horse ran on with Jōtarō clinging to its neck and crying first that it was dangerous, then that someone should stop it, then at last simply for help. It tore through ridge and slope, through post stations and villages, over hard road and down steep descent, while the boy bounced like a thrown ball above the saddle. People looked up, shouted, and jumped aside, but none stepped into the path of such madness. The horse seemed to feel fire in its hindquarters and would not stop. Jōtarō had once begged to ride like the wind. Now he had more wind than any boy could bear.

Down a steep slope at last a branch stretched out across the road like a hand from heaven. When it struck his face, Jōtarō, half-blind with fear, grabbed it with both arms and was torn from the saddle. The horse thundered on without him. For a while he hung foolishly in the air, twisting and clutching as if the ground were death itself, though it was not far below. Then the branch cracked, and he dropped safely enough onto the earth. He sat there for a moment in shock, then sprang up and cried Otsū's name.

In the next instant he was running back the way he had come, wooden sword in hand, with the face of a boy racing toward some great battle. He no longer cared about the horse, the road, or the shame of his fear. What filled him now was the sudden knowledge that Otsū had been left behind with that savage man. So the runaway horse had carried one child to safety and left the woman to danger, and the bright winter road of the morning had become, before noon, a place of blood, pursuit, and desperate separation.

Part 16

Boats on the Yodo were already carrying New Year things. Pine rings for gate decorations and other first-spring goods moved busily over the water. When Akemi saw them, tears came again. She had once looked toward the first morning of the year with a secret, trembling hope. At the foot of Gojō Bridge, she had believed, Musashi would come and wait for Matahachi. For a long time that thought alone had given shape to her heart.

From the day she first began to think, “There is something about that man I love,” no other man in the city had been able to move her deeply. Her feeling had grown quietly over the years. It had not grown through meetings and sweet words, but through distance, memory, and scraps of news heard from others. A young girl’s love is often like a ball of thread. Even when the loved person is far away, the thread keeps winding and winding in the heart until it grows large enough to fill the whole chest.

Until only yesterday, Akemi had still carried that kind of maiden heart in her. Something fresh and soft had remained in her from the days under Mount Ibuki, like the smell of a white field lily hidden in grass. Now she felt that all of it had been smashed into pieces inside her. No one in the street could possibly know what had happened to her, and yet she felt that every eye had changed. It seemed to her that the whole city had somehow learned her shame.

So she walked through the temple district near Gojō in the evening light like a winter butterfly, small, cold, and without direction. Bare willow branches hung

over the road. Old towers stood dark against the winter sky. Then someone called out to her from the roadside, asking whether the cord at her waist had come loose, because something was trailing behind. Akemi stopped and looked down. Her dress was indeed in disorder, and at that common human voice, so ordinary and careless, she suddenly saw herself from outside and almost could not breathe.

She asked herself again and again why she had come there that morning at all. In the short time since then she had already passed through too many feelings to hold. She had thought of death. She had believed all men were made of lies. Love, hate, anger, sorrow, disgust with others, disgust with herself, all of them had risen together until crying was not enough to empty her heart. Still, she had gone on walking, because she could not stand still and she could not return.

More than the man who had wronged her, more than the rough creature who had frightened her afterward, she began to hate Oko, the woman who had raised her. That hatred shook her to the bones. Oko had always used her, pushed her, and darkened her life. Akemi remembered even the things she had been made to do as a child after the war, ugly things among corpses that should never have touched a little girl’s hands. Now all of it came back at once, and she felt that the chain of dirt had followed her from childhood into womanhood without ever once letting go.

In that state she drifted deeper into the darkening city and nearly fell into another danger. A rough man, seeing her alone, her clothes disordered and her mind broken, came too close and tried to make use of her weakness. Akemi no longer had the strength to resist clearly. Her body was there, but her spirit seemed far away, as if she were watching some other woman fall. Then another man stepped in between them.

He was Aoki Tanzaemon. He was not young, and there was something dry, even a little mocking, in the way his mouth moved when he smiled. But he was steady, and the rough man gave way before him. Once the danger had passed, Aoki said only that it was all right now and that she need not fear anymore. Those simple words, spoken after such a day, were enough to break the last hardness in her. For the first time since morning, Akemi could bow and say thank you.

Aoki looked at her carefully and asked where she lived. At that question she could not answer properly. “My home,” she said, and then stopped. Tears rose again, and she covered her face with both hands. When he asked gently what had happened, she could not tell him everything. She said part of the truth and hid part of it. She spoke of having a different mother, of being pushed toward sale like a thing with a price, and of running all the way from Sumiyoshi because she could no longer endure what waited there.

She said too that even if she died, she would not go back. She had endured enough already, she told him, and then, with the shame of a person who has been forced to tell the world too much, she spoke of her childhood after the war and of being made to strip the dead. Hearing herself say such things aloud, she shook and wept again. Aoki did not interrupt her with large pity or fine words. He simply stayed where he was and let her cry until the worst of it passed.

At last he told her to come with him. The place where he was staying, he said, was poor enough, but it was quiet and safer than the road. He led her to Komatsudani, a small valley under Amida Peak where the bell of Kiyomizu could be heard not far away and the winter wind struck more sharply than in busier quarters. There, in that lonely hollow between hills, stood his temporary lodging. When they came near and he pointed it out, Akemi asked in surprise, “Here?” before she could stop herself.

The place was an abandoned Amida hall, rough, weather-worn, and half given back to cold and dust. Yet after the streets, the fear, and the long day of shame, even that ruined shelter seemed to her like a place where breathing might still be possible. Aoki, baring his large front teeth a little as he smiled, said that his lodging was simple but free. Akemi stood there looking at the broken holy place and at the man who had saved her, and for the first time that day she felt something weaker than hope, but not nothing. It was only the feeling that perhaps she would live through the night.

Part 17

The small valley of Komatsudani lay under Amida Peak, not far from the sound of Kiyomizu Temple's bell. Surrounded by the slopes of Uta-no-Nakayama and Toribe Hill, it was a quiet place, but the winter wind struck there with a harder, thinner cold than in the busy streets below. When Aoki Tanzaemon brought Akemi down into that hollow and turned to show her his temporary lodging, he smiled with his big front teeth and said that it was a wonderfully carefree place to live. Akemi looked where he pointed and could not stop herself from asking, almost in surprise, "Here?"

The building was a deserted Amida hall, weather-beaten and half ruined. The boards were old, the place had a deserted smell, and cold had settled into it like another resident. If this could be called a dwelling, then many of the empty temple buildings in that region could be called dwellings too. The whole district was old holy ground, full of traces of famous priests and forgotten devout people, and such empty halls were not rare there. Yet for a young woman who had just fled the city in a state of terror and shame, the sight was still shocking.

Aoki did not seem to notice that shock deeply, or perhaps he noticed and did not think it needed softening. He only led her inside in his dry, easy way. The hall was poor, but not filthy. A little fire had been made, bedding was rolled in one place, and a few objects lay about in the disorder of a man living alone without much care for appearance. There was no woman's hand in the place, no settled household warmth, and no sign of ordinary family life.

Akemi stood near the entrance and looked around in silence. She had said that she would not return home even if she died, yet now that she had reached a shelter, however rough, a new uneasiness rose in her. A woman alone could not simply stop fearing because she had been saved once. She had escaped one danger only to find herself in the dwelling of a man she did not know well at all. Aoki, however, behaved as if the matter were simple. He told her to sit by the fire and warm herself first.

The calmness of his manner worked on her. He did not come near her with false sweetness, and he did not question her with greedy curiosity. That gave her some small peace. She sat down where he told her, drew her clothing close, and

let the fire touch her cold hands. For a while neither of them said very much. The silence itself was a kind of kindness after the long day.

Yet the hall could not become home by silence alone. Akemi's thoughts still moved like frightened birds. Again and again she saw Sumiyoshi, the shore, Seijūrō's face, the rough hands that had wronged her, and the city roads after that. Her body had reached shelter, but the heart had not yet arrived there. When Aoki looked toward her now and then, he seemed to understand at least that much. He let her remain inside her own thoughts.

Even so, his lodging was not a place where a young woman could stay long without danger of another kind. That was true whether Aoki meant harm or not. A ruined hall in a lonely valley might keep off the common street scoundrel, but it could not protect reputation, and it could not protect the future. Akemi was too shaken to plan far ahead, but somewhere beneath the pain she knew this was only a stopping place, not a place where life could truly be remade.

Aoki himself seemed to live in that same loose, temporary spirit. He had the air of a man who had long ago become used to sleeping where he happened to be, answering to no household order, and laughing a little at his own poverty. There was steadiness in him, but not the kind that builds a lasting shelter. He had rescued her honestly enough, yet the very way he smiled at the old hall showed that he was a man of the roadside and the byway, not of settled walls and fixed duties. Akemi, seeing that, felt gratitude and unease at once.

Night gathered more thickly in the valley. The bell from Kiyomizu sounded through the cold, and the emptiness around the old hall seemed to widen. Akemi drew closer to the fire and at last felt the trembling in her body begin to ease. She did not trust the future. She did not trust men. She scarcely trusted herself. But for that one hour, in that broken holy place, she at least had a roof, a little warmth, and a pause in which no one was pulling at her sleeve or forcing a lie from her lips.

While Akemi was hiding in the valley, another young life was moving forward in a very different mood. At about dusk, a young samurai with a small monkey on his shoulder had appeared at a sword shop. He sat down boldly in

front of the place and asked whether the master was in. When the craftsmen answered that the master was out, he said he had brought a blade of unmatched quality and would not trust it to any lesser hand. Then, in the most natural way, he demanded to know how good the shop truly was.

The workers, though annoyed, showed him several proper swords that their master had polished or mounted. The youth looked at them one after another with careless disdain. He said they were all dull things, the sort of blades a poor shop might handle for ordinary soldiers. Then he unslung his own sword and drew it out with a shining movement. He declared that this blade was called the Drying Pole, a famous treasure of great length and great quality, and he spoke of it with such force that even the craftsmen, though irritated, had to look.

One of them muttered that it was indeed a fitting name, since it seemed valued less for curve or balance than simply for being long. At that the young samurai showed a little displeasure, though not enough to lose his bright composure. Instead he rose at once, asked the way to the boats that went up from Tenma toward Kyoto, and declared that Osaka's sword shops were full of rough blades for low soldiers and not worth his time. Then he left as lightly as he had come, without the least sign of doubt in himself.

The men in the shop were left staring after him. The more they repeated his words to one another, the more shameless and self-important he seemed. Yet even while they mocked him, his sword, his monkey, and his fearless face stayed in their minds. He had not come as an ordinary customer, nor even quite as an ordinary braggart. There had been too much natural power in his pride, and too much ease in the way he carried it. That youth was Sasaki Kojirō.

Kojirō moved through the world as if it existed partly to reflect him back to himself. When he praised his sword, he meant it. When he looked down on craftsmen, he did not pretend otherwise. Yet there was also a freshness in him that made his arrogance hard to separate from youth itself. He could offend people deeply and still leave them strangely alive with the memory of him. So it was now. He was going on toward Kyoto, with the monkey on his shoulder and the long sword like a challenge across his back.

That movement toward Kyoto mattered more than the craftsmen could know. The city was already drawing together several lines of fate at once. Musashi was on the road toward it. Otsū's hope was moving toward it. Seijūrō had been forced back toward it by challenge and shame. Akemi, though hidden for the moment in Komatsudani, still belonged to its net. And now Kojirō too was coming nearer, bright, vain, dangerous, and pleased with himself.

In the abandoned hall, Akemi did not know that. She only sat before the poor fire and tried to let her heart grow quiet enough to last through one night. Outside, the winter wind moved over the old roofs and through the valley grass. Aoki went about his rough tasks as if nothing extraordinary had happened. But the world beyond the hall was already shifting. Paths that had long been separate were beginning to bend toward one place, and when they met, none of the people caught in them would be able to return unchanged.

Part 18

Seijūrō returned to Kyōto with the taste of cold iron still in his mouth. The ride back from Sumiyoshi had been fast, but speed did not make his mind any firmer. He had left Akemi behind in fever and confusion, and even after he entered the Yoshioka house, her broken voice still seemed to come to him through every screen and wall. He was not thinking first like a school head or like a samurai of name. He was thinking like a man already weakened by private shame and by a wound in the heart that he could not easily show.

Ueda Ryōhei and the others around him did not have that weakness in the same form. They had their own fear, but it was the fear of the house, of reputation, of what people in Kyōto would say if the Yoshioka line failed to answer Musashi properly. So from the first they urged action. They said that whatever Seijūrō felt in himself, the letter from Musashi could not be left lying unanswered. Once such a challenge had come, and once the old promise had been called up openly, silence would already be half defeat.

Yet Seijūrō did not reach for the letter at once. He kept it before him on his

knees and only looked at it, as if something in the folded paper might strike him the moment he opened it. Ryōhei grew restless and urged him again to read it without delay. At last Seijūrō took it up and opened it. The room was quiet, but from the far side of the house, through the sliding doors, memory brought back to him the fevered cries Akemi had been making at the inn.

The words themselves were plain. Musashi asked after his health, reminded him of their old agreement, and said that he too had continued his training in the meantime. There was no wild bragging in the message, no dirty insult, no empty threat. He only asked where they should meet, on what day, and at what hour, so that the old contest could finally be settled. He added that an answer should be posted near Gojō Bridge by the seventh day of the New Year.

That clarity made the letter heavier, not lighter. If Musashi had shouted like a fool, Seijūrō might have despised him and found strength in contempt. But the directness of the message left no room for that kind of easy superiority. It asked for one thing only, and it asked for it without trembling. Seijūrō's fingers shook a little as he finished reading, not because the writing itself was fierce, but because his own spirit was not whole enough at that moment to receive such firmness cleanly.

The men around him understood enough without hearing all his thoughts. They watched his face and knew that the matter had already gone beyond a private grudge between two swordsmen. This was now something that touched the standing of the Yoshioka school itself. If Seijūrō refused, delayed, or answered in some weak half-way fashion, all Kyōto would talk. That was why Ryōhei had ridden out so quickly in the first place, carrying not only his own view, but the view of the others, that Seijūrō must be brought back and made to decide.

Still, the house was not settled. The season itself was lonely. The year was ending, and though men moved in and out of the Yoshioka place, the feeling there was not lively. Even Sasaki Kojirō, on whom some hidden hopes may have rested, had not shown his face recently. Seijūrō's younger brother Denshichirō also kept away. Seijūrō did not think he needed any man to stand beside him in a duel with Musashi, and he did not rate Musashi so high as to imagine needing rescue. Yet

in that year's end cold, with trouble already at his sleeve, the absences around him deepened the sense that he stood more alone than he wished.

So the decision had to be made not out of fullness, but out of necessity. Ryōhei and the others withdrew to another room and drafted the answer as a public notice. It was not enough simply to send a private word back. The challenge had come with force, and the answer too must stand where men could see it. When they returned, they placed before Seijūrō a freshly planed white board, still smelling of new wood, with the ink on it not yet dry.

The notice answered Musashi directly. It said that, according to his wish, the match would indeed be held. It named the place as Rendai Field in the north of Kyōto. It fixed the time as the morning of the ninth day of the New Year, at the lower part of the hour of the hare. It further declared, under oath, that if Musashi failed to appear, the Yoshioka side would laugh at him before the world, while if the Yoshioka side failed, divine punishment would fall upon it.

Seijūrō read the board in silence. The writing was bold and public, exactly the opposite of the weakness he had shown when the letter first lay unopened before him. For a little while he said nothing. Then, perhaps because the matter had now been lifted from his private nerves into the clear shape of public action, something in him steadied. He gave a great nod and said that it would do. It may have been the first moment since returning from Sumiyoshi that his belly truly settled.

Once that happened, the men moved quickly. Ryōhei tucked the notice under his arm, gathered two or three others, and set out through the last evening of the old year toward Gojō Bridge. The night was already turning into New Year's Eve. The streets of Kyōto held the hard chill and restless motion of the season's end, and over the city there was that strange feeling that comes when festivity and danger exist side by side. Somewhere people were preparing for the first dawn of the year. Somewhere else a deadly meeting had just been fixed.

So the challenge ceased to be merely a letter between two men. It entered the city itself. Once the board was raised, people would read it, repeat it, carry it from mouth to mouth, and the name of Miyamoto Musashi would stand openly before

the name of Yoshioka Seijūrō. The field, the day, and the hour were now given to the world. What had long been approaching through different roads, delays, and private pain had finally taken public form. And with that, the year ended under the sign not only of spring's arrival, but of a duel that none of those involved could now escape.

Part 19

While the public notice was being carried through the cold streets of Kyōto, Otsū was still living inside a much more private hope. She and Jōtarō had searched through many roads and many towns, but even after reaching the shores of Lake Ōmi, crossing the Seta bridge, and coming over the Barrier of Ōsaka, they had still not found Musashi's path clearly. Now the year was ending, and pine decorations already stood in the city. Yet the sight did not only make her sad for what she had missed. It also gave her a new place to put her heart.

Jōtarō had told her of the message left through Akemi. Musashi, he said, would come to the foot of Gojō Bridge on the morning of the first day of the year. If not only that morning, then again on the second, the third, and on each morning up to the seventh day. He would come there to wait for Matahachi. Otsū knew well that he was not coming there to wait for her, and that knowledge hurt her a little. Even so, the chance to see him at all felt like the answer to nearly all her prayers.

Yet even in that hope, fear moved like a shadow under the light. If Musashi came to wait for Matahachi, then Matahachi himself might also come. Otsū prayed in the depth of her heart that this would not happen. Better, she thought, that Musashi should stand there alone and that she should see him before any old claim or old wound rose between them again. As she walked through the crowded city before the New Year, she felt at times that Musashi might be just ahead of her in the crowd, and at times that Matahachi might suddenly appear. Worse still, she felt from time to time that Osugi might step out from behind her like a bad dream made flesh.

At another point in the city, Musashi was spending the end of the year in a very different way. He had no bright room, no family around him, no true home waiting for him. Instead, he sat alone and wrote down a hard rule for himself. Each time he found weakness in his own mind, he tried to strike it with a short saying, like a nail driven into wood. That night he first wrote, “I will not regret anything,” but after thinking deeply, he changed it. The first words seemed too soft to him.

He wrote again, more firmly, “In all things, I will not regret.” Then he looked at the line and still felt it was not strong enough. At last he changed it once more and struck the brush down with satisfaction. “In all things, I do not regret.” That, he thought, was the shape the rule must take. It was not yet the truth of his life, but it was the point at which he fixed his eyes, far ahead, as a man fixes his eyes on a mountain not yet climbed.

Just as he had finished, the sliding door opened behind him and his aunt looked in with a face full of cold fear. Her voice shook as she told him that her bad feeling had been right. Osugi had come to the house. She had found Musashi’s sandals at the entrance and was now pounding and shouting that Musashi must be inside. Musashi listened and at once understood the danger, not because Osugi herself could overpower him, but because her wild certainty always brought confusion, noise, and the worst possible turn of events.

He could already hear her rough old voice, hard as ever, cutting through the winter air outside. There was no time for long thought. His aunt, worried and half trembling, asked what he would do. Musashi answered simply that he would go at once. Even then he spoke not first of himself, but of the trouble his presence had caused her. He said that he had in truth been hungry since the night before, and she, instead of thinking of fear, hurried to bring him what little she could.

She placed five pieces of rice cake on a sheet of white paper and pushed them into his hands. Musashi bowed deeply and took them as if they were an offering of great value. Then, before the first light of dawn had touched the world, he stepped out from the house and into the freezing dark. The road was hard with ice. The New Year had already begun, but there was nothing festive in the sky or in

his heart. He went away like a cold bird stripped of its feathers, small against the black world, carrying his hunger and his rule within him.

The cold outside was severe beyond common speech. It seemed to him that even his hair and the nails on his fingers might freeze where they were. Only his breath could be seen, white before him, and even that breath felt so cold that it might turn to frost on the small hairs around his mouth. Without meaning to, he said aloud, “Cold.” Then he wondered why that one morning felt colder than any other. At once he answered himself that it was because the heart was colder even than the body.

He accused himself sharply. Too often, he thought, he still longed for human warmth like a child. He still felt the pull of gentle homes, bright lamps, and living company. He still feared loneliness instead of thanking it. What a poor spirit that was, he thought. If a man was given solitude and wandering, then he should carry them with pride, gratitude, and purpose. Without those things, a wanderer was no better than a beggar who merely happened to keep moving.

As he thought in that harsh way, something changed in his body. The feet that had felt painfully numb began to grow hot again, even to the tips of the toes. The breath that left his mouth no longer seemed weak, but strong, as if it could push the cold back. He reflected that the difference between a holy wanderer and a common beggar might lie in nothing outward at all. It might lie only in whether the heart held an ideal or not. That thought made his spine straighten, and he kept walking through the deep dark without lowering his head.

Before long he found that he had come down to the eastern bank of the Kamo River. Water and sky were still one dark weight. There was no sign of dawn yet, and once he became aware of the river at his side, his feet suddenly slowed. Until then he had crossed the dark as if blindfolded, carried forward by thought alone. Now the cold of the open bank struck harder. He decided that he must make a fire before he went farther.

So he went under the shelter of the bank and gathered what he could find, dry twigs, bits of wood, anything that would take flame. It was not easy work. To make even a small fire in that cold required patience and exact effort. He struck

the fire stone again and again, bending close, guarding each tiny spark as if it were a living thing that might run away. At last a small flame took hold.

He watched it with deep attention. The little fire was poor and low, but in that bitter dark it seemed to contain more than warmth. It was a point of will made visible, a sign that even in the hardest season a man could still keep a small life burning if his hands did not fail. Musashi held out his hands to it and felt that the cold around him had not grown less. Only his own spirit had grown more stubborn inside it.

So he remained there by the black river in the first hours of the New Year, poor, hungry, and alone, with a few pieces of rice cake hidden in his robe and a hard sentence fixed in his heart. The city behind him was full of people, lights, houses, and voices. Before him lay challenge, danger, and whatever the next morning at Gojō Bridge might bring. Yet under the winter sky he chose, once again, not comfort, but the road.

Part 20

The little fire by the Kamo did not last long. It was only enough to warm Musashi's hands and bring life back into his feet. When the dark of the New Year morning began to thin, he rose and went down toward the shallower water. The river stones were black with cold, and the sky still held stars above the eastern hills. He stripped without hesitation and entered the water for purification, letting the bitter stream cut over his body and drive the last softness from him.

Not far away, hidden by the low cover of a small boat, another pair of eyes had found him. Osugi had come into that place by chance and yet, in her own mind, not by chance at all. Seeing Musashi there in the first light, bare and unguarded, she felt at once that the gods and Buddhas had finally led her by the hand to her enemy. Her first thought should have been to rush at him with steel while he stood defenseless in the river. But the old woman did not move so simply. Age, hatred, piety, and excitement all rose together in her until she first pressed her hands together and gave thanks, almost as if the revenge were already done.

She whispered upward that her daily prayers had not failed. She said that heaven itself had placed Musashi before her and that no ordinary fate could have done such a thing. In that strange delay there was something weak, but also something deeply like her. She could be savage, but she was never simple. By the time her heart had finished praising divine help, the best instant had already slipped away.

Musashi came out of the river and dressed with quick, exact motions. He tied his belt hard, set his two swords in place, and then knelt and lowered his head silently to heaven and earth. The river stones around him were slowly lifting into view under the thin dawn light. Mist and pale haze softened the roofs and bridges of the city, while the hills in the east still lay in dark ink. Seeing him begin to move off, Osugi bit back the cry that had risen in her throat. If she called from too far away, he might escape before she could touch him. So she climbed the bank in haste and began following along the higher ground.

Musashi passed under the temporary bridge at Sanjō and came up from the riverbed to the top of the embankment. His stride was large and steady. There was no sign in him that he felt himself watched. That was the opening Osugi needed. She went after him with the fierce patience of an old creature that has carried one purpose so long that it no longer knows how to rest. The city around them was waking to the first morning of the year, but on that bank there was still enough emptiness for revenge to breathe.

In truth, Musashi had not been careful enough. He had come out from the cold, had purified himself, had fixed his heart on the coming day, and yet had let the thought of human danger fall away for a little while. Later, this would stand before him as a real failure. Even an old woman with a small body and a crazed will had been able to draw close enough to strike. That alone showed that his body, spirit, and awareness were not yet joined as fully as he believed.

Osugi came in with all the strength left in her old frame. Her blade reached him. It was not a clean and perfect cut, nor the work of a trained swordsman, but it was enough. In that instant Musashi understood, with a shock sharper than the steel itself, that he had made an error. The blow, the sudden nearness of the old

woman, and the bitter voice of her hate all arrived at once. He had allowed himself to stand inside another person's reach without knowing it.

He moved at once with his full power. Before Osugi, maddened by success, could follow the first strike with another, Musashi turned and slapped her hard across the shoulder with an open hand. The blow was not a killing one, but it broke her balance completely. She dropped to all fours like a turtle overturned in mid-crawl, and the sword flew from her hand. Musashi caught the danger before it could rise again. He snatched up the weapon with his left hand and with the other arm lifted Osugi's body sideways against him.

Even then the old woman did not beg for mercy. Shame, anger, triumph, and despair all twisted together in her thin throat. She cried out that it was bitter beyond bearing to have struck the enemy and still fail to finish him. Then, in the same breath, she told Musashi to take her head. If he would not let her kill him, then he should kill her and end the matter cleanly. To leave her alive after such a failure, she cried, would only cover her with humiliation.

Musashi answered nothing. His mouth stayed hard and shut. Holding the old woman fast under one arm and the fallen sword in the other hand, he began to walk in long steps along the bank. Osugi, tucked there against his side, kicked and writhed and called upon heaven, upon fate, upon all the powers she believed had governed her life. She said that if she died here by his hand, it would still not be a wasted death. Gon-uncle had already died on the road, she shouted, and if word of her own end reached Matahachi, then perhaps at last that useless son would rise in true anger and avenge both of them.

She said her death might be the medicine he needed. She cried that a dog's death would at least serve a purpose if it lit proper hatred in her son's heart. Again and again she ordered Musashi to stop and cut off her head. Musashi still did not answer. He only walked. That silence was harder for her to bear than any insult. She had prepared herself for struggle, for killing, or for being killed, but not for being carried away like an angry old child whose fury could no longer direct events.

The first morning of the year was brightening around them. Haze softened

the roofs of the city. The stars were fading one by one, and the line of the eastern hills was beginning to separate from the sky. Yet on that bank the beauty of the morning did not reach either of them. Musashi was thinking of his own mistake. Osugi was thinking only of revenge not yet completed. Between them, the failed attack remained like a needle still buried in flesh.

So the New Year day began not with peace, but with a wound, a captured blade, and an old hatred still alive enough to shout at heaven. Musashi strode on without explaining where he meant to take her. Osugi twisted beneath his arm and cried after him, asking where he was carrying her now. But he gave her no answer at all.

Part 21

Musashi did not answer Osugi's cries as he carried her along the bank. He held her hard under one arm, took her sword away, and went on toward Gojō Bridge with long, steady steps. In his mind there was still one simple thought. If Matahachi had truly heard the message, he might already be waiting there. Then mother and son could meet face to face, and Musashi could at last speak plainly and break the old misunderstanding that had poisoned everything.

The city was only just waking on the first morning of the year. The doorways had been swept clean the night before, and the broom marks still lay fresh in the pale light. Pine decorations and New Year things were already moving on the Yodo in small boats, but the houses near the bridge were still mostly shut. The air was thin and cold, and the first brightness of morning softened roofs and eaves without warming them. Osugi, dragged or half-led behind him now, hated even the sight of Musashi's footprints before her.

She shouted at him again and again, calling him heartless and less than human. The old woman's voice cut through the quiet like something torn out of a sick throat. Musashi heard every word, but would not turn. He wanted first to reach the bridge and see whether Matahachi was there. Only then, he thought, could any useful speech begin.

But Matahachi was not the one waiting there. Akemi was. Since the day before, shame and grief had broken her heart into pieces, yet still she had come because hope, even in a broken heart, can drag the body farther than reason can. She had looked toward that morning for a long time. She had believed that if Musashi came to wait for Matahachi, then she too might see him there. So she stood at Gojō Bridge in the first light of the year, with all her pain still alive inside her.

When she saw him at last, tears came before words. She had loved him quietly for years, gathering the feeling in herself like thread wound into a ball. She had compared every other man against that far image and found them all poor beside it. Even the shame that had so deeply wounded her the day before could not cut that thread cleanly. Now, standing before him again, she could only weep.

Musashi stopped. He had not expected to find her there. Her face, her tears, and the change in her whole manner told him at once that something terrible had happened, though not yet exactly what. He spoke to her with rough kindness, and because she could not hold herself up any longer, she leaned against him and cried. For a little while he let her remain there, her face pressed to his chest, while the river moved below the bridge and the city slowly opened to the morning.

Yet they were not alone. Jōtarō had also come near the bridge and saw the scene with round, angry eyes. To him it seemed a betrayal of Otsū, and because his heart was simple, he at once took Otsū's side with all the force of a child's loyalty. He glared from a distance, muttered that both Musashi and the strange woman were in the wrong, and looked around in growing impatience for Otsū. He had thought she would already be there. Instead, she was still delayed.

Nearby, another watcher stood with very different eyes. A young warrior in town dress had followed Akemi without her knowledge, full of sharp dislike and wounded pride. This was Sasaki Kojirō. He had first come because Akemi had gone without telling him, but now he stayed because another force had risen in him. Looking across at Musashi, he felt at once the strange anger and attraction that strong young men sometimes feel when they meet another of their own kind.

Musashi sensed him too and asked Akemi quietly who that young warrior

was. Before she could answer much, the feeling between the two men had already begun to form. Each measured the other without speech. Each saw youth, force, pride, and danger. They were close in age, both full of self-belief, both still at that hard age when a man thinks he has nearly understood the world. So they looked not merely with their eyes, but with their whole spirit.

At last Kojirō gave a small smile, one with mockery and challenge mixed together. Musashi answered with a smile of his own, but his answer held no softness. It struck back. Between them, that silent exchange said more than ordinary words could have done. Akemi, standing there between two such men, felt only the pressure of her own heart and tried again to make Musashi promise that he would come to see her later.

Musashi told her to go back for the moment with that young man and wait at the lodging in front of Rokujō Gobō, at the juzuya room she named. He said he would come later. Akemi, still unsatisfied, seized his hand under her sleeve and pressed it hard, asking once more whether he truly meant it. At that, Kojirō burst into loud laughter and turned away, walking off with his back toward them as if he had seen something both foolish and amusing. Musashi watched him go for an instant and felt, not peace, but the beginning of a future contest.

It was just then that Otsū finally came near enough to see. She had carried her hope all the way into the city and had told herself that seeing Musashi alone at the bridge would almost fulfill her whole wish. Instead she found Akemi clinging to him. At once all the blood in her body seemed to turn into jealousy and pain. Yet because Akemi was still there, Otsū could not step forward and speak. Her pride, her training, and her ordinary sense of what a woman should and should not do held her still by force.

She stood in torment, telling herself to remain cold, cold, cold. But after Akemi moved away with Kojirō, that restraint broke. Otsū meant to go straight to Musashi then, to say everything that had filled her heart through all the long roads, all the waiting, and all the loneliness. She had no clear order for the words. She only meant to let them all out at once. Yet the road of life turns on one small step, and one moment’s delay can become years of suffering.

In those few moments she lost sight of Musashi. Looking one way and then another, she moved too quickly and too blindly, and instead of reaching him, she ran into the worst figure she could have met on that day. Osugi was there. Whether the old woman had broken free or simply come around by another path, Otsū saw her face suddenly before her like a nightmare walking in daylight. At once all the old fear returned.

Otsū turned and fled without dignity, without plan, almost without breath. Even in dreams, when terror came, it often wore Osugi's face. Now that same face pursued her on the first morning of the year. She ran three or four blocks before she dared look back. Only then, for one instant, did her breath return. But the chance to speak to Musashi had already slipped away, and the bright hope with which she had come to Gojō Bridge had turned, in a few cruel moments, into another wound.

Part 22

Jōtarō had run about in anger, looking first for Otsū and then back again toward Musashi, when at last he caught sight of a white face between the wheels of an ox cart at a crossroads near the bridge. "There you are!" he cried, as if he had found a demon in hiding. Otsū was crouching there, trying to make herself small, with one hand still pressed against her breast. Her face was pale and wet, but she said nothing at first.

Jōtarō could not understand what had happened. He had seen Musashi with Akemi, had seen Otsū vanish, and then had watched an old woman come raging through the morning like some curse from another world. To him, all these things were mixed together into one burning wrong. He asked Otsū again and again why she had hidden there and why she had run. But the pain in a grown woman's heart was too deep and too tangled for a boy to understand.

Otsū only shook her head and tried to rise. Shame, jealousy, fear, and love were all pulling at her at once. She could not say plainly that she had seen another woman clinging to Musashi, could not explain the old terror Osugi's face still

carried for her, and could not even tell herself which wound hurt most. Jōtarō stared, baffled and angry, while she brushed at her sleeves and tried to gather herself enough to walk.

At that very time, Osugi was moving through the same streets with a mind full of her own wild certainty. She had seen Otsū crying and fleeing and had at once turned the whole thing into a story that pleased her hatred. Musashi, she decided, must have spread a mat for a meeting with Otsū there at the bridge. Some sweet talk had gone wrong, Musashi had thrown the woman off, and now Otsū was running after him in tears. Such thoughts were enough for Osugi. Once she believed them, they became truth in her mind.

“Wait!” she screamed, and when Jōtarō, not knowing who she was, tried to stop her, she struck him aside with the hard, dry strength of age sharpened by rage. The boy could only gape after her for a moment, stunned that such an old woman could move with such force. He still did not understand why Otsū feared her so deeply, but by then he knew enough to feel that the matter was no ordinary one. So he remained near Otsū, half ready to defend her again, though he still had no clear idea from what.

Otsū, unable to speak openly and unable to stand there forever, finally rose and let Jōtarō lead her away from that corner. Her feet moved, but her heart lagged behind at the bridge. She had come all that way carrying one bright hope, and in a few cruel moments it had been broken, stained, and driven into hiding. Even now, though she told herself not to look back, every part of her longed to return and see once more whether Musashi might still be there. Yet fear held her as strongly as longing.

Meanwhile, on the bridge itself, another pair of eyes had remained fixed on Musashi. Kojirō had not laughed only out of mockery at Akemi’s desperate grip on Musashi’s hand. He had been measuring the man before him with the delight of one young fighter who suddenly sees another worthy of future testing. Musashi, too, had felt that gaze like a blade. In the clear light of the New Year morning, their first silent recognition had passed between them and would not be forgotten.

Musashi remembered something his father had once said, that his own eyes

were not the same as his father's but had come instead from an older line, clear brown and sharp as polished amber. Those eyes now followed the line of the bridge, the riverbank, and the winter light until they found Kojirō standing against a withered willow like a bird of prey at rest. Kojirō, for his part, looked at Musashi and thought at once, "So this is the man." The name Miyamoto Musashi had already reached him, and he judged the reality with hungry attention.

Yet that recognition, important as it was, did not stop the movement of the city around them. New Year people passed. River water glittered below the bridge. Akemi had gone with wounded longing, Otsū had fled in pain, and Osugi still seethed with hatred. Musashi, who had come there first to wait for Matahachi, found himself in the middle of many tangled lives at once, all of them pulling at him from different sides.

When the first heat of those meetings had passed, the day widened. The streets around the old bridge grew busier and brighter under the calm winter sun. Otsū, Osugi, and Jōtarō eventually came back toward the neighborhood again, though not together in peace. What drew them was not love or intention now, but the strange pull of the city itself, where news gathers and people drift toward whatever has become the center of talk.

And there, not far from the old place by the bridge, they found it. A high public notice stood before a swelling crowd. Men craned their necks, read aloud for those behind them, repeated names, argued, laughed, and pushed closer. Some had never heard the name Musashi before and asked one another who he could be. Others said that any man bold enough to call out the Yoshioka house in such a shining public way must be no ordinary swordsman.

Otsū stopped as if struck. Osugi too stood still. Jōtarō looked up with round eyes. Around the notice the crowd moved like a whirl of fish, flowing away and back again, leaving one word always in the air. "Musashi," they whispered. "Musashi." And so the volume ended not in silence, but in the widening sound of that name spreading through Kyōto under the clear sun of the New Year morning.

Book 4: Wind

Part 1

From the road toward Tanba, people could see the distant line of the western hills. White snow still lay there, bright as a sharp flash of light through the trees. The day was only the ninth of the New Year, and the wind from Kinugasa was still too cold for spring. Small birds cried in the field, but even their voices sounded thin and cold. Men standing there felt the chill come through the scabbards at their waists and into their bones.

Someone said, “Set fire to it.” Another answered, “Be careful. If the fire jumps, it will become a field fire.” A third man laughed and said Kyoto would not burn so easily. So they threw dry grass onto the edge of the dead field, and flame rose at once with a loud, hungry sound. The fire bent upward toward the morning sun, and the men stepped back from the heat, though the rest of the air was bitterly cold.

“That is enough,” Ueda Ryōhei said at last. Smoke had already filled their eyes and stained their faces. They had burned the grass there for a while, and in doing so they had also burned away a little of their waiting. But only a little. When they looked up at the sun again, several men said the same thing in uneasy voices. “It must already be past the right hour.”

The men gathered in that place were only part of the Yoshioka following, but they were not weak or unimportant men. Ryōhei was there, and several of the proud senior pupils were there too, men who liked to call themselves the ten swords of Kyoto. So the heart of the dōjō had clearly come out. They had been told that their master, Yoshioka Seijūrō, would pass by this field before going on to the duel place at Rendai Field. They had also been told, very clearly, that no one was to offer help in the fight itself.

No one among them truly thought Seijūrō would lose. They did not look down on Musashi in a foolish way, but they could not yet imagine their own master being cut down by such a man. Still, beneath that confidence was another

feeling. Public notice had already been posted, and all Kyoto was watching. So the men wanted not only Seijūrō's victory, but also the full display of Yoshioka dignity. That was why they had gathered there in force, though officially they were doing nothing at all.

Yet Seijūrō still did not come. The more the sun rose, the more the men felt that something was wrong. "Strange," one of them muttered. Another asked whether Musashi might already be waiting at the true duel ground. A third suggested sending someone to look. But no one moved. Each man wanted news, yet no man wished to be the one who stepped away first and perhaps seemed afraid or impatient. So they stayed together in the smoke and wind, trying to look calm.

Around them, the crowd grew larger. Many common people had mistaken this field for the duel place. They gathered in groups, asking, "Where is Seijūrō?" "Has Musashi come yet?" "Are those men helpers from one side?" The watchers did not come too near the Yoshioka group, but they spread everywhere else, through the grass, among the trees, and along the edges of the road. Heads seemed to rise out of the dry field itself.

Among those heads moved Jōtarō. His wooden sword was bigger than his body looked fit to carry, and his straw sandals were too large for his feet. He walked through the dry earth, kicking up dust, looking from face to face with quick, anxious eyes. He was not searching first for Musashi. He was searching for Otsū. He was sure she had to come there that day, because she would never stay away from news of Musashi's fight if she knew of it.

But he could not find her anywhere. He walked the field again and again, and each time his worry grew heavier. "That is strange," he thought. "She has not come to the Karasuma house, not even once, since New Year's Day." Then darker thoughts began to rise. Perhaps she had fallen ill. Perhaps Osugi had lied to her and trapped her somewhere. For Jōtarō, that fear was greater than any fear about the duel itself.

He did not worry about Musashi's victory at all. To him, that part was simple. He had seen Musashi among the spearmen of Hōzōin, and that memory had settled

in him like an unshakable truth. Even if all the Yoshioka men gathered there joined together, Jōtarō still believed his teacher would win. So while thousands of other people believed in Seijūrō, the boy alone held firmly to Musashi. It was Otsū's absence, not Musashi's danger, that made his heart beat hard.

As he stood looking over the field once more, another thought came to him. "The notice said Rendai Field," he told himself. "Then why are all these people waiting here?" At just that moment, someone called out to him in a rude, easy voice. "Boy, you there." Jōtarō turned and saw a tall young man he already knew by sight. It was Sasaki Kojirō, the same young swordsman he had seen on New Year's morning at Gojō Bridge.

"What is it, old brother?" Jōtarō asked in a familiar way. Kojirō came closer and looked him up and down before speaking further, as if he were measuring not only the boy's body, but also what use the boy might be. He asked, "You were with that woman on the bridge the other day, were you not?" Jōtarō answered at once, "Yes, with Otsū." Kojirō asked whether Otsū was related to Musashi. "No," said Jōtarō. "Then what is she to him?" Kojirō asked again.

Jōtarō answered in the direct way of a child. "She loves him." Kojirō's eyes sharpened a little at that. Then he asked whether Musashi was truly Jōtarō's teacher. The boy lifted his chin proudly and said yes without the least doubt. Kojirō then asked whether Musashi had already come out from his lodging and whether Jōtarō knew where he was. Jōtarō answered honestly, "I do not know. I am searching too."

Before Kojirō could ask more, quick footsteps came from behind. Several Yoshioka men had seen him and hurried over at once. Ueda Ryōhei was among them. "Why, Sasaki-dono," he said, taking Kojirō's hand with forced warmth, "where have you been? Seijūrō-sama has spoken of you often these past days." Kojirō answered coolly that if he had returned today, that should be enough. But Ryōhei and the others did not mean to let him stand outside the center of things. With polite words and careful smiles, they drew him away toward the middle of the field where the Yoshioka men were gathered.

The moment the crowd saw Kojirō's bold figure, his long sword, and his

bright, striking face, a whisper spread like wind through dry grass. “Musashi.” “That must be Musashi.” “So that is the man.” People stared hard and passed the mistake from mouth to mouth. Jōtarō, left behind in the dust, grew angry at once. He shouted, “No, no, that is not him. Musashi-sama does not look like that.” But his thin voice could not reach far across the growing field, and already the wrong excitement was beginning to rise.

Part 2

Jōtarō’s protest did not carry far. The crowd had already taken hold of the mistake and liked it too much to give it up at once. A handsome young swordsman with a long blade and a proud face seemed exactly the kind of man they wanted Musashi to be. So men and women kept whispering, “There he is,” and “That must be him.” Jōtarō stamped in the dust and shouted that they were wrong, that Musashi did not dress like some bright young actor. But the field was too wide, the people were too many, and the boy’s truth was too small against the pleasure of public rumor.

In the middle of the field, Kojirō allowed himself to be led among the Yoshioka men as if he were doing them a favor by standing there. He carried himself with the same ease that had angered men on the boat and at the bridge. His eyes moved over the gathered pupils one by one, not warmly, and not with fear, but with a cool, measuring contempt. Ueda Ryōhei and the others had meant to bring him in politely, yet once he stood among them, it seemed almost the other way around. It was as if he had entered their circle only to test whether it deserved him.

The senior men of the Yoshioka line did not hide their displeasure. They stood around him with hard faces, their shoulders tight, their hands never far from their swords. Among them were men who had pride in their school, pride in Kyoto, and pride in the public victory they still expected to see before the day was over. To be looked down upon in front of such a crowd was already hard enough. To be looked down upon by this smooth-faced young upstart was harder still.

Kojirō then began to speak, not in a low private way, but in a voice meant to be heard. He said that the fact neither Musashi nor Seijūrō had yet arrived there was a blessing for the Yoshioka house. Since there was still time, he told them, they should divide their men, find Seijūrō before he came, and bring him back to the dōjō at once. He said this as if it were obvious wisdom, and as if only fools would fail to act on it. The words struck the Yoshioka men like open-handed blows.

That alone would have been enough to provoke them, but Kojirō did not stop there. He said that what he offered was the truest help Seijūrō could receive, better than any ordinary aid in combat. He even called himself a messenger sent by heaven for the Yoshioka house. Then, with complete certainty, he gave his prediction. “If the match happens,” he said in substance, “Seijūrō will lose, and Musashi will take his life.”

Ueda’s face lost all color. The other men looked as though hot coals had been thrown into their sleeves. One of the senior pupils, Miike Jūrōzaemon, could bear it no longer and stepped in until his chest almost touched Kojirō’s. He raised his right arm in the space between their faces, showing the beginning of an iai posture, not yet drawing, but making the meaning clear enough. “What are you saying?” he demanded. “How dare you speak like this?”

Kojirō only smiled, and because he was taller, even the smile looked insulting. He asked mildly whether his words had offended them. When Miike answered that of course they had, Kojirō gave a shallow apology that sounded more like laughter than regret. Then he said that if his help was not wanted, he would withdraw it. Yet even while pretending to pull back, he pushed deeper. He reminded them that they themselves had welcomed him warmly from Kema embankment to the Shijō dōjō, and that Seijūrō too had shown him honor. So why reject a true warning now?

The Yoshioka men answered that whatever courtesy had been shown him had been no more than proper treatment of a guest. Kojirō laughed openly at that and said he had measured both Musashi and Seijūrō with his own eyes and that there was almost no chance of Seijūrō’s victory. He recalled seeing Musashi at Gojō Bridge on New Year’s morning and said that from the first instant he had

felt something ill for the Yoshioka house. The posted notice of the duel, he said, had looked to him less like a proud announcement than like a mourning sign the family had written for itself. Such words were almost more than flesh and blood could bear.

The men around him began moving all at once. It was not yet a full attack, but the field darkened with their anger. Forty men taking one step forward together can create a feeling like storm-clouds closing over a plain. Kojirō felt it and drew back in a flash, quick enough to show that he had expected violence from the start. Whatever kindness he claimed to offer did not fit the look that now shone in his eyes. It was too eager, too ready, too pleased by the edge of danger.

The crowd around them sensed the change and began to murmur more loudly. People rose on their toes, pushed forward, and pointed. Then, before steel or fists could truly meet, another disturbance broke through the edge of the gathering. A small monkey came bouncing across the field like a tossed ball. Behind it ran a young woman with equal speed, not caring how she looked. Her hair and breath were loose, and her whole body moved with the helpless force of someone who had run not from pride, but from desperate feeling. It was Akemi.

Her voice broke the air before she reached them. “Kojirō-sama, Kojirō-sama,” she cried. “Where is Musashi-sama? Is Musashi-sama here?” At once every eye shifted. The hard line between Kojirō and the Yoshioka men was cut through by astonishment. Even Ueda and the others, still burning with rage, forgot it for a moment and stared. Kojirō turned sharply and scolded her at once, asking why she had come when he had clearly forbidden it.

Akemi answered that her body belonged to herself and that she had the right to come where she wished. Kojirō stepped toward her and told her to go back. She shook her head with fierce refusal, breathing so hard that the words almost tore out of her. Then her voice broke, and for an instant her grief sounded soft and pitiful enough to cool the field. But only for an instant. What came next was not softness. It was accusation.

She cried out that he had tied her up in the upstairs room of the juzuya, as though she were some thing to be shut away, and that he had done it because he

knew she would try to come to Musashi. She said that whenever she worried over Musashi, Kojirō had taken pleasure in hurting her. She said that he had spoken openly the night before of how Musashi would likely be killed that day, and that even if Seijūrō failed, he himself would step in and help finish the work. The words rushed from her in a fever, but there was truth in them, and everyone there could hear it.

Kojirō told her she was mad and reminded her that they stood in open daylight before a crowd. But Akemi did not stop. She said she had shouted for help from the upstairs room until neighbors came and loosened her bonds, and that she had run there because she had to see Musashi with her own eyes. She declared before all of them that Musashi was the man in her heart. Then, with tears and wild force mixed together, she cried once more, “Where is he? Bring Musashi-sama out. Where is Musashi-sama?”

Kojirō at last fell silent. He bit back whatever he wished to say and only glared at her with white anger in his face. The men around him no longer saw him in quite the same way. Until then he had been only insolent, dangerous, and young. Now something darker showed through, something that took pleasure not only in swordplay and pride, but in holding another person under his will. The field, already tense from the waiting duel, changed again. Musashi had still not appeared there, Seijūrō had still not come, and yet the morning had already opened one hidden wound after another before the watching city.

Part 3

Kojirō had no answer ready against the force of Akemi’s crying truth. He clicked his tongue and glared at her, but for the first time that morning his easy pride had been checked. The Yoshioka men, who only moments before had been ready to seize him with their own hands, now stared with a different kind of anger and suspicion. The whole field had become confused, as if the duel itself had already begun somewhere behind the eyes of the people watching.

Then the confusion broke open entirely. From the line of trees along the road,

a servant came running like a deer, his arms raised, his voice already cracking before he reached them. It was Tamihachi, the young attendant who usually followed Seijūrō. Before anyone could stop him or even fully understand him, he cried out, “Terrible news! All of you, come! Come quickly! The young master has been struck down by Musashi. Struck down!”

It was as though the ground itself had fallen away under the feet of the Yoshioka men. Faces lost all color. Several men shouted at once, each with a different question, but all with the same broken fear. “What?” “Seijūrō-sama?” “Where?” “When?” “Are you telling the truth?” Tamihachi could hardly form his words properly, yet the wildness of his face made lying impossible. Still, because they had expected Seijūrō to appear there and prepare himself in full sight of them, the news felt unreal, like a mad story dropped from the sky.

Tamihachi did not even wait to persuade them. “Quickly, quickly,” he cried again, and turned at once to run back the way he had come. Then the Yoshioka men broke. The order they had tried to preserve all morning vanished in a breath. Ryōhei, Miike, and the others no longer cared who was watching or what dignity looked like. They leaped after the servant all together, clearing the smoking fire and rushing through the dry field with the speed of animals crossing flame.

Dust rose behind them. The crowd, seeing that something truly terrible had happened, began to pour after them at a distance, though fewer dared come close than before. The women in the field clutched one another, and the men who had been joking all morning now found no jokes. Jōtarō too ran with the flow for a few moments, then slowed. The duel, he understood, had already been decided. That alone was enough to make his heart leap, because he knew what the result had to be. Yet the wildness of the Yoshioka men made even victory look frightening.

The road north from there lay straight between trees, and after some distance the servant plunged off to the right into another wide stretch of dead grass. There, under the pale sun of early spring, the field seemed quiet enough to belong to no violence at all. Small birds rose and fell among the stalks. Nothing moved in anger. Yet in the middle of that wide calm stood a low mound, and beside it lay the fallen

form of a man in blue flower-dyed robes, with a leather strap across his body and a white cloth tied hard around his brow.

"There!" Tamihachi screamed. "The young master!"

The men who had rushed so fiercely now stopped as if nails had been driven through their feet. Before them, Seijūrō lay face down in the grass. The sight was almost harder because it was so still. No blood stained the cloth around his head. No wound showed in the sleeves, the robe, or even on the grass around him. Yet when they lifted him, his head hung with dreadful weight, and his lips had turned the dark color of wild berries. Life was still there, but only faintly.

"Breathe, Seijūrō-sama, breathe," they cried. "It is we. Your pupils are here." But the body answered only with a faint stirring. One man bent to take his right arm across his shoulder and lift him at once. The instant he tried, Seijūrō cried out in pain so sharp and helpless that the men recoiled as if they themselves had been struck. They understood then that the injury lay deep inside the shoulder and arm.

"A door, a board, anything," someone shouted. Three or four men ran to the nearby houses and in a short time came back carrying a rain shutter torn from its place. They laid Seijūrō on it on his back, but after his breath grew stronger again, the pain seemed to wake fully in him. He twisted violently, unable to bear the movement of the shattered shoulder. In the end they had to untie their own belts and bind him to the board so that he would not throw himself off it in his agony.

Only when Seijūrō had been secured did Ryōhei turn to Tamihachi and demand the whole story. The servant was still half mad with fear, but because all the others fixed their faces on him, he managed to speak. He said that Seijūrō had ridden out with only him in attendance. Before leaving, the master had warned him of one thing only. If he should lose, Tamihachi was to gather his bones and take them home. The other Yoshioka men waiting in the milk-field were not to be summoned before the result was decided. He would not win by cowardice, Seijūrō had said, nor allow anyone to say later that victory had come by help from the side.

Then, Tamihachi said, they had come straight to Rendai Field. Musashi was already there, waiting alone near the mound. Seijūrō had advanced toward him

after a quiet exchange of greetings. Tamihachi had been standing at some distance behind. He said that Musashi had seemed almost to be smiling over Seijūrō's back. Then a sharp voice had cut through the field, and in the same instant Seijūrō's wooden sword had flown upward into empty air. The next thing he saw clearly was only Musashi standing there alone with his orange headcloth and wild hair lifted by the wind.

That was all. The blow had been too sudden for the servant's eyes to follow. He had run to Seijūrō only after Musashi had already gone. The pupils listened in a silence heavier than grief. Their master, whose strength they had trusted without wavering, had not merely been defeated. He had been broken in a single exchange before a servant's eyes could even hold the movement. No one wished to speak what that meant.

At last they lifted the shutter and began the slow return. The field that had seemed empty a little earlier now felt full of unseen shame. Seijūrō groaned and muttered, his body rigid under the belts. The men carrying him stepped carefully, as if each breath of wind might increase his pain. Behind and around them, the Yoshioka followers moved in a dark cluster, each man swallowed by the same thought and yet unable to say it aloud.

The public duel had been meant to spread the fame of the Yoshioka house through Kyoto. Instead, before most of the crowd had even seen a sword drawn, the truth had already been decided elsewhere in the grass. The men who had come out to display the power of the school now carried its wounded head back on a stolen shutter like mourners in a funeral line. And while the bright winter sun continued to lie quietly over the field, every one of them felt that the day had changed beyond repair.

Part 4

The men carrying Seijūrō went back toward the road in a dark cluster, and the wide field behind them seemed suddenly empty of all purpose. The public duel that had drawn so many people there had already ended somewhere else, out of

sight, in one sharp instant. Now the Yoshioka men no longer cared who watched them or what the crowd might say. Their only thought was the broken body tied to the shutter. Yet even while they moved with all the care they could, Seijūrō groaned and twisted so violently that the wooden board shook beneath him.

More than once the carriers stopped in fear. Some of the younger men, hearing their master cry again and again for his arm to be cut off, began to wonder whether that dreadful thing might truly be the kinder course. But Ryōhei and the older men would not allow such madness in the open road. They said that pain alone would not kill him, while a cut made there without proper care might finish him at once. So they ordered others ahead to summon a doctor and prepare what would be needed at the dōjō. Everything now had to be done in haste and yet with control.

The road itself had changed since they first came out in confidence that morning. The curious people who had followed from the field still hung back among the trees and along the roadside, looking with hungry eyes. Ryōhei felt their staring like an insult laid across his own face. He snapped at the younger men to drive them away and not allow Seijūrō's condition to become a street show for idle mouths. At once several pupils rushed out toward the onlookers, and the crowd scattered in dry bursts like insects kicked from grass.

While the road cleared, Ryōhei seized the servant Tamihachi and demanded a fuller account. He wanted to know every step, every breath, and every word that had passed before the blow. The servant, still half shaking, told them again that Seijūrō had gone straight to the field instead of coming first to the milk-field as expected. He repeated the warning Seijūrō had given him, that if defeat came, no side help was to be called in, and that a man of the sword must not win by cowardice. Then he described Musashi already standing by the mound, alone and waiting.

When Tamihachi spoke of the exchange itself, his words only deepened the horror. He said the two men had greeted one another quietly, without wild anger or noise. Then, before he could properly follow what happened, Seijūrō's wooden sword had leaped into the air, and the next clear thing in sight had been Musashi

alone in the field. The Yoshioka men heard this with faces like iron gone cold. A duel that should have proved the greatness of their school had instead ended before a servant's eye could even count the movements.

As they stood in that bitterness, another sound came from above them. Dry leaves and pine cones began to fall from the roadside trees, and one of the carriers cried out when a hard pine nut struck his face. Men looked up sharply. There, in the branches, sat a little monkey with a foolish, innocent face, as if it had nothing to do with the misery below. A short whistle sounded from somewhere under the trees. Then the monkey sprang down and landed neatly on the shoulder of Sasaki Kojirō.

Kojirō stood there with Akemi beside him, the monkey on his shoulder, and the same easy, dangerous brightness in his face. He looked first at the wounded Seijūrō, not with mockery, but with a strange seriousness, almost as though he were studying the shape of defeat itself. The Yoshioka men did not trust that look. They remembered too well the words he had spoken earlier in the field, warning them that Seijūrō would lose and be killed. So now, seeing him there beside the road, many of them thought at once that he had come to laugh in secret at the truth of his own prophecy.

Ryōhei snarled that the monkey's trick was the work of a creature no better than its master and urged the carriers on. But Kojirō did not let them pass so quickly. He stepped forward and, with a tone half command and half concern, told them to stop for a moment. Then he looked closely at Seijūrō and said that carrying him on his back like that was wrong, that the body should not be jolted in such a position when blood might already be gathering inside. He added that a man like Seijūrō must not be seen returning to Kyoto on a shutter like a corpse if there was any chance he could still stand.

Seijūrō, whose face had turned white and strange with pain, opened his eyes and stared at Kojirō. The words reached him through the torment like hooks. Whatever else had been broken in him, pride had not been fully crushed. When Kojirō said that his father's name would be shamed if he were carried home helpless before the city, the thought bit deeply enough to wake his spirit. He

struggled upright with a terrible effort, and his right arm swung loose from the shoulder like something no longer part of his body.

“Miike,” he gasped, “cut it off.” The men nearest him turned pale and did not move. “Ryōhei, then,” he said, but Ryōhei too hesitated. There was too much blood, too much danger, and too much awe in them. Then Kojirō said, in his calm way, “If I may.” Seijūrō answered at once, “Do it.” Kojirō stepped close, lifted the ruined arm by the wrist, and in the same motion drew a short blade. What followed was so quick that most of the men around them only heard the sound before they understood what had happened. Then the arm was already on the ground, and blood burst from the shoulder like water from a broken plug.

The Yoshioka men rushed in at once, pressing cloth and hands against the wound while Seijūrō swayed on his feet. For a few steps he did indeed walk, more by stubborn will than by strength. It was not the body that moved him then, but pride alone. He went perhaps ten steps, then twenty more, leaving dark drops along the road. After that the will that had held him upright broke. He collapsed into the arms of his followers, and they could no longer pretend that dignity could carry him home.

They lifted him again and hurried off in a disorderly mass, no longer caring who saw. Kojirō watched them go. Then, turning to Akemi with a small, almost playful smile, he asked whether seeing Seijūrō in such a state had satisfied the hatred she had so often poured out in her words. But Akemi did not smile. Looking at Kojirō’s calm face after the quick cutting of a human arm, she felt something colder than fear. Seijūrō had ruined her, but he had not seemed evil in the deep way this man now seemed. Kojirō, she thought, was not merely cruel in action. He was a man who could look on another person’s pain and use it as part of his own strange pleasure.

That thought clung to her as he began to walk away, the monkey still riding his shoulder as if nothing in the world were out of place. Akemi followed because she did not yet know how to break from him, though every step felt bitter. Behind them, the road had swallowed the Yoshioka men and their wounded master. Before them, the winter day went on as though no great name had just fallen. And

somewhere beyond all of them, Musashi was already walking alone through the wide field, carrying his victory with no joy in it at all.

Part 5

Musashi walked away alone through the dead field. In his heart he told himself, “I have won.” He had defeated Yoshioka Seijūrō, the heir of a famous Kyoto house, and no man of the sword could call that a small thing. Yet the words gave him no joy. He went on with his face bent slightly down, his wooden sword in hand, and felt only a deep, empty loneliness around him.

It was not the cheap sadness of a man who likes to feel important after danger. What troubled him was something harsher. He had seen clearly, just before the duel, that Seijūrō had come with doubt already in him. Musashi had even thought for a moment that it would be better for both of them if some excuse could be found and the meeting broken off. But Seijūrō had been the son of a great house, tied to a father’s name, a thousand pupils, and the pride of Kyoto. Once he had stepped into the field, he could no longer step back.

So Musashi had struck, and struck cleanly, and the thing had been settled in a single instant. Now, looking back in memory toward the long thin pine by the mound, he thought not first of his own strength, but of the man he had left there. “I did a pitiful thing,” he told himself. He hoped with all his heart that the blow from the wooden sword would heal quickly and not end in death. That thought stayed with him longer than any feeling of triumph.

At last he rebuked himself. Whether a man won or lost, to keep chewing on the finished matter was not the way of true training. Such backward thought was no better than regret. So he lengthened his stride and tried to leave the duel behind him. It was just then, when he had decided to walk faster, that he nearly stepped on an old woman crouching in the grass.

She was dressed almost the same color as the winter field, in pale plain clothes with only the cord of her padded jacket showing a soft purple. A small round head under a hood, a thin refined face, and hands holding a little basket of

young greens made her look more like a gentle old nun than an ordinary country woman. For a moment Musashi himself was startled, because another step and he might truly have trodden on her. He bent a little and asked in a friendly voice what she was gathering there in the cold field.

The old nun only stared. Her coral rosary trembled at her wrist, and in the basket lay young sprouts, shepherd's greens, butterbur buds, and other early plants she had searched out from between the roots. Musashi saw the trembling and at once guessed that she had taken him for some dangerous wandering ruffian. So he spoke even more gently. He remarked on how early the green shoots had come, and how spring, though weak, had truly begun if one could find such things already.

But instead of calming her, his nearness frightened her more. She dropped the basket where she was, cried out, "Kōetsu!" and ran off in great alarm with short, quick steps. Musashi remained standing there, surprised and almost ashamed. He had meant only kindness, yet he had frightened an old woman into flight. Looking down at the scattered greens, he felt more pain from that than from the duel.

So he knelt and carefully gathered the little plants back into the basket. It was no easy work, for she had picked them one by one from a poor winter field, and he felt the trouble her old hands had taken. Carrying the basket, he followed the direction in which she had fled. Before long he came upon a small open-air resting place with a red felt spread there, and a man sitting quietly with paper on his knees and a brush in his fingers. That man rose at once and came toward him with grave courtesy.

"Sir rōnin," he said, apologizing for his mother before anything else. He explained that he himself was already forty-eight and that from that Musashi could judge how old she must be. Her body was still sound, he said, but her sight had grown dim of late, and perhaps she had imagined some danger where none existed. He bowed deeply enough that Musashi, embarrassed, had to kneel at once and stop him. Musashi said the apology should come from him instead.

He explained exactly what had happened. He did not know why the old lady

had been frightened, he said, but seeing the basket and the scattered greens she had gathered with such care, he had felt sorry and followed only to return them. Hearing this, the son turned and called back toward the old woman in a warm, easy voice. He told her she had misunderstood and that the young swordsman had no harmful purpose at all. Then the old mother, still cautious, came partly out from hiding and bowed with great humility, apologizing again and again.

The whole matter might have ended there. Yet the son saw more in Musashi than a rough fighter passing through the field. He noticed the strange bright eyes, the dry hair, the whole sharp body that seemed able to cut by mere presence alone. And for some reason he did not shrink from it. Instead, he invited Musashi to sit and rest if he was not in haste. The old mother too joined him and said that once she had gathered a little more, she would cook a grass porridge and serve tea.

Something in that mother and son pair entered Musashi at once like warmth after a long cold road. The killing edge in him softened. He removed his straw sandals and sat on the felt without quite noticing when he had yielded to the invitation. Their speech was plain, but it held a depth of kindness and cultivation that did not press itself forward. Sitting among them, he felt as though some of the thorns growing from his own spirit were being taken away one by one.

As they spoke further, he learned who they were. The old mother was Myōshū, a woman of rare reputation and wisdom, and the son was none other than Hon’ami Kōetsu. Any man who carried swords knew the name of the Hon’ami house. Yet Musashi had never imagined that the famous Kōetsu would appear in so simple a form, out in the winter field beside his mother and a basket of spring greens. That surprise grew stronger when he heard still more.

Kōetsu was not only a man of the sword world through family name. He painted, shaped clay, worked lacquer, and above all was counted among the finest hands in writing of the age. Great nobles and refined people in Kyoto spoke of him with respect. Yet none of that pride sat on him like an ornament. He remained quiet and open, with none of the stiffness Musashi had expected from a celebrated man. Musashi, who had measured so many people by the scale of swordsmanship alone, suddenly felt that his scale was too short.

For that reason he became shy in the presence of Kōetsu and his mother. He could face armed men and not tremble, but before a deeper kind of humanity he always grew smaller and more honest. Kōetsu saw this and smiled inwardly, not to mock him, but because he found something lovable in that fierce young warrior. So they sat there together in the winter field, among the first green shoots of the year, while Musashi's heart slowly loosened from blood, victory, and loneliness. The duel had ended only a short while before, yet already another world had begun to open before him.

Part 6

The meal in the field was a poor one in outward appearance, yet to Musashi it seemed richer than many feasts. Myōshū cooked porridge and young greens and set them out on small dishes that looked plain at first glance and yet held a deep, quiet beauty. Musashi looked at one bowl and wondered whether Kōetsu himself had made it. When he learned that such things were indeed within the man's skill, his respect only deepened. It was not merely that Kōetsu could do many things. It was that in each thing he seemed to go inward, as if the work and the man were parts of one hidden depth.

Musashi felt himself growing small again in the presence of such a person. Whenever he met someone whose measure he could not reach with the rule of swordsmanship alone, he became shy in a way that battle never made him shy. So it was there in the winter field. He could not even accept Kōetsu's praise easily when the older man said that Musashi had sharp eyes and some true feeling for form. Musashi answered honestly that he knew nothing of ceramics or tea things and had only guessed badly, but Kōetsu smiled and said that good eyes were not formed only by study. A man who had long used the sword with seriousness, he suggested, might naturally come to see other things with unusual force as well.

That answer pleased Musashi and troubled him at the same time. He had spent his life thinking of the sword as the straightest road into truth, yet here before him sat a man who did not walk that road in the same way and still seemed to

stand on high ground. Kōetsu did not praise himself or display his gifts. He spoke simply, and from that simplicity came greater weight than from boasting. Musashi had met bold fighters, skilled monks, and proud masters, but this was different. Kōetsu's strength was quiet, and because it was quiet, it seemed to widen instead of striking.

Time passed before Musashi noticed it. A servant added more greens, Myōshū poured out a fragrant drink from a jar, and the little meal in the field went on with the peace of old country life. Yet inside that peace there was cultivation of a kind Musashi had scarcely known. The bowl in one's hand, the way the food was set out, the care with which a small thing was made and then used, all these carried meaning. Musashi did not understand the whole of it, but he could feel enough to know that a world stood there which his past wandering had hardly touched.

Later, when he thought back on the meeting, he understood that the field had not been the end of it. Afterward he found himself again near the Hon'ami quarter in the upper part of Kyoto, not far from places already dear to his memory. At a small bridge called Rakan Bridge he noticed white clouding in the water below. Each time it drifted across the stream and then cleared again. Looking more carefully, he saw that the muddy water was coming from one house where blades were being polished. Even then he did not guess that he himself would soon be living there as a guest.

It was Myōshū who saw him first and stopped him on the road. She was delighted and called him in as if his coming had been planned between them. Musashi had not in fact gone there with such bold intention, but once she took him by the words and led him inside the long gate, he let himself be drawn along. Kōetsu, when called from his work, received him with the same natural goodness as before. He said he had an important polishing task in hand and could not sit long at once, but he begged Musashi to stay and talk with his mother until he finished. There was no ceremony in it, yet no coldness either.

Only after entering did Musashi fully see the place. The people of the town called that corner Hon'ami Crossroads because Kōetsu's own house stood there

and around it lived relatives, craftsmen, and others of the same line, all in a clustered way like an old large family that had not entirely broken apart into separate households. To Musashi it was a strange sight. He knew the lower life of towns and roads well enough, but the life of a great Kyoto townsman, half craftsman and half something finer, had been outside his reach until then. The Hon'ami house stood between classes in a way that made simple naming impossible. Its men were workers, yet their connections reached nobles, great houses, and even powerful lords.

Kōetsu himself belonged to that difficult world completely. His family line had old warrior roots, yet their present life was that of skilled urban artisans. Money came from high places, old honor remained around the house, and still the daily work was pure handcraft. Musashi began to hear more of Kōetsu's reputation in that house, not from boasting, but from the air around him. He painted, worked clay, made lacquer, and above all wrote with such distinction that among living famous hands his name stood beside the greatest. Yet even with that reputation attached to him, he did not seem fully satisfied with his own achievement. That too impressed Musashi.

Evening deepened while he sat there. Small maidservants came and went with a modest grace that spoke of long household training. Kōetsu, feeling the cold more keenly than Musashi, noticed the sky darkening over Mount Hiei and the north clouds drawing in. He thought of closing the screens and making the room warmer, but Musashi had become absorbed in looking out across the garden toward a lower plum grove where children were playing ball. Their tastes, their bodies, even their skins answered the world differently. Kōetsu was shaped by city refinement and delicate perception, while Musashi sat there like a man made of hide, weather, and long roads.

The difference showed itself in the smallest things. When Kōetsu asked whether the air had grown too cold, Musashi answered honestly that it had not, and never guessed that the other man had wished to close the room more for comfort than necessity. Yet Kōetsu did not find him coarse in an ugly way. Rather, the contrast itself seemed to interest him. For Musashi, who could survive cold,

hunger, and pain with little complaint, the room remained open to the fading light. For Kōetsu, who lived by finer changes of feeling, the closing of evening brought another order of awareness.

Then a few boys of fourteen or fifteen, perhaps his sons or younger people of the house, came peering in from the veranda with their ball. At first they were lively enough to call to their uncle in a free voice, but when they saw Musashi sitting there, their manner changed. They became quieter, more respectful, and after a moment one of them asked whether he should go and call an elder from within. Kōetsu told them there was no need, yet they ran off anyway in their youthful eagerness. Their movement, the fading winter light, the quiet servants, and the cultivated disorder of the house all entered Musashi's memory at once.

So the rough victor of the field, who had crushed Seijūrō that morning with one blow, sat that evening in a world altogether different from the duel ground. There was no shouting crowd there, no public notice, no smell of burned grass. Instead there were bowls, children, polished steel somewhere beyond a room, and a man whose greatness did not depend on fear. Musashi could not yet understand how deeply such people might change him. But already he felt that the road of the sword did not run alone through killing grounds and lonely hills. It also passed, in some difficult way he had hardly begun to learn, through houses like this one and through men like Hon'ami Kōetsu.

Part 7

The boys had run off to call their grandfather, and after the screens were closed and the lamp was lit, the room changed at once. Until then Musashi had been looking outward, toward the fading light, the ball sounds, and the plum blossoms in the lower grove. Now the warmth of the house gathered around him more clearly. What he felt most strongly was not luxury, but ease. The distant sound of family laughter came softly through the rooms, and even to a first-time guest the place gave a feeling of quiet welcome.

He looked around more carefully. The room held no heavy display of wealth,

and that pleased him even more than fine objects would have done. Everywhere there was plainness, almost as if the household were trying on purpose to hide the smell of money under simple things. The effect was not poor, yet it was not proud either. To Musashi, it felt more like sitting in the guest room of some large country house than in the residence of a famous Kyoto townsman.

Then a strong, open voice sounded suddenly from behind them. “Ah, forgive me for keeping you waiting so long.” Musashi turned and saw the master of the house, Haiya Shōyū. If Kōetsu was fine-boned and quiet, this man was his opposite. He was thin like a crane, but his voice was large, lively, and younger than his years, and the whole impression he gave was of a man who moved easily toward others without stiffness.

Kōetsu introduced Musashi, and at once Shōyū answered in the same free manner. When he heard whose nephew Musashi was, he nodded with quick recognition and said that he knew the uncle’s name well. Hearing that, Musashi understood a little more clearly than before how men of the great town houses were linked with court people and high retainers. These merchants and craftsmen were not cut off from the upper world as country men might imagine. The city had finer threads tying rank to culture, craft to noble houses, and money to names of long standing.

Shōyū did not remain sitting long or speaking slowly. He had already decided what should happen next. Since the light was nearly gone, he said, it was no longer possible to wander at leisure as he had first imagined. Better to call for a palanquin and go at once. Then, turning directly to Musashi, he asked in a tone halfway between invitation and assumption whether he too would of course join them.

The contrast between the two older men amused Musashi at once. Kōetsu, if left to himself, might well have forgotten the whole idea of going out to the pleasure quarter, so deeply could he sink into thought, objects, weather, and talk. Shōyū, by contrast, seemed unable to let any pleasure remain merely an idea once it had come into his head. He was already moving forward before others had fully agreed. One held the world by quiet depth, the other by cheerful insistence.

Musashi, who knew little of such refined urban company, could only follow

the movement with his eyes and listen. Before this, the city had shown him roads, inns, dōjō, and the rougher parts of common life. But this was another side of Kyoto, a side where famous craftsmen, wealthy old families, noble connections, and the floating world could all meet in one evening without seeming strange. In his own mind, the sword had always stood at the center. Yet here again he found himself standing near forms of power and importance that the sword alone could not explain.

As Kōetsu and Shōyū exchanged a few more words, Musashi learned more of the latter's standing. The name Haiya, he discovered, was not a personal family name in the ordinary way, but a house-name taken from an old trade. Their people had once dealt in ash used for dyeing, a large business in earlier days and one closely tied to the city's older commercial order. Though Shōyū himself now lived more gently and had left such work behind, the old substance of the house remained. Like Kōetsu, he belonged to a world Musashi had scarcely entered before.

The more Musashi observed, the more he felt the width of Kyoto. One man like Kōetsu could stand near great lords, work with clay and lacquer by his own hand, and still remain plain in dress and manner. Another like Shōyū could live amid comfort, write linked verse, and yet speak with a rough good nature closer to a traveling companion than to a grand person. Neither fit the simple measures Musashi had long used. Their world had rank in it, but not like a warrior house. It had money, but not in the vulgar shape of greed. It had art, but not in a weak or useless form.

For that reason he did not refuse when Shōyū pressed the matter again. He did not know whether the night would teach him anything worth having, but he understood already that following such men for an evening was not the same as wandering idly after pleasure. The city itself was speaking through them, and he had lately begun, however dimly, to feel that the true path of a man might pass through more kinds of knowledge than he had once allowed. So while the winter evening deepened outside and the last of the children's ball sounds faded from the garden, Musashi remained seated among them, ready to be drawn farther into the

hidden life of Kyoto.

Part 8

Haiya Shōyū lost no time once he had decided on pleasure. He knew Matsuo, Musashi's uncle, and after that small thread of connection was made, he treated Musashi as if the younger man naturally belonged in their company for the evening. There was no stiffness in him. If Kōetsu moved like a man who could forget the whole world while looking at one bowl or one cloud, Shōyū moved like a man who, once an evening had begun in his mind, could not rest until it had become action. He urged them all to leave at once.

Since darkness had already fallen, the slow walking plan was abandoned. Town palanquins were called instead. Kōetsu and Shōyū took theirs, and Musashi, for the first time in his life, climbed into one of those swinging city litters and was carried along the edge of Horikawa. He had spent years on mountain roads, temple steps, muddy paths, ferries, and open fields, but this rocking passage through Kyoto's night was altogether new to him. The sound of the carriers' feet, the creak of poles, the moving lantern light, and the glimpses of water and eaves from behind a hanging blind made him feel that he was passing not through the world of fighters, but through another city hidden inside the same walls.

The air grew sharper as they reached Yanagi-no-Baba. The carriers themselves spoke loudly to keep warmth in their bodies. They said the wind struck like blows, that a nose could freeze off on such a night, and that some kind of weather was surely coming. Above them, the clouds Musashi had seen dimly from Kōetsu's house had now spread thickly across the sky over Kyoto. Their lanterns swung and flashed in the gusts, and the whole night seemed to be waiting for some change.

Yet the men inside the palanquins did not turn back. Shōyū enjoyed weather almost as much as he enjoyed drink, and Kōetsu, though finer in body and taste, did not refuse the outing. Musashi, for his part, had no reason to draw back from cold or wind. So the three of them went on toward the quarter, carried between

darkness below and dark cloud above, while the city lamps thinned and then thickened again according to the streets through which they passed.

By the time they reached the pleasure district, the place was already shining under lamps, though the weather made the lights seem unsteady and the night itself feel rawer than usual. The women who received them were practiced in grace, and the servants' movements carried the discipline of a house used to important guests. Tea and sweets were placed before them in a garden room while the hosts prepared further arrangements. Even the small maidservants moved with care enough to remind Musashi that here too there was a kind of training, not of sword or prayer, but of body, tone, and gesture.

Musashi watched all this with the same seriousness he would have brought to a strange fighting school. Nothing in such a world was familiar to him. He had known roadside inns, low drinking houses, and rough company often enough, but this polished pleasure world was different. Rank, poetry, wealth, wit, desire, and household art all met there and shaped one another. A room could be playful and dangerous at the same time. A laugh could be careless on the surface and sharp beneath. Even before anything truly happened, Musashi sensed that much.

Then word came that one guest, above all others, was wanted for the evening. Shōyū wished to see Yoshino Tayū. He spoke the wish not as a passing fancy, but as a man naming the final ornament needed to complete a properly satisfying night. A messenger was sent. The answer that returned was promising and yet not enough. Yoshino, they said, wished to come. She would come if possible. But she was at that moment with other guests, and those guests would not let her go at once.

That reply changed the color of the room at once. Shōyū's good humor became sharper. He could tolerate delay from ordinary obstacles, but not from what sounded like stubbornness on the other side. "Who is the unpleasant guest?" he asked. The answer, when it came, only half annoyed and half amused those present. It was "Kangan-sama," the hidden name used by Karasuma Mitsuhiro, with his usual noble companions beside him. Kōetsu smiled. Shōyū smiled too, but his smile had more challenge in it.

“Good,” he said in substance. “Snow, wine, and now this. If Yoshino comes, the night will be complete.” He ordered writing tools brought at once. Since the men beyond were no common buyers but cultivated people, force would not do first. Wit had to go before feet. He pushed paper and ink toward Kōetsu and demanded a poem asking that Yoshino be sent over.

Kōetsu resisted lightly, saying that such a request would need a good poem, and that good poems did not simply rise on command. Shōyū laughed at the difficulty and brushed it aside. If a great poem could not be made, then something lively and sufficient would do. He took up the brush himself and wrote the opening lines asking that one branch of Yoshino’s blossom be moved into his humble hut. Seeing that, Kōetsu’s own poetic spirit was stirred enough to write the lower lines, saying that the flowers on the high peak must surely be cold among the clouds.

Shōyū was delighted. He said such words should humble even cloud-dwelling noblemen. The poem was sealed and entrusted not to some low servant, but to a courtesan of standing, so that its dignity would not be diminished before it reached the other room. Musashi watched the whole thing with fascination. Here men challenged one another not first with steel, but with verse, names, rank, and elegance. Yet beneath that elegance he could still feel combat.

The reply that came back was worse than refusal. It was only blank paper. No answer, no poem, no excuse, no bow, just white paper returned. That struck Shōyū harder than an open “no.” To be denied by silence was, in its own way, more insulting than to be denied by words. At once his playful mood turned stubborn. He declared that if he remained quiet after such a return, then those young court gentlemen would only think themselves finer than they were. He would go himself, he said, and bring Yoshino back by direct talk if not by poetry.

Kōetsu tried to restrain him with gentle hands and cooler judgment, but Shōyū had entered the fierce stage of old drunken pride where refusal becomes fuel. He was not a foolish drunk who merely fell over his own feet. He was worse in a livelier way. The more delicate the insult, the more his spirit stiffened. Women tried to support him as he rose, and he scolded them if they held him too much,

then demanded help if they let him go too freely. Even his staggering seemed to belong to the game. He asked to be carried, mocked those who pitied his unsteady feet, and made the whole movement through the corridors itself into part of the evening's entertainment.

Musashi, following with Kōetsu behind him, saw that even drunkenness had degrees and kinds in this world. Shōyū was old, thin, and bent by wine, yet his will remained sharp. He knew the inner and outer sides of pleasure too well to be fully mastered by it. The women handling him knew that too. They laughed, coaxed, and obeyed, but always with care. It was as if all of them were acting in a play whose rules each knew by long practice.

At the same time, something else began to press on the night. The wind grew stronger. Snow started to move through the air, not in hard driving sheets, but in soft scattered flakes that looked almost like flower petals at first. Seen in the lantern light, they seemed too delicate to matter. Yet each gust brought more, and the women began muttering that the weather had turned in truth. Beyond the bright rooms and perfumed sleeves, Kyoto was quietly becoming a snow city.

So Musashi's first entry into that polished pleasure world did not come as a warm and careless spring night. It came under dark cloud, rising wind, and the beginning of snow. Poetry, rank, drunken pride, famous beauty, and hidden insult were all already moving around him. He had followed Kōetsu and Shōyū thinking only that he would see a new side of the city. He was now beginning to understand that this new side had its own forms of rivalry, display, and danger. The sword was not in any man's hand there, but conflict was already alive in the room.

Part 9

The three town palanquins moved through the dark along the willow road, rocking under the wind. The carriers blew white breath and complained loudly that the cold struck like blows, that noses might fall off on such a night, and that something was surely coming down from the black clouds over Kyoto. Yet what waited ahead shone so beautifully that even Musashi forgot the complaints.

Beyond the wide darkness, a mass of earthly lights burned and trembled as if a swarm of fireflies had been polished by the wind. Kōetsu leaned from his palanquin and called back softly, “Musashi-dono, there it is.”

When they entered the quarter, Musashi felt at once that this too was a world trained to its own discipline. Lamps burned behind screens, servants moved with smooth practiced steps, and the women who received men of name spoke with a softness that was also skill. Nothing there was rough in the roadside way he knew. Even small maidservants carrying tea and sweets seemed to have been taught how to place each finger and lower each eyelash. He watched as seriously as if he had entered a new fighting school.

Shōyū, however, was not there to study such things in silence. He wanted one woman above all others. “Yoshino Tayū,” he said, and the whole room took his wish as something natural, though not easy. A messenger was sent. The answer came back that Yoshino wished to come, but that she was at that moment with other high guests and could not leave at once. When Shōyū learned that those guests were none other than Kangan-sama, Karasuma Mitsuhiro, and his noble companions, his face changed from pleasure to stubbornness.

Force would have been ugly in such a place, so wit went first. Shōyū called for paper and ink. He wrote a playful opening line asking that one branch of Yoshino’s blossom be moved into his poor hut, and Kōetsu, smiling, added the lower line about flowers growing cold among the clouds. The verse was sent not by a common servant but by a woman of standing, so that no shame would touch the request on the way. Musashi watched this with fascination. Here, men challenged one another not first with steel, but with names, poetry, rank, and style.

The reply came back as white paper and nothing else. No poem, no refusal, no excuse. Blankness itself had been sent in answer. Shōyū took that more deeply than an open insult. He laughed at first, but the laugh had iron in it. Kōetsu tried to cool him, yet Shōyū would not let the matter go. He rose and declared that since words had been treated so lightly, he would go and fetch the flower himself.

While this was happening, the weather turned in truth. Snow began to fall, soft at first, so soft that it seemed no heavier than drifting blossom. Seen against

the lamp glow, each flake looked too delicate to matter. But they kept coming, and the roofs, the branches, and the screens of the quarter slowly gathered a pale hush around them. Outside, Kyoto was becoming a snow city. Inside, the warm rooms only grew more enclosed, more fragrant, and somehow more dangerous.

The evening lengthened and changed shape. Men who had at first sat in separate groups now crossed one another's paths more freely. Famous people of different kinds, old merchant houses, noble guests, cultivated idlers, and people living by beauty and art, all passed under the same roof for an hour and made it seem natural. There were games, cups, and talk that moved from play into argument. Some spoke of politics and rank, some of the place of nobles and townsmen, and some only drank until their thoughts rose too large for their words. Musashi sat among them and felt more strongly than ever how wide the city was.

Yoshino came at last, but not like an ordinary woman brought in to please a room. She came with the calm of a person long used to holding the eyes of men who believed themselves important. Yet when her eyes fell on Musashi, something in the evening shifted. He was not polished, not easy in movement, not sweet of speech, and not beautiful in the courtly way. But he sat there with a body like a drawn bow and with eyes that had no servant's fear in them. Yoshino had seen many men, but not often that kind.

Musashi, for his part, could hardly look at her directly. The more beautiful the woman, the more awkward and inward he became. Yet his awkwardness did not amuse Yoshino as she might once have expected. It moved her. In the middle of a house built for practiced pleasure, she found before her a young man who did not know how to enjoy pleasure in the ordinary way at all. He was full of force, shame, alertness, and some hidden suffering that made him seem, even while alive and seated before her, like a man already walking close to death.

Little by little, the room loosened from him and he from the room. At some point, without any open announcement, he was no longer in the common company of all the others. The conversation, the cups, the laughter, and the arguments remained elsewhere. Musashi found himself instead led into a quieter place where only Yoshino's presence held the room together. Attendants, not understanding the

true strangeness of the pair, prepared luxury fit for a princess and withdrew. When they left, even the gold bells hanging from the silk pillow seemed too bright and too worldly for the silence that remained.

The snow outside thickened. From time to time, masses of it fell from roof or branch with a heavy sound, as though someone had jumped down into the courtyard. Each time that happened, Musashi's whole body sharpened. Yoshino watched him and saw something she had not expected to see in a man victorious enough to sit in her room without asking for anything. His nerves were alive to every danger. His eyes, clear as a hawk's, did not belong to a man resting in pleasure. They belonged to a man who felt blades waiting for him in the dark.

So the snowy night that had begun with verse and vanity changed into something far stranger. Yoshino, older in knowledge of love than Musashi could yet imagine, felt herself turning back toward maiden uncertainty in the face of his fierce innocence. Musashi, who had entered the pleasure quarter as a guest of Kōetsu and Shōyū, now sat alone with the most celebrated woman there and could not give himself wholly either to desire or to ease. Beyond the room, the quarter still glittered. Beyond the quarter, snow was covering Kyoto. But within that quiet chamber, what stood between them was not luxury. It was the nearness of beauty, death, and a dawn that had not yet broken.

Part 10

The room prepared for Musashi and Yoshino was too rich for the stillness inside it. Before the attendants withdrew, they had spread bedding fit for a great lord's daughter, and from the silk pillow small golden bells hung in the dim light. Yet those things did not invite ease. They only made the silence sharper. Musashi sat as if every muscle in him were awake, while Yoshino, though older in the knowledge of men and love, found herself drawn back toward the nervous heart of a girl.

In years, she may have stood one or two steps above him. In the world's hidden arts, in the hearing of desire, in the understanding of what men seek and

what they fear, she stood far above him still. But in that room all such advantage became uncertain. The young warrior before her did not look at her with the practiced hunger she had seen a thousand times. He looked, when he looked at all, as if the beauty of her face itself were almost too bright to bear, and then his eyes would turn away again toward shadow, wall, or night.

The attendants had imagined an ordinary pleasure meeting and had left them with every outer sign of it. Yet the very perfection of that preparation hindered both of them. The fine bedding, the bells, the expensive quiet, all these stood there like witnesses. Yoshino, who was never clumsy in such matters, found her own movements becoming more careful than usual, and Musashi, who was already made awkward by beauty, became even more inward. They were close enough to feel one another’s breathing, yet far enough in spirit that neither could easily step across the distance.

Outside, snow kept falling. From time to time a great mass slid from the roof or from a branch and dropped with a heavy sound, as if some man had leaped down into the garden. Each time it happened, Musashi changed shape at once. Yoshino saw the shadow of him swell like a hedgehog putting out every spine. The eyes that had seemed almost shy when they rested on her face became in an instant hawk-clear and terrible. His nerves were alive to the tip of every hair.

That sight made her shiver. The cold of the hour before dawn was certainly sharp enough to enter the bones, but what touched her now was not only cold. Between the beat of blood that rose toward a man and the chill that rose from danger, her body held two different kinds of trembling at once. Yoshino had known many men who were bold in talk and soft in danger. Musashi was the reverse. In his silence she could hear death waiting, and because of that, his nearness drew her more deeply.

For a long while neither spoke. The brazier fire continued to burn between them as steadily as if it alone understood what kind of meeting this was. Then the kettle Yoshino had set over it began to sing. That ordinary domestic sound brought her back to herself. The professional calm she had worn for years returned, not as a mask exactly, but as a needed form. She moved with quiet grace, prepared tea,

and when it was ready, invited him gently to come nearer and warm his hands.

Musashi thanked her with words alone. He bowed slightly, but did not turn fully toward her. Even that refusal was not harsh. It was simply that some greater pull held him. The duel that would come at dawn had already taken his whole body. Yoshino understood then that she had not been brought into the room to conquer a man through beauty, nor had he come there to lose himself in her. He had merely passed, for an hour, into the warmth of another life while death stood waiting outside. And she, who had spent so long lending herself to other men's passing desires, felt suddenly that this hour mattered more to her than to him.

Elsewhere in the same quarter, the night had gone on in another fashion. Takuan, who had come in company with Shōyū and Karasuma Mitsuhiro, had not let himself sink fully into the amusements around him. His mind kept turning back toward Otsū. He had learned how badly she had been frightened by Osugi and had spent part of that very day searching out the old woman's lodging at Sannen-zaka. Later he had gone on with a lantern to Kiyomizu to be certain of what had happened. Since then he had brought Otsū safely back, yet the fright had struck too deeply. She had taken fever, and now still lay in bed, while Jōtarō watched over her with touching devotion.

For that reason Takuan wanted to return early. He thought of the two waiting at the Karasuma house and felt no comfort in wine or argument. But Mitsuhiro was lively, and Shōyū, once his pride had been touched, had no wish to let the night end quickly. They passed from games and noisy drinking into heavier conversation, speaking of great matters, warrior rule, the worth of court nobles, the townsman class, and the country's outward future. Takuan sat by the post with his eyes closed, smiling now and then at the edges of their words, though his own thoughts stayed elsewhere.

At last the talk broke for a simpler reason. Mitsuhiro suddenly noticed that another noble guest had slipped away without farewell, and Shōyū, growing sober enough to feel the wound to his pride again, realized that Yoshino too was no longer with them. The room lost color at once. A great house of pleasure could excuse many things, but not the silent disappearance of the very flower most

desired that night. Mitsuhiro called sharply for the little attendant Rin'ya and ordered the child to fetch Yoshino at once.

While the child ran off, Takuan half opened his eyes and listened. He understood enough of the quarter to know what this might mean. He also knew enough of Musashi to guess that if the young man had indeed gone with Yoshino, he would not be resting like an ordinary guest. So even there, in the middle of silk, snow, and late wine, Takuan's mind returned to the same thought. Men called Musashi wild because he lived outside settled forms, but what most separated him from others was not roughness. It was that even on a night given to beauty, his soul would still be standing under the shadow of dawn.

Shōyū's irritation rose again as the delay lengthened. He had already swallowed the insult of the blank sheet, and now this too touched his vanity. Yet beneath his annoyance there was also real curiosity. The celebrated Yoshino was not a woman to misplace herself carelessly, and Musashi was not a man likely to be carried away by ordinary pleasure. If the two had withdrawn together, then something stranger than common seduction had occurred under his roof. That possibility unsettled and excited the room at once.

But in the quiet chamber apart from them, the strangeness had already taken shape. Yoshino no longer felt like a courtesan guiding an inexperienced guest. Nor did Musashi feel like a man receiving a woman's favor. They sat in the same room yet before different abysses. She was discovering that her own heart, which she had long hidden under polish and knowledge, could still beat with the helpless force of first love. He was discovering that even beside the most beautiful woman in Kyoto, the call of battle, danger, and destiny could still rise stronger than desire.

Dawn was drawing near. The snow outside thickened and whitened the whole quarter. In the pauses between falling roof-snow and the breathing of the kettle, Yoshino could hear the nearness of morning. She knew that when the first light came, the strange hour between them would end, and Musashi would go not toward life but toward blood. That knowledge entered everything. It made the tea she offered him gentler, the room colder, and the silence between them more precious than any practiced exchange of words.

Part 11

The strange night in the pleasure quarter did not end in the way such nights usually ended. Before the deeper hours had passed, Musashi had already made up his mind to go. He borrowed paper and brush, wrote a short note, folded it, and tucked it with care into the sleeve of the robe he was leaving behind. Then he asked the old keeper of the roadside rest place to keep both the robe and the note. If he had not returned by the lower hour of the boar, the old man was to send them to Kōetsu at Ogiya. When he had finished giving these instructions, he asked the time once more, as if even in that quiet moment his whole body were already measuring itself against the hours ahead.

A girl bought him new straw sandals. Musashi did not take them in haste. He turned them in his hands, checked the twist of the cords, and then fitted them over his leather foot covers with the care of a man examining armor before battle. After that he paid more tea money than his poor condition could easily bear, accepted a traveling hat, and stepped out into the snow. He did not put the hat on properly, but only held it over his head against the flakes as he walked away without saying more than he needed.

The snow was soft, finer than blossom, and the road took it quietly. Near the river at Shijō there were still scattered house lights, but once Musashi turned toward the trees of Gion, the world changed at once. There the snow lay in broken patches, the ground was dark, and the only small lights came from lanterns and sacred lamps hidden among trees and shrine buildings. Even the shrine halls and priests' houses seemed empty of human life. Only the snow made sound, now and then slipping from branches and then leaving the darkness even deeper.

In that silence another group was already moving. They had been kneeling in prayer before the Gion shrine and had only just risen when the evening bell sounded from the temples on the mountain. The sound of the hour carried sharply through the snow air, so clear that it seemed to strike the inner body more than the ear. One of the men turned at once to the younger figure among them and asked

respectfully whether the cords of his straw sandals were sound. The younger man was Yoshioka Denshichirō.

He had come there with his followers not merely to pray, but to harden his spirit before what lay ahead. There was in him less beauty and more raw force than in his elder brother Seijūrō. His body was fuller, his temper harsher, and his confidence less elegant but more direct. Yet because Seijūrō had already fallen, all the hopes, anger, and shame of the Yoshioka house now pressed toward him. He had not inherited only a challenge. He had inherited a wound.

The men around him felt that wound as their own. They spoke carefully, watched him closely, and kept their respect always in front. The snow on their shoulders and sleeves gave them a ghostly look in the dim shrine light. Some of them had prayed sincerely for victory, others perhaps more for the washing away of disgrace, but all of them knew that this was no ordinary meeting of swords. Musashi's name now carried a danger far sharper than before, because one Yoshioka brother had already been broken by him.

Denshichirō himself did not speak much then. Men of his kind often grow quieter, not louder, as the instant of violence comes nearer. Yet his silence was not the same as Musashi's. Musashi's silence tended inward and grew like a deep well. Denshichirō's silence gathered like pressure inside a vessel too tightly bound. The men serving him could feel that pressure and were eager to smooth every small matter, even down to the cords of his sandals.

While they were still near the shrine, Musashi passed through the same dark quarter of snow and trees. He did not know every man standing there, but he knew enough of the night to feel that the city itself had tightened around him. Kyoto was no longer only a place of roads, merchants, artists, and women's faces. It had become a field of drawn intentions. Somewhere in that snow-dark city, the next blow against him was already waking and putting on sandals of its own.

He went on without haste and without softness. The note left behind, the robe folded away, the hat held against the snow, all these were signs not of fear, but of order. Before danger, he liked to leave even small matters finished. That was not because he thought of death theatrically. It was because unfinished things irritated

him, and a man who wished to keep his whole mind for the sword could not allow needless loose ends to trail behind him.

So the same snowy evening carried two men forward through Kyoto, each by a different road and with a different spirit. Musashi walked alone through dark trees and shrine lamps, stripped down to purpose. Denshichirō stood among followers, prayers, and family duty, drawing the strength of a house into his own body. The snow fell on both alike. The bells of the city sounded for both alike. Yet what moved beneath those equal outward things was not equal at all, and the night that held them both was already narrowing toward blood.

Part 12

The group leaving Gion Shrine moved through the snow with a hard and silent purpose. The bell of the mountain temples had just sounded the hour, and the cold made every breath look white and sharp in the dark. Men around Yoshioka Denshichirō kept asking whether the cords of his straw sandals were sound, whether his clothing sat well, whether anything still needed attention. He brushed off such concern in a rough, confident way and even used the moment to instruct them, saying that in weather like this a man of the sword should prefer cloth cords to straw ones. He walked in the middle of them with broad force in his shoulders, as if he meant to crush the night simply by going through it.

Yet the men around him were not at ease. Snow fell softly, but their faces were drawn and dry, and the memory of Seijūrō's defeat walked among them like a fourth shadow beside every three men. Denshichirō was not his brother. He had less beauty, less polish, and less of the city's easy grace. But he had weight, heat, and a direct violence that some men found more reassuring. That very difference made the others gather around him more tightly, as if the whole wounded pride of the Yoshioka house had now been packed into his body and sent forward through the snow.

Musashi, meanwhile, had already reached the place first. He did not wait out in the open field. Instead he stood on the veranda of the long hall at Sanjūsangendō,

using the building itself as part of his ground. The height of the veranda gave him command over the earth below, and the wall behind him protected his back. Any man coming at him from the front would have to fight upward, while any side attack would be slowed by the shape of the place. He was not merely brave. He had already chosen the better ground.

Denshichirō saw him there and felt hatred rise at once. The snow, the darkness, the hall, and the man waiting above him all combined into one sharp insult. He had come to avenge his brother and to wash the name of the school clean again before Kyoto. Instead he found Musashi already in possession of the field, already calm, already forcing the Yoshioka side to answer him on terms that favored him. Even before either man moved, the balance had leaned.

Near Denshichirō stood Ōtaguro Hyōsuke, ready to help if needed. But Denshichirō did not want help close at hand in that first instant. He told Ōtaguro sharply to stay back and not crowd the space. It was not mercy toward Musashi, nor pure confidence. It was the instinct of a man who knows that a bad ally too near the blade can become a burden. He wanted the area before him clean, his own movement free, and his enemy fixed clearly in front of his eyes.

Musashi then spoke. His voice was quiet, almost like water thrown over heat, and because it was so quiet, it struck more sharply than a shout would have done. Denshichirō answered not with words, but with action. The first cry came out of him with full force, and almost in the same breath his long sword flashed through the snow air. It was a powerful cut, exact in strength and full of killing intent, and it swept through the place where Musashi had been standing.

But strength of stroke is not the same as mastery of the moving target. Musashi was already gone from that line before the blade arrived. He had slipped along the veranda and then dropped from it into the snow, turning movement itself into the answer. Faster still was the counter that came from below his ribs, where his own blade seemed to leap out of the body rather than from the hand. For one instant, the two swords flashed together under the falling snow, and after that instant the world seemed to slow.

Snowflakes, which had been barely visible before, now looked strangely

large and gentle, as if they had all the time in the world to descend. Wind touched them and made them turn. White on white, shadow on white, breath on white, the whole night seemed to pause around the action that had already decided the matter. Denshichirō's great body gave a broken cry, staggered backward, and then collapsed into the snow with a heavy burst of whiteness. By the time he tried to call out again and order Musashi to wait, the man he had come to kill was no longer standing beside him.

The answer to that cry came from far off in the dark. Men shouted, "It is the younger master," and "Quickly, quickly," and then the snowfield began filling with black figures running hard. These were the relatives and pupils who had stood farther off, believing there would be time enough to close in after the result. They reached the place only to find both Denshichirō and Ōtaguro already down. Ōtaguro had been cut from the right ear across toward the mouth, and Denshichirō had taken one slanting stroke from the crown of the head down across the face. Both were dead. Both had been killed by a single stroke each.

The snow around them had already turned pink. Mibu Genzaemon, the old uncle, bent over Denshichirō in grief and rage and cried out that he had warned them, warned them again and again not to take Musashi lightly. But warning was useless now. He clutched the body and spoke to it as if the dead could still hear rebuke. Around him the others stared with faces emptied by shock. Two brothers of the Yoshioka house had now fallen, and both had fallen quickly, cleanly, and before the city could even settle its breath after the first defeat.

Musashi had already withdrawn into the snow-dark before the others could close on him. That retreat was not mere flight born of fear. It was part of the same sharp judgment with which he had chosen the veranda and broken the first attack. He had struck, finished, and vanished before the wider force could seize him. To men who hated him, it looked cunning and unbearable. To men who understood battle, it showed that he knew not only how to cut, but how to survive the world that followed a cut.

So the snowy night ended in a second ruin for the Yoshioka side. Denshichirō had gone out under prayer, family duty, and the burden of his brother's shame,

and all of it had come down in one brief exchange on the white ground before the hall. The snow kept falling after his death as though nothing in the world had changed. But for the Yoshioka house, everything had changed. The first defeat could still be called a blow. The second began to look like destruction.

Part 13

The men who gathered around Denshichirō and Ōtaguro did not need long to understand the truth. No calling of names, no lifting of shoulders, and no pressing of hands could call either man back. Ōtaguro had been cut from the right ear across toward the mouth, and Denshichirō had taken one slanting stroke down from the crown across the face. Each had been killed with only one cut. Under the feet of the men bending over them, the snow slowly turned from white to a broad, quiet pink.

Mibu Genzaemon, the old uncle, held his nephew and lamented like a man reproving the dead for not listening while already knowing that reproach had become useless. He cried that he had warned them not to despise Musashi. The others stood about in a silence more terrible than shouting. Seijūrō had fallen before, and now Denshichirō too was gone. What had still been called misfortune after the first defeat was beginning to look, even to them, like the breaking of a house.

In that bitterness, Kojirō appeared again. He had come near enough to be seen, and that alone was enough to sour every face turned toward him. The Yoshioka men remembered too well how he had spoken before Seijūrō's fall, and how his sharp eye had measured ruin ahead of them. So now, with two brothers dead under Musashi's hand, they did not receive him as a witness or as a friend. They received him as a man whose presence itself seemed to carry bad fortune.

Miike Jūrōzaemon spoke most openly. He told Kojirō that no one on the Yoshioka side had asked him to act as witness in that morning's matter. If he had come, then he had come on his own taste for involvement, or perhaps at Musashi's request, but certainly not at the formal desire of the Yoshioka house. The words

were cold and sharp, and they were meant to drive him away. In such a moment, grief wanted a target, and Kojirō's proud face stood too near to refuse that role.

Kojirō answered in the same hard spirit. He said that when the duel notice had first been raised, he had spoken plainly that he himself would stand as witness, and that no one had objected then. Miike replied that such a thing had never amounted to a proper request from either side, and that a man could not claim authority merely because he had named it for himself. The old bitterness between them, already present before the duel, now came back with deeper poison. In another setting, they might almost have drawn on one another then and there.

Kojirō's face changed. The anger in him was no longer the bright, half-playful anger of a daring youth. It grew pale and tight. He said, in effect, that they would remember this insult later and that they should wait to see who would show whom the true measure of things. Then he turned sharply to go, as if he would rather cut himself loose from the whole ruined company than remain one instant longer among men who could neither accept warning nor endure truth.

It was at that moment that old Mibu Genzaemon stopped him. Unlike the younger men, the uncle still had room in his grief for calculation. He called Kojirō back with the courtesy due not merely to a guest, but to a swordsman whose value had at last become impossible to deny. Kojirō halted, though not with willingness. The blood on the snow, the dead under the men's hands, and the bitter wind across the field all stood between them while the old man chose his words.

Mibu spoke more wisely than the others had done. He said, in substance, that he knew well enough what kind of man Kojirō was and that Seijūrō himself had regarded him as a formidable young warrior. That much was true, and saying it out loud changed the air. The old man did not abase himself, but he did something harder. He treated Kojirō not as a nuisance to be chased away, but as a force that must now be understood and perhaps drawn closer.

This mattered because the Yoshioka side had been altered by two deaths. Seijūrō's fall could still be called a single blow. Denshichirō's death made that impossible. No one there could now tell himself that Musashi was merely a rough provincial fighter who had caught them badly once. He had taken the elder brother.

He had taken the younger brother. He had broken the house in the place where it was most proud, its sword.

Kojirō understood all this, and because he understood it, his anger did not wholly master him. He was too proud to soften quickly, but he was also too intelligent not to feel the weight of the hour. The Yoshioka men who had mocked his warning earlier now stood in blood and snow with proof before their eyes. That fact alone gave him a dark satisfaction. Yet it also brought him nearer to the center of the coming struggle than ever before.

So the snowy field did not end only with Denshichirō's death. It also marked a turn in the shape of the whole conflict. From that point on, the matter was no longer a simple duel between proud men of the sword. The Yoshioka house had been driven toward desperation, and Kojirō, who had until then stood partly outside it, was being pulled toward its inner circle by the very force of its ruin. Musashi had vanished again into the winter distance, but behind him he had left not silence, but a field where grief, insult, fear, and new calculation had all begun to move together.

Part 14

Around that same time, another line of trouble was tightening in the dark. Matahachi had again seen Kojirō and had lost all calm at once. Even after Kojirō had passed, the fear remained in him like a sickness. He told Osugi in a weak, hurried voice that the sharp-eyed young swordsman had just gone by and that it might be dangerous to stay there any longer. He spoke like a man who expected a blow from every shadow and wanted first to save himself before asking what duty required.

Osugi listened with growing contempt. When he explained that the "Sasaki Kojirō" whose name he had once shown her on the license had been only a lie and that the real Kojirō had later beaten him badly for that fraud, the old woman stared as though words had failed her. What she saw before her was not merely a weak son, but a man stripped of even the poor pretenses by which he had once tried to

stand taller. Yet because he was still her only child, that very weakness twisted her heart into a deeper, harsher possessiveness.

She cut off his frightened talk and brought him back to the one thing that mattered to her. Did he know, she asked, that Gon-uncle was dead? Matahachi went still at once. He had not known. When Osugi said that the old man had died on the shore soon after they parted from him, the news struck Matahachi with a real pain, but not one strong enough to change him. Osugi watched his face closely and then told him there was still something that should please him more than grief.

"Otsū," she said.

The name worked on him with terrible force. He lifted his face sharply and asked whether the woman who had just gone farther off with Osugi was really Otsū. Osugi stepped in front of him at once and demanded to know what he meant to do if she allowed the two of them to meet. Matahachi answered with the softness of a guilty man. He said he wanted only to apologize, to beg forgiveness, and with Osugi's help to make things right again. Then, like a child asking for the return of a toy lost years before, he said that he wanted the two of them to become husband and wife as they had once been meant to be.

Osugi struck him across the face. The blow was not only anger. It was disgust. She had not dragged Otsū into that place so that her son could kneel and whimper for love. She had brought the woman there because she wanted the old insult answered in blood. When Matahachi still muttered that he could not give Otsū up, Osugi's whole body began to shake. She said that if he truly wished to shame her so deeply, then better she should die there at once.

With that she drew her short blade and raised it toward her own throat. Matahachi cried out and seized her arm in panic. Osugi, seeing that fear, pressed harder. If he could not cut down the woman who had betrayed him and the house, she said, then perhaps he could at least watch his mother die. If he would not choose one death, then he would have the other on his hands. Matahachi protested wildly, begging her to stop, but she drove him further and further into the corner she had prepared for him.

At last she spoke plainly. Had she not brought Otsū there, she said, because

she wanted his own hand to punish the faithless woman? Was that not a mother's proper heart toward a son who had been shamed? Matahachi recoiled, asking whether she truly meant that he should kill Otsū. Osugi answered with a voice that no longer sounded humanly warm at all. Yes, she said. If he still had any manhood, any blood of the house, any duty left in him, then he should cut off the root of his own shame with his own sword.

Yet even under such pressure, Matahachi's heart ran in another direction. He groaned that he still loved Otsū and that he wanted her no less for all that had happened. Osugi turned pale and began trembling again, this time with a rage near madness. She said that if he still spoke of love after all the years, all the disgrace, and all the deaths, then he was no son of hers. Again she brandished the blade and demanded either Otsū's death or her own. Matahachi, unable to bear either choice and too weak to refuse the game itself, gave way to the moment and moved as she wanted.

So at last he stood before Otsū. The place was dark, lonely, and thick with the sound of water somewhere below. Otsū, who had already been dragged through too much by Osugi's schemes, looked at him not with tenderness, but with watchful pain. Matahachi began poorly. He tried first to sound like a humbled man, speaking of regret, apology, and his wish to return to what had once been promised between them. But as soon as Otsū did not melt, his words changed shape, becoming self-pitying, then grasping, and finally accusing.

He said that Otsū had originally been his betrothed and that without his consent she could belong to no other man, certainly not to Musashi. Otsū answered with a strength that only made him smaller. She reminded him that a written release had already come long ago under the names of both Matahachi and Oko, telling her plainly to consider the bond ended and marry elsewhere if she wished. Matahachi denied it in confusion and anger, saying he had never meant such a thing and that Oko must have acted on her own. Otsū replied that Takuan himself had seen the letter and laughed at it before throwing it away. There was no softness in her now. She had crossed too much pain to be moved by a man who remembered love only after ruining it.

Desperate, Matahachi tried another path. He said that if they forced the world to oppose them and if she still chose Musashi, she could never live in peace. He swore that he had already cut himself free from Oko, that he had changed, that he could still make a life with her. But Otsū would not bend. She said such talk was useless to her. When he pressed still lower, asking whether even his bowed head meant nothing, she answered him with the clearest truth he had heard from her yet. A man who did not know shame, she said, could not move a woman's heart.

That sentence broke the last restraint in him. Shame, wounded pride, fear of his mother, jealousy of Musashi, and the old weakness that had never become manly strength all rushed together at once. The sword came into his hand, and the sword seemed then to hold him more than he held it. Otsū saw the change in his face before she saw the blade clearly. It was not the steel alone that froze her. It was the expression of a man no longer ruled by reason, only by panic and injury.

He cried out at her and struck. The blade slashed past the knot of her sash. Otsū gave a sharp cry and fled into the dark. Matahachi shouted for Osugi even as he chased her, and from farther off the old woman answered at once and ran toward the sound with her own drawn blade. The ground fell away into a steep place near rushing water. Otsū caught her sleeve on a branch, tore free, and ran on again, while behind her the mother and son came in terrible pursuit, no longer pretending to judge, persuade, or reclaim. They had become hunters in the dark, and she their living prey.

Part 15

Otsū ran without seeing where her feet were falling. The dark below the slope was full of wet noise, and the sound of the waterfall ran through the night like torn cloth. Once her sleeve caught hard on a branch, and for one horrible instant she thought the two behind her had seized her. She tore the cloth loose and stumbled forward again, half sliding, half running. But the ground there was no open road. It was a trapped place under the cliff, with trees, bushes, and steep broken earth hemming her in on every side.

Behind her, mother and son came down with the sound of hunters closing on an animal. Osugi's voice cut through the dark first. She cried that the woman was caught now and that there was no need to hesitate. Matahachi answered with broken breath and blind rage, calling to his mother and then cursing Otsū as if curses could harden the hand that still trembled. The old woman's small blade was already drawn, and her whole body had become only one thing, the will to see Otsū destroyed.

Otsū heard those voices so close behind her that hope seemed to leave her all at once. Her body still moved, but her heart felt already cornered. The darkness before her looked like a wall. The darkness behind her was worse, because it had names and voices and steel in it. She tried to gather herself for one more leap through the brush, but the ground betrayed her, and the next step threw her down among dry reeds, broken branches, and tangled shrubs.

Osugi saw the fall and screamed for Matahachi to strike quickly. By then he was no longer carrying the sword like a man deciding what to do. He was being carried by it. The fear in his face, the jealousy, the pressure from his mother, and the blind shame of his own life had all driven him beyond the place where he could still stop and think. With a hoarse cry he sprang forward like a beast and brought the blade down into the thicket where Otsū had fallen.

There came at once the cracking sound of branches and then a cry from something living under the blow. Blood flew upward through the dark brush. For an instant everything afterward stood still in Matahachi's eyes. He had not seen clearly what the blade had entered. He had only struck with all the force in his body and heard the answer. To a man already half mad with fear, that was enough. He believed he had done it.

Osugi leaned forward beside him and peered into the mangled brush with hungry satisfaction. She gave a dry laugh and said that at last her son had done it. She told him that the thing below no longer moved, that the old shame of their house had at last been cut down, and that half the weight on her chest had now fallen away. Then, still speaking as if this were some proper duty at last fulfilled, she ordered him to take Otsū's head and carry it home. In her mind, revenge and

family honor had become the same thing completely.

But Matahachi did not move. He stood like a man turned to wood, the blood still on his hand and on the blade, his breath bursting out of him in ugly shallow gasps. When Osugi urged him again, he gave her not obedience but a sound like a sob breaking in the throat. He rubbed his eyes with the back of the blood-marked hand and cried out that he had killed Otsū. The words were not proud. They were full of terror. He seemed only then to understand what his own arm had done.

Osugi stared at him in disbelief. Had she not wanted this? Had she not driven him to it with all her force? She praised him again, but the praise only made him recoil further. He burst out against her then with the misery of a coward who has at last obeyed the cruelest voice nearest him and now can no longer bear either the deed or the one who urged it. He cursed her as a mad old woman and cried that she had made him kill the woman he still loved. The hatred he had never found courage enough to turn against himself now struck first at his mother.

Yet even in that rebellion there was no true strength. Matahachi's grief did not become resolve. It became confusion, self-pity, and fear. He had wanted Otsū, wanted forgiveness, wanted his mother's approval, wanted to avoid pain, and wanted to avoid shame, and because he had wanted all these things at once, he had become the servant of the worst impulse among them. Now, standing over what he believed to be Otsū's blood, he could no longer hide from the kind of man he was. His mother saw that too, though she named it only as weakness.

For a few moments the dark hollow held only the waterfall's voice, the old woman's harsh breathing, and Matahachi's broken cries. The night around them did not change. The trees did not pity them. The water did not pause. In that indifference, the act seemed even more terrible. A mother still thought first of the severed head that should be taken. A son, with blood on his blade, thought first not of atonement but of his own unbearable pain. And under the torn brush at their feet, the thing they believed they had cut down lay hidden in the dark.

Part 16

For a few breaths after the blow, neither Matahachi nor Osugi truly understood what had happened. The cry that had burst from the brush had been sharp and living, and blood had leaped upward through the broken stems. That was enough for Matahachi. He stood shaking, the sword still in his hand, and believed that he had cut Otsū down at last. Osugi, peering into the darkness with eyes hungry for revenge, took the same thing for truth and cried out that her son had finally done what a man of the house should have done.

But the truth in such darkness was not so simple. The undergrowth moved, then went still. Water roared nearby. Loose leaves and broken twigs continued falling for a little while after the stroke. Otsū herself did not lie there. She had already torn free from the branch that had held her and slipped farther down through the dark. The thing Matahachi had struck was not the woman he imagined, but some living creature driven into the same tangle by fear and chance. In the confusion of branches, blood, and panic, his mind accepted the easier horror and held to it.

When Osugi urged him to take the severed head and finish the business cleanly, Matahachi could not obey. The sword had become suddenly heavy, and his whole body felt wrong to him. He wanted to look, and he could not bear to look. He wanted his mother to keep praising him so that the deed might feel necessary, and at the same time he wanted her to stop speaking forever. He had not become brave by drawing blood. He had only become more miserable. So after one sick glance toward the trampled brush, he turned away from it with the face of a man fleeing from his own hands.

Osugi still shouted after him. She called him weak and half-made, then called him her son, then cursed Otsū again, though she believed Otsū already dead. But the old woman’s cries no longer entered Matahachi clearly. He stumbled up the slope and into rougher ground, carrying the drawn blade as if it were something that might still bite him if he put it away too quickly. The night around him was not empty. Every shape among the trees looked as though it might suddenly speak Otsū’s name back at him.

In that state, he wandered farther than he knew. He was no longer chasing

anyone, and no one was visibly chasing him. Yet his legs kept moving with the same hunted haste. Once or twice he thought he heard water again and started, believing he had somehow come back to the same place. Then he thought he heard a human cry and turned with the sword half-raised, only to find nothing there. Fear after violence has a way of making the world answer every thought with another shadow.

At last, in a more open place, the night changed its shape again. There were people there, or signs of people. Matahachi, still half out of himself, moved into the edge of another life and found that he was not alone. Somewhere nearby was a young woman already trembling with fear, and the man she feared came quickly through the dark. When the two men saw each other at almost the same instant, both voices broke out together. “Who is that?” The new arrival came on fast and stopped short only when he saw the naked blade and the blood still wet upon it.

That blood, as it happened, was dog’s blood. Somewhere in his blind rushing after Otsū, or in the confusion just after, Matahachi had struck at some animal in his path. He no longer held a clear memory of the instant. But the man facing him now saw only that the sword was bare and bloodied. So he glared at Matahachi from the first moment as if a dangerous criminal stood before him. “Who are you?” he demanded again, with the hard authority of someone used to pressing others by sheer confidence.

Matahachi’s first alarm passed quickly. The figure before him was tall and strongly built, but young, almost his own age. More than that, the young man wore a flashy front lock and a handsome young warrior’s robe, a style that in Matahachi’s present bitter temper looked soft and foolish rather than dangerous. “So this is the fellow,” he thought, looking him over with rising contempt. “This peacock is the man who has been tormenting the woman.” In a strange way, the thought relieved him. It was easier to be angry at someone else than to continue looking back into the dark he had just come from.

So he stayed silent on purpose and let the other man speak again. The youth repeated his question more sharply. Matahachi then answered not with courtesy, but with a rough challenge, asking in turn what business the other had with him.

Such words would have been reckless even under calmer stars. In that moment they were almost a wish for trouble. He wanted to strike somebody, anybody, and the beautifully dressed young man before him seemed the easiest target in the world.

The young warrior did not retreat before the tone. Instead his eyes hardened at once, and what had looked soft in his dress stopped looking soft in his face. Matahachi felt that change but did not yet understand it. Men who have long lived badly often misread danger. They are too used to measuring others by outward show alone. So he continued to despise the young man and even drew comfort from that contempt. Here, he told himself, was a chance to prove that he was not wholly broken, not wholly driven, not wholly the coward his mother's eyes made him feel.

Yet before any full clash could unfold, the world turned against Matahachi in another, more humiliating way. The smell of blood on his blade and on his clothes had spread into the night. Along the roads and wastes near Kyoto, half-wild dogs often moved in hungry bands. Whether they took him for wounded prey, for some strange rival creature, or merely for a weak thing worth teasing, they began to gather. One bark sounded, then another, then many. Matahachi spun once and saw gleaming eyes, narrow ribs, and sharp teeth circling wider and wider around him.

A man can face one enemy and think himself brave. A ring of snapping dogs is another matter. They did not attack in a straight line. They moved, feinted, leaped away, came back, and filled the dark with a low, ugly noise. Matahachi, already shaken and sick in spirit, lost what little firmness he had found. He shouted, slashed, backed toward a tree, and in the end made himself into a ridiculous fortress, pressed against wood, trying to keep teeth from his legs while still holding the sword in front of him. There was no heroism in it. Only terror.

The young warrior watched this with cold attention. Whatever anger he had felt toward Matahachi did not disappear, but the sight changed it. Here was no steady killer and no great criminal. Here was a man who had come out of some dark business with blood on his blade and no strength in his center. The dogs

themselves seemed to sense it, for they tormented him rather than rushing cleanly in, as if they too were mocking what was weak in him. Matahachi's face, twisted now between rage and fear, looked more miserable than dangerous.

In that miserable circle he stood exposed before another man more completely than if he had confessed his whole life aloud. His sword could not save him from dogs. His anger could not command respect. His earlier contempt for the youth in bright dress now began to curdle into something else, the uneasy feeling that he had mistaken softness for power and plain showiness for harmlessness. The night had not yet finished teaching him how much smaller he was than the image he still tried to defend inside himself.

So the dark after Otsū's escape did not settle into any clean result. Matahachi had not won anything. He had not truly avenged anything. He had only added blood, confusion, and fresh humiliation to a life already bent out of shape. Otsū was gone into the dark beyond him. Osugi remained somewhere behind, believing revenge close at hand. And before him, under the thin stars and among the circling dogs, stood a young man in bright clothes who no longer looked weak at all.

Part 17

The young man who came quickly through the dark was Sasaki Kojirō. Akemi had feared exactly such a meeting, and when she saw him there at last, the fear in her body became real. The blood on Matahachi's drawn blade, still wet from the dogs he had struck in panic, only made the scene worse. Kojirō stopped before him at once and demanded to know who he was. The question came not once, but again and again, each time more sharply, as if he meant to force the other man into truth by the edge in his voice alone.

Matahachi, however, had already made his first mistake and clung to it. He looked the young swordsman over from head to foot and decided he was only some flashy weakling. Kojirō's front hair, his bright young-man's robe, and the ease of his posture all seemed to Matahachi like signs of softness. So instead of answering plainly, he kept silent with an ugly, swollen pride, thinking that he

would first humble this over-decorated youth and then ask his own questions later. He even told himself that this must be the man who had been tormenting Akemi and that he would do a good thing by teaching him fear.

But silence of that kind does not always increase a man. Sometimes it only reveals him. Kojirō saw at once that the man before him was no steady warrior, only a trembling, blood-marked figure trying to look large. The dogs circling in the dark seemed to understand it too. They barked, rushed in, sprang back, and ran around him in low snapping circles, not because they feared him, but because they had already judged the weakness in him and found sport in it. Matahachi's sword flashed here and there, yet each swing showed less control and more panic.

Akemi, caught between the two men and the dogs, shrank back in terror. She had known Matahachi before, had known him through old ties to Oko and the broken house of her childhood, and yet even that knowledge did not comfort her now. One man was wounded in soul and desperate. The other was cool, hard, and dangerous in a way far less noisy. Neither gave safety. So in her fear she did the only thing her body found at once. She fled from the open ground and took refuge near a tree, climbing higher in the dark while the confusion swirled below.

Kojirō still demanded an answer. Matahachi still gave none that could satisfy either dignity or sense. By then the dogs had worked him into a fever of shame. Every bark seemed to laugh at him. Every glance from Kojirō seemed to strip him smaller. So instead of standing and naming himself, he chose the only thing he had chosen all his life when pressure grew too sharp. He thought of escape. The instant that thought formed fully, his body turned with it.

Kojirō saw the movement before it was complete. "Run, and I will cut you," he said, and the words came like a spear thrown after a retreating animal. But Matahachi had already broken away. For one jump it seemed he had opened a good distance between them. The dark helped him, and the confusion of dogs and brush gave him one hopeful instant. Then Kojirō's great long sword, the Drying Pole itself, flashed over his shoulder.

He did not use it twice. One sweep was enough. The blade drew a silver line in the dark, swift as a snake through reeds, and at once Matahachi's body lost all

shape of running. He rolled over the ground two or three times like something dry and light blown by wind, and then lay stretched out without motion. The dogs scattered from the sudden clean force of the cut. The whole place, which a moment before had been full of noise, seemed to stop and listen.

Kojirō did not look long at the fallen man. He sheathed the long blade in one smooth motion, and the high note of the guard striking home sounded almost delicate after such violence. Then he turned away from Matahachi as though the matter no longer deserved another glance. His concern, if it can be called concern, went elsewhere. He stepped beneath the tree and called upward for Akemi.

"Akemi," he said, and the voice now was not the hard voice he had used with Matahachi. "Come down. I will not do that again. I have cut down the man who, you said, had been your foster mother's husband. Come down and help tend him."

No answer came from the branches. The pine darkness above him was thick, and only the wind moved there. Kojirō called again, promising in his own way that he would not torment her now and that the danger below had passed. Still there was no answer. The monkey on his shoulder stayed strangely quiet, as if even that little creature understood the change in the hour.

Then Kojirō climbed the tree himself. He moved up through the branches with the speed of a man used to doing whatever the moment required, whether graceful or not. But when he reached the place where he had expected to find her, he discovered that Akemi was gone. She had slipped away in the darkness the first moment she found, leaving only shaken needles and empty branches behind. Kojirō sat there for a little while among the pine boughs, not speaking, with the night wind moving around him and his monkey crouched close.

Below him, Matahachi lay where he had fallen. The blow had not killed him outright. It had struck him down hard enough to empty him of movement and pride together, but life remained. That fact would matter later, though nothing in the stillness below made it clear at once. For the moment he looked no different from another body thrown down by a stronger hand. And perhaps that too suited the truth of him. In spirit, he had indeed been thrown down.

Kojirō finally came back to the ground and stood for a moment where the dogs had circled earlier. Their eyes and noise were gone now. The blood smell remained, but the mockery had ended. He looked once toward the darkness where Akemi had escaped and once toward the fallen Matahachi. Neither sight gave him what he wanted. His face, under the loose front hair and handsome dress, held no joy then, only irritation and a deeper restless displeasure.

As for Matahachi, the stroke did more than wound his body. It stripped away yet another false skin. Only moments earlier he had thought himself able to frighten and punish the man before him. In one instant he had been cut down instead, without even making his name matter. The world had again shown him that his pride rose more quickly than his strength and that his fantasies of manhood still ran ahead of the man he actually was. When consciousness later returned, that truth would weigh more heavily than the pain of the cut itself.

And so the night closed over them in three different ways. Akemi fled farther into uncertainty, unable to trust the man who pursued her or the man who had appeared before him with blood on his sword. Matahachi lay broken in the dark, not dead, but humbled yet again by a force he had misread. Kojirō stood between pursuit and contempt, having cut the man down but failed to keep the woman he wanted near him. After that, the paths in the volume shifted. This dark confusion under the trees gave way to a harsher road ahead, where open killing, large design, and the narrowing of fate would no longer wait in the shadows.

Part 18

Matahachi did not die from Kojirō's cut. He came back to himself later with pain, shame, and fear all mixed together, and the first thing he did was not to repent or grow wiser, but to cling again to whatever living hand seemed nearest. In the confusion after that dark encounter, he drew Akemi along with him and tried to turn flight into a new beginning. He told himself that leaving Osugi behind would solve everything. If the old woman learned she had been abandoned in such a desolate place, he thought, she would rage for a while, but once he made his

name and rose in the world, all would somehow be forgiven.

So he urged Akemi forward with a forced kind of confidence. He said they should hurry and choose another road. When she hesitated and warned him away from the mountain path ahead, he laughed too loudly and said that no goblin or dwarf spirit on some lonely shoulder of the hill could be as frightening as his own mother. Yet even while pretending lightness, he kept glancing back, and when at last he heard Osugi calling his name from the valley behind, the false ease left him at once. The two of them ran up the slope and vanished into the rocks while the old woman's voice wandered below them in emptiness.

After that, the story turned sharply. The dark knots of Otsū, Akemi, Matahachi, and Osugi did not disappear, but the road ahead narrowed toward something greater and more terrible. Men had spoken of challenge, revenge, and public honor long enough. Now those things were moving toward their final test. Under a dark predawn sky, on the way toward the lower pine at Ichijōji, the line between life and death itself seemed to grow thin.

The wind had begun rising in the deep hedge along the narrow road. Small birds stirred and cried in the brush, though the morning was still too dark for their shapes to be seen. Sasaki Kojirō, remembering the tricks and false calls already used in this struggle, came running across the long narrow path and shouted before anyone could challenge him that it was he, the witness, Kojirō. He had come in such haste that his breathing was hard, and when he reached the crossing by the lower pine, the Yoshioka men hidden around it came boiling out of their positions and blackened the place with their numbers.

They had been waiting with impatience almost beyond bearing. The old man Mibu and the others at once demanded news. Had Musashi appeared? Was he already near? Kojirō answered that he had indeed met him. At those words every face turned harder and more alert. Then Kojirō added that after the two of them had walked together for five or six chō from the Takano River, Musashi had suddenly vanished from his side. The instant he said that, Miike Jūrōzaemon cried out that the man must have fled.

Kojirō checked that disturbance at once. He said no. From Musashi's look,

from the quiet tone of his words, and from the whole settled way he had carried himself, Kojirō did not believe he had run off in fear. On the contrary, he suspected that Musashi had only shaken him off because he meant to use some stratagem he did not want the witness to see. That explanation worked on the Yoshioka men more deeply than simple news of flight would have done. Fear became caution. Caution became a harder kind of tension.

All of them had already prepared in numbers, and not for a fair duel. Men were hidden in the brush, behind the crossings, among the low places, and around the lower pine itself. Yet until that moment they had still been waiting in the ordinary way, expecting the enemy to come by the road into the trap laid before him. Kojirō's report changed that. If Musashi had slipped away from his side on purpose, then he might already be circling them. He might already have seen what no enemy should have seen. He might already be nearer than any of them wished to think.

That fear was not empty. Musashi had indeed seen. Coming by another line, he had thrown himself down suddenly into the wet grass like a wild rabbit flattening against the earth. From there, with his chest and knees soaked in the undropped dawn dew, he stared hard toward the lower pine. He measured the ground by eye, saw the height and distance clearly, and at last picked out a figure hidden in the tree itself. The man up there was not merely watching. He had some kind of firearm or heavy projectile weapon with him. Musashi felt both anger and pity at once. To mass so many men and then add such hidden force against one lone opponent was pitiful. But it was not unexpected.

He did not make the foolish mistake of thinking that the one figure in the tree was the whole danger. If one armed man could be hidden above, others might be behind rocks, down in the low ground, or stretched along the ridges with bows or guns. A single discovery was not the whole answer. The only true gain he had won was this: the men below had forgotten the mountain behind them. Their faces and weapons were turned toward the roads and crossings in front. They did not believe the back slope mattered. That was where Musashi had found them unguarded.

So he remained motionless and thought. Courage alone was useless now. To

step out openly under such conditions would be no bravery at all, only stupidity. The men below were waiting for one man to arrive as a marked target. They meant to swallow him with numbers, confusion, and sudden force from several sides at once. But because they believed only in the front of the road, their own arrangement had created a weakness behind them. Musashi, lying there in the wet grass, understood that the battle would not be won by answering their expectation. It would be won by breaking its shape.

Meanwhile, below the pine, the Yoshioka forces grew more and more uneasy. Kojirō's words had not calmed them. They had sharpened them. Men peered into the dimness between the hedges and tried to listen to the wind as if it would tell them where Musashi stood. No one wished to speak too much, because speaking would only betray tension. Yet no one was at peace either. The lower pine, the crossing, the hidden men, the old grudge, the public shame of two dead brothers, all these things stood there together waiting for one instant to begin.

Musashi waited too, but not in the same way. He was not merely preparing to survive the ambush. He was measuring how to strike first and where the first break must be made. The men below believed they were the hunters. From where he crouched above them, Musashi began to see how hunters could be turned into prey if the first movement were swift enough and fell at the right point. The dawn was still dark. The dew still clung to the grass. The lower pine still held its hidden watcher. And in that last breathing space before steel, powder, and cries burst open the morning, Musashi fixed his whole being on the one road now before him, the road where life and death had become the same path.

Part 19

For a while Kojirō remained up in the tree, sitting among the dark needles with the wind passing over him. He had called for Akemi and found nothing. He had cut Matahachi down in one stroke and yet had gained no satisfaction from it. The woman he wanted to keep near him had slipped away, and the man he had despised had fallen without even giving him the clean answer of a true enemy. In

that restless stillness, he looked less like a victor than like a hawk that had seen its prey vanish into a deeper wood.

When he finally came down, Matahachi was still alive. The blow had not ended him, though it had emptied him of strength and pride together. There were others nearby by then, men who belonged not to Matahachi's pitiful world, but to another chain of old duty and sword inheritance. From them Kojirō heard again of the dead and of obligations still hanging from the past. The night no longer belonged only to rage and impulse. It had become entangled with name, transmission, and the rights of the sword.

One of those men, Genpachi, spoke with more steadiness than anyone else there. He did not deny that Matahachi had played a false and ugly part by living under Kojirō's name. But he also urged that punishment need not be crude. If the matter was truly the honor of the dead and the face of the family, there were ways to repair that later and more completely. A man did not always have to be finished in the grass at once in order for the dead to be answered properly.

Kojirō listened. He was not a merciful man in any ordinary sense, but he was not foolish either. Once his first anger had passed, there was little profit in cutting down a broken pretender who had already been stripped of all dignity. If a further reckoning was needed, it could be made under cleaner circumstances. If not, the shame in which Matahachi already lay was itself a punishment of a special kind, perhaps sharper than steel for a man like him.

So Kojirō let the matter fall. He said, in effect, that if Genpachi thought another way better, then he himself had no objection. He would not waste more of the night on a man already lying in defeat. Then he added the true reason for his impatience. Akemi had escaped, and that concerned him more at that moment than any false Sasaki lying on the ground. He meant to search for her at once.

But Genpachi stopped him with one last reminder. Had he not forgotten something more important than the wounded man or the runaway woman? There was still the transmission scroll of the Chūjō line, the license that had originally come down from Kanemaki Jisai through his nephew Tenki and should by right now be in Kojirō's hands. Matahachi had stolen not only a name, but the paper

that gave shape and proof to that name in the world of the sword. That must not be left with him.

Kojirō answered, “Ah, that.” The answer was light, but the thing itself was not. Genpachi knelt at once beside the fallen Matahachi and thrust his hand into the man’s robe. From the bottom of the belly-wrap he drew out the document that had so long been hidden there. Matahachi, though still alive enough to feel hands moving across his body, made no protest. He did not regret losing it. On the contrary, once it was gone, he felt his breast grow strangely lighter, as if one more false burden had at last been lifted from him.

That feeling told the truth of his whole fraud more clearly than any confession could have done. He had carried the name, the license, and the pose of another man not because he was strong enough to bear them, but because he had hoped they would bear him. Once they were taken back, nothing noble remained in him to defend. He did not even have the force to feel cheated. Relief came first, and that relief itself was his humiliation.

Kojirō took back what was his without ceremony. The scroll mattered. The man who had hidden it did not. If Matahachi lived, then he lived. If he died later, then he died. Kojirō’s concern had already turned elsewhere. He was thinking of Akemi moving alone through the dark, of where she might flee, and of how quickly a frightened woman could vanish into Kyoto’s countless corners once a little distance opened behind her.

So he separated from Genpachi there. The business of the license was finished. The false Sasaki had been cut down and stripped of the last thing by which he had borrowed another man’s shape. Genpachi could do as he wished with the rest, whether that meant tending the wounded, carrying news home, or arranging later explanations to the family and the dead. Kojirō had no wish to stay and watch over any of it.

Yet before leaving, he stood for one brief instant and looked down at Matahachi again. The man on the ground was not worth hatred any longer. He had become only an example, the sort of man who takes up another’s name because he cannot stand inside his own, and who even in danger thinks first of escape

rather than of truth. Kojirō's face held no pity. But neither did it hold the bright irritation of a few moments earlier. The matter had gone flat for him.

Then he turned and went off in haste to look for Akemi. The wind still moved through the pines. Somewhere deeper in the dark, the woman he wanted had slipped beyond his grasp again. Behind him, Matahachi remained on the ground with his life still in him and his falseness exposed. Ahead of Kojirō, the road bent toward larger dangers still, for the struggle around Musashi was narrowing, and men no longer meant only to challenge him. They meant to kill him outright, by any means that would work.

Part 20

The men hidden around Ichijōji had not gathered there for a fair meeting between swordsmen. They had already thrown that away in their hearts. After Seijūrō and Denshichirō had both fallen, the older and harder men of the Yoshioka side had come to one decision. Musashi must not be allowed to leave alive. If he escaped once more, then whatever they said afterward would sound like excuses. If he died there, then the dead would keep silence, and the living could tell the story as they wished.

So they prepared in the dark before dawn with all the caution of men who feared one opponent more than they feared shame. Some held ordinary swords. Others carried half-bows. One man was placed in the tree with a gun. They did not even trust numbers by themselves. That was how far the matter had changed. A house that had once trusted the brilliance of its school now trusted hidden weapons, numbers, and traps.

Musashi had expected no less. That was why, when he felt something wrong in the shape of the lower pine and the crossing below it, he had thrown himself flat into the wet grass instead of stepping forward like a proud fool. Dew soaked his knees and chest through at once. From there, like a wild rabbit pressed close to earth, he stared at the tree and found the hidden man with the gun. He did not think that man was the whole danger. He understood at once that bows might lie

behind stones, more guns farther off, and swords in every fold of the ground.

Yet the sight gave him one gift. All the men below had turned their eyes and their expectation toward the roads in front. They had forgotten the mountain behind them. Their trap had a back side, and they were leaving it open. Musashi remained still and let that truth sink into him fully. Courage would not save him there. Only speed, timing, and the choice of the first point to break would do that.

Below, the Yoshioka side was growing more uneasy with every breath. Kojirō had told them Musashi had slipped away from him, and that alone had sharpened the whole place with fear. Men who had meant only to wait now found themselves listening to every leaf and shadow. The young heir of the Yoshioka house, a child placed there as the name under which the house still stood, was guarded near the center of the formation. Around him were the real fighters, the men who meant to kill Musashi before the boy could ever be touched. That was exactly where Musashi's eyes settled.

He did not descend straight down. He moved first through the rough rear slope, choosing places where brush and broken ground would cover him from the front. Then, when he had come close enough, he struck without warning. He did not announce himself. He did not challenge. Like a sudden beast dropping from a ledge into penned animals, he burst out where no one expected a human enemy to appear.

The first cry came too late. Before the hidden men could even turn together, Musashi was already among them. His blade fell not on the strongest warrior first, but on the young heir. In a war of one against many, sentiment would only be another form of death. He cut down the child in a single rush and at once threw the whole Yoshioka side into ruin. The center of their gathering, the name they had meant to protect, had been broken before their own hands had even found order.

Men shouted that the heir had been taken. Others cried for the gunman to fire. But confusion had already entered them. Some rushed toward Musashi and got in one another's way. Some looked around wildly, unable to understand from where he had appeared. Others, hearing only the name of the fallen child, lost their heads

and ran toward the wrong place. In that first instant, Musashi gained what he had needed most, not safety, but a moment in which the many ceased to behave like one body.

He used that moment with absolute force. Two or three men were down before the others understood the direction of his movement. He drove not toward the open road they had expected him to take, but toward the weak place between the bamboo and the stream. Those nearest tried to hold him there, but the closeness of their own numbers betrayed them. A man with room can strike. A crowd in a tangle can only jostle and shout. Musashi cut his own narrow path through that living knot and sprang over the small water beyond.

Behind him they roared at last with one voice. “Wait, Musashi!” “Do not let him go!” “After him!” Men poured through the bamboo gap, some stumbling, some slipping, some already maddened beyond skill. Musashi was by then up the bank in two great leaps. He paused only long enough to breathe and turn. From that higher ground he saw the whole shape at once. The lower pine stood below him. The crossing lay under it. The scattered groups were joining into one black mass, and more men were running in from the sides.

What he had first imagined as many was now even more. The Yoshioka side had not come with ten or twenty. It seemed as if the whole remaining strength of the school had gathered there, blackening the slope and the field like a moving stain. If they had joined hands, they might almost have circled the whole open ground. Yet for all their number, they had been struck at the heart. Musashi stood alone above them, his sword fixed in front of him like one sharp point of light against a field of iron.

Dawn was now breaking. Men from the road, woodcutters, peasants, and monks from the mountain paths had begun to notice the clamor and gather at a distance. Horses cried somewhere below. The village roosters had started too, as if ordinary morning had come on schedule despite all this blood. Around the upper edge of the field, even the watchers near Hachidai Shrine were beginning to understand that this was no duel at all, but slaughter waiting to become legend.

Musashi did not retreat farther at once. He stood and looked over the men

coming toward him. There were too many to cut down one by one in any common sense. There were too many even to count easily while they moved. Yet he did not let that number enter his heart as fear. It entered instead as necessity. The battle had changed shape again. It was no longer about breaking into the trap. That had been done. It was now about passing through the whole black ring of men before it could close completely around him.

Part 21

The men below had gathered in numbers great enough to darken the whole slope. If they had linked hands, they might almost have made a ring of steel around the entire field. Musashi stood above them with his sword held small and bright before him, not wasting a movement, not giving them a cry or a challenge. From the village side, from the roads, and from the paths down from Mount Hiei, people were already beginning to notice the disturbance. Woodcutters, peasants, and monks stopped and stared, and even horses and cocks in the distance answered the rising noise.

He did not wait long. Once he had seen the shape of the ground, the weakness in the ring, and the point where panic could be driven into the center, he moved. He had already taken the strength of the shrine into himself, and now he went down from the height as if the god stood at his back. He did not descend like a man stumbling into danger. He descended like a man throwing himself into his only possible road.

What mattered first was not the strongest swordsman among them, but the heart around which their courage had been gathered. The young heir, Genjirō, stood there as that center, a child in years but the vessel of the Yoshioka name. Musashi struck him first. To men watching from outside, the act was terrible and pitiless, because the boy was no true measure against him. Yet in such a field, pity would only have meant death for the lone man surrounded by many.

The effect was immediate. Men shouted in disbelief that the young heir had fallen. Rage burst from them, but rage is not order. Their whole force, which had

meant to close upon one enemy like a single trap, broke into separate cries, separate charges, separate fears. Old Mibu Genzaemon came first with a face full of grief and fury, lifting his heavy sword above his head as he rushed in. Musashi gave way a little with his right foot, turned, and sent his blade back up in the same flow in which it had just passed the boy's neck.

The old man's arm and face were caught in that rising answer. At almost the same instant, another attacker drove in from behind with a spear, and a third came from the front. The field was too tight for clean individual duels now. Men crashed into one another's lines, stumbled across the dying, and entered Musashi's reach one by one or two by two, exactly as he needed them to. Before those nearest fully understood it, the old man and the spearman had already fallen into one red confusion at his feet.

Another man rushed him straight on, full of the blind courage that appears when too many people are shouting behind one back. Musashi cut him through the ribs and sent him on for two or three steps more with death already inside him. Others cried to one another to come on, to strike there, to catch him now, but their cries did not become one will. They were no longer hunters closing from prepared shadows. They were men trying to close a hole after it had already been torn open.

That was the whole secret of the fight from that point onward. Musashi never allowed them the stillness needed to surround him fully again. He kept changing the center. He cut where a face suddenly opened, leaped where a shoulder blocked him, and turned a body into a wall against the next blade. Men who thought to strike him from the side found his sword already coming from another direction. Men who feared to be the first in died behind bolder fools. The great black ring of Yoshioka strength had numbers, but its numbers now worked against it, because fear and fury made each man hurry at a different instant.

Witnesses on the roads and near Hachidai Shrine could see only parts of it. They saw black figures rushing, a narrow brightness moving among them, and sudden bursts of men going down into the pale ground. They heard shouts for help, shouts of hatred, and the names of the dead. They heard the strange cry that rises when a group begins to understand that the many are not enough. The dawn itself

seemed to sharpen from those sounds.

Musashi did not think of winning glory there. He thought only of breaking through before the ring could heal. Every blow had to make a path, not a spectacle. Every step had to carry him toward the place where their numbers were least useful and their fear most contagious. He had entered the dead center of their plan and turned it into the beginning of their ruin, and now he kept forcing that ruin outward with each cut and each leap.

Behind him and before him, the whole mountain seemed full of enemies. But because he had already accepted that feeling before he descended, it no longer confused him. All his body had become battle, down to the fingers gripping the hilt and the toes seizing earth inside the sandals he had blessed with shrine water. Where another man would have frozen at the sheer count of opponents, Musashi had already passed beyond counting. He was moving inside necessity alone.

So the great ambush at Ichijōji did not begin as the Yoshioka men had planned. It began with their center cut out, their order broken, and their great advantage of numbers turned into a choking crowd. Around the lower pine and across the slope, they still came in waves, and the morning's blood had only begun. But already the story had changed. The lone man they meant to crush was no longer trapped inside their design. He was carving his way through it, and every man who saw that understood, if only for an instant, that the battle had become something more dreadful than an ambush. It had become a struggle in which one will was trying to pass through the hatred of an entire house and live.

Part 22

Men below him shouted all at once. "Wait, Musashi!" one cried. "Shameful!" another answered. "How can you show your back?" Their voices broke through the bamboo in confused waves, not like one command, but like many wounded prides chasing after a single target. Musashi did not waste a glance on their words. He was already beyond the outer edge of the bamboo, leaping the narrow stream below it and then springing up the bank beyond with the speed of a hunted animal

that has chosen the only gap left open.

He did not run blindly. Once he gained the little rise above the brook, he turned and gave himself only two or three breaths. That brief pause was not weakness. It was measurement. From there he could finally see the dawn beginning to spread over the lower ground, and below him lay the crossing by the lower pine exactly as if some dark knot had been tied in the earth. Around that knot the Yoshioka men were gathering in broken masses, and as the shouting moved outward, more figures came in from every side.

What had looked like many before now became more terrible still. Men were pouring toward the rise from the road, the grove, and the fields until the whole slope seemed to blacken under them. In one breath Musashi understood that the force before him was perhaps three times what he had first counted. This was not some small band of hot-blooded disciples alone. It was the whole remaining strength of the Yoshioka side, drawn together in one place for extermination rather than honorable trial.

A lone sword in Musashi’s hands shone there on the rise, fine and narrow as a needle. Against it moved a whole field of iron, men enough that if they had linked hands they could almost have ringed the entire open ground. Yet the numbers did not crush his spirit at once. He stood where he was and looked over them, blue-eyed and still, while the cold of the last dark hour touched his face and hands. Whatever fear entered him came not as confusion now, but as sharper wakefulness.

The world itself was beginning to wake around the slaughter. Somewhere a tired horse cried out. From the village and the mountain paths came the first movement of ordinary morning, woodcutters, peasants, and monks going about early tasks. When they heard the shouting, they stopped and called to one another, asking where the fighting was. Even the roosters in the distant huts answered, and from the higher side near Hachidai Shrine a small knot of watchers stood fixed, staring down at the scene.

That changed the battle again. Until then, the Yoshioka men had meant to kill Musashi in secrecy and afterward tell the story as they pleased. But once the roads

awoke and the mountain people turned their heads toward the sound, the fight belonged less to hidden design and more to what living eyes would carry away from it. Men on the Yoshioka side felt that too. Some shouted louder from anger. Some hurried their feet, wanting the thing finished before more witnesses gathered. Some, seeing Musashi alone above them and remembering the bodies already behind them, felt the first sting of unease in their own numbers.

Musashi read all this while scarcely moving. The enemy had numbers beyond fairness, but numbers are not one thing. They become many things once fear, haste, wounded pride, and the pressure of onlookers begin working through them. Men who a little earlier had believed they were the hunters were now laboring under another burden as well. They had already failed to hold their center. They had already lost the child in whom the house's future name had been gathered. Now they had to pursue the killer uphill in growing daylight before strangers' eyes.

So he did not see only danger below him. He saw disorder. The first rush through the bamboo had not merely saved his life. It had broken the shape of the trap. Those coming after him were no longer arranged as hidden weapons around a single point. They were climbing in anger and clashing against one another in their hurry. Some wanted to shoot, some to cut, some only to be first enough to wipe away shame. And because each man's purpose had now separated a little from the others, Musashi found before him not one great beast, but many smaller openings moving inside the larger mass.

The wind came hard from the mountain and struck his body with wet cold, flinging fine drops from the trees and from the lower pine's branches as if dawn itself were raining on him. Below, the great pine shook and trembled like a sign. The men around it seemed to surge and contract with each new shout. Musashi's breathing went down into the bottom of him, so deep and so even that the life in his fingers and even in the nails of his toes felt already engaged in combat. He had passed beyond counting enemies. Now he could only choose the next line through them.

Around him, all the trees, the rocks, and the pale ground still felt like enemy

ground. Yet that no longer drove him backward. It gave the field a final simplicity. Either he would pass through the whole black ring of men, or he would end there before the rise under the eyes of villagers, monks, horses, and morning birds. He knew this as clearly as he had known the sharp first leap at the center of the trap. And because he knew it, the loneliness of one against many became no burden now. It became only the true shape of the road still left under his feet.

Part 23

When the great slaughter at Ichijōji had at last fallen behind him, Musashi did not carry away any triumph in his heart. He carried only fatigue, blood, and the quiet knowledge that he had passed through a death-road by a hair's breadth. The cries, the black ring of men, the lower pine, and the child struck down at the center of the trap did not leave him at once. They stayed under his skin while he moved away through the hills and rough country beyond the field, and because of that, even the open air afterward did not feel free.

By then Osugi's life too had been reduced to little more than stubborn breath and rage. The old woman, after wandering in grief, fury, and hunger, had come at last to a pitiful state. When Musashi found her, she was on the ground with a cow nearby, half fallen over the grass like someone already beginning to leave the world. Her skin had gone dull and earth-colored, her hair stood out in wild disorder, and from the look of her, she might have died there if left alone much longer. Yet the moment he came near and touched her in concern, the old strength of hate answered before weakness did.

"It hurts, it hurts," she complained first, and then, when he tried to support her and ask whether she wanted water, her stubbornness rose all at once. He asked whether she would take a little food. He even offered her half of the lunch still wrapped in oak leaves that he had been carrying. But Osugi turned her head hard away and spat the answer back at him. She said she would rather fall by the roadside and be eaten by crows and beasts than take food from the hand of the man she still called her enemy.

Musashi did not grow angry. On the contrary, her hatred made him feel even more sorrowfully close to her. If only the great misunderstanding in her heart could be removed, he thought, then perhaps she would understand him. He spoke to her as one speaks to a sick parent or a child in pain, with patience rather than argument. He said it would be foolish to die there uselessly. He said that Matahachi's future still needed her. He said that they should not abandon hope for the son's life simply because the road had grown bitter.

That only enraged her more. When he spoke of Matahachi's future, she snapped like a dog guarding the last bone of its pride. Did he think, she cried, that Matahachi would need his pity to become a man? Did he think she, Osugi, would have to take such sweet talk and false goodness from him? She called him a sham saint, a false good man, one who tried to melt old hatred with soft words. It would not work, she said. Whatever kindness he showed her now only made the old wound burn harder.

Seeing that every further word only drove her back into feverish fury, Musashi left off trying to persuade her. He did not leave from anger. He left because forcing help onto a proud old enemy would only make her suffer more. So he stepped away from where she clung to the grass, went where she could no longer see him directly, and sat down by himself. There he opened the oak-leaf wrapping and looked at the simple rice balls inside. After all the blood and all the miles, the meal was poor enough. Yet in such a world, a handful of rice and a little daylight were still not nothing.

Even while he sat there apart, Osugi's misery did not leave his mind. He could not harden himself against her in the way a simpler man might have done. Though she hated him and misread every action of his life, he still saw not only an enemy, but the mother of a companion from childhood. Her rage, like an old sickness, seemed to him pitiful as much as terrible. The whole matter of Matahachi, Otsū, and Osugi had become to him less a feud than a disease running through many hearts at once, and there was no sword-cut that could cure it.

After some time, the road drew him onward again, and eventually it brought him near a teahouse where chance prepared another strange meeting. He learned

there that a sick person was lodged within. That alone did not interest him deeply at first. Yet when he heard more, and when his eyes fell on the man before him, he found not a stranger, but Matahachi. For a moment he did not weigh the lies, the weakness, the wasted years, or the endless trouble that had grown between them. He felt only an old, direct gladness. The sight of his childhood companion alive before him was enough.

Matahachi could not return that feeling so cleanly. The moment he faced Musashi, all the unfinished boasting of earlier years came back to accuse him. He remembered the proud words he had once written in letters and the life he had not built. He remembered too much that had gone crooked in him. So while Musashi laid a hand on his shoulder with simple warmth, Matahachi lowered his eyes. It was not modesty. It was the shame of a man who knows another has overtaken him not only in name, but in being.

Musashi asked first about the lodging. Was the sick guest there someone close to Matahachi? Matahachi answered vaguely and tried to put the matter aside. Then Musashi suggested that they step outside to talk more freely, since too much speech in front of others might not be good. Matahachi agreed at once. In truth, he had wanted exactly that. He feared the sick person inside, feared what Musashi might see if he looked too closely, and feared above all the need to explain himself under a roof where every lie sounded smaller.

So they went out together into the open air beyond the teahouse and sat down on the grass. There Musashi began not with accusation, but with the plainest question a man can ask another: “What are you doing now? How do you live?” Matahachi answered that no lord had yet taken him into service and that he still had not found any true work worthy of the name. Then, as men like him often do, he turned quickly to blaming the woman who had once helped ruin him. “It was all because of Oko,” he said in effect. “That was where I made the great mistake.”

Musashi did not let that pass. He answered with a severity more useful than anger. To blame one’s whole life on a woman, he said, was cowardly talk. A man must make his own life. No one else can be made the final author of it. Those words struck hard because they were true. Matahachi admitted as much, but with

the weak admission of a man who sees truth and still wants to escape its full weight. He shifted, excused, looked aside, and tried to speak half honestly and half self-protectively, as he always had.

Yet for Musashi, sitting there beside the grass, none of those evasions mattered first. What mattered was that the old friend was alive, within reach, and still part of the road ahead. He wanted, perhaps for the first time in many years, to sit long and speak deeply, to see whether anything still remained in Matahachi that could be called back to life. The battle behind him had left him lonelier, not prouder. So this meeting, coming just when his body and spirit were both worn thin, touched him more strongly than a mere chance reunion should have done. He did not yet know how much pain still lay under Matahachi's vague answers, nor how much darker the road would grow before this volume ended.

Part 24

Matahachi kept pulling at the grass and biting the tip of it as if that could hide his shame. Musashi watched him with a face that was stern, but not cold. "What are you brooding over now?" he asked. "Stand up inside yourself. If you have wasted five years, then think of it as being born five years later than I was. That is all. You are still alive, and a living man can still begin."

Matahachi lifted his eyes a little, but not enough to meet Musashi's fully. "Easy for you to say," he muttered. "You have gone straight ahead and made yourself into something. I kept stepping aside. Every road I took bent away from where I meant to go." Musashi answered at once that this was exactly the thinking he hated. A man must stop talking as if the road moved his feet, he said, and must instead admit that his own foot chose where it stepped.

The words struck hard because they were true. Matahachi knew that, and because he knew it, he could not answer with anger. He only sat there in a more painful silence than before, chewing the grass and looking over the field. Then Musashi said again, more quietly this time, that there was still no reason for despair. "You are only twenty-two," he said. "There are men older than that who

have not even begun to understand themselves. But if you are to live as a man, you must choose the right road for your own nature. The sword is not for you. Books are. Service under a good lord is. That is the way I see it."

Matahachi let out a weak breath. "I will do it," he said. "I will. I mean to." Yet even as he said the words, his own voice betrayed him. He did not sound like a man making a promise. He sounded like a man trying to comfort himself with the shape of one. Musashi heard that too, and his heart tightened, because the weakness in his old friend could almost be touched with the hand.

For a while neither spoke. The grass moved in the wind, and somewhere nearby a bird rose and went low over the field. Then Musashi, remembering the tea shop and the uneasy way Matahachi had hidden the matter, asked at last, "Now tell me plainly. The companion in the inn, who is it?" Matahachi shifted at once. "No one worth naming," he began again. "Just someone traveling with me for a little way."

Musashi turned his head and looked at him sharply. "That is not a real answer." The rebuke was not loud, but it forced Matahachi to the point. He rubbed his hands together, glanced away, and then said with a kind of embarrassed haste, "It is Akemi." For an instant Musashi did not speak. The name itself was enough to darken the air between them.

Matahachi mistook the silence at once. "You are angry," he said. "I thought you might be. That is why I hesitated." Musashi's brows drew together, but not in jealousy or personal offense. What came over him was something nearer to alarm. Akemi was not merely some passing woman from the road. She was tied to too many wounds, too many dangerous people, and too much confusion already. To hear that this weak friend, who had learned nothing from Oko, had now taken Akemi at his side was like hearing that a man who had once been burned had put his hand back into the same fire.

"Fool," Musashi said at last, and the word came from pity more than anger. "After Oko, and after all that followed, how could you take up with such a companion again?" Matahachi flushed and tried to defend himself, but the defense only made the thing look worse. "It was not planned," he said. "It happened. We

met by chance." Musashi asked how, and then Matahachi, having begun at last, poured the rest out with little power to choose or hide.

He told of meeting Akemi at the inn at Sannenzaka. He told how one thing had led to another, not through any deep design, but through weakness, opportunity, and the old sickness in him that always mistook sudden feeling for fate. He confessed that on the previous night, up on Uryūyama, they had spoken like people in a half dream and suddenly decided to run away together to Edo. He even admitted that he had abandoned the woman's mother on the road behind them and chosen flight over duty with the same ugly quickness he had shown all his life.

"Then came the punishment," he said, trying to laugh and failing. "Akemi slipped on the mountain path and bruised herself badly. Since then she has been lying at that tea shop and cannot travel on." He ended with a sigh that sounded like a man who blamed both fate and himself but could not separate the two. "I regret it now," he added. "But once a thing has gone that far, what is there to do? I cannot catch the old woman again, and I cannot leave Akemi in the road either."

Musashi listened without interruption. The more Matahachi spoke, the more plainly the whole shape of the matter stood before him. It was exactly like him. Not evil in a clean, deliberate way, but weak in such a way that weakness itself created evil. Oko had once taken hold of him because he drifted. Now Akemi had become another dangerous companion not because he had chosen after long thought, but because he had let himself be drawn again into the current nearest to him. Musashi felt not rage, but a kind of stunned sorrow. "Why is it," he thought, "that every dark and unstable road finds this man so easily?"

Matahachi, seeing Musashi sit so still, misunderstood again. "You need not think I meant insult," he said hurriedly. "I did not hide it because I wanted to deceive you. I only thought it might be bitter for you to hear." Musashi looked at him with open pity now. "Bitter?" he said. "You think too much in the shape of cheap rivalry. I am not thinking of myself at all. I am looking at you and wondering whether misfortune was made for you, or whether you go out and choose it with both hands."

That landed harder than accusation. Matahachi lowered his face and said nothing. Musashi then asked more quietly about Akemi's condition. Was she badly hurt? Had a doctor seen her? Did she know what road they were taking? Matahachi answered as best he could. The injury seemed to be a painful bruise from the fall, he said. She had been in bed since morning. As for the future, nothing was fixed. He only knew that they could not remain there long and that Edo had seemed the easiest dream to name.

Musashi's heart darkened further. Akemi, hurt and half driven by desperation, beside Matahachi, who could not guide even himself, looked to him like two people already walking toward another pit. He did not say all that at once. He only sat and breathed for a while, looking over the open grass. Then he said, "This road you have taken is unlucky from the first step. A man may carry his own weakness alone for some years, but when he joins it to another ruined life, the burden becomes heavier than either can bear."

Matahachi heard the truth in that too. He tried once more to joke weakly that perhaps all roads looked dark from outside and that perhaps Edo would still turn fortune toward them. But the words died quickly. He himself did not believe them. The person he had hoped to face that day with a little pride was Musashi, and instead he found himself confessing another miserable turn in his life to the one man before whom he most wanted not to appear small.

Musashi did not press him further then. He knew enough already. The friend beside him was alive, but still without center. The woman in the tea shop was hurt, unstable, and tied to too much danger. And the road beyond them would not wait kindly for such travelers. So he sat there a while longer with Matahachi in the grass, feeling not victory, not superiority, but only the deep weariness of seeing yet again how far apart two boys from the same mountain village had drifted in only five years.

Part 25

Matahachi sat with his face lowered and his fingers pulling at the grass. He

had already told too much to stop, yet what remained to be said still hurt him. Musashi did not hurry him. He knew that a weak man often speaks truth only in short bursts, as if each piece must be dragged out of him like a thorn. So he waited, looking not at Matahachi's face but over the grass before them, while the other man tried to gather enough courage to continue.

"You are thinking badly of me," Matahachi said at last.

"No," Musashi answered. "Not in the way you mean. I am not thinking of myself at all."

Matahachi turned his face a little, uncertain. He had expected anger, jealousy, or at least some wound to Musashi's pride at the mention of Akemi. Instead he found something different, something almost harder to bear. Musashi's eyes held pity. There was no rivalry in them. There was only a deep and tired sadness, as if he were looking at a man who had once walked beside him on a mountain path and had since stumbled into one dark hollow after another.

"Then what are you thinking?" Matahachi asked, half in resentment and half in fear.

Musashi answered slowly. "I am wondering whether you were made for misfortune, or whether you go out and choose it with both hands."

The words struck harder than rebuke. Matahachi flinched as if something sharp had been pressed into his ribs. He wanted to defend himself, but the story he had just told would not let him. Oko had taken him in once, and that road had already taught him enough ruin for one life. Yet after all that, he had taken up with Akemi, another wounded and dangerous companion, not through care, not through duty, and not through any strong man's decision, but through weakness, chance, and desire.

Musashi saw the hurt land and pressed no further at first. He knew too well that once a weak man's shame is fully awakened, he will often either collapse into tears or bolt toward excuses. So he moved the matter aside for a little and asked in a quieter tone about Akemi's body. Was the injury serious? Had a physician seen her? Could she stand? Did she understand where Matahachi meant to take her?

Matahachi answered unevenly. He said the hurt seemed to be from the fall on the mountain, and that since reaching the tea shop she had remained in bed, complaining of pain in the side and back. No doctor had yet been called. As for where they were going, he admitted that nothing had truly been decided. Edo had only been a name thrown before them in the dark, a place far away enough to sound like escape.

“That is just like you,” Musashi said. “You name a far place and call it a road.”

Matahachi winced. “What should I have done, then? Leave her there on the mountain? Go back to that old woman? Go after Otsū and beg again? Every road behind me was already rotten.”

“Then you should have stopped,” Musashi replied. “A man who does not know the road should at least stop before he drags another life with him.”

Matahachi bit through the grass stem and spat it out. “Easy for you to say. You always know where to put your foot.”

“No,” said Musashi. “I do not always know. But when I do not know, I do not hand my blindness to another person and ask her to walk with me.”

That silenced Matahachi completely. He bent lower, drew his knees up, and stared at the ground between them. The wind moved through the grass in thin waves, and for a little while neither spoke. Musashi felt both anger and sorrow together. What pained him most was not simply that Matahachi had taken up with Akemi. It was the shape of the thing. The friend of his youth could still feel shame and could still hear truth, but he did not yet have the strength to build anything on either one. Again and again he drifted toward the nearest heat, the nearest hand, the nearest escape, and then called the ruin that followed “fate.”

At length Matahachi said, “You think I am filth.”

Musashi turned sharply. “Do not talk like a fool. If I thought that, I would not still be sitting here with you.”

Matahachi looked up at him then, and for a moment the two boys from the old village seemed to face one another again beneath everything that had happened since. Musashi’s face was harder now, leaner, more cut by road and

battle. Matahachi's was softer, more clouded, more bent by avoidance and regret. Yet something old remained between them still, enough that Musashi could not cast him away, and enough that Matahachi still felt the pain of being measured by him.

"Then what am I to do?" Matahachi asked in a low voice.

Musashi answered without softness. "First, stop lying to yourself. Stop calling weakness 'misfortune.' Stop saying a woman ruined you, or a road trapped you, or a chance meeting decided your life. Speak plainly inside yourself. After that, care for the woman you have already put under your shadow. Whether you wanted the burden or not, you took it. So now you cannot wriggle out of it like a snake slipping old skin."

Matahachi gave a tired laugh with no joy in it. "You speak as if I had chosen nobly. I did not. I only stumbled into it."

"That is true," Musashi said. "But once you have stumbled into another person's life, your duty begins whether your choice was noble or base."

Again the words fell heavily between them. Matahachi rubbed his face and groaned a little, as though his own skin had become uncomfortable to wear. Then, trying weakly to lighten the matter, he said, "You should not think too badly of Akemi herself. She is not Oko. She is unfortunate too."

"I know that," Musashi replied at once, and his voice changed slightly. "That is why I am troubled."

Matahachi heard that and misread it again. "You still feel for her, then."

Musashi's eyes hardened. "Stop. I told you before, do not make everything into cheap rivalry. You are still thinking like a child."

Matahachi shrank at once. Musashi continued, more quietly now, "Akemi is dangerous, not because she is wicked, but because she is hurt. A hurt life draws hurt toward it. You are not a man who can carry such a burden safely. That is what I see."

There was no answer to that. Matahachi knew it too well. He had felt it from the first hour in the tea shop, even before his old friend put it into words. Akemi's presence did not calm him or strengthen him. It made him feel both needed and

doomed, and because he could not distinguish those two feelings, he had mistaken them for fate.

Musashi rose at last. The talk had reached the point where no further pushing would help. “Come,” he said.

Matahachi looked up in surprise. “Where?”

“To the tea shop,” Musashi answered. “I will see her.”

Matahachi blinked and then got to his feet too quickly, as if afraid that Musashi might change his mind if left waiting. He brushed the dry grass from his robe and tried to recover a little of the swagger he had lost in the talk, but it did not return properly. Walking beside Musashi now, he felt once more the distance between them, not only in what each had done, but in the weight of each man’s step.

As they turned back toward the tea shop, Musashi remained silent. He was already thinking ahead. Akemi hurt and lying in a roadside room, Matahachi restless and without direction, Osugi somewhere on the road behind them, and all Kyoto still unsettled by blood and challenge—none of it promised anything simple. Yet because those threads had crossed before him, he could not pretend not to see them.

Matahachi, walking at his side, wished once or twice to say something lighter, something that would make the road between them less heavy. But nothing came. The friend he had met again by chance had not struck him, had not cursed him, and had not turned away. That mercy was harder to bear than anger. So the two of them went back across the grass together, one with pity and foreboding in his heart, the other with shame and uncertainty, toward the tea shop where Akemi lay waiting without yet knowing that another turn in her troubled road was already coming closer.

Part 26

As they walked back toward the tea shop, Musashi said little. He had already understood enough to trouble him deeply. Hearing that his old friend was now

traveling with Akemi had startled him, not because of any petty jealousy, but because the whole shape of the thing was too plainly dangerous. Akemi was not a calm or simple woman who might quietly share a hard road. She was wounded in spirit, unstable in fortune, and tied to too many dark turns of the past. To place such a woman beside a man like Matahachi, who could not even choose his own road firmly, seemed to Musashi like watching two broken boats cut loose into the same black current.

Matahachi, feeling the weight of that silence, tried once more to explain himself. He said that when he and Akemi had met again at the inn on Sannenzaka, nothing had been planned. One thing had led to another, he said, and then on the previous night, there on Uryūyama, in the strange darkness and confusion of all that had happened, they had suddenly spoken of running away together to Edo. The thought had come almost like a fever. It had seemed easier than turning back, easier than facing Osugi again, easier than thinking at all.

Musashi listened and at last said, “That is exactly your weakness. You call a fever a decision and then wonder why the road burns under your feet.” Matahachi looked miserable and answered that perhaps it was true, but that once they had gone so far, what else could he do. He had left Akemi’s mother behind. He could not now return and beg that old woman’s pardon. He could not easily go after Otsū either. So he had told himself that Edo, far away and unknown, might become a new life simply because it was distant enough from the old one.

“A far place is not the same as a new life,” Musashi said. “A man may carry his own ruin across any number of provinces if he does not change inside himself.” Matahachi laughed weakly and said that Musashi always spoke as if men could be remade by force of will alone. Musashi answered that if not by force of one’s own will, then by what else? No other hand could build a life in a man’s place. No road, no woman, no lord, and no accident could do that work for him.

By then they had come within sight of the tea shop. It was a small place and poor, with the tired look that such roadside houses often wore between seasons, neither protected by winter’s full quiet nor yet quickened by the true life of spring. The eaves seemed lower than before, and even the little smoke rising from the

back looked dull. Matahachi slowed a little, not because he meant to avoid going in, but because bringing Musashi inside now made the whole business seem more real than it had while they talked in the grass.

Musashi noticed the hesitation and looked at him sharply. “What now?” he asked. Matahachi answered that there was nothing, only that Akemi might still be sleeping. He added that the bruise from her fall had made her irritable and full of pain, and that if she were startled by finding Musashi suddenly beside her bed, the scene might grow awkward. Musashi did not smile at that. He knew too well that weakness, pain, and shame together can make a wounded person speak or cling without measure. Even so, he said they would go in.

Before entering, Matahachi paused once more and muttered that Musashi need not think too harshly of Akemi. She was unfortunate, he said, and not at heart a bad woman. Musashi answered at once that he knew this, and that was exactly why he was troubled. A bad person is simple to judge and simple to leave. But a wounded one draws pity, confusion, responsibility, and danger all together. That was the road Matahachi had now stepped onto without understanding it.

They entered the tea shop quietly. The dimness inside and the smell of old mats, warm water, and travel weariness seemed to settle around them at once. From the inner room there came no loud sound, only the breathing stillness of someone lying down through pain rather than rest. Matahachi lifted the hanging screen with a careful hand and glanced in first, as though he feared what expression might be waiting there. Then he motioned Musashi forward.

Akemi lay on the bedding with her body turned slightly to one side, trying to keep the bruised place from touching the mat too heavily. Her face, always quick to color or pale under emotion, now held both signs at once. She looked as if pain had drawn the blood away from her skin and then sorrow had driven some of it back again in patches. Even before she fully turned her eyes and recognized who had come, there was already a kind of tension in the room, as if three different roads had entered and crossed there against their will.

Musashi stood still for a moment, saying nothing. Whatever had once lain between him and Akemi, whatever she had felt, whatever she had suffered, none

of it could now be met carelessly. He saw at once that she was truly hurt, and also that her spirit was in no better condition than her body. She was not merely a woman resting after a fall. She was a life already driven too far, now lying helpless in a roadside room with Matahachi, of all men, as her only companion. The pity he had felt in the grass grew heavier, not lighter.

Matahachi, unable to bear the silence, tried to speak first in a bright and awkward tone. He said that he had brought Musashi only to let him see with his own eyes that Akemi truly was ill and that nothing under the roof need be taken in any foolish way. But the explanation only made him look smaller. It was plain from the shape of his words that he still half feared some rivalry where none existed, and still half wished Musashi to approve a road that Musashi could not possibly approve.

Musashi ignored that tone and asked only the simplest things. Where did it hurt? Had she eaten? Had she slept? Had any doctor been called? Matahachi answered some of it, but not neatly. Akemi herself, hearing Musashi's voice so close, opened her eyes fully at last. What rose in them first was not relief alone. It was the painful shock of seeing before her, in one room, the man she had once looked toward with deepest feeling and the man beside whom she had now thrown her uncertain life. She had no words ready. The very act of looking from one to the other already seemed too hard.

Musashi understood that words spoken there without care would only deepen the confusion. So he did not ask more than was necessary. He looked once around the poor room, once at Matahachi, and once again at Akemi's face. Then, in his heart, he made a judgment he did not yet put into full speech. This could not continue as it was. Leaving the two of them together to drift toward Edo or anywhere else would not be kindness. Nor could he simply tear apart what had already been tangled without causing new pain. Somewhere ahead, he knew, another decision would have to be made.

And so the return to the tea shop brought no peace, only a clearer form of the trouble. In the grass, Matahachi's confession had been only words. Here, under the low roof and before the hurt woman herself, those words became flesh.

Musashi felt again that old weariness which had come to him more than once in these recent days, the weariness not of combat, but of seeing how human weakness multiplies suffering where a clean sword-stroke would at least end something. Yet because the suffering was human, he could not turn away. That was why he remained there, grave and silent, while the dim room held all three of them together in the uneasy pause before the next turn of the road.

Part 27

At the Karasuma house, Otsū had fallen into one of those illnesses that do not come only from the body. She had not been struck by a blade, and no great wound showed on the skin, yet she lay weak as if some deep sickness had entered her bones. Fear, waiting, shame, disappointment, and love had all pressed on her too long without release. In such a state, even a strong woman may suddenly grow light and cold and lose the power to stand. Jōtarō, who could not understand the full shape of a woman's grief, understood at least that she suffered and that he must stay near her.

He did what he could. He brought water. He carried little things from room to room. He tried to make her speak and to make her eat. But the more he watched her, the more one truth forced itself on him. His own cheerfulness was not enough to cure this kind of sickness. Otsū did not need jokes or boys' courage. She needed Musashi.

Takuan came and went through those days with more care than he showed openly. He had already seen too much of the confusion around Osugi, Matahachi, and Otsū to treat any of it lightly, yet he preferred to hide concern behind laughter and teasing. That was his way. He would press truth into others by play, and when play cut too deep, he would then offer real kindness before the wound quite closed. Jōtarō, being young, often hated that method before he understood it.

So when the boy spoke fiercely of Musashi and Otsū, Takuan answered him by saying almost the opposite of what he wanted to hear. He said, in effect, "Look well, and you will see that Musashi does not think of Otsū in the simple way you

imagine. Why should she go on loving such a man?" Jōtarō flared up at once. He shook his head hard and said there was no truth in that. If anyone told Otsū such words, he cried, she might truly lose the will to live.

Takuan laughed and called him an angry little fellow. But Jōtarō did not soften. He said Takuan was a fool and an enemy to both Musashi and Otsū if he could speak like that. The monk then reached out, half amused and half touched, to pat the boy's head. Jōtarō jerked away and said he needed nothing from him. He would find Musashi by himself and bring him to Otsū if no grown man would help properly.

Takuan looked at him with more warmth then. "Do you know where Musashi is?" he asked. Jōtarō answered hotly that if he did not know, he would search until he found out. Takuan then said that the house of Yoshino Tayū would not be easy for a boy to locate in the city, and that perhaps he could tell him the way. But Jōtarō, now too stubborn to accept even useful help, refused again and again. The more Takuan tried to turn things lightly, the more the boy took them as insults.

At last Takuan stopped teasing and spoke more plainly. He said that he was not Otsū's enemy, nor Musashi's. On the contrary, he wished in his heart that the two of them might somehow come to a good end in life. Yet wanting that did not mean he would flatter them. "The truth," he told Jōtarō, "is that both of them are like sick people now." The boy frowned, because he could understand Otsū's fever and weakness, but he did not like hearing the same word applied to Musashi.

Takuan explained as much as he thought a child could bear. A body may be sick, he said, but a spirit can be sick too. Otsū was plainly ill in body and heart, and Musashi, though walking upright and carrying his sword, was not whole inside either. Each of them had been living too long under strain, each had gone too far into loneliness, and neither could simply be pushed together like two pieces of wood and made happy by force. Jōtarō did not accept this easily, but the seriousness in Takuan's face finally stopped him from answering with another angry word.

Then the boy asked the thing that mattered most. When would Musashi come? Takuan hesitated, and when he did, Jōtarō at once pressed him harder. Otsū

had been waiting every day, he said. Takuan himself had promised to help. Where was Musashi now? If the place were known, Jōtarō declared, he would run there at once, drag his teacher back if he had to, and put him beside Otsū's bed with his own hands.

Takuan could not help smiling at the picture, yet he did not laugh this time. He had in fact gone that very day to Kōetsu's house after leaving Daitoku-ji, meaning to ask after Musashi and perhaps arrange what the boy wanted. But Kōetsu had met him with a troubled face and said that Musashi had not returned to the Hon'ami house at all since the night before last. Myōshū too was uneasy. A letter had already been sent to Yoshino Tayū, begging that Musashi be urged to come back quickly, but no answer had yet brought him home.

Jōtarō heard this with wide eyes. In his mind, Musashi should have been moving straight toward whatever was important. To hear that he remained away, in or near the house of a famous courtesan, while Otsū lay ill and waiting, was almost more than he could bear. He did not yet understand the deeper reasons, the danger, the delays, or the strange workings of the city and of fate. He only knew that one person was absent and another suffering for it. For a loyal child, that was enough to make the whole world seem badly ordered.

Takuan saw the hurt rise again and tried to guide it gently. He said that Musashi had not stayed away from cruelty or neglect. Something else had surely held him. He repeated that they would meet again, that the Karasuma house had already been asked to keep the two young people safe, and that Jōtarō's task for now was to give Otsū courage, not despair. "That patient," he said, meaning her, "needs strength of heart more than medicine." Jōtarō answered at once that his own small strength would never be enough. Only Musashi's coming could truly heal her.

The words were childish, but they were not empty. Takuan knew that too. He looked toward the room where Otsū lay and said with a sigh that the boy had indeed become the companion of no ordinary people. Then he added, half to himself, that some lives seem fated to drag others into deep waters merely by existing. Jōtarō did not follow all of that thought, but he caught the sadness in it.

For a little while after that, he stood quietly, no longer angry, only troubled.

The day outside the house was already fading by then, and with evening Otsū's waiting always grew sharper. Morning still held a little foolish hope in it. By evening, when footsteps passed and no one stopped, and when light thinned and no known voice entered, her spirit usually weakened again. Jōtarō knew that pattern by now. He wanted to shield her from it, but there was no shield he could make with his hands. So he could only sit near, talk when she wished, be silent when she turned her face away, and listen for a footstep that did not come.

Takuan remained a little longer, then rose. He did not speak grandly when leaving. He only said again that they must keep heart, because despair cures nothing. But as he stepped out, he carried a real burden in his mind. Otsū was growing weaker under waiting. Jōtarō was too young to bear such watching without pain. Musashi was absent and had not returned from Yoshino's world. And somewhere under all these crossings, the roads of several broken people were still twisting toward one another. The monk who joked so easily knew better than most how dangerous such crossings could become.

Part 28

Walking along the ridge from Mount Shimei and passing through the mountain paths toward Shiga, a man could come down at last behind Mii-dera. That was the road Musashi now took. The mountain air was still cold enough to cut the skin, and the path was rough underfoot, turning between bare earth, roots, and stones that had not yet fully lost the memory of winter. On that narrow way moved a single cow, slow and patient, and on its back, bent over with pain and pride together, rode Osugi.

Now and then the old woman groaned as if labor pains were twisting through her body. The sound came from her in short, unwilling bursts, as though even suffering itself were something she hated to reveal before another person. Musashi walked ahead of the cow, holding the lead rope and turning back from time to time to look at her. His own stride could have been faster. The road would have allowed

it. But the old woman's state would not.

"Osugi-baasan," he said once in a quiet voice, "if it hurts too much, let us stop and rest a while. There is no need to hurry. Neither of us is on a road that must be finished before sunset."

The old woman did not answer. She remained folded forward on the cow's back, thin hands gripping the rough hide, her face turned away so that he could not clearly see it. But her silence had shape. It was not the silence of weakness alone. It was the silence of a person who would rather bite her own tongue than accept open kindness from the man she had chosen as her enemy.

Indeed, the more gently Musashi spoke to her, the harder she seemed to force her spirit against him. In her heart she was saying the same thing again and again. "Do not think that because you feed me, carry me, or pity me, I will forget. Do not think I will soften merely because this old body cannot stand without help." Her pain, instead of wearing down her hatred, seemed only to sharpen it. She clung to resentment with the stubbornness of a person who had already built her life around it.

Musashi understood some part of that. It was one reason why he never answered her harshness with equal harshness. Osugi was no strong enemy in the ordinary sense. She did not stand before him with skill, courage, or a clear blade. Yet among all the people who had blocked, wounded, trapped, or burdened him, none had in truth hurt him more deeply or more persistently than this old woman with almost no physical strength at all. Her hatred had entered every soft place in the tangled matter of Matahachi and Otsū. In that way she had been more troublesome than armed men.

Still, he could not hate her simply. That was what made the road between them so strange. He had been deceived by her, obstructed by her, and driven into needless pain because of her. Yet when he looked at her bent frame on the cow's back, he did not feel only resentment. He felt something closer to sorrow. She seemed to him like one who had kept herself alive only in order to continue hating. Such a life looked too poor to envy and too pitiful to crush.

The road wound along the mountain shoulder. Below, here and there through

the trees, Musashi could see pieces of the world opening, pale sky, distant roofs, a thread of water, and farther still the direction of the lake country. The wind came and went in sharp breaths. Sometimes it brought the smell of pine and wet earth. Sometimes it carried only cold. The cow moved with the dull patience of an animal that has accepted men's burdens without needing to understand them. Its slow hooves made a sound against the path that seemed almost peaceful beside the restless bitterness of the human pair.

After some time Musashi turned again and said, "If you cannot bear the pain, say so. There is no shame in stopping. This road is not an enemy to be defeated in one rush."

Osugi lifted her face only enough to let the answer come out hard. "Shame? From whom? From you? I would sooner die on the roadside and let crows take my eyes than owe comfort to your hand."

Musashi did not reply at once. The old woman's voice, though thin, still had iron in it. He walked on a few more paces, then said only, "Even so, if you die here, it serves no one. Not you. Not Matahachi."

At the name of her son, she gave a bitter sound that was almost a laugh and almost a curse. "What know you of my son? Do not put that name in your mouth as if you had any right to it."

"I know enough," Musashi answered. "Enough to say that if he is ever to stand straight in this world, he will need someone at his back. Better that you live to see it than die here in spite."

That stung her more than direct insult would have done. She twisted a little on the cow's back and bared her teeth as if she would bite him from there if she could reach. "You false good man," she snapped. "You smooth hypocrite. Do you think sweet words will wash away old hatred? I know your kind. You would feed me rice and then call the grudge finished. I am not such an old fool."

"I did not say the grudge was finished," Musashi said.

"Then keep your mouth shut!" she cried. "Do not come near me with kindness. It is filthier than open anger."

The cow flinched slightly at the sharpness of her voice, then settled again

into its slow steady motion. Musashi let the words pass. He had already learned that arguing with her when she reached this pitch only made her cling more fiercely to the very suffering that was breaking her body. So he fell silent and walked on, holding the rope loose enough not to trouble the animal and firm enough to guide it down the narrower turns.

The path dipped at last into a more sheltered place where brush grew thicker along one side and a little flat ground opened beside the road. There Musashi stopped the cow without announcing any decision. He tied the rope lightly to a low branch so the animal could not wander, then stepped away where Osugi could no longer see him directly. He had understood that to sit openly before her and eat while offering food would only provoke more abuse. But neither could he go farther without taking strength into his own body.

From his robe he drew the small meal he had been carrying, rice balls wrapped in oak leaves. The leaves had already dried a little at the edges and held the faint clean smell of the tree. He opened them with quiet care. The meal was simple enough, and after all the roads, fights, and tangles of recent days, almost poor. Yet to a traveler, and especially to one who had walked long among enmity, even such food could seem honorable.

He glanced once toward the old woman. She had turned her face away again and clung with both hands to the cow’s back as if mere contact with its rough hide steadied her more than any human help. Her shoulders rose and fell with pain and stubborn breath. Musashi looked at her for a moment longer, then sat down apart and began to eat in silence.

The mountain wind moved lightly through the leaves above them. The cow flicked an ear. Somewhere farther down the slope a bird called once and was quiet. Between the man with his rice wrapped in oak leaves and the old woman who would rather starve than accept his kindness, there was no peace and no reconciliation. Yet there was still the same road under both of them, descending step by step toward the lower world.

Part 29

Musashi had gone aside to eat because he understood that any open kindness shown in front of Osugi only made her harder. He unwrapped the rice from the oak leaves and found black miso in the middle. To a man who had been living on road food, it tasted good. Yet even while chewing, he thought of the old woman and wished she would take at least half of it. In the end he wrapped the remaining portion again and put it into his robe for later, still unable to stop thinking of her.

Then he heard voices near where Osugi lay. Looking back from behind the rock, he saw a mountain woman who had come up the path, dressed like an Ōharame with rough trousers and hair tied carelessly behind. She asked whether she might take some milk from the cow, because a sick guest had been staying at her house and she thought fresh cow's milk might help the recovery. The woman had brought a jar for the purpose, and her voice rang clearly in the mountain air. Osugi, who would not take so much as a drop of water from Musashi's hand, raised her face eagerly at once and asked whether milk could truly help illness.

The mountain woman crouched under the cow and began drawing the white liquid into her jar with all the steady skill of one used to farm work. Osugi watched in a wholly different spirit from the one she had shown Musashi. Her eyes brightened, and the stubborn dead heaviness that had made her look half ready for the grave seemed to loosen. When the woman finished and thanked her and started off again, Osugi quickly called her back.

First she looked around to make sure Musashi was not near. Then, in a dry trembling voice, she asked whether the woman would let her have just a little of the milk too, only one mouthful. The woman answered kindly and handed her the jar. Osugi pressed the mouth of it to her lips and drank with her eyes shut, so greedily that the milk ran from the corners of her mouth down across her chest and onto the grass. It was the first thing she had truly taken into herself in some time.

When she had drunk until her stomach could hold no more, she shook herself and made a strange face, saying that the taste was uncanny, though perhaps it might indeed make her stronger. The mountain woman asked whether she herself

was sick. Osugi answered that it was nothing serious, only a fall on top of a fever. And while saying so, she did something important. She stood up by herself. The woman who a short while earlier had seemed hardly able to cling to life on the cow's back now rose and stood without help, like someone whose real illness had always been only partly in the body.

Then, in a lower voice, keeping one sharp eye out for Musashi, Osugi drew closer and asked the woman where the road ahead would lead. The woman answered that going straight on would bring them out above Mii-dera. Osugi then asked whether there was another path, some side way. When the woman asked where she wanted to go, Osugi answered with bitter haste that it did not matter where, so long as she could escape from the villain who had caught her and would not let her go. The woman said there was indeed a path a little farther on. If one took the small road turning north and kept going down, one would come out somewhere between Ōtsu and Sakamoto.

Osugi listened like a starving animal hearing of a gap in the fence. She asked the woman one more favor. If anyone came after her asking questions, the woman was to say she knew nothing. Then, without another word, Osugi darted away. The figure that had so lately lain groaning in the grass now hurried off with the quick, crooked haste of a crippled praying mantis, vanishing up the side path before the mountain woman had even fully gathered her thoughts.

Musashi had seen all of it. Rising from behind the rock, he watched the old woman go and could not help smiling bitterly. She was exactly herself again, not healed, not changed, not softened, but restored just enough to hatred and suspicion to flee the hand that had led her safely so far. Yet he did not call after her. He did not chase her. The milk, the mountain path, and the old woman's sudden strength told him two things plainly: she would not die that day, and she would never accept rescue from him while breath remained.

He went instead to the mountain woman, who had stiffened at the sound of his step and looked ready to deny everything before he even spoke. But Musashi did not question her about Osugi. He merely asked whether she was from a farmer's house or a woodcutter's house. She answered that she lived at a tea shop

on the pass just ahead. That pleased him at once. A tea shop meant a place to sit, write, and wait. It also meant a messenger could come and go within a day.

Musashi then told her he would pay her if she would run an errand for him into the city. The woman hesitated, saying she could do so, but that a sick traveler was staying at her tea shop and needed care. Musashi answered that he himself would carry the milk to the house and wait there for her return. If she left at once, she could go to Kyoto and come back before dark. He added that she need not fear him. He was no villain, and as for the old woman, if she still had strength enough to run like that, she was not on the edge of death.

The woman's face showed that she half believed and half feared him, as mountain folk often do when a stranger speaks plainly but looks like no common traveler. Musashi told her not to worry. He would write a letter there on the spot. She was to carry it to the Karasuma house in Kyoto, ask for an answer, and return with it. The reply, he said, could be brought back to the tea shop, and he would wait there. Since she had already drawn the milk and since the tea shop lay just ahead on the pass, nothing in the arrangement was difficult except the run itself.

So there in the mountain air, with the escaped old woman already taking the hidden path toward another trouble, Musashi took out his writing things. The road had changed again. He had not chased Osugi. Instead he had turned his thought at once toward Kyoto, toward the house where Otsū and Jōtarō were, and toward whatever answer might come from there. He had lost the old woman, but he had gained a clearer next step. And on these roads, where human knots never loosened cleanly, a clear next step was often the most one could hope for.

Part 30

At the Karasuma house, Otsū had become little more than a shadow of herself. It was not only the body that had been worn down. Waiting, disappointment, fear, and the constant strain of hope had all worked on her until even small things became difficult. She lay much of the time with her face turned toward the pillow, answering when spoken to, but never with the old quickness of

tone. Jōtarō, who could not understand the full shape of a woman's suffering, understood at least that she was failing before his eyes, and because of that he had begun to feel a child's anger toward every person who seemed not to help enough.

Takuan came and went as he pleased, half laughing and half serious as always, and that only sharpened the boy's impatience. The monk would sometimes say things that sounded almost cruel, as if he wanted to shake Jōtarō out of his simple belief that one meeting between Musashi and Otsū would heal everything. He said that Musashi too was like a sick person in his own way, and that Otsū, for all her longing, was not living with a sound and balanced heart either. To the boy, such words felt like insults.

"You say terrible things," Jōtarō burst out once. "If Otsū hears you, she really might die. You call my teacher cold and say Otsū is a fool for loving him. You are the fool."

Takuan laughed and reached to pat the boy's head, but Jōtarō shook him off at once. "Do not touch me," he said. "I will go and find Musashi-sama by myself. I do not need your help." Takuan's face softened then, though he still kept the smile around his mouth. He told the boy that he himself wished more than anyone to see the two come to some good end, but that wishing does not mend a broken spirit. One cannot press people together like two planks and call that healing.

Jōtarō did not want to hear it. Yet some part of him knew the monk was not speaking from mockery alone. That was what made the words harder. They carried truth inside them, and truth is often more irritating to the young than an open lie. So the boy turned away, saying he would no longer ask the monk for anything. But he remained nearby all the same, because there was nowhere else for his loyalty to go.

Takuan, after a little silence, said that he had gone that very day to Hon'ami Kōetsu's house to ask after Musashi. There he had learned only that Musashi had not returned since the night before. A message had been sent to Yoshino Tayū's house begging that he be told to come back quickly, but no answer had come. Jōtarō, hearing this, felt his face grow hot. To think of Musashi still absent while Otsū lay there waiting and weakening was almost more than he could bear. Yet

the monk only spread his hands and said that impatience cures nothing.

By then Jōtarō had already done what little he could in his own way. He had even gone out to find oranges for Otsū, searching the city with the seriousness of a general sent on campaign. More than once he had mistaken some shining fruit for an orange, only to find it was a bitter orange or some hard useless fruit not fit to eat. At last he found real oranges on an offering stand in a shrine. He stole them in terror, ran all the way back to the Karasuma house, and begged the gods under his breath not to punish him, because he did not mean the theft for himself.

When he laid them out by Otsū's pillow, he expected delight or at least a smile. Instead she turned her face away and cried. "Again?" he said in helpless annoyance. "I thought you would be glad." Otsū apologized at once and said it was not his fault, and because the apology was gentle, Jōtarō could not stay truly angry. Yet the scene left him with a bitter little bruise in the heart. Nothing he did had power enough to lift her.

Evening came down over the house. The light faded early, and with the fading of it Otsū's waiting always grew sharper. Daytime still carried some foolish hope in it, but by evening each passing footstep that was not the right one made the heart sink lower. Jōtarō sat near and spoke now and then, while Otsū lay still, listening harder than she seemed to listen. Takuan remained also, not because he had any medicine in his sleeve, but because leaving the two of them alone with such waiting felt too much like abandonment.

It was then, just after dark had fully taken the rooms, that a red glow of torchlight struck across the outer side of the house and a hand knocked firmly at the entrance. One of the Karasuma men came in bearing a letter. He said it had been brought in haste by a messenger and that it came from Musashi. The words changed the air in the room at once. Even before the letter was opened, Jōtarō gave a cry and sprang forward.

"It is his writing," he said almost immediately, looking at the outside. "If he had died at Ichijōji, he could not have written this." There was triumph in that, and relief, and a child's directness that made no room for any other feeling. Otsū rose from the inner room and came toward them, pale and unsteady, yet drawn by

the letter more strongly than by pain. “Show me,” she said. Jōtarō, still half offended from earlier disappointments, pulled the letter behind his back and told her perhaps it was not for her after all.

“Do not be cruel,” Otsū pleaded. “Please.”

At that the boy thrust it toward her in a sudden rough movement that only half hid his excitement. Yet Otsū had scarcely heard his words. The instant she knew it was truly from Musashi, the rest of the room fell away from her. Her fingers trembled taking the paper, and for a moment she could not even unfold it properly. Takuan watched without speaking. He knew well enough that in such hours a letter can become more dangerous than a sword, because it can revive hope in a heart that had almost forced itself to sleep.

Otsū opened it at last. The writing was brief and plain. Musashi had sent word from a mountain tea shop and asked that if Otsū were still at the Karasuma house, she be told where he was. There was no flowery speech in it, no careful explanation, and no long expression of feeling. Yet because it came from him at all, and because it pointed to a real place and not another uncertain rumor, it struck Otsū more deeply than a hundred tender words from another man could have done.

Jōtarō leaned in close, trying to read at the same time. His first joy at seeing Musashi’s hand now turned instantly practical. “We should go,” he said. “At once. Why wait till morning? If he is there now, then we can be there too.” Takuan looked from the boy to Otsū and then back again. He knew how dangerous it might be to move her in such weakness, yet he also knew the greater danger of leaving her to another night of waiting when the place of the awaited man was finally known.

Otsū herself made the matter simplest by the way she held the letter. Her whole body, which had seemed so near collapse only a short while before, was now kept upright by one force alone. It was not health. It was not reason. It was longing given a road. She lifted her face and said she would go. Jōtarō answered before anyone else could speak. Of course they would go. He had already half forgotten his anger, his worry, and even his fatigue.

Takuan sighed in the way of a man who knows that argument is now useless.

Some roads open not because they are safe, but because the heart will accept no other one. He told them then to prepare as best they could and not waste time in disorder. If they were going, then they must go with clear heads and not like people running after a fire. Yet even as he said this, he understood that neither of them had a clear head. Otsū held only the letter. Jōtarō held only the joy of movement.

So the house that had been heavy with waiting suddenly shifted into motion. Otsū still looked weak enough to fall, yet the name and direction written in Musashi's hand had given her feet another chance to move. Jōtarō, who had spent days suffering because he could do nothing, at last had something to do. And Takuan, seeing all this, could only stand aside and let the next turn of their troubled road begin.

Part 31

By the time Otsū and Jōtarō climbed to the top of the Shiga mountain road, the Big Dipper had already turned pale, and the clouds had begun to take on the still, thin look that comes just before dawn. Both of them were tired, but the sight below drew them forward at once. Beyond the slopes lay the roofs of Ōtsu and the wide water of Lake Biwa, pale and quiet under the morning sky. What had been only a place name in their talk now stood before their eyes like a real promise.

"You are tired, are you not, Otsū-san?" Jōtarō asked.

"Yes," she answered, "it was all uphill until now."

The boy at once brightened. "But from here it is downhill," he said. "And look, there is the lake." Otsū asked where Seta lay, and he pointed proudly into the distance, though from such a height everything seemed near and simple when in truth it was still far. Then, because the hope in both of them had loosened their bodies a little, they agreed to rest.

Jōtarō hurried to find a good place and soon called her to the shade of two great trees standing close together. Their branches spread wide, and under them the ground was drier than the rest. He asked what kind of trees they were.

Otsū lifted her eyes and answered that they were nemu trees. When he asked why such a tree was called that, she explained that the word was written not with the character for sleep, but with the characters for “joining” and “joy.” Then, almost without meaning to, she remembered the old temple garden where she and Musashi had played as children, where such trees had stood in summer with pale red thread-like flowers that folded at evening as if they slept.

That memory made her voice softer, but also sadder. For Jōtarō, the talk was only pleasant road talk. For Otsū, every simple thing on that journey had become tied to Musashi. Trees, roads, water, sky, all of them turned toward him in her mind. She sat a little while in the early air, trying to calm the beating in her chest, but the closer she felt herself drawing to him, the less calm she became.

At that same hour Musashi too was coming down toward Ōtsu. He had already passed the road from Mii-dera and was descending by way of the slope near the Eight-View Tower. He had sent his letter and received word that Otsū had indeed gotten it. From the answer, he had judged that even if she set out quickly, she would not be able to arrive until near evening. She had been ill, after all, and she was a woman traveling with a boy. So he did not hurry or let impatience master him. The big cow moved slowly, stopping now and then to pull at grass still wet with mountain dew, and Musashi did not force it.

He did not think, “Surely we will meet on the road.” Yet neither did he think meeting impossible. Their roads, times, and purpose had now drawn so near to one another that chance and intention were almost the same thing. Even so, he remained outwardly quiet. The road itself, the weight of recent days, and the strange peace that comes after battle had all entered him too deeply for him to move like a lover running to a gate.

Otsū and Jōtarō came down by another line of the same mountainside, their feet quickening as the roofs of Ōtsu drew clearer below. They no longer looked like a sick woman and a boy moving without direction. They looked like two people being pulled downhill by hope. Jōtarō talked brightly, trying to guess whether Musashi might already have gone farther ahead to Seta or whether he might still be in some tea house below. Otsū answered, but her answers came only

halfway from her mouth. The rest of her was listening for a footstep not yet heard.

At last the road brought them to a tea place where travelers stopped before going farther down. It was no great inn, only a roadside place with rough benches and a little life already moving under the eaves. Otsū asked at once whether a samurai matching Musashi's look had passed that way. Jōtarō too searched every face and every horse. But no one there could say clearly. For one sharp instant Otsū felt the same hopelessness that had struck her so many times before, the fear that even after all this, she had come only to find herself still one step late.

Then movement at the side of the road changed the whole air. Jōtarō's face, which had begun to cloud, lifted first. Otsū turned too. There, not far away, was Musashi. He was not in a grand posture, nor waiting in any arranged beauty. He was simply there, on the road, after all the years, all the wrong turns, all the waiting. For a moment neither Otsū nor Musashi seemed able to move properly. It was as if meeting at last had become harder than all the searching.

Jōtarō, however, had no such difficulty. He cried out at once and ran forward with the full straightness of a child's joy. His voice broke whatever spell had held the other two still. Otsū went on more slowly, because in the same instant that she saw Musashi, all the roads behind them seemed to rise and stand around her. She was not merely seeing a man on a road. She was seeing the whole hope of her life given a face again.

Musashi looked at her and understood at once how much she had suffered. The illness had left traces in her face, and the journey had not hidden them. Yet to him, that only made her more deeply herself. He wished to speak lightly at first, perhaps to spare them both, but no light words came. So they stood awkwardly for a moment with all that had once been impossible suddenly placed within reach.

Jōtarō, who in his happiness forgot all measure, stayed too near. He spoke quickly, laughed, asked questions, and looked from one face to the other with a satisfaction that was almost proud. At last Otsū, gathering courage, turned to him and said in a voice that was almost a plea, "Jōtarō-san… please do not say

such things. Go over there for a little while. Please."

The boy made a face at first, but Otsū rarely asked him anything so directly. Once she did, his resistance weakened at once. "All right," he said. "Then I will climb up there. Call me when you are done." He went scrambling noisily up the narrow woodcutter's path above them like a young deer. Otsū, perhaps out of embarrassment more than real concern, called after him that he need not go so far. But he was already gone.

Then, at last, the two were alone.

Otsū stood with her back half turned and her eyes lowered. Musashi looked up at the sky and then away, as if even now he could not place his full feeling directly into his own gaze. This was the meeting they had both carried for years, and when it finally came, neither knew where to begin. Any ordinary words would have been too small. They stood side by side in a silence thicker than speech, one facing the ground and one facing the open air, both unable for the moment to bring the truth in the heart cleanly to the lips.

Yet the silence was not empty. It held all the years in it, all the longing, all the missed meetings, and all the roads finally narrowed into one place. Otsū felt her chest grow tight, almost painful, because she had imagined this moment too many times and in too many ways. Musashi too had imagined it, though differently. Now that it had come, both of them found themselves strangely helpless before it. And so, in that little pause by the mountain road above Ōtsu, they stood not as bold lovers or easy companions, but as two people who had at last reached one another and did not yet know how to bear the nearness.

Part 32

Musashi still kept his face turned partly away, and Otsū stood with her back half turned too. One looked into the open sky, the other down toward the earth. Yet between them lay all the years that had driven them toward this single moment. Neither was empty. Neither was uncertain of feeling. The trouble was rather that the feeling was too large to fit into ordinary words. What should have

been said first had already been burning unsaid for too long.

Musashi searched for speech and found none equal to the heart. Every phrase that came toward his lips seemed too small, too thin, or too false. He could, in a simple way, have said that he had thought of her often. He could have said that he was glad to see her alive. He could have thanked her for the years of faith. But none of those would have carried the whole truth. They would only have covered it over with small surfaces.

So he stood there and in the space of a breath saw again, all at once, the path since that dark dawn under the great cedar years before. He had not seen with his own eyes the long way she had walked after that, but he knew it well enough in spirit. Her life had been tangled, troubled, and burdened from many sides. Yet through it all she had carried one clear flame. Musashi knew this. He had never been blind to it. He had simply never been able to answer it in the easy human way that another man might have answered.

Indeed, when he weighed her suffering and his own, he often thought bitterly in silence that he himself had borne the heavier inward burden. But even as that thought rose, he rejected its selfishness. What made Otsū so moving before him was not only that she had loved, but that as a woman, with far fewer powers given by the world, she had continued to live, endure, and still keep that love alive. A man may carry one impossible weight and call it training. A woman often must carry several and still smile before others. That was the thing in her that made Musashi feel both tenderness and reverence.

“Only a little longer,” he thought. He looked at the position of the moon and knew how little time there was before the hour would force him again toward the sword and away from any human resting place. That urgency entered the moment and made speech still more difficult. If this were to be said, it must be said truthfully. There was no room left for softness that only comforted and then broke.

At last Musashi began. His voice, when it came, was low and rough, as if the words had first had to cut their way through a place sealed too long. He said that he was a man standing almost before death. Therefore, he told her, he must

speak without shame and without ornament. There had been days when the thought of her made even his waking hours fevered. There had been nights when he could not sleep soundly because dreams of her clung to him with heat and torment. He had lain in temples, in fields, and under poor roofs with her image following him everywhere. There had even been nights, he confessed, when he had held a thin straw quilt in his arms as though it were her and had ground his teeth till morning. He had loved her. He had loved her wildly. That much, he said, was true.

Otsū lifted her face a little at those words, but only a little. She had longed to hear truth from him, and now that truth was coming, it struck too deeply to be borne in a steady upright way. Her cheeks were wet, and in the dimness her face looked like a white flower beaten by night dew. She tried once to answer, but the force in Musashi's expression stopped her. He was no longer merely confessing affection. He was setting his whole soul in order before her.

"But," he said, and the word itself cut the air, "each time that fever rose and each time your image tried to claim me completely, if I drew the sword and looked at it long enough, the blood would clear in me again. The madness would grow still. Your figure would thin like mist and drift from the mind. Then there would remain only the sword and the road." He told her that this had been his true division all along, not between indifference and love, but between love and another love. He had not lacked feeling. He had been torn by too much of it.

"That was my real self," he went on. "I was always divided. One foot in longing, one foot in training. One hand reaching toward you, one hand drawn toward the sword." He said that through these years he had not conquered that division nobly. He had only dragged himself, painfully, again and again, toward the discipline that claimed him more strongly. He was not a great man, not a saint, not some natural master born above other men. He was simply a man who, when love and the sword both called, found that he loved the sword a little more.

Those words did not wound Otsū because they denied love. They wounded her because they were so bare and so true. If he had said, "I cannot love you," she might have fought it. If he had said, "Forget me," she might have

resisted it with hope. But this was harder. He was saying that he did love her, and yet that another path held him more deeply than any woman could. That left no easy place for her heart to stand.

Otsū's whole body seemed to tremble under the weight of that truth. She raised her face once toward him, and the moonlight or the dim sky showed her tears plainly. Yet when she saw how terribly earnest and unguarded he was, she could not continue looking. Her breath caught, and again she bent downward until her face nearly touched the earth. She did not reject him. She was simply overwhelmed.

Musashi, seeing that, suffered too. Nothing in him took pleasure in speaking such words. He would rather have fought ten armed men than laid this bare before her. Yet he knew that if he spoke falsely now, or hid behind gentle evasion, he would only poison both of them more deeply than before. So he remained with the truth, though it cut him as much as her. He said again that his nature was not splendid. It was only fixed. If he had greater talent, perhaps the day would come when the sword and human love might no longer fight in him as enemies. But he was not yet at such a height.

Silence followed. It was not the silence from before, when words had not yet been found. This was the silence after a wound had been opened cleanly. The air around them seemed sharper. Somewhere above, Jōtarō was out of sight. The mountain road below remained still. And in the middle of that stillness Otsū suddenly swayed.

She did not fall dramatically. There was no cry. Rather, the strength seemed to leak out of her all at once. Her knees weakened, and she bent forward onto the ground, face down, as if the body had chosen to lie where the heart had already been cast. Musashi moved at once, but before he could gather her fully, Jōtarō, hearing something in the silence below that frightened him, came rushing back. The boy saw Otsū on the ground and cried out in alarm, asking whether she had coughed blood.

Otsū shook her head faintly. She could not yet speak properly. Jōtarō knelt at once, rubbing her back in helpless earnestness and asking what was wrong.

Was she in pain? Was it her chest? Did she need water? At last she gave a small sign that yes, water was what she wanted. That gave the boy a task, and like all children made useful by love, he sprang to it with his whole body.

"Wait here!" he said, and began searching wildly with his eyes. The path ran through a soft hollow between hills, and everywhere the sound of water seemed to whisper through grass and stone. It was not far. He soon found a spring welling up among roots and rocks just behind them. The water was so clear that even little stream crabs could be seen in it. Kneeling down, he first meant to scoop it in his hands for Otsū. But because his own throat was dry and the water looked so pure and cold, he shifted a little farther and bent low to drink first from the edge himself.

In that instant, by the spring under the moon's fading place in the sky, the meeting that had held so much of human longing turned toward another danger again. Otsū lay with her face to the ground, shaken by love and truth together. Musashi stood over her, unable to regret honesty and unable to lessen its pain. And Jōtarō, who had only wanted to help, leaned down toward the water where another turning of fate was already waiting close at hand.

Part 33

Jōtarō bent low toward the spring, meaning only to drink first from its cold edge before scooping water for Otsū. The water was so clear that even the small river crabs could be seen near the stones. The sky above it, reflected in the dark surface, seemed more beautiful there than when looked at directly. But just as his lips were about to touch the water, he started and cried out softly. Something in the reflection had changed. The world in the spring was no longer only sky and drifting cloud. Another figure had entered it.

He turned sharply. Musashi was there.

The boy had not heard him come. Whether Musashi had stepped down from the rocks, or had followed the sound of the water after Otsū's collapse, Jōtarō could not have said. He only knew that the master stood over him in silence and

that, before he could form a proper word, Musashi said in a quiet voice, “More than for me, take the water quickly to Otsū-san.” The words were simple, but because they came from him at that moment, they struck the boy almost like a command from heaven.

“Ah,” Jōtarō answered, fumbling in haste. He thrust his hands again toward the spring, but the clear surface broke and clouded under his clumsy movement. “I spoiled it,” he cried.

Musashi at once drew out the bamboo tube at his waist and held it toward him. “There is better water a little farther along,” he said. “Use this.”

Jōtarō looked at the tube, then at Musashi’s face. Some quick boyish feeling, half loyalty and half understanding, rose in him at once. He pulled his hands back and said with sudden seriousness, “No, Master. You carry it. You carry it to her.”

Musashi paused. The truth of that struck him more deeply than the child intended. “Is that so?” he said.

“Yes,” Jōtarō answered. “You.”

Without another word, Musashi knelt, filled the bamboo tube himself, and carried it back. Otsū was still on the ground where she had fallen, face down, her thin shoulders trembling and both hands pressed over mouth and breast. He slid one arm beneath her, raised her carefully, and held the bamboo to her lips. The water went down her throat in little swallows. Jōtarō, kneeling close and watching every breath, cried out beside them, “Otsū-san, it is Musashi-sama. Do you know? It is really him. It is not me holding you.”

At first her eyes remained far away. Then, little by little, life came back into them. Tears filled them so suddenly that they looked as if hot water had been poured behind the lids. She did not answer in words. The tears alone answered. They spilled down her cheeks while her head made the slightest motion, enough to show that she knew.

“Good,” Jōtarō said, almost shouting with relief. “Good, now you must be satisfied. This is what you wanted. You kept saying you had to see him once more, and now you have seen him. So no more foolishness. If you go on like this,

you will die. Tell her, Master. Tell her not to do such things again. She never listens to me."

Musashi, still supporting Otsū with one arm, answered, "It is all my fault. I will say what must be said. I will ask pardon for what is mine and speak to her of what is hers. Jōtarō—"

"What?"

"Leave us alone a little while."

The boy frowned at once. "Why?"

He stood there with his mouth pulled sharp, not angry exactly, but suspicious and wounded, as though some right of his own was being taken away. Musashi himself seemed uncertain how to explain it. Then Otsū, with more effort than the words should have required, whispered toward Jōtarō, "Please… go for just a little while. I beg you."

That settled it. The child who would argue with Musashi himself lost all argument when Otsū spoke so directly. "All right," he said. "Then I will climb above. When you are done, call me." He went scrambling up the woodcutter's path again, pushing through brush and roots until the two below were only shapes among rocks and dim grass. Otsū called after him that he need not go so far, but he either did not hear or pretended not to hear.

When the two of them were finally alone, the old difficulty returned in a form even stronger than before. Otsū, though steadier now in body, turned her face away in shame and tenderness together. Musashi, though he had just held her in his own arms and given her water, looked instead toward the sky and then toward the trees as if direct sight of her would only make honest speech harder. He had already spoken too much truth to her to hide behind easy tenderness now.

Yet what followed between them did not remain in the small human shape of two lovers parting or joining. The pain in Musashi had gone farther inward than that. He had loved her, that was true. He had said so. But he had also loved another thing more fiercely and more ruinously. Even while his body still remembered the warmth of her against his arm, the divided heart in him began again its old torment. Love drew him one way. The sword, and whatever lay

beyond the sword, drew him another. And because he could no longer bear that division in mere words, he rose at last and moved away from her.

Otsū watched him without understanding at first. Jōtarō, higher up the slope, had sat restless and miserable, thinking perhaps that the two below were speaking peacefully at last. Instead he saw Musashi go on alone toward the deeper ravine where the sound of falling water beat continually through the dark. The boy stared, then began following by another path. Otsū too moved after him, though more slowly, clinging to the cliff-side way with both hands when the slope turned sharp.

What Musashi sought there was not death, though from a distance it could easily look like death. Two falls struck down through that hidden place, one narrower and sharper, one wider and heavier. Before such water, a man's whole body can seem no stronger than a bundle of reeds. Musashi went down into the dark basin of the stronger fall and stood under it. At once the whole waterfall seized him. Water as hard as iron beat on his head, his shoulders, his chest, and his knees. It did not merely strike. It bit, clawed, and dragged. The pool rose nearly to his breast, and the force of the fall tried every instant to break his footing and fling him into the deeper swirl below.

Otsū, clinging halfway down the cliff path on one side, saw him there and cried out his name in terror. Jōtarō, on the bank opposite, shouted too with all the force in his young lungs. "Master! Master!" But the sound of the fall swallowed every other voice. Nothing of their calling could reach him in any useful way. He stood beneath the water as if he had gone there to give his body to the whole pressure of nature and have the last mud washed from his heart.

Jōtarō, in his first horror, thought Musashi had gone into the fall because he meant to die. He cried and pleaded with him not to do it, hands clenched and body bent forward as if he too were trying to hold up that crushing water. Then, little by little, another understanding came. Musashi was not yielding himself weakly. Even beneath that dreadful pressure, life was running through him, rough and bright as raw metal. He was fighting, enduring, cleansing, and remaking himself there, not asking the fall to end him, but forcing it to answer him.

Otsū vanished from Jōtarō's sight for a moment, and the boy, half mad with fear, thought she too had perhaps thrown herself into the stream out of despair. But that fear passed quickly. His eyes returned to Musashi in the white violence below. Even through the spray and roar, he could see that the man standing under the fall was not a man choosing death. He was a man wrestling with all the blood, desire, confusion, and divided longing still left in him, trying to come out of that water harder, cleaner, and more fully himself than before.

Then, through the thunder of the fall, a cry rose from Musashi's own throat. Neither Otsū nor Jōtarō could make out the words. It might have been a prayer. It might have been self-reproach. It might have been a battle-shout thrown not at an enemy outside him, but at the enemy in his own blood. Whatever the words were, they did not sound like surrender. They sounded like a man beating at the locked door inside himself until it opened.

Jōtarō stood frozen, hands knotted tight, tears on his face, no longer knowing whether to pray, cry, or laugh. Otsū, clinging to the cliff path, could only stare through her own tears at the figure in the water. Love, fear, reverence, and helplessness all seized her together. And there, between the woman on the cliff, the child on the opposite bank, and the man under the crushing white force below, the troubled road of the volume entered its last and fiercest silence.

Part 34

The fall beat on Musashi without mercy. Water like countless silver dragons bit at his face and shoulders, while the whirl below pulled at his legs like living hands trying to drag him down into a place from which no man returned. If even one weak breath escaped him, if even one softening entered the mind, his heel might slip on the moss below and his body would be taken at once. The force from above felt like the weight of whole mountains laid on his head, chest, and heart. Yet even there, in that crushing violence, he could not drive Otsū's image out of his blood.

That was what shocked him most. He had fought men, fear, loneliness,

ambition, pain, and death. He had gone to Sekigahara as a village boy because of the same hot blood. He had risen again under Takuan's blows, had climbed toward Sekishūsai, and had cut his way through the white-blade forest at Ichijōji by the strength of that same fierce life within him. But when that life turned through the permitted object of Otsū and flamed into the body's deepest desire, the little reason and discipline he had gathered over the last years could not master it. Against this enemy, the sword itself was useless.

For every other enemy there is shape. One can see it, name it, meet it, and strike it. But this enemy stood within him. It had no visible form, no separate body, no neck for cutting, no arm for breaking. That was why he had been thrown into panic. Under the waterfall he recognized with terrible clarity that the collapse was not in the road, not in Otsū, not in fate, but in the hollow within himself. He had discovered a deep sinking place in his own spirit and had been frightened by it more than by any armed man.

From the cliff path Otsū looked down through tears, and from the opposite bank Jōtarō called until his throat hurt. Yet neither voice could reach him through the roar. Slowly, however, both of them understood that this was not a man abandoning life. It was a man fighting for it at the deepest point where no one else could stand beside him. Otsū, who had loved him through all the roads, saw now that what she loved was terrible as well as dear. Jōtarō, still young enough to think in straight lines, felt his fear change into awe.

Time passed under the fall in a form no one watching could measure. Dawn began to whiten the edges of rock, spray, and tree. The black of night loosened, and the water itself changed from iron-dark to cold pale force. Still Musashi remained there, taking the whole weight upon himself until the struggle in his face seemed to alter. The panic was not gone, but it was no longer master. What had entered the water divided and tormented began, little by little, to stand under it as one thing again.

At last, when the light had grown enough to separate cliff from mist and tree from sky, the man under the fall moved. Whether he came out from victory or only from a harder knowledge of himself, neither Otsū nor Jōtarō could fully

say. But both knew that he did not come out as the same man who had entered. Otsū clung to her tears and silence. Jōtarō held his breath. And over the ravine, over the woman, the boy, and the man who had gone into the water to face the enemy without shape, morning opened quietly on the next road ahead.

Book 5: Sky

Part 1

When they entered the Kiso road, they could still see snow on the high places. White lines of snow lay on Mount Komagatake, and pale white patches shone on Mount Ontake far away. But the fields and the road already had soft green on them, and everything seemed to be growing fast. Jotaro too seemed to be growing fast, above all in one place: his stomach. He had lived a hard life from early childhood, and that had made him quick, clever, and shameless in some ways. Otsu often sighed and thought, with tired love, that she had let this boy become far too close to her.

Jotaro knew very well that she loved him. That was why he begged without fear whenever he saw food. In Suhara he had made her buy him special rice crackers, and before they had gone even half a mile, he had already eaten them all. Later, near Agematsu, he looked up at hanging dried persimmons and cried, “Otsu, Otsu, do you not want one of those? I do.” Otsu sat on the back of the cow and acted as if she had not heard him. Jotaro had to give up that time, but only for a while. As soon as they entered the busy town of Fukushima, when the sun was lowering and his hunger was strong again, he stopped in the road and began a new attack.

“Let’s rest here,” he said, pulling at the rope of the cow. Then he looked at a shop and dragged out the words through his nose. “Kinako mochi. I want kinako mochi. Do you not?” He would not move, and because he held the rope, the cow would not move either. Otsu grew angry at last and said, “Enough. If you keep troubling me, I will go tell Musashi-sama.” She made a show of getting down from the cow, but Jotaro only smiled and watched her. He knew she would not really go, and in the end she gave in and went with him to the cake shop.

Inside the shop, Jotaro shouted for two trays of cakes and tied the cow outside. Otsu said she would not eat, but he laughed and answered that he would eat both shares himself. He bent over the tray and ate with all his heart, as if nothing else

in the world existed. Then, while chewing, he looked out into the road and suddenly froze. He swallowed the last cake in a hurry, jumped up, and stopped Otsu from coming after him. “Wait,” he said. “I just saw Matahachi go past.” At once the color left Otsu’s face, and the weak body that had only just begun to recover shook again with fear.

Jotaro tried to sound brave. He told her that if Matahachi came near them, he would run to call Musashi. Yet after saying this, the boy’s tongue wandered into another dangerous place. He asked why she and Musashi had stopped talking to each other after the falls at Magome Pass. He asked why they walked apart and slept in different rooms. Otsu did not answer. Since that day at the falls, her heart had been confused and sore. Musashi’s sudden passion, her own refusal, her shame, her love, and her wish not to lose sight of him had all become tangled together inside her, and she could not untie them.

They passed the barrier without trouble, thanks to the travel paper they carried, and people in the tea houses looked at Otsu on the cow and called her “Fugen,” like the holy figure. Jotaro asked what that meant, and Otsu answered that Fugen was a Buddhist saint. Jotaro laughed and said that if she was Fugen, then he must be Monju, because those two were always shown together. Otsu blushed and told him not to talk nonsense. Then Jotaro asked another foolish question, and she was just giving him a short answer when a sharp voice came from behind them. “Hey.” A man had come up so close and so quietly that he seemed to have flown there like a fly.

It was Matahachi. Otsu looked at him and felt disgust rise in her at once. He too was full of violent feeling when he saw her. He had already seen Otsu and Musashi traveling together from Kyoto, and now, because they walked apart and spoke little, he imagined even worse things. He stood by the cow and said, “Get down.” Otsu kept silent. He said it again, louder, and she answered coldly, “Why should I? I have no reason to get down.” Then Matahachi grabbed at her sleeve and shouted, “You may have none, but I do.” His voice was rough and shameless, full of the old right he no longer had.

Until then Jotaro had only watched. Now he threw down the rope and cried,

“If she says no, you cannot force her.” He even pushed Matahachi in the chest. Matahachi staggered, then turned on the boy with anger. The two threw cruel words at each other. Jotaro mocked him for his past, and Matahachi, stung with shame in front of Otsu, lost all control. He lunged, Jotaro ran around the cow, and the chase circled under Otsu’s very eyes. At last Matahachi caught the boy by the collar, and when Jotaro half drew his wooden sword, Matahachi flung him away into the brush beside the road.

Jotaro fell into a muddy little stream and crawled back up at once. When he looked toward the road, he saw the cow already running away with Otsu still on its back. Matahachi was dragging the rope and striking the air with it like a whip as he fled. Jotaro shouted in fury, but in that first hot moment he forgot to seek help and thought only of the wrong before his eyes. While this happened, Musashi was far ahead, standing alone on a low hill and looking toward the great mountain. His eyes were on the sky, but his heart was on Otsu. He still could not understand her heart, and the thought of his own shame at the waterfall still burned in him.

He told himself to cut free from thoughts of women and go forward on his path, yet he knew he could not simply leave Otsu behind. He had brought her this far, and he felt a duty toward her whether he wished to or not. Time passed. The evening light weakened. Otsu and Jotaro should have appeared on the road below, but they did not. At first he thought they had only been delayed at the barrier, yet soon worry grew too strong to ignore. He ran down the hill, and as he reached the road, a traveler came toward him and asked, “Sir, are you with the young woman riding the cow?” Musashi answered at once, before hearing more, “Has something happened to them?”

Then he learned that a ronin-like man had driven off the cow and taken the woman away. The news had already spread among travelers along that road, but Musashi had known nothing because he had been waiting alone on the hill. He ran back toward the barrier tea house and asked where they had gone. The shopkeeper pointed into the dim evening and said that people had seen the man turn off toward Nobu-no-Ike. Musashi flew in that direction without another word. He did not imagine that the kidnapper could be Matahachi. He thought instead of

bandits, wild fighters, or men who lived by stealing on the road. As darkness spread under the cold stars, he kept running into the deepening dusk, with fear for Otsu driving him on.

Part 2

Musashi ran back through the darkening road and stopped at the tea shop by the barrier. The shopkeeper told him what others had seen: a rough man had driven off the cow with the young woman still on it and had turned away toward Nobu Pond. Musashi could not believe that the man could be Matahachi. He remembered the tears, the promises, and the hand that had once gripped his in friendship, and so his mind looked instead for robbers, wandering fighters, or cruel men who lived by stealing on the road. He ran into the cold night toward the foot of Mount Komagatake, but the way was uncertain, the fields and woods all looked the same, and the darkness grew so thick that even the ground at his feet was hard to see. At last he saw a red light behind a belt of trees and, when he moved closer, he found the spotted cow tied outside a farmhouse.

At first that sight gave him hope. If the cow was there, then Otsu must also be there. Yet as he hid and listened, he heard a loud young man ordering his old mother about the house, speaking roughly, and boasting that he had brought home a fine cow that could work in the field and give milk. Musashi crept nearer and looked through a side window. Inside he saw not only the fire of the hearth but also a fine naginata hanging on the wall, far too good for an ordinary farming house. The young man he had seen in the firelight also looked wrong to him, strong in the body, fierce in the eyes, and too steady in movement to be a simple peasant. Musashi's doubt deepened, and while he watched, smoke from the hearth caught in his throat and forced a cough out of him.

The old mother heard it and called for her son, Gonnosuke. The young man came out at once, searching the dark with a watchful body and a strange long staff in his hand. Musashi stepped out and demanded that the woman and the child taken from the road be brought back at once. Gonnosuke, who knew nothing of

Otsu or Jotaro, took this as a terrible insult and attacked without another word. Then Musashi learned how strong he really was. The staff moved so fast that Musashi could barely breathe, much less draw his sword, and he felt at once that this was no common village fighter but a man whose whole body had been shaped by the art he held.

The fight grew harder with every breath. Gonnosuke's staff could strike, sweep, turn, and stab from both ends, and Musashi, though greater with the sword, could not find even one easy opening. The old mother cried warnings from the window, and at last Musashi slipped in, seized Gonnosuke, and threw him to the ground with all his strength. But victory did not come. The old mother burst out of the house with the naginata, her hair wild and her eyes bright with desperate love for her son, and Gonnosuke, pinned beneath Musashi, still fought like an animal caught in a trap. Musashi suddenly saw that if this went one step farther, one of them would die for nothing. So he called out for the old woman to wait, and after a moment, through anger and suspicion, the truth slowly began to come into the open.

They went into the house and sat by the hearth. The old mother, still shaking, told her son to show the whole house if needed, so the stranger could see that no woman and no boy were hidden there. Then Gonnosuke explained the spotted cow. He had found it struggling in deep mud by Nobu Pond, believed it had been left by thieves, and happily dragged it home as a gift from heaven. Musashi apologized for his mistake, and Gonnosuke, now ashamed of his own hot temper, answered honestly and without pride. The old mother, wiser than both young men, told her son to eat quickly and then go help Musashi search, for if wicked men had taken the travelers into the mountain country, delay could be dangerous.

So the two men went out together with torches and searched through the night. They walked past ponds, fields, village paths, and dark clumps of trees, asking at house after house, but no one had seen Otsu. Musashi worried for her more with every step, yet another thought also stayed with him: had this accident not happened, he would never have met this staff fighter of the mountains. He wanted badly to ask Gonnosuke who he was and where he had learned such skill,

but the time was wrong, and the search had to come first. At last they reached another lonely house, and from the hunter's wife there they gained one small thread. She had seen a muddy boy with a wooden sword running wildly toward Yabuhara and asking where the magistrate's office was. When she heard what had happened, she had told him that officials would not help with such trouble and that he should go instead to Narai and seek a good man called Daizo. Hearing this, Musashi knew at once that the boy must be Jotaro, and he crossed Nobu Pond with Gonnosuke in a small boat, carrying the torch over black water bright with stars.

That same moving light was seen by Otsu. She was then at the rain-prayer shrine by the pond, her hands bound, her body aching, and Matahachi beside himself with fear when he noticed the torch on the water. He dragged her roughly behind the shrine and then into the building itself, gagged her when she tried to cry out, and watched in panic until the boat passed by and the fire went away into the dark. When he felt safe again, he did not become calm. Instead he leaned against the wooden lattice and brooded. He told himself that Musashi had stolen Otsu's heart, turned her against him, and tricked him with false friendship. Thinking of old words from Kojiro, he changed his mind once more and decided that he would stand against Musashi for the rest of his life, not as friend but as enemy.

He went back inside with that bitter thought hard in his heart. Otsu, pale and worn, still would not yield, and when he demanded her answer, she gave it clearly. She said that the only name tied to her heart was Musashi's and that she hated Matahachi so deeply that his very nearness made her shiver. Such words should have forced a man either to stop or to kill, but Matahachi chose another cruelty. He swore that if he could not win her heart, he would still claim her body, and then, in a fit of rage and shame, he bit deep into her upper arm until blood ran down her sleeve. Even he was shocked by what he had done. Later, when a poor country man happened to look in at the shrine, Matahachi seized him, took his horse, tied Otsu on its back, and forced the man to guide them away from the main road and over the mountain path toward Ina. By dawn they had climbed high, and

Otsu, who had spoken no word for a long time, begged only that the farmer be set free. When Matahachi finally let her down from the horse and ordered her to walk quietly beside him, she answered that she would not run, for the mark of his teeth on her arm would not disappear, and escape was useless now.

Part 3

By the time the long search ended, the eastern sky was beginning to pale. Musashi and Gonnosuke had found no sign of Otsu, and the single small clue Jotaro had left behind was not enough to follow at once in the dark. Gonnosuke asked Musashi to come back to the farmhouse, rest a little, and take food before going on to Narai. Musashi accepted, because his body was tired and because he still wished to understand the rough young man with the staff. Yet even under that roof, he could not sleep deeply, for his mind moved between worry for Otsu and wonder at the strange skill he had met by chance in the mountain country. Before full morning came, he rose and heard voices in the next room.

He looked through a crack and saw a scene he had not expected. The huge Gonnosuke, who had fought like a wild beast the night before, was kneeling before his mother and crying like a child. The old woman was not comforting him. She was angry because he had spoken of giving up the martial way and spending the rest of his life as a farmer beside her. She seized his clothing and told him that she had raised him for more than that, teaching him letters and warlike arts in poverty because she wished to see the old name of their house rise again. Musashi understood then that their fierceness did not come from empty pride alone. It came from years of hunger, hope, and a hard wish carried by both mother and son.

He also felt danger in that wish. If he stayed, they would surely ask for another match, and if he fought again, one side might not leave the field alive. So he quietly slipped out before sunrise and took the road alone. He had gone only some distance into the rocky hills when he heard a voice behind him. Gonnosuke had come after him with the cow, his mother riding on its back, the long staff in his hand. The young man shouted that Musashi should not run away after reading

their hearts and escaping without a word. From below, on the narrow mountain path, he demanded one more contest.

Musashi stopped halfway up the rocks and looked down. He had already defeated this man once, and he wanted no more hatred from a proud son or from a mother who loved too fiercely. The memory of another old mother, bitter and full of curses, rose inside him and made him wary. For a moment he thought the wisest thing was to keep climbing and leave them behind. Then the mother called up to him, and her voice was no longer sharp with blind anger. She begged him not out of revenge but out of shame and longing, saying that if they parted now, her son would have gained nothing from meeting a true master and would carry only the disgrace of being thrown down like a common peasant.

That plea moved him. He came back down, helped the old woman settle again on the cow, and said they would walk together while he thought. The three went on in silence through the stony hills, and at last the second trial came upon them not on a flat field but among steep rocks and narrow footing. Gonnosuke grew hot and eager again and wanted to rush upward straight at Musashi, but his mother checked him sharply, warning him not to lose his mind in anger. The words did not end the danger. They only made it deeper, because now the young man attacked with even more care, and Musashi, who had chosen not to refuse, had to meet him in earnest. The staff whirled, the sword flashed, and on that hard mountain path the fight became more terrible than the first.

Gonnosuke’s staff pressed Musashi again and again with its double power, able to strike from either end and change shape as if it were a living thing. Musashi answered with skill and patience, yet he felt the mountain, the narrow ground, and the speed of the staff closing around him. Then came the moment when sword and staff locked in a deadly bind. Gonnosuke fixed all his will on Musashi’s blade and drove in with desperate strength, trying to force the end at once. At that instant the mother cried out only one word from the side, calling to his waist. Gonnosuke dropped his hips as she meant, and in that tiny change the point of the staff leaped toward Musashi’s chest with a truth neither fighter had fully seen before.

Musashi saved himself by a violent backward spring that tore the ground

beneath his feet, but he knew in the same breath that death had already touched him. The staff had reached the place it should have reached, and only a last desperate movement had kept it from driving straight through him. Gonnosuke, carried forward by the force of his own success, stumbled past the line of perfect balance and showed his back. In that single opening Musashi struck, not with the killing edge, but with the back of the sword, and Gonnosuke fell face forward onto the earth. Musashi too dropped into the grass, pressing a hand to the pit of his stomach, and cried out, “I lost.” The old mother stared, unable to speak, and for a while only the wind among the rocks seemed alive.

When she feared her son had been cut down, Musashi told her at once that the blow had not been fatal. Then, after Gonnosuke rose and all three had become calm enough to breathe, Musashi asked the old woman why she had shouted about the waist. Her answer struck deeper than any weapon. She said that her son had been so fixed on Musashi’s sword that he had forgotten the living body beneath his own hands, and that if, without changing hand or aim, he had simply settled his waist and let the body act as one, the staff would naturally have gone to the enemy’s chest. Musashi listened with full attention and gave thanks for the lesson. What the mother had seen was not born from books or schools but from love sharpened by the sight of life and death, and both young men understood that the cry from her mouth had opened a new gate in the way of combat.

Part 4

For a while after that, none of the three spoke. The old mother looked from her son to Musashi, and the fierce wish for victory had gone out of her face. In its place there was something calmer and deeper, as if she had seen not only danger but also grace in that morning among the rocks. Gonnosuke stood with lowered eyes, no longer burning to prove himself at once, and Musashi too had become quiet. He knew that this meeting had not ended in defeat or in victory alone, but in the opening of a gate which both men might walk through for years.

At last the old woman bowed her head and spoke with great respect. She said

that her son had long carried a staff in his hands but had had no true master and too few worthy enemies. Because of that, he had trained his body, but his spirit had not yet found its right road. She begged Musashi not to leave them with only the memory of blows and danger, but to let the young man carry away one true lesson from their meeting. Musashi answered that the best lesson had already been given, not by him but by her own cry from the side of the path, and that if Gonnosuke kept that one truth in his bones, he would find the rest of the way by himself.

Gonnosuke then bowed in turn. It was not an easy bow, because pride still lived in him, but it was honest. He admitted that until that morning he had wanted only to win, and that he had thought of strength as something that broke the other man down. Now he had felt another thing, a discipline that did not rush, a force that did not waste itself, and a quiet that could still strike like lightning. Musashi told him that skill without right spirit became only a noisy trick, and that a weapon must become a path for the whole life, not merely a means to beat another fighter. After hearing this, the mother placed her palms together and said that the gods had sent them this meeting on the mountain road.

They parted there. Musashi went on alone, carrying in his chest both pain and gratitude, while behind him the cow, the old mother, and Gonnosuke slowly disappeared among the stones and thin trees. The cold air of Kiso was clean, and the sky above the peaks seemed larger than before. Yet Otsu still remained somewhere ahead in danger, and that thought soon drew him back from all reflection. By noon he had come down from the rough heights to a river place where the road opened a little, and there he stopped to wash the sweat and dust from his body in the clear moving water.

While he was bathing, he felt that someone had been looking at him. On the road above stood a samurai of strong build and dark weathered face, the kind of man who seemed made for armor and long riding. The stranger stared hard, as if trying to place him from old talk or distant report, and after a short moment he turned away. Musashi wondered whether the man might be connected with the old Yoshioka line, for the name had been spoken, and it was not impossible that

some surviving follower still carried revenge in his heart. So he dried himself quickly, dressed, and came out onto the road with caution.

The same samurai stepped forward, bowed, and asked whether he was not indeed Miyamoto Musashi. When Musashi gave a guarded answer, the man's face opened with satisfaction, almost with joy, and he introduced himself as Ishimoda Geki, a vassal of Lord Date Masamune of Sendai. He said that he was no suspicious wanderer, though he now traveled with only a small company, and that from the beginning of this journey he had somehow felt that he might meet Musashi on the road. He asked permission to share the same lodging that night and talked with an easy warmth that was far from the secret malice Musashi had feared. Since the man's bearing was open and his speech frank, Musashi accepted.

That evening they sat together at the inn, and Geki spoke at great length. He was the sort of retainer who loved his lord so deeply that speaking of him seemed to give him real pleasure. Again and again he said that among the great men of the age none cared more truly for the realm or for the Imperial House than Masamune. He spoke of troubled times, of the weight of Tokugawa power, of the danger that the people and even the court might once more be made small while the government fattened itself, and he praised his lord for seeing this danger clearly. Musashi listened, often only nodding, for he knew war and men at close hand but had never given deep thought to the wider movements of the realm.

Geki did not seem to mind this silence. He continued to tell story after story about Masamune's mind, his care for order, his pride, and his devotion, and he spoke too of old books and old models of rule. In his talk there was also something else that struck Musashi more strongly than all the praise: the sense that within this house of Date there lived a living discipline, a spirit that joined loyalty, conduct, and purpose into one shape. At last Geki urged him to come to Sendai, saying that his lord was plain in manner and quick to welcome men of true worth, whether they were retainers or masterless swordsmen. He even offered to guide and recommend him if Musashi wished to go.

Musashi answered only that he would think on it, and the two men parted for sleep. But when he lay down in his separate room, his eyes remained open in the

dark. The word that stayed with him was not the name of Date, nor the talk of courts and lords, but one deeper word: the way of the warrior. He saw then with sudden force that mere sword skill was too small, too narrow, too hungry for victory, and that his own path must become something larger and stricter. Not sword technique, but the sword as a way. Holding that thought in the stillness of the inn, while the night deepened outside and the road to Edo waited ahead, Musashi felt that another step in his life had quietly begun.

Part 5

Musashi asked at last why Ishimoda Geki was showing him such unusual kindness. Geki smiled, lifted his cup, and answered with complete openness. He said that he had long wished to meet Musashi, not because of idle curiosity, but because he had heard many different stories about him from many different mouths. Some had called him a dangerous swordsman, some a wild man, and some a true fighter born in a hard age. Geki said that when he first saw Musashi by the water, something in his face and body had made all those stories join together, and he had felt at once that he was in the presence of a real man.

He then began to speak again of his lord Date Masamune. He said that in troubled times many men cared only for their own house, their own gain, and their own fame, but that Masamune looked beyond such narrow things. According to Geki, his lord wished above all that the realm be held in strength and order, and that warriors remember that they existed not for drunken pride or private greed, but for a higher duty. He praised Masamune’s plain habits, his strong will, his wide sight, and his readiness to value a worthy man even if that man served no master. As he spoke, his face changed from cheer to deep seriousness, and it became plain that he loved his lord not with empty praise but with faith.

Musashi listened, still and silent. What struck him most was not the praise itself but the shape of the life behind it. This retainer was not merely loyal because he had been paid or born into service. He carried his lord’s way of living inside his own speech, his posture, and even his pleasure in small things. When Geki had

praised Musashi's rough clothing and simple manner, he had done so because he saw in them something he had already been taught to honor. Musashi began to understand that where a house was sound, even one of its men might show the whole spirit of that house.

Geki urged him several times to come north to Sendai. He said that a man like Musashi should not waste himself wandering alone without a field worthy of him. If he came to Masamune's service, Geki declared, he would not be treated as a common sword hand, but as a rare man whose strength of body and spirit could be used for greater work. Then, after talking of war and government, Geki laughed softly and said that even if Musashi refused forever, he was glad just to share one night under the same roof. There was such honest feeling in the words that Musashi could not reject them harshly.

Yet Musashi's heart was not wholly in the room. Even while Geki filled the cups and spoke of warriors, rulers, and the changing age, Musashi's thoughts returned again and again to Otsu. From time to time, as the sound of the river and the voices of the town rose from outside, he felt as if he heard a cry for help mixed among them. He knew this might be only his own troubled mind, but that did not lessen its force. The more Geki talked, the more Musashi felt how torn his own life still was, pulled at once toward human ties, toward the sword, and toward some greater road whose name he had not yet fully grasped.

When the night had grown late, Geki noticed that his guest remained sober, grave, and inwardly far away. So he let the talk become quieter. He spoke no longer of service and ambition, but of the burden placed on any man who lived by the sword. To kill skillfully was not enough, he said. If that were enough, then the world would belong only to cruel men with strong arms. A true warrior had to govern himself first, then his weapon, then his desire for victory, and then his relation to all other lives around him. Musashi did not answer quickly, but these words settled into him like sparks dropping into dry grass.

At last they withdrew for the night. Geki slept warmly content, pleased with his meeting and perhaps still half dreaming that Musashi might one day follow him north. Musashi, however, lay awake for a long time. In the dark he turned

over the things he had heard from Geki, the lesson he had received from Gonnosuke's mother, and the shame he still carried from his own confusion over Otsu. Slowly these separate pains and teachings began to gather under one thought. Swordsmanship alone was too narrow. If he gave his whole life only to winning over another man's body, then no matter how famous he became, he would remain small.

The path had to be larger than that. It had to include the body, but not end there. It had to include victory, but not depend on victory alone. It had to govern the self in standing, sitting, walking, sleeping, eating, speaking, and fighting alike. As that thought became clearer, the word that formed within him was not merely sword law, but the warrior's way. He did not yet know how far that way would go or what shape it would finally take, but he felt that he had at least touched its gate, and that once seen, it could not be forgotten.

Before dawn he rose without noise. He did not wish to be held back by thanks, invitations, or more warm words. He washed, tied his things, and stepped out while the world was still gray. Behind him, in that riverside town, Ishimoda Geki slept after his one night of deep admiration, while ahead of Musashi lay the long uncertain road, Otsu's danger still unresolved, and the hard labor of shaping his life into the true way he had only just begun to see.

Part 6

After leaving Ishimoda Geki, Musashi walked on through the town with the feeling of that one-night meeting still in him. Travelers, packhorses, laborers, merchants, and priests passed before his eyes in an endless flow, and although he moved among them, his mind remained fixed on Otsu and Jotaro. More than once he started at the back of a figure in the crowd and thought, for one breath, that it might be one of them. Geki noticed this restlessness before they parted and asked whether Musashi was searching for companions. Musashi answered briefly, explained the trouble, thanked him for the kindness of the night before, and then, instead of following the same road, turned toward a different way so he could

continue the search.

Geki was sorry to lose him, yet he did not press too hard. He only repeated his invitation to Sendai and said again that Musashi should one day come north and see the spirit of the Date house with his own eyes. Musashi gave a grave answer of thanks, and the two men separated, Geki striding ahead toward Wada Pass while Musashi remained in the town. It was a troubled age, and men of the great domains were always looking for talent on the road, so such meetings were not as strange as they might seem. Even so, Geki had left a strong mark on Musashi, not merely as a useful acquaintance, but as a living sign that a warrior's life might be shaped by something wider than personal skill. He watched the man go until he disappeared, and only then did he turn fully back to the business of finding those who were lost.

Just then someone called out behind him, "Sir, sir." It was a porter, one of the rough road men who knew the inns, crossroads, and side paths of the district better than any map. The fellow listened quickly to Musashi's explanation and declared that if he were given half a day's wage and sandal money, he and others could spread through the roads and surely find the missing people by evening. Musashi accepted at once. He counted his poor travel funds and found that even all he had was not enough for the amount the man named, but without complaint he took out everything that remained. Much of that money had originally come from Otsu, who had managed the costs of the road from Kyoto and had even pressed a share into his hand for his own use, yet now he gave the whole sum over to the porters without hesitation.

The men divided the coins among themselves and told him to wait at the great gate of Suwa Shrine until sunset, promising that good news would come before the day was done. So Musashi waited. He stood by the gate and watched the traffic of the road, the fading light, and the busy life around him, while his mind moved between hope and doubt. The hours passed slowly. Every step on the road seemed important, every child's voice made him look up, and every woman passing at a distance forced his heart to beat faster before reason corrected it. As evening fell, the place grew darker and quieter, and from somewhere near the deep

trees below the stone steps he began to hear a hard striking sound, as if something were kicking wood in anger.

Drawn by that repeated noise, he went down and looked into a small building where a sacred white horse was kept. A man in plain shrine clothing was there, feeding it. When Musashi explained why he was waiting and how he had hired the porters to search, the fellow threw back his head and laughed so hard that Musashi's face darkened with anger. Yet the laughter was not simple mockery. The man told him that the road was full of wicked laborers who took money in advance and then drank, gambled, and vanished, and that only a traveler new to the world would believe such promises so easily. Step by step, with examples from the roads around Suwa and Shiojiri, he showed Musashi how ordinary men were often cheated in just this way.

The words struck him more deeply than open insult would have done. He stood silent after the shrine man went away, holding the empty lesson in his chest like a stone. With the sword in hand, he had long believed himself alert and difficult to surprise, yet in the common dealings of the world he had been handled by ignorant road men as easily as a child. He did not burn with shame in the simple way of a proud man who has lost money. What came over him instead was the stronger pain of seeing another kind of immaturity in himself, one that could also appear later in larger matters of command and judgment. He said quietly that it could not be helped, and at the same time resolved that from now on he must learn from common life as humbly as from masters of combat.

When he went back up toward the shrine gate, he saw a single figure waiting where he himself had stood before. At first he thought it might be another trick, but as he drew nearer, the man hurried down the steps and called to him with honest eagerness. He was indeed one of the porters from the morning, yet unlike the others he had not disappeared into drink and gambling. He told Musashi that only one side of the matter had been found, but that he had come quickly to report it. Musashi felt immediate relief, not only because of the news, but because he saw all at once that the world was not made only of cheats. When he asked whether it was Otsu or Jotaro, the porter answered that he had traced the boy's path and

had learned that Jotaro was in the company of a man known as Narai no Daizo.

That news lit one side of Musashi's heart. Otsu was still unaccounted for, and that darkness remained, but at least Jotaro was no longer lost in the empty road. The porter, seeing that his truth had been received with respect, gave what further direction he had and was rewarded honestly for it. Musashi thought that such a man, paid justly, would likely go back to the road the next day and deal justly with other travelers too. Then a new decision came to him at once. Rather than seek some corner to sleep until morning, he would go on through the night, cross Wada Pass, and try to catch up with Narai no Daizo and Jotaro ahead. With that sudden purpose, he left the town of Suwa behind and stepped once more into the dark road, alone, tasting again the strange pleasure of night travel, where the heart could grow quiet even while it hurried after those it loved.

Part 7

Musashi liked walking alone at night. In a crowded place his spirit often felt strangely lonely, but on a dark road, with only his own steps and the sky above him, his heart grew full and active. Many thoughts came to him there that would never appear in daylight among people. He could think of the world calmly, and even look at himself as if he were another man. So he went on through the mountain dark after leaving Suwa, forgetting for a while even his hunger and worry.

Then at last he saw a single light. It stood far away in the wide hollow between the mountain ridges, and as soon as he noticed it, human warmth pulled at him. He felt the cold on his sleeves, the emptiness in his stomach, and the strong wish to sit by a fire where people lived. When he came near, he found not a lonely hut but a roadside tea house, still open deep in the night. From inside came the smell of cooking, the crackle of a fire, and the rough voices of men drinking.

Musashi stopped at the edge of the eaves and hesitated. A poor hut might have given him a little millet porridge out of pity, but a place of business would expect money, and he did not believe he had even one small coin left. Still, the

smell of boar soup and hot food was stronger than caution. He decided that if he must, he would offer the small carved image of Kannon he had made with his own hands in payment for one meal. So he entered, startling everyone inside into silence.

Three rough men sat beyond the hearth, drinking and watching him with hard eyes. The old master of the house turned and asked sharply what he wanted, but Musashi, driven now by hunger, sat down at an empty stool and asked for food at once. The meal came quickly: cold rice and hot boar soup. While eating, he asked whether a man called Narai no Daizo had passed that way with a boy during the day, but neither the master nor the three men claimed to know anything. Once his body had warmed and his hunger was quiet, he explained his trouble and offered the small Kannon image in place of money.

As he opened the travel bag on his back to take out the carving, something heavy dropped from inside and struck the floor. Gold spilled out. Small pieces rolled over the earth, and for a moment no one in the room moved or breathed. Musashi himself stared in surprise, for he had never put any such thing into the bag. Then a folded note fell after the money, and when he opened it, he found only a single line from Ishimoda Geki, saying that this was for his present expenses.

At once Musashi understood enough. The gift was not simple kindness alone, but part of the wider custom of great houses who wished to bind rare men to themselves before the day of need came. He did not want to use such money, because to spend it was to take on the weight of favor. Yet there it was, shining before strangers, impossible now to deny. The innkeeper would not take the Kannon image after seeing the gold and demanded proper payment, so Musashi gave him a silver piece and, unable to make change, left the rest as tea money. Then he wrapped the gold, tied it about his body, put the rejected carving back in his bag, and stepped out into the night again.

He had not gone far when one of the three drinking men came after him and called out that he had forgotten a silver piece. The man held it out and said it must have rolled aside when the money spilled onto the floor. Musashi took it with thanks, but the act did not move him deeply, because the fellow at once began to

stay too close and ask too many questions. He spoke of having once been a samurai, of living hidden in the mountains with other men until the time came for war, and of serving whichever great side offered the best chance. Musashi answered little and noticed, more than the words, how the man kept pressing toward his left side, the side from which a sudden attack was easiest to make.

Even so, Musashi let him go on and even agreed when the man invited him to sleep at their hidden hut rather than cross the dangerous mountain passes before dawn. The guide led him down from the road toward a ravine and said they must cross a narrow log bridge and then climb along the stream. Musashi walked ahead without turning. The moment he stepped onto the log, the man leaped from the bank and tried to hurl him into the rushing water below by lifting the bridge itself. But Musashi had already left the bridge. He landed light on a rock in the torrent, sprang back in the spray before the other man could recover, and struck him down in a single blow.

He did not waste even one breath looking at the falling body. His sword and his whole being were already turned toward the next danger. Just then a gun roared across the valley, and the ball cut through the place where he had stood a moment before and buried itself in the earth behind him. Musashi dropped low and looked across the dark water. Two faint red sparks moved there like fireflies, and then two shapes began to crawl toward the bank. The dead man had lied when he said his friends were still drunk at the tea house. They had gone ahead, laid their trap, and were waiting in the mountain dark.

Part 8

The two red sparks moved again in the dark, and Musashi knew they were the burning ends of matchcords. The men were crawling low beside the stream, hoping to fire once more before he could close with them. He did not wait for a second shot. Springing from stone to stone through the spray, he rushed across the black water with such speed that the men, who had planned the trap with care, suddenly found the fight already upon them. One tried to raise his gun properly,

but Musashi struck before the aim was set, and the weapon went uselessly aside.

The other man dropped the match and reached for a blade, yet he too was too slow. These were not disciplined fighters but rough mountain thieves who had hoped to win by trick and darkness. Against a man like Musashi, the first failure broke their courage almost at once. One fell badly wounded, and the other tried to twist away among the rocks. The stream roared under them, and the dark banks, which had seemed so useful for an ambush, now trapped them in their own narrow ground.

In the middle of that sudden violence, a woman’s voice cried out. It was not the scream of a stranger seeing blood, but the sharp desperate call of someone who knew one of the fallen men. Musashi checked himself for a breath and turned. A woman had rushed out from the shadows near the hut above the ravine, and behind her, half rising from the earth in pain and confusion, was one of the men he had struck down. She stared at Musashi, and then, with astonishment and old familiarity breaking through the fear in her face, she called him by the childhood name almost no one used any longer.

Musashi was startled. There was only one old woman in the world who still called him so in that familiar way, or so he had thought. But now, as he looked closely at the face before him, memory returned. The woman was Oko, the widow who had once lived by trapping men through drink, beauty, and deceit, and who had later fled with Gion Toji, a former man of the Yoshioka school. The wounded thief on the ground was indeed that same Gion Toji, now dragged down to this miserable state, living like a roadside robber in the mountains.

For a moment Musashi could only stare. He remembered the stories he had once heard in Kyoto, how Toji had stolen money meant for the Yoshioka school and run off with Oko, and how people had spoken of him as a shameful man. To find him now here, thin, ruined, and bleeding beside a stream after a thief’s trap, felt less like victory than like a hard lesson about the end of crooked lives. Musashi said that if he had known who the man was, he would still have had to defend himself, but he would not have struck with such force. Oko bowed her head and said there was no excuse to offer, only shame.

She knelt beside Toji, gave him water, and bound the wound as best she could. Musashi stood near them, his sword lowered now, while the cold night moved through the ravine. Toji, half awake and half broken, squinted up at him with a face still clouded by pain. When Oko told him who stood there, he too seemed struck dumb, as if the sight of Musashi in that lonely place showed him all at once the full distance between what he had once been and what he had become. None of the three spoke easily after that.

At last Musashi asked the question that had driven him over the roads and through the mountains. Had they seen a boy named Jotaro, or a young woman taken by force? Oko answered that she knew nothing of Otsu, but she had heard talk of a boy with a wooden sword who had passed through the region in great haste. She also knew something of the rough men and hidden paths of that district, and from her words Musashi understood that Jotaro had likely been carried onward by chance into another line of wandering lives, not murdered on the road. The answer was uncertain, yet even uncertainty of that kind was better than complete darkness.

The night had now grown deeper, and the wild attack had turned into something sadder and quieter. Musashi told Oko to tend her husband and abandon this life if they still had the strength to do so. Whether they truly could or not, he did not know, and he did not stay to preach further. Leaving the ravine, the broken bridge, and the fallen robbers behind him, he climbed back toward the road with the wet sound of the stream still in his ears. He had not yet found Otsu, and Jotaro too was still somewhere ahead, but now the road had at least begun to open again.

Part 9

The story then moved away from Musashi and followed another road. The Koshu highway was still rough in those years, hardly shaped like a true great road, and many old war paths were still used as they had been in the days of fighting. Inns were poor, travel was hard, and those coming from the west often felt they had come into a half-made land. Yet even on such roads, people, goods, and

human sorrow kept moving eastward without rest.

Among those travelers was a company of women being taken down from the Kyoto side toward Edo. They were not grand ladies but women marked for the pleasure quarters, led by a man named Shoji Jinnai, who had left the west early and, seeing profit in the new eastern capital, had begun moving women there in groups. Some were already used to that world. Some were still half children. Some laughed loudly because they were frightened, and some had already become silent, as if their hearts had turned to dust on the road.

Akemi was among them. She had already been driven through enough shame and pain to feel that the great thing called a woman's life had been broken once and for all. Because of that, she sometimes spoke as if it no longer mattered what happened to her body from now on. But this was not peace. It was hurt speaking in a tired voice.

At Kobotoke, when the road rose and the carriers stopped early for food, Jinnai had the lunch bundles handed out. The women sat apart in little groups and ate dry rice wrapped in leaves, without tea, without beauty, and without any sign of the bright painted future people later would imagine for them. Their skins were yellow with dust, their hair had gone pale with road dirt, and when one girl cried from the heart, "Ah, that was good," it sounded less like a courtesan than like a hungry village child. Anyone hearing such a voice from a daughter of their own house would have wept.

While they were eating, some of the women caught sight of a young traveler passing among the packhorses and porters. He carried himself with the careless pride of youth and looked like a handsome swordsman still wearing the front hair of an unmarried man. At once the women began whispering, nudging one another, and saying that he looked fine. Then one of them said she knew him well, because he had often come with men from the Yoshioka school. The name passed quickly among them: Sasaki Kojiro.

Kojiro at first did not even understand that the shrill voices calling "Sasaki-san" and "young front-hair man" were meant for him. Only when the calls grew louder did he turn with a hard face, annoyed that such women should be shouting

after him in the road. Some of the group laughed, some hid smiles in their sleeves, and the mood among them rose for a little while. It was one of those light moments that can appear even in miserable journeys, when tired people suddenly remember they are still young. But Akemi did not brighten as the others did.

Jinnai, who watched people more sharply than he seemed to, called Akemi aside and asked once more whether she truly meant to become a courtesan. He told her plainly that this was not work one could leave after a month from dislike. Once she entered that life, men's wishes would rule her day and night, and she would not be free to refuse. Akemi answered bitterly that men had already ruined the deepest part of her life, so what more was left to protect. Jinnai, for all his trade in women, answered more seriously than she expected and told her that having been hurt once was no reason to throw herself into greater ruin.

He said that until they reached Edo she still had time to think, and that if she turned back from the choice, he would not demand the road money or the cost of the journey from her. Those words did not save her, and they did not heal her, but they did strike some quiet place inside her. So the company rose again and moved on along the rough eastern road, with dust on their feet and doubt in their hearts. Behind laughter, calling voices, and the foolish excitement over a passing young swordsman, Akemi walked on under a burden much heavier than the travel pack on her back.

Part 10

When the women called after Sasaki Kojiro, he finally stopped and turned with a dark face. He had not imagined that such a noisy cry in the middle of the rough road could be meant for him. Some of the women laughed harder when he frowned, and one or two waved at him with the bold playfulness that sometimes rose in tired women like a last weak flame. Kojiro only looked at them with annoyance and pride, as if their voices were dirt thrown at his clothes, and then moved on again through the packhorses and porters. The little scene ended as quickly as it had begun, but it left behind a short, foolish brightness among the

women.

Akemi did not share in that brightness. Her eyes had followed the young swordsman for a moment, but not with the simple pleasure the others felt. She had seen too much already, and the sight of another handsome young man on the road did not promise beauty to her. It only brought back the thought that men passed freely where women were carried, sold, or cornered. So while the others talked, laughed, and argued over whether Kojiro had truly heard them, Akemi sat apart with her wrapped meal in her hands and felt only the weariness of the journey inside her chest.

Shoji Jinnai noticed this. He had the sharp eye of a trader, and he could read a face even while pretending to think only of loads, money, and road time. So he called Akemi near and spoke to her in a lower voice than before. He asked again whether she truly meant to become a woman of the pleasure house, and whether she understood what that life really required. She answered bitterly that her life as a woman had already been ruined by men, so there was little left to protect. Jinnai did not laugh at that. He told her instead that one wound was no reason to throw herself into a second and deeper one.

He even said that until they reached Edo, she still had time to turn away. If she changed her mind, he would not demand the road money or the cost of food and lodging from her. The words surprised Akemi, because they came from a man whose business lived on women’s bodies. Yet perhaps precisely because of that trade, he knew how final the step would be. Akemi gave no clear answer, and Jinnai did not force one from her. The company gathered itself again, and with dust rising around their feet, they went on eastward under the long burden of the road.

Before long they reached Takao and the temple lodging at Yakuoin, where travelers often stopped among the hills and cedars. There, on that same evening, another party had also come to rest. A retired gentleman had arrived with a servant carrying boxes and with a boy of about fifteen in attendance. The place held the mixed feeling common to mountain temple inns in those days: holy names at the door, rough travelers inside, smoke from the kitchen, tired sandals at the steps,

and human trouble hidden under every roof. Akemi, moving through that half-quiet place among women who were not truly free, felt that her own life too had come to such a resting place, neither safe nor fully lost.

Somewhere in the grounds, Jotaro was also moving about. Fortune, which had already thrown him through fear, mud, separation, and strange company, had now brought him into this place. He had not forgotten Musashi and Otsu for one moment, even when new adults spoke kindly to him or when food and shelter softened the body's pain. His young heart still leaned toward the two figures he had lost on the road. So when someone suddenly called, "Jotaro-san, is that you?" in a young woman's voice, he turned with sharp hope, thinking for an instant that the impossible had happened and Otsu herself had found him.

But it was Akemi. She stepped out from the shadow of the garden leaves, and his face at once showed disappointment so plainly that she clicked her tongue and struck him lightly on the back. Even so, both were glad in their own way to see a face from an older part of life. They asked each other what had happened, and Akemi, with no one else to hear the truth from her without judgment, admitted that she had been traveling with a group of women bound for the pleasure world and that she still did not know whether she would truly enter it. Jotaro, being a boy, could not answer such sorrow with wisdom, but he listened.

Then Akemi lowered her voice and asked the question that had been waiting in her from the first moment she saw him. She asked how Musashi was living now. That name, more than any talk of her own future, had been at the center of her heart all along. Jotaro understood this at once, and his own face grew serious. For him too, Musashi's name was not a light thing to be spoken carelessly, because every road he walked still seemed to lead back toward that missing master.

Part 11

Akemi asked in a low voice how Musashi was doing now, and Jotaro's face changed at once. Until then he had spoken like a boy meeting an old acquaintance by chance, but at that question he became grave and careful. Musashi was not

merely a traveling master to him. He was the center of his loyalty, the shape of the future he wanted, and the one adult in the world whose strength seemed to make all roads meaningful. So Jotaro answered not with silly talk, but with the serious pride of a young follower speaking of the man he most admired.

He told her that Musashi had gone on living hard, walking his own difficult road, and that he himself had been separated from him by the trouble on the journey. As he spoke, Akemi listened with an eagerness she could not hide. It was plain that from the beginning this had been the true reason she had called him into the shade and stopped him there. Her own misery, the road to Edo, and the women around her were all heavy enough, yet the name that still reached deepest into her heart was Musashi's. Jotaro, though young, understood this very well.

Their talk was cut short by the life of the lodging itself. Other travelers were moving, servants were calling, and the rough order of the road pressed on without pity for private feeling. Akemi could not remain long in secret speech with a boy who belonged to another party, and Jotaro too was still under the care of the strange older man who had taken charge of him. So the two parted with much left unsaid. Yet for a little while, each had been given one small thing the road had not taken away: a face from an earlier life, and a voice that still remembered the same central name.

The older man with Jotaro was Narai no Daizo. He had come to Yakuoin the evening before with a servant carrying boxes and with Jotaro beside him, asking humbly for lodging and saying that he would make his visit of worship on the next day. At first the temple officers had not known who he was. But after he gave a large offering and his name was seen in the register, their manner changed completely, for Daizo's name was famous in many temples and shrines as that of a man who gave gold freely. He accepted their respect without pride and left the place in the plain quiet way of one used to both wealth and movement.

As they went on from Takao, the day was bright and full of moving white clouds. Jotaro walked beside Daizo, but his heart was not at rest. He had now heard Akemi speak of Musashi, and the old longing to break away and search for his master with his own feet had become stronger than before. At last he could not

keep it in any longer. He told Daizo that if he stayed like this, being carried along by another man's plans, he might never meet Musashi again.

Daizo answered him without softness. He said that Jotaro was too young to run alone through the roads and mountain passes, and that the world would not kindly guide a child simply because his heart was loyal. Then he told the servant to go on ahead and sat down on the grass with Jotaro beside him. There, as if speaking of some ordinary road matter, he suddenly said that from that day onward Jotaro should become his son. Jotaro stared at him in shock, then refused at once and with the plain honesty of a child.

He said that he did not want to become the son of a merchant, because he wished to become a samurai. Daizo replied that he was not merely what he seemed on the road, and that if Jotaro became his adopted son, he would one day be made into a fine warrior. The boy trembled a little, half from surprise and half from distrust. Adults had carried him from place to place since childhood, and kind words from grown men did not always lead where a child hoped. So he asked, with open suspicion, why Daizo had suddenly begun saying such a thing.

Daizo did not answer that question lightly, and Jotaro could feel that the matter was not a joke. The road, which had already separated him from Otsu and Musashi, was now opening yet another path under his feet, one that might pull him farther away even while promising to raise him higher. He did not know what to do, and the simple wish to find Musashi at once struggled against the strange new future being placed before him. So the two went on together under the wide sky, the older man calm and thoughtful, the boy troubled and stubborn, while the road ahead prepared still more change for both of them.

Part 12

Daizo did not answer Jotaro's question at once. He looked at the boy for a long moment, then drew him closer with a hand that seemed calm but allowed no escape. The wide Musashino grass moved softly around them, and the servant was already far enough ahead that he could not hear. Jotaro felt, without understanding

why, that the road itself had suddenly grown dangerous. The older man’s face still wore its usual half-smiling look, yet something hidden and hard had come out behind it. Jotaro repeated, in a weaker voice now, why Daizo had begun talking in this strange way, and Daizo answered that the reason was simple: the boy had seen something he should not have seen.

Jotaro went cold. Until that moment he had tried to believe that the adoption talk was only a strange wish from a lonely rich man, or at worst the selfish play of an adult who wanted a clever child near him. But now another memory rose from the night before with terrible clarity. He had not slept well that night. The temple lodging had gone quiet, yet the road, the women, Akemi, Musashi, and all his own confusion had kept his eyes open. So when he noticed a shadow moving away from the house at an hour when honest people should have been asleep, his body had risen before his mind could stop it.

At first he had thought the figure might be a wood thief or some poor man sneaking through the dark for a bundle of fuel. The person came slowly along a narrow field path and then up to the roadside, passing so near Jotaro’s hiding place that the boy almost cried out. What froze him silent was the shape of the shoulders and the steady walk. It looked very much like Daizo, and yet not like the Daizo of the day. This figure wore dark cloth over the face, black leggings, and light sandals suited for quick movement, and there was a heavy bundle on the back. Jotaro told himself it must be someone else, but he could not stop following.

The man turned off the road and climbed toward a place marked by a signstone that said the Head-Mound Pine stood above. Jotaro crept after him among bushes and grass, his curiosity stronger than caution. Under the great pine the man set down the bundle, lit tobacco, and smoked in the dark as calmly as if he were sitting in his own house. Then he took off the black cloth from his face, and Jotaro saw clearly that it was indeed Narai no Daizo. The sight was so strange that for a moment the boy could not even be properly afraid. He only stared and wondered what kind of rich merchant walked at night in a mask to sit under an old pine and smoke alone.

Daizo then circled the roots of the giant tree, found a stone on the north side,

rolled it away, and began digging with a hoe he had somehow taken in hand. He worked without glancing around, as if he knew exactly where to strike. Jotaro crept closer and closer, trying to see what lay hidden in that place, and the more he watched, the more a sick feeling entered him. The hill stood between the town and the quarter where warriors and richer houses were built. Nothing about it felt clean. Daizo was not digging like a farmer turning soil in daylight. He was opening the earth like a man touching an old secret.

Jotaro did not know how long he watched. He only knew that at some point the watching itself became fear, and fear became the wish to slip away unseen. But he had already come too near. At some later moment, whether on the hill or after he fled and was found again, Daizo had caught him and spoken the words that now returned in full force. “You saw it, boy,” he had said. “You saw what I did last night.” Jotaro had stammered that he had seen nothing, then begged forgiveness, then promised he would tell no one. Daizo had not struck him. That was part of what made the moment worse. He had only drawn the boy into his arms with gentle strength and said that because Jotaro had seen the secret, there were only two choices left: become his son, or be killed.

Sitting now in the grass under the bright day, Jotaro felt the same helpless fear again. In greater danger before, he had fought, shouted, run, or bitten like a little wild thing. But with Daizo he could do none of that. The man’s gentleness was more frightening than open rage, and the smell of an adult body, tobacco, and control seemed to bind him like rope. Daizo asked once more which he chose, and though his tone remained soft, the question carried the weight of death. Jotaro began apologizing again and saying he did not want to die. Daizo rubbed his rough beard against the boy’s cheek and asked, almost kindly, whether that meant he would be a son.

Jotaro could not think clearly enough to answer with courage or cleverness. Musashi was somewhere ahead. Otsu was lost. The road had already torn him away from all safe things, and now this new hand was closing over him. Part of him wanted to scream that he belonged to no one but his master, that he would rather die on the road than be trapped by a secretive old man. But another part,

the small living part of the body that fears death before all else, trembled and gave way. So between terror and confusion, with the endless grassland around him and Daizo's hidden life pressing in from all sides, Jotaro saw that the road before him had become darker than he had guessed, and that escaping this man would not be simple at all.

Part 13

Daizo held Jotaro close and spoke into his ear in a voice so soft that it was worse than a shout. He said that Jotaro had seen too much the night before, and that such a secret could not be left loose in the world. If the boy became his son, he would be protected and raised. If he refused, he would have to die. Jotaro felt real fear for the first time in his life, not the hot fear of a fight or a chase, but a cold fear that entered the bones and made the body weak.

He begged at once. He said he was sorry and promised that he would tell no one what he had seen. Daizo answered that he was not angry about the seeing itself, because what was seen could not now be undone. He only said again that there were two roads left, and that Jotaro must choose one. The man's arms were not crushing him, yet the gentle strength was somehow more terrible than violence. The smell of Daizo's body, his rough beard against the boy's cheek, and the quiet words at his ear made Jotaro feel like a bird trapped in hands too strong to escape.

Daizo asked again and again, "Which do you choose?" Jotaro could not answer. He began to cry, rubbing his face with dirty hands until tears and dust made black marks under his nose. Daizo spoke as if he were offering a gift. He said that if Jotaro became his son, he would be lucky, and if he wished to be a samurai, then all the more reason to agree. At last Jotaro stammered out the thought that had been burning in him: he did not want to belong to a thief.

Daizo threw back his head and laughed. He patted the boy on the back and said that there were thieves who stole purses and there were men who reached for something much larger. He said that even great rulers had taken the world by force, and no one called them common robbers. He denied that he lived by petty stealing

and claimed that he was a much greater kind of man. Jotaro was too young to measure such words, and his mind was too confused to know whether they were madness, pride, or truth.

Then Daizo let him go. He said that from that day on Jotaro would be his son and must never speak of what he had seen under the pine. If he did, Daizo promised, the boy's neck would be twisted off at once. Jotaro could only stand there, wiping his face and trying to swallow his crying. He was still alive, and that alone felt like a kind of rescue, though he knew he had only stepped from one danger into another. So he walked on again beside Daizo, no longer free even inside his own thoughts.

The story then turned away from the boy and followed another traveler coming into Edo at the end of May. It was Osugi, Matahachi's mother. After nearly two months on the road, with stops for illness, prayer, and old-woman troubles, she had at last reached the great eastern city. The weather had grown hot, and because the rainy season had not truly begun, dust rose everywhere in pale clouds. Looking around at the roads, the marsh ground, the new houses, and the endless building work, she muttered in dislike and wonder that people should choose to live in such a place.

Edo offended her from the first moment. The roads were full of carts, piles of timber, builders, laborers, and young men hurrying everywhere. White dust stood in the air, and wet earth from new walls splashed into the street. When wall mud struck her clothes from a building site and the plasterers laughed, Osugi's old village pride rose at once. She marched straight into the work place, tore loose the plank they were standing on, and sent the men falling down into their own mud. When they jumped up in anger, she put her hand to her short sword and ordered them outside, and the rough workers, seeing that she was no ordinary old woman, hesitated and drew back.

That should have been the end, but one young helper wanted revenge. As Osugi walked away, he ran out from the side and threw a bucket of foul mud across her back. She turned and found no one to seize, only the laughter of people in the street. Then she began scolding all of Edo at once. She shouted that people

from far lands were treated without kindness, that the city was only dust, half-buried reeds, noise, and low hearts, and that the much-praised eastern capital was in truth rude and ugly. The more she spoke, the more people stopped and laughed, yet she only grew more certain that she alone had dignity left in that young and shameless city.

As she went on, still grumbling, she saw more of the place and hated it no less. New houses stood beside empty ground, and before one place was fully built, someone was already hanging a shop curtain, painting a sign, or opening a trade. The whole city seemed too young to her. The masters were young, the officials were young, the samurai were young, the workers were young, and even the streets looked as if they had not settled into the earth yet. At last she came near a small bath hut, paid a coin, washed some clothes, and sat in only her under-robe beside the wall, waiting for the garments to dry in the strong sun.

While she waited, she watched some townsmen across the road bargaining over land. They spoke of hundreds of plots, rising prices, and new ground that had hardly been filled in before buyers fought over it. Osugi listened with wide eyes. In the country, fields that gave rice were worth less than one or two small pieces of this muddy city land. She could not understand it. Then, just as she was still staring at the place where the bargain had been made, a hand slipped to her belt from behind and pulled free her purse.

She caught the thief’s wrist at once and screamed for help. The man dragged her several steps, but Osugi clung to his body and would not let go, though he struck and kicked her hard in the side. When that still did not free him, he kicked again with all his strength. Osugi fell, but even as she went down, she drew the short sword she still carried and slashed at his ankle. The thief ran bleeding for several yards, then dropped in the road from loss of blood and pain.

At that moment Han-gawara Yajibei happened to be passing nearby with one of his men. He recognized the thief as a low fellow who had once lived around his own place, and when he heard the cry of “thief,” he acted at once. He had his man look after the old woman while he himself seized the bleeding robber and threw him down in an empty place. Then, after hearing what had happened, he

ordered a post driven into the ground and had the thief tied to it. On a board above the man's head he wrote a public notice that this was a thief being punished, and he left instructions that the workers nearby should keep him there in sun and rain and feed him only enough to keep him alive.

Such punishment was not strange in that rough new city, where official order was still growing and people often kept their own hard ways of discipline. After this, Han-gawara had Osugi's purse returned to her and asked where her clothes were. When he learned that they were drying by the bath hut, he told his man to fetch them and then carry the old woman on his back. He said it would be foolish to punish the thief and then leave an old traveler alone in the street, only to fall into trouble again. So Osugi, hurt in the side and still angry even through her pain, was carried away through the new white streets of Edo behind the man who had saved her.

Part 14

After Han-gawara Yajibei saved Osugi in the street, he listened carefully to the whole story of her journey, her son, and the enemy she hated most. The more he heard, the more he pitied her. In the end he accepted her view of Musashi almost without question, because he had first met the matter through the burning words of a wronged old mother. From then on, the Musashi he imagined was the Musashi she described: a cruel man who had ruined a family and driven an old woman across the roads of Japan. So he treated her not as a burden picked up in the street, but as a guest of honor.

He had a small room built for her in the open ground behind his place, and whenever he was home, he came morning and evening to ask after her health with unusual respect. His own men found this strange. They could understand helping an injured traveler for one day, but not honoring an old country woman so carefully over many days. When one of them finally asked why he was so polite to her, Han-gawara answered with a seriousness they did not expect. He said that these days, whenever he saw an old father or mother, he felt a deep wish to show

the kind of duty he had failed to show his own dead parents. So in caring for Osugi, he was also bowing late before the memory of his own father and mother.

Time passed, and spring moved forward. The wild plum in the town had already fallen, and Edo still had few cherry trees in those years. Only on some hillsides and at a few special places could pale blossoms be seen. One day Han-gawara suggested that they make a visit to Sensoji in Asakusa, because he knew Osugi had deep faith in Kannon and because he himself wished to show her one of the places people in the young city already spoke of with respect. Osugi agreed at once, and so Han-gawara took her along with two of his followers, Juro and Koroku, carrying food and small things for the outing.

They went by boat from the Kyobashi canal, and the journey itself showed Osugi how strange Edo still was. Water ran in and out among half-finished banks, timber floated or stood stacked for new building, and broad open stretches of land still looked more like the edge of a marsh than the center of a great city. Yet life was already gathering there with a force she could not deny. Children shouted near the banks, men bargained loudly over wood and earth, and from every side came the feeling that this young city was trying to grow faster than nature wanted. To Osugi, whose eyes had been trained on older places in the west, it all seemed rough, unfinished, and almost shameless in its haste.

On the way near the river, children came to them with arrowheads they had dug out of the ground and urged them to buy and offer them in prayer. Han-gawara, who did not care for such things, gave them coins instead, but the children’s parents quickly came out and took the money away. He clicked his tongue at the sight, yet Osugi paid little attention to the family quarrel, because the broad riverbank had already caught her imagination. She said that if so many old arrowheads still came up from the earth there, then battles must once have been fought on that ground. Han-gawara answered that many old struggles had indeed crossed that land, from the days of Minamoto no Yoritomo down through later wars, and that men had risen and fallen on those banks long before Edo became what it now was.

When they reached Sensoji, Osugi was disappointed at first. The temple that

people in Edo spoke of so proudly was still only a poor thatched hall with a shabby little house behind it for the monks. Beside the hall ran water from the great river, and around it stood enormous ancient trees whose roots seemed to belong to another age entirely. Somewhere among those trees an axe sounded from time to time, the blows echoing in the air like the cry of some huge bird. As they stood there, monks repairing the roof called down in friendly greeting to Han-gawara, whose face was known even in that outlying place.

They went inside after a lamp was lit. When Osugi sat before the image and took out her rosary, she forgot Han-gawara, forgot his men, and forgot even the poor state of the building around her. She began to chant the Kannon chapter softly, then louder and louder, until her whole face changed and her voice filled the little hall. It was no longer the prayer of a calm old believer. It was the cry of a heart that had narrowed itself around two wishes only. When she finished one full recitation, she pressed the beads hard between trembling fingers and begged the merciful Kannon to let her kill Musashi soon, repeating the plea again and again with frightening force.

Then, as suddenly as that fierce prayer had risen, she bowed lower and changed her request. Now she prayed that Matahachi might become a good son and that the Hon'iden house might prosper once more. In those two prayers, hatred and mother-love stood side by side without shame or contradiction, each just as true in her heart as the other. Han-gawara watched and was deeply moved. To him, the old woman no longer seemed merely stubborn or troublesome. She seemed like one of those hard figures produced by an age of war, half holy and half terrible, whose faith, grief, and anger had all become one fire.

When the temple keeper, seeing that her prayer had ended, came quietly to say that hot water had been prepared in the next place, the spell of the hall loosened. But it did not fully break. Han-gawara left the temple with Osugi more firmly tied to her cause than before, and Osugi herself felt that her visit had not been empty. She had laid her hatred before the holy image, and in return she carried away a stronger belief that the day would come when Musashi must answer for all that had happened to her house. So they went back from Asakusa

through the wide raw edges of young Edo, the old woman clutching her beads, Han-gawara walking beside her in growing loyalty, and the two followers behind them, while over all of them the rough new city kept building itself toward the future.

Part 15

As they were leaving the poor temple at Asakusa, children came running to the monks and cried that a fight had broken out on the riverbed. They said one swordsman was facing several others with drawn blades. The monks groaned as if this were no rare thing there, slipped quickly into their sandals, and hurried off, explaining that the riverbank was often used for duels, traps, and bloody quarrels, and that afterward the officials always demanded reports from the temple. Han-gawara Yajibei, who was not a man to stay behind from such a sight, ran at once with his followers Juro and Koroku. Osugi, slower on her feet, came after them and reached the edge of the woods only when silence had already fallen over the place.

Everyone there was staring into the wide open riverbed without speaking. The water shone under the sky, swallows cut through the air, and in that broad bright space a single young samurai walked alone with perfect calm. He wore a bright peony-colored battle coat and carried on his back the long sword people called the Clothes-Drying Pole. At first Osugi could see only him. Then, with a shock, she noticed that behind him four bodies lay scattered over the stones, and that the fight had already ended before the crowd had truly understood what it was seeing.

One of the fallen men was not yet dead. With blood all over him, he rose like a spirit from the ground and staggered after the young samurai, shouting that the fight was not over. The samurai turned and waited in perfect order. When the wounded man charged at him with his last strength, he stepped back lightly, drew the great blade from behind him in one terrible motion, and split the attacker’s face as if breaking a melon. The stroke was so swift that many watching did not

see the hand move at all. After that, the victor calmly wiped the blade, washed his hands in the stream, and looked over the water as if he were thinking of some distant home.

Soon he found a small boat tied by the water and began to untie it, no doubt meaning to use it for escape before any official trouble came down on him. Juro and Koroku, rough young men from Han-gawara's house, jumped out at once and shouted that the boat was theirs. The swordsman smiled, asked whether payment would do, and when they answered roughly that they were no boatmen, he did not force the matter. He stepped back from the boat and turned to go on foot instead. At that moment Osugi hurried forward, saw his face clearly, and cried out, "Kojiro-dono. Is that not Kojiro-dono?"

The young victor was Sasaki Kojiro. He knew Osugi from before and greeted her at once with warmth, and that surprised Han-gawara more than anything he had yet seen that day. He had watched the killing on the riverbed, and now he saw the same swordsman speaking gently with the old woman he protected in his own house. Han-gawara came forward, apologized for the roughness of his men, and offered Kojiro the boat if he wished. Kojiro accepted the courtesy, and so all of them rode back together. On the water, with drink and food passing around, tongues loosened, and Osugi spoke again of her long wish to see Musashi destroyed.

Kojiro encouraged her. He said that Musashi was still likely somewhere in Edo and that he himself would not forget the meeting they had once promised to have with drawn swords. Han-gawara too joined the talk and confessed that he had long wanted to help Osugi but had still found no clear trace of Musashi's path. Kojiro then began boasting of the fight they had just witnessed. He said the dead men had belonged to the circle around Obata Kage-nori and had talked too loudly not only about military learning but even about swordsmanship. So, he said with a laugh, he had invited them to the riverbed and shown them the power of the Ganryu school and the cutting strength of his long blade. The rough men in the boat, hearing this and seeing the blood still on his clothes, were deeply impressed.

Before the boat reached Kyobashi, Han-gawara had already given Kojiro a

place in his heart. A few days later Kojiro came to visit Han-gawara's house, and the owner showed him the open land behind it where cloth was drying and where, he said, a training ground could be made. Kojiro looked over the broad empty space and answered that no building was needed. The sky itself would be roof enough. Han-gawara worried about rain, but Kojiro only laughed and warned him that his instruction would be harsher than what the city teachers gave. Limbs might be broken, he said. Men might even die. Han-gawara, impressed rather than frightened, gathered his followers and had them swear that they accepted those terms.

So the lessons began. Three times each month Kojiro came to the yard in his bright clothes, carrying a long loquat-wood practice sword and calling for the next man to step forward. His beauty and showiness made his cruelty feel even sharper. He struck without mercy, and by the third training day one man had already been maimed and several others lay injured inside the house. When no one wanted to step forward, Kojiro mocked them. He said they were quick enough to fight over pride, women, or a scuffed sandal in the street, yet when facing a true contest of life and death, their bodies froze. While he was speaking, one hot-headed follower attacked him from behind, and Kojiro dropped low, struck the man's waist with the wooden sword, and sent him down with a cry. The blow killed him.

Kojiro showed no pity. He washed his hands at the well with the dead man lying close by and then, as if nothing important had happened, announced that he wanted to see Yoshiwara that very night. Han-gawara could not leave because of the death that had to be dealt with, so he sent Juro and Koroku to guide the honored teacher. Outside the gate, the two young men forgot all orders about proper service and began laughing like boys set loose for a holiday. Kojiro too was in good spirits. Edo was dark after sunset, darker than Kyoto or Osaka, and they stumbled through muddy roads until the red light of the pleasure quarter rose ahead of them and the whole district shone on the far side of the moat.

On the bridge Kojiro asked why it was called the Old Man's Bridge, and the two followers explained that the quarter had been opened by Shoji Jinnai. Koroku even sang a little song about the old man and the bamboo lattice, and Kojiro

laughed, then covered his head with a cloth just as the two guides did. Inside Yoshiwara they moved from one house to another among bright curtains, bells, lattices, and heavy crowds. At one place Koroku said a courtesan had hidden her face the moment she saw Kojiro, which proved, he insisted, that she knew him. Kojiro denied it and said it was his first time there, but the two would not believe him. They pulled him back into the house, which was the Sumiya, and the old woman there suddenly remembered him from the road long ago, when women had been traveling east under Shoji Jinnai's charge.

That was enough to stir an old trail. The woman called for the courtesan who had hidden, but she did not come. The house began to stir uneasily, and the servants whispered that the same girl had once vanished on the road when Kojiro and Jinnai had spoken together. Now she had disappeared again. The courtesan's name in the house was Hanagiri, but in truth she was Akemi. She had hidden herself in a half-built section behind the pleasure house, among piles of wood shavings and raw beams, and while the servants called "Hanagiri, Hanagiri," she crouched in silence and thought bitterly that Kojiro was hateful, Seijuro was hateful, the drunken ronin who had dragged her into a fodder shed was hateful, and indeed all men were hateful. Yet even in that hatred she still longed for a man like Musashi, or even for someone only faintly like him, and that was the most painful thing of all.

At last, when Kojiro and the others seemed to have gone, Akemi lifted her head in relief. She had hidden first because she knew Kojiro's face, but while she crouched there, her anger had widened until it covered every man who had touched or used her life. Then, just as she thought she was safe, a kitchen woman saw her and cried out in surprise. Akemi put a finger to her lips at once and hissed, "Quiet."

Part 16

Akemi pressed her hand toward the kitchen woman's mouth and told her to keep quiet. Then, still watching the wide kitchen doorway in case someone came

back, she asked for a drink of cold sake. The woman, frightened by the color of her face and by the strange stillness in her voice, filled a cup to the top and handed it over without question. Akemi closed her eyes and drank it all in one hard swallow, lifting her pale face with the cup as if she were taking medicine or poison. When another call of “Hanagiri” came from inside, she answered sharply that she was only washing her feet and would come in later.

The kitchen woman, half relieved, pulled the door shut. But Akemi had no thought of going back. With the dust of the building ground still on her feet, she slipped into a pair of sandals, said to herself that the sake felt good, and walked out toward the road in an unsteady line. The street beyond was red with lantern light, and everywhere there were only men, streaming, laughing, bargaining, calling, and pushing through the night. She spat at them in her heart and wondered what kind of filthy world this was, where men crowded the roads while women like her were ground down to feed the brightness of the houses behind them.

Soon the road grew darker. She saw stars floating in the moat water and heard hurried footsteps behind her, no doubt servants from the house coming with lanterns to search. That only made her anger rise higher. She thought bitterly that the people of the house did not care for her life at all, only for the money still left in her body and for the work she could do under their roof. So she would not go back. Hatred of Kojiro widened into hatred of every man who had used, bought, forced, or judged her, and with that hatred burning like cheap liquor in her blood, she ran straight into the dark without knowing where she meant to go.

Around that same hour, Kojiro himself was already deep in drink. Leaning heavily on Juro and Koroku, he was coming back through the dirty pleasure streets with his steps broken and his speech thick. He refused all advice to stay at some house for the night and muttered that he wanted to go once more to the Kadoya, as if the woman who had hidden from him had become a game he could not leave unfinished. Yet even in that drunken state, pride ruled him more than desire. When one of the men asked whether he had fallen for the woman, Kojiro only laughed and said he had never loved any woman and never would, because his mind was fixed on a larger ambition.

That ambition soon came out in full. He declared that any man who carried a sword must aim to become first in the realm and that the surest road upward was to become fencing teacher to the shogun's house itself. He spoke scornfully of those already near such power, saying that Yagyu and Ono Jiroemon were no reason for fear and that he would one day kick such men down from their places. Juro and Koroku, though half amused and half troubled by his boasting, could not deny the force of the man after what they had seen at the riverbed. So they helped him on through the dark until they reached again the broken embankments and half-dug waterways outside the quarter, where the new city ended in mud, reeds, and uncertain ground.

There the night changed at once. As they began to descend the embankment, Kojiro suddenly shouted, flung the men from his shoulders, and dropped flat against the side of the bank. A shadow that had rushed from behind missed its footing in the same instant and crashed down into the marsh below. Other voices rose out of the dark and called him by name, reminding him of the men he had killed before on the Sumida riverbank. Kojiro sprang up to the top of the embankment and looked around. In the hollows, behind clumps of earth and among the reeds, more than ten armed figures were gathering with blades out. At once he understood that they were followers of Obata Kagenori, come in numbers this time to wash away earlier shame.

He drew the great sword from his back and shouted for them to come if they wanted death. That challenge, and the blood already in the air from the evening's earlier fight, carried the story away from the pleasure roads and toward another house where Kojiro's name had long been growing heavier. It was the house of Obata Kagenori, near Hirakawa Tenjin, an old thatched dwelling with newer lecture rooms and entrances added to it. Kagenori, once a retainer of the Takeda and heir to an old Kōshu line of military learning, had in old age withdrawn there to teach. He was ill, broken by pain, and now rarely appeared before his students, who honored him under the lonely name of the Owl Hermit because the woods behind the house were full of owls.

Beside that sick old teacher there was always one devoted disciple, Hojo

Shinzō. Shinzō was the son of a fallen Hōjō retainer, a young man who had come years before to carry water, split wood, study, serve, and gather the old military teachings into his own bones. Late that night, as he watched by his master's side and tended the lamp, Kagenori lifted his face from the pillow and said he heard water at the stone well outside, and with it the movement of men. Shinzō guessed that some younger disciples had perhaps slipped out again for night wandering, for he had already feared they would do something reckless over Kojiro. He told the master to rest and went out through the back door into the paling hour before dawn.

At the well he found what he had feared. Two disciples were there washing blood from their hands and faces, and another lay nearby with such deep wounds that he seemed hardly able to breathe. At the sight, Shinzō's face tightened with grief and anger together. He strode to the well in his leather socks and cried out that they had gone after Kojiro after all. The two men, seeing him, looked as though they might burst into tears like children, and one of them choked out that the result was bitter beyond words. Shinzō called them fools, not once but twice, his voice harder than a blow.

He demanded why they had gone when he had warned them again and again that Kojiro was not an opponent for hot blood and group courage to overcome. The wounded men answered through shame and pain that they could no longer bear it. Kojiro had insulted their sick master, mocked the school, and already cut down four of their fellows before. How, they asked, could they remain silent and swallow such disgrace? They said that Shinzō's command to endure had itself become unbearable, because to them it felt like cowardice dressed as patience. They had gone to strike for the honor of the house, and now they had come back with blood on them and one friend dying at the well.

Shinzō did not yield an inch. He said that if Kojiro were an enemy fit for ordinary men to punish, he himself would have gone first. He had not held back from fear, but because he knew Kojiro's real power better than the others did. However coarse, vain, and arrogant the man might be, his skill with the long sword was no lie, and to underestimate it was madness. He said that the shame

laid on the teacher’s name did not come from Kojiro’s loud mouth, but from disciples who rushed out in anger and returned defeated. One of the younger men, stung by this truth and yet unable to accept it, stepped forward fiercely as if to seize Shinzō by the chest.

Part 17

The younger disciple stepped forward in anger, as if he might seize Shinzo by the chest, but the movement died before it fully became action. Shinzo did not retreat, and he did not raise his own hand. He only stood there with such bitter control in his face that the others could not quite break through it. He said again that Kojiro was a true danger, whatever else he might be, and that rage was no answer to a long sword wielded by a man who knew exactly how to use it. The wounded men, ashamed and stubborn at once, lowered their eyes, yet the fire among the younger disciples did not go out.

The group fell into a dark silence. Above them, an owl cried again from the woods, and the sound made the whole morning feel colder. Then one of the men, as if suddenly struck by a useful thought, said that a cousin of his served in the Yagyu house. Perhaps, he said, they should ask the Yagyu for help and borrow power from outside. At once several others rejected the idea with anger, saying that such a thing would disgrace their teacher even more and spread the shame beyond the school. They could not bear the thought of outside hands cleaning up what had become their own dishonor.

Since they rejected outside help, the talk quickly turned toward one answer only. They said they must challenge Kojiro again, this time openly and in proper form, not by another dark ambush on a drunken road. Better to lose again in a true contest, some argued, than to sink lower by trick and still be beaten. Others agreed, saying that no matter how many times they were defeated, they could not simply step back and live with the name of cowards. Someone warned that Shinzo must not hear of it, nor the sick master in the house, because both would forbid it. With that, the group began quietly moving toward the shrine office to borrow ink and

paper for a formal challenge.

But before they could go far, the men in front suddenly stopped as if the earth itself had risen before them. One cried out and stepped back. All eyes turned upward toward the old corridor behind the shrine building, where the warm wall caught the shadow of an old plum tree heavy with green fruit. There, with one foot resting on the railing, stood Sasaki Kojiro. He had apparently been there for some time, listening to the whole talk from above while the disciples below planned how to face him.

For one frozen instant, the gathered men turned pale and empty with shock. Even their breathing seemed to stop. Kojiro looked down at them with that proud half-smile of his and said that if he had heard correctly, they were once again discussing whether to send him a challenge. There was no need, he said. He had chased after the survivors from the previous night, had come to the school itself, and had waited there from dawn because he expected some answer. His voice rang over them in bold waves, and because no one answered, his mockery only grew sharper.

He asked whether the disciples of Obata had to consult lucky and unlucky days on the calendar before they could fight, or whether they were only able to draw their blades when they could hide in darkness and strike a drunken man from behind. Still no one spoke. Kojiro shouted again, asking whether there was not one living man among them. One could come, he said, or all of them together. Even if they came armored and beating drums, Sasaki Kojiro would not show his back. His contempt was so total that it seemed to press the whole group backward without touching them.

Then he began praising himself in full, naming masters from whom he had learned sword and quick-draw techniques and declaring that he had formed his own school, the Ganryu, after mastering those secrets. He mocked the disciples as men who had only chewed on books, who talked of the Six Secret Teachings and Sunzi while knowing nothing of courage, timing, or the real body of combat. He even said that what he had done the night before, and what he was doing now by appearing suddenly at their own place, was itself a lesson in military strategy.

A true man, he said, did not merely survive an ambush and hurry away to safety. He cut through the attack, chased the survivors, and appeared at the enemy's own center before they had even made their next plan. That, he claimed, was real war learning.

The cruelty of it was not only in the words. It was in the truth that some part of the words carried. The disciples had indeed been driven into fear and disorder by exactly such boldness. Kojiro laughed and said that he, though only a swordsman, had come to teach military science to a military school. Then he called out to the two rough young men waiting near the shrine, Juro and Koroku, and told them to bring water because his throat had grown dry from so much teaching. They came at once, handed him a rough earthen cup, and after he drank, they too mocked the silent disciples below.

At last Juro asked openly whether the men of Obata meant to fight or not. Kojiro tossed the empty cup toward the group and told Juro to ask their blank faces. Koroku laughed and said he did not see one man among them who looked ready to move. Then the three of them turned and walked out through the shrine gate as if leaving behind not opponents but broken tools. From a hidden place, Shinzo watched the whole thing. He could only whisper, "You wretch," while the bitter shaking of self-control passed through his body. Yet for the moment, there was nothing he could do but swallow it.

The disciples remained standing as if they had been struck senseless. The first fire in them did not come back. Their anger, which had been burning hot, seemed to turn into the gray ash of shame, and not one of them stepped forward after Kojiro's back. Then a servant came running from the lecture hall and asked a simple question that cut through them more deeply than any insult. Five coffins had been delivered from the coffin maker, he said. Had so many really been ordered? No one wished to answer. In time the coffins were stacked away in the storehouse, and in another sense one coffin seemed to settle into each man's mind.

A wake was held in the lecture hall. They tried to keep the matter quiet so the sick master would not fully know, yet he seems to have understood something of it all the same. He asked no questions, and Shinzo, who stayed near him, offered

no explanation. From that day, the disciples grew dark and silent, almost like mute men. The ones who had once raged loudest now looked broken. And in Shinzo's eyes, though he appeared more restrained than any of them, a deeper and more dangerous resolve had begun to burn.

Time passed. One day Shinzo noticed an owl resting in the top of a great zelkova tree visible from his teacher's sickroom. It always seemed to be there, and even in daylight it sometimes cried from the branch as if calling from another world. When summer ended, the old master's illness worsened, and Shinzo could not hear the owl without thinking that it was announcing death. The teacher's son, Yogoro, had written that he was returning at once, but each day people wondered whether the son would arrive first or death would. Shinzo felt another clock moving beneath that fear: the time for his own decision was drawing near as well.

On the night before Yogoro's expected return, Shinzo left the Obata school. He left a written farewell and bowed from the shadow of the trees toward the room where his master lay. He asked forgiveness for departing without permission and said that now the teacher's son was returning, the sickroom could at last be left in other hands. Then he added the truest part. If fortune allowed, he said, he would come back once more before his master died, carrying Kojiro's head. If instead he himself fell by Kojiro's sword, then he would wait for his teacher first on the road beyond death.

Far away from that house of sickness and shame, the story moved to another road and another season. In a poor countryside near Gyotoku, across a waste of reeds, brush, and open wild ground, one lone traveler was making his way at evening. It was Musashi. The day was dying over red marsh water, and he had come to a fork in the path with no house in sight. He had slept in the fields the night before, and the night before that upon mountain stone, and after days of hard travel his body felt dull and tired in a way he disliked admitting. He wanted only a light, a roof of straw, and a bowl of warm millet rice.

Part 18

At first Musashi saw nothing but red water in the low ground and the dim crossing of narrow field paths. Then, far off through the reeds and thin brush, a small light trembled. It seemed weak enough to go out at any moment, yet to a tired man in the open waste it was like a promise. He turned from the fork and followed it over the rough ground, stepping around shallow pools and through wild grass that brushed his legs with the chill of evening. At last he came to a poor hut standing almost alone in the open land, with only a few stunted trees near it and a fence so broken that it no longer truly marked a boundary.

The light came from inside. Musashi stood by the low door and called out for lodging, saying that he was a traveler seeking only one night's shelter and a little warm food if any could be spared. At first there was no answer. Then a small voice from within asked who he was and what he wanted, not in the loose tone of a child, but in the sharp wary way of one who had already learned distrust. Musashi gave his name only as a traveler on the road and asked again, more gently this time, whether he might at least warm himself for a moment by the fire.

The door opened a little, and a boy looked out. His head had been shaved roughly, and the plain robe on his body made him look at first like a child novice from some poor temple, yet his eyes were not mild. They were bright, watchful, and old with trouble. He looked Musashi up and down from straw sandals to sword hilt, and only after that long look did he move aside. Inside the hut the poverty was bare even for the countryside. A little lamp burned weakly. A kettle hung above a poor fire. In one corner, covered with cloth, lay the still body of an old man.

Musashi understood at once. The boy was keeping the night watch over the dead. No woman moved in the hut, no neighbor sat by the body, and no elder voice answered from the dark. The child alone had remained there with the dead man and the lamp. When Musashi asked where the others of the house were, the boy answered bluntly that there were no others. His father had died before. His mother too was gone. The old man under the cloth had been his grandfather, and he had died that day. Since there was no one else, the boy had put up the lamp and meant to sit through the night.

Such loneliness moved Musashi more than the child's hard manner did. He sat down near the fire and asked what food there was in the house. The boy answered that there was only a little millet and some poor vegetables. Musashi told him to cook what remained and to think of him not as a guest, but as another pair of hands for the night. The boy, who seemed at once suspicious and proud, did not thank him like a village child. He only nodded and began to move about the hut with small quick actions, as if he had long ago learned that grief did not excuse delay when work had to be done.

They ate a poor meal together. The millet was coarse, the broth thin, and the hut full of the strange stillness that lives where death has just entered. Yet Musashi, who had slept on stone and grass more nights than he could count, felt almost grateful for the heat, the roof, and the human presence. The boy asked few questions, but from time to time he stared at Musashi's swords with undisguised hunger. He asked whether Musashi was a samurai, whether he had fought many men, and whether the road beyond the marsh truly led all the way into the great eastern city. Musashi answered simply, and the boy's eyes burned brighter with every word.

Then the boy said, with no shame and no softening, that he too wished to become a samurai. The wish burst from him not like a dream but like a need. He spoke of his dead father, who had once lived in better times, and of how no one remained now to raise him into anything except a poor field hand buried in the same waste. Musashi listened without smiling. Many children made brave speeches, but not many sat alone beside a corpse and still had strength left in them to look beyond the next sunrise. So he asked what the boy's name was, and the answer came at once: Sanosuke.

That night Musashi did not sleep much. The lamp burned low, the reeds outside whispered in the dark, and from time to time the boy woke with a start and sat up again beside the body, determined not to fail in his duty. Musashi watched him and thought that courage did not always first appear with a weapon in hand. Sometimes it appeared in a child who would not run from death because no one else remained to do what was needed. Before dawn the hut grew cold, and

with the first bird voices in the gray morning, the work of the living began again.

Musashi helped carry the old man out and saw to the burial with the boy. There was no proper crowd, no priestly order, and no long display of tears. The earth was poor and the tools were poor, but the act itself was clean. When it was over, Sanosuke stood looking at the grave with a face far harder than his years. Then he turned, came straight to Musashi, and bowed low in the grass. He said once more, even more strongly than in the night, that he wanted to be made a samurai and begged Musashi not to leave him behind in that lonely place.

Musashi did not answer at once with easy kindness. Instead he told the boy that words were cheap and that many children asked for grand lives without knowing the pain inside them. He picked up a rough stick from near the hut and handed another to Sanosuke. Then he said that before speaking further, he would test the boy's hands and heart. Sanosuke's whole body tightened with excitement, and when Musashi told him to strike, he attacked at once with every bit of force he possessed. Musashi gave him no special mercy. He struck the boy's shoulders, arms, and face with the stick, drove him back again and again, and waited for tears that did not come.

The stick in Sanosuke's hands broke, but still he did not stop. He threw himself at Musashi with his bare body, caught at his waist, and struggled like a small wild beast too proud to know when defeat had already come. Musashi, amused and impressed together, seized him, lifted him high into the air in both hands, and asked whether he yielded. The boy, half blinded by the sun above him and kicking in empty space, answered that he did not. Musashi threatened to smash him on a stone if he would not admit defeat, but Sanosuke still refused. At last the child cried out that as long as he remained alive, he would surely beat Musashi one day.

That answer stopped Musashi more sharply than tears would have done. He demanded to know how such a small creature meant to win against a stronger man. Sanosuke answered with the logic only a stubborn child and a true fighter might share: if Musashi trained ten years, he too would train ten years, and if Musashi stayed stronger, then time itself would defeat him, because an older man would

die first. When Musashi lay in a coffin, the boy said, he would strike him then and claim the victory. For one breath Musashi stared at him as if he had been hit. Then he threw back his head and laughed, not in mockery, but in real delight.

He set the boy down on the earth instead of against the stone. Looking at the thin body, the dirty face, and the will that would not bend even in the hands of a stronger man, Musashi felt that chance had placed something valuable before him in that empty land. So he said suddenly that he would take the boy with him after all. Sanosuke's joy broke free at once, open and shining in a way grief had not been able to kill. Musashi added that from that day the boy would bear not the old child-name alone, but a new name fit for a future follower. He called him Iori. And in the poor hut by the wild fields of Hoden-ga-Hara, with the fresh grave still near and the morning light growing over the waste, the lonely funeral boy stepped into a new life.

Part 19

The next morning Musashi told the boy that if there was anything in the hut he still wished to keep, he should take it now and leave no regret behind. Sannosuke came running out from the back at once with only the clothes he wore, straw sandals on his feet, and a cloth bundle of millet rice on his back. Musashi had already begun calling him Iori, because he had learned that the boy's grandfather had been a retainer of the Mogami house and had borne the name Misawa Iori, a name handed down in that family. Musashi thought that if the child was now to return to the path of a samurai, then he should also take back the sound of his ancestors. Yet the new Iori, standing there in his short worn clothes with a lunch bundle on his back, looked less like a young warrior than like a frog-child setting off into the world.

Musashi told him to take the horse away and tie it to a distant tree. Iori at once answered "Yes," and the simple change in that one word struck Musashi. Until the day before, the boy had answered with the rough "Hei" of a village child, but now he said "Hai" with sudden care, changing himself without shame or

delay. When he returned after tying the horse, Musashi was still standing under the low eaves of the hut. The boy looked at him with wonder, not understanding why he remained there so long without speaking.

Then Musashi placed a hand on the child's head and told him that he had been born under that straw roof, and that the hut itself had helped raise the stubborn spirit and unbending will in him. Iori nodded quietly under that hand, and for a little while the two remained there, looking at the poor dwelling that had held the whole life of a family now gone. The place was miserable, yet it had not been empty of meaning. Hardship had lived there, but so had endurance. Musashi did not speak of pity. He spoke instead as if the hut itself had been a stern teacher.

After that, the old place was set on fire. Iori watched the flames leap up and asked in surprise why they were burning the very house that had sheltered him and his dead kin. Musashi answered that if such a place were simply left behind, it would become a hiding place and a convenience for bad men, and that would stain the memory of those who had lived honestly there before. Better, he said, to let the old hut go into fire and ash than leave it standing for the use of men who poisoned society. The child listened, and though he could not fully grasp the thought, he saw that Musashi was not burning the past from contempt, but protecting it in the only way he believed right.

Soon the hut had fallen into one low burning heap. Iori, whose young heart did not linger long over what was gone, said at once that they should now set out. But Musashi shook his head. He told the boy that they were not leaving. They were going to build another hut there with their own hands, and that this new place, unlike the one they had burned, would belong to their life from the next day onward. Iori stared and asked whether they truly meant to stay there and not continue on the road in search of sword training and adventure. Musashi answered that they were already on that road, and that this too was training: the training of the sword, the training of a warrior, and the training of the heart.

He sent Iori to fetch the axe and other tools he had earlier set aside from the fire. Then the two walked into a grove of chestnut, pine, and cedar, and Musashi stripped to the waist and began cutting trees. Fresh white wood flew from the

trunks under the blows of the axe, and the sharp sound of iron on living wood rang out over the waste. Iori dragged branches, carried tools, and watched everything with a boy's restless eyes, still not fully believing that this could be part of a warrior's path. In the evenings they lit a fire with chips and bark, slept with timber under their heads, and began the slow rough work of shaping a place to live.

The days passed into deeper autumn. They peeled bark, trimmed wood with hatchets, set posts, and built a poor sleeping hut out on the open waste. At night insects grew fewer, and the sound of them thinned as the season turned. When the roof was finally raised and the first shelter stood ready, Musashi put a hoe and a spade into their lives as naturally as he had taken up the axe. Iori complained honestly that none of this was interesting and that if the plan was only to become farmers, he had not needed to become Musashi's disciple for that. Musashi only answered that it would become interesting in time.

Before breaking the ground in earnest, Musashi walked over the surrounding waste and studied it carefully. He asked himself why so much open land lay abandoned under brush, reeds, and wild trees when men needed fields and food. The answer he found first was water. When great rains fell over the broad eastern plain, water rushed wherever it pleased, cutting sudden channels, dragging stones, and leaving behind wide empty beds with no order and no true direction. There was no main stream strong enough to gather the smaller flows and lead them as one, and because of that, the land remained at the mercy of every heavy sky.

So they began by trying to fight water with labor. They dug, raised banks, opened channels, and tried to claim one little space at their feet from the wild ground around them. Then one day a hard rain came. Seeing no sign of the boy, Musashi ran anxiously toward the half-made field, fearing that Iori had been caught in the downpour and would fall ill. There he found him standing soaked from head to foot in the muddy ground, looking almost like a scarecrow planted in the rain. Musashi shouted that he was a fool and told him to hurry into shelter before the water rose and trapped him, but the boy only searched for his master's voice through the rain and then grinned.

"You are the one who is in a hurry," he said. "This rain will stop. Look there.

The clouds are already breaking.” He pointed one finger up to the sky. Musashi fell silent, feeling for a moment that the child he meant to teach had just taught him something instead. Iori, simple and direct, was not thinking in heavy knots the way Musashi often did. He only saw what was before him and trusted it. Then, with the rain still on his face, he called out cheerfully for Musashi to come and said there was still enough light left to do more work.

Part 20

About ten days later, the look of that wild place had already begun to change. A hut that could almost be called a home stood there now, and beside it a rough piece of ground had begun to look like the beginning of a field. Yet to the people living nearby, the whole thing still seemed foolish. They had watched Musashi and Iori cut wood, drag timber, dig earth, and break their backs over a place that every heavy rain would soon destroy again. To them, the two were not builders of a future but odd men wasting strength in a land that had always defeated ordinary labor.

Musashi did not care what they thought. He walked the whole stretch of wasteland again and again and studied it not as a farmer only, but as a man trying to understand why nature and human life had remained separated there for so long. The answer he found first was water. When heavy rain came over the great eastern plain, water did not move under any master. It burst where it wished, cut new channels, dragged stones, spread into wide beds, and left destruction behind. There was no great current strong enough to gather the smaller waters and lead them with order, and because of that, the whole place remained like a land abandoned by rule.

So he and Iori began their true labor. They dug channels, raised low banks, cut brush, and tried to force one small piece of earth to remain dry and steady under their hands. Day after day they worked with spade and hoe. The hut became real shelter, and the first shape of a little farm could be seen around it. In the evenings they cooked what poor food they had, slept under the rough roof, and

woke again to the same hard work. Iori still grumbled honestly that none of this was interesting, but he worked all the same.

Then the rain came in full violence. One day the sky darkened suddenly, and Musashi gathered their tools and called for Iori to run back with him to the hut. By the time he reached it, rain was falling so hard that it seemed to grind heaven and earth into one white wall. Lightning tore the sky. Thunder shook the whole open land. Musashi looked from the window, called again and again for the boy, and for a moment fear rose in him more sharply than he liked to admit. He remembered old days, great trees, and the stern mercy of Takuan, and he wondered whether he himself had yet become broad enough to stand above a child like a sheltering cedar.

At last he found Iori out in the half-made field, drenched through and standing in the mud. Musashi shouted at him to run for cover, but the boy only answered that Musashi was the one in a hurry and pointed calmly at the sky. The clouds, he said, were already breaking, and the rain would stop soon. Musashi fell silent then, for once taught by the child instead of teaching him. Iori had no heavy thought in him at that moment. He only saw the sky as it was and trusted what he saw.

Yet the rain did its work. After the storm, the little field lay ruined. Mud had broken through where they had thought it would hold. Water had cut across the ground in new places, carried away what they had built, and mocked their careful labor. Musashi began again and fought the next rush of water in the same way. Again he failed. When winter came, snow often covered the waste, and when the snow melted, the flood returned and tore at the ground once more. Even after the new year, through the first months of bitter cold, all their sweat and all their digging had not yet produced even one proper strip of field.

Food grew short. When there was nothing left, Iori had to go to Tokuganji and beg. He did not always come back in shame, but there was worry in his face now, and the people at the temple did not hide that they had begun to look on the two workers at Hoden-ga-Hara as fools. Even Iori, though loyal, finally spoke his mind. “This is no good, Master,” he said. “Breaking your bones for nothing is not

what makes a man skillful in war." Musashi did not answer in anger. He could not, because somewhere in himself the same doubt had already begun.

For several days he hardly touched the hoe. He only stood in the field and looked at the ruined ground in silence, thinking from morning until dark. Then, suddenly, the answer came. He said that until now he had been trying to rule earth and water by his own plans, as if he were a governor forcing his policy on unwilling land. That had been the mistake. Water had its own nature. Soil had its own law. He had tried to conquer them, when what he should have done was serve them, protect them, and move with their character instead of against it.

After that, he changed everything. He no longer tried to bend the place to his pride. He studied how the water wished to run, where the ground truly held, and where it must be left alone. He worked not as a conqueror of nature but as its servant. When the next great snowmelt came down over the plain, floodwater again rushed through the wasteland, but this time their small field remained. Then Musashi understood that the lesson reached far beyond farming. The same was true, he thought, in rule and government. Men too could not simply be forced by clever plans forever. To guide them rightly, one must first understand their nature and the law already living in the world.

Part 21

After his field survived the snowmelt, Musashi understood that the lesson reached beyond farming. He wrote a short warning to himself in his travel notebook, a line reminding him not to go against the true way that runs through the ages. Around that same time, a man named Nagaoka Sado often came to the nearby temple as an important supporter. He served the Hosokawa house, lived under heavy duties in Edo, and used temple visits as a way to breathe again. He arrived with only a few attendants, lived simply, bathed, drank a little country sake, and lay listening to the frogs in the dark as if he had stepped outside the human world.

On one such night he laughed loudly and told his men that the wind smelled

of rape blossoms. Just then a priest shouted outside, scolding a boy who had been peeping in to look at the visiting samurai. The priest apologized and explained that the child was an orphan from Hoden-ga-Hara, the grandson of a man who had once served as a samurai, and that the boy always said he too would become one. Hearing this, Sado asked that the child be brought in. He was bored, liked children, and thought such a boy might amuse him for a while.

The boy was Iori. He had come to the temple first for millet, loudly demanding grain from the old kitchen woman because the supply at the hut had run out. The temple workers mocked him cruelly, called Musashi a mad ronin, and said that both master and boy were wasting their lives digging ground that could never become a field. Iori fought back in his own childish way, throwing a huge toad into one monk's face and speaking with open cheek. Then he was led before Sado, still carrying the temper of the kitchen with him and not at all frightened by rank.

Sado liked him at once. He asked his age, asked whether he wanted to become a samurai, and even offered to take him to his own household, saying that if the boy served well enough, he might in time rise among the retainers. Iori only shook his head. When sweets were given, he stuffed them away at once instead of eating them there, and when Sado asked why, the boy answered simply that his teacher was waiting. Before anyone could draw more from him, he leaped up and ran off into the dark, playing a leaf whistle as he went and forgetting even to sing a proper song to match it.

On his way back across the open land, he suddenly stopped. Near a small earth bridge, several large men were gathering in the dark and speaking in low voices. Then more groups came running in from different sides until there were many of them, perhaps forty or fifty. At once an old terror returned to him. These were the mountain raiders who, every few years, came down like a false god demanding grain, goods, animals, and young women from the poor villages. He saw them form up, heard the cry that sent them forward, and then watched them rush toward the sleeping settlement like locusts in the night.

Iori first thought of warning the temple and the visiting samurai, but before

he could get away, two raiders caught him near the bridge. They suspected at once that he had seen too much. Instead of killing him on the spot, they threw him under the bridge and tied him to a piling, leaving him there while the attack spread through the village. Above his head he heard wheels, cattle, screams, and the movement of plunder being carried off. He heard villagers trying to fight and being cut down. Bodies fell from the bridge into the water before his very eyes, and blood splashed his face in the dark.

At last one wounded villager, half dying, crawled close enough for Iori to shout at him and order him to cut the rope. The man managed it, then died where he fell. Iori ran along the riverbank, crossed the shallows, and raced over the wild ground toward the hut on the hill. There he found Musashi standing outside and looking at the distant fire. Breathless, he cried that the mountain men had come again, that there were many of them, and that Musashi must go at once and save the village. Musashi made ready in a moment, but when Iori begged to guide him by the shorter way, Musashi refused and ordered him to stay behind, saying that the fire itself was guide enough.

Musashi ran through the red night toward the village. Before entering it, he came upon a line of captured women being driven across the fields, tied together and dragged behind a loaded horse while the raiders laughed at their cries. He killed the man leading them, then stood waiting with a blood-wet blade in his hand as the others came up in confusion. There were a dozen or more, armed with axes, hunting spears, and mountain swords. Musashi told them that he was a servant of the guardian god who protected the good people of the soil, then crashed into them before they could even settle themselves. He used their own weapons instead of his own swords, partly from habit and partly because he did not care to damage his true blades on such men.

When several fell and the rest began to break, he freed the women and told them that being rescued once was not enough. Their parents, husbands, and children were still inside the burning village, and if they wished truly to live, they must stand up, take weapons from the ground, and help. Then he led them back toward the settlement, where frightened men were hiding in shadows. He spoke

to them as he had spoken to the women. A village of seventy households, he thought, should not bow forever before fifty raiders. The trouble was not only bad rulers or bad times. It was also that people who had forgotten all strength came to fear force like a magic thing.

So he gave them a plan. The villagers were to hide on both sides of the road while he alone received the returning bandits. As he expected, a fresh group came charging in and found him standing in the way. After a short hard clash, he turned and ran, drawing them after him into open ground, spreading them out, and then cutting back through them in sudden bursts until they fled in confusion. When they rushed back toward the road, the hidden villagers sprang out with bamboo spears, clubs, poles, and whatever else they had found. They struck, hid, sprang again, and beat down the scattered men one by one. With each success they discovered, almost in disbelief, that the strength they had thought absent in themselves had been there all along.

Once that fear broke, Musashi drove them forward. They armed themselves with the fallen bandits' weapons, and even women, old people, and children came behind him into the village. There he smelled liquor and guessed at once where the main band still sheltered. The village headman's large house, set behind a low wall, had become the raiders' center. Musashi went in alone. Inside, the chief and the strongest of them were drinking stolen sake and abusing captured women. Hearing a cry outside, they rose in disorder, and in that instant Musashi came not through the front but in from the side, leaping through a window and driving a spear straight through the leader's chest.

The others broke before they could form themselves. He snatched a sword, struck two men down, then seized again the spear from the dying chief and drove the survivors out into the yard and toward the gate. But the gate was already packed with villagers. Those who tried to escape were beaten down, and the rest tumbled over the wall only to be killed or crippled outside. Soon the village was full not of screams alone, but of wild cries of reunion as people found wives, children, and parents still alive. When someone then trembled and said that the raiders would come again for revenge, Musashi calmed them and told them that

this band would not return. Yet he also warned them not to become drunk on force. Their true calling, he said, was still the hoe, not the weapon, and if they worshiped half-learned violence, heaven would punish them more terribly than bandits had.

Nagaoka Sado heard of the fire from the temple and sent men to see what had happened. They returned saying that the villagers themselves had killed many of the raiders and driven off the rest, but Sado found this hard to believe. So on the next morning, though he was due back in Edo, he rode by way of the village. There he learned the truth: a strange ronin from Hoden-ga-Hara had led the whole thing, trained the villagers' courage in the very middle of danger, and then gone back to his rough life. When Sado heard the name, he repeated it at once. It was Miyamoto Musashi. Before leaving, he saw a fresh signboard standing in the village, written by Musashi's own hand, telling the villagers that the hoe and the sword were one, that in peace they must not forget disorder, in disorder must not forget the earth, and that all must return to their true place without going against the lasting way of the world.

Part 22

Time passed, and the memory of that spring night did not leave Nagaoka Sado easily. He carried away from Hoden-ga-Hara not only the sight of Musashi's rough signboard and the strange tale of a ronin opening waste land with a child at his side, but also a question about rule itself. If peasants who had long lived in fear could be made, in one night, to discover courage and order inside themselves, then perhaps the strength of a province did not rest only in taxes, walls, and punishments. Even so, a man like Sado lived under duties that never ended. Days became months, months became more than a year, and the name of Musashi, though never forgotten, sank down into a quiet place in his mind.

During that time Edo continued to grow in its raw new way. The Hosokawa residence spread wide, though the grounds were not yet fully shaped and much of it still felt like a place half pulled out of woods and earth. Lord Tada-toshi, the young heir, was already showing the kind of sharp mind that made older men

watch him with respect. He was not yet many years past twenty, but he moved among the powerful lords of the new city without losing the dignity of his house. One day Sado went looking for him through the residence, first in the reading rooms, then near the stables, and at last toward the archery ground, where the clean sound of arrows was already cutting the air.

On his way there, another retainer stopped him to speak of a man he wished to recommend. The fellow said he had in his own house a rare young swordsman who ought to be put before the lord if a chance arose. There were many such petitions in those days. Every road in Japan produced men seeking place, income, and protection under some great house, and most of them had more need than worth. Yet this speaker was warm with belief. He said that the young man had come from the Iwakuni side, had studied the Tomita school under Kanemaki Jisai, had received full teaching in quick-draw methods from Katayama Hoki no Kami, and had even founded a style of his own called Ganryu. His name, the man said with pride, was Sasaki Kojiro.

Sado listened politely, but his heart was not in the recommendation. He had heard many men praised in much the same way, and in truth there was now in his memory another figure who seemed far rarer than any polished youth in fine clothes. While the speaker went on praising Kojiro’s skill, carriage, and promise, Sado suddenly found himself thinking again of the solitary ronin out on the waste land of Hoden-ga-Hara. More than a year had passed. Was Musashi still there, still digging, still guiding that orphan child, still shaping field and spirit together in the same rough place? The question struck him strongly enough that, before many more days had gone by, he decided to leave the city for a visit.

He went first to Tokuganji, remembering that the temple had stood near the land Musashi had once worked. The monks received him with respect, for they knew him from before. When he asked at once after Musashi and the boy Iori, however, the answer stopped him cold. Musashi, they said, was no longer there. He had left about half a month earlier, and Iori had gone with him. Sado asked whether some trouble had driven them away, whether the soil had failed, whether enemies had appeared, or whether the villagers themselves had turned against

them. The monk shook his head and answered that none of those things had happened.

On the contrary, he said, the wild wet ground had at last turned green. The land that once held only water, reeds, and failure had become a true new rice field. The people had rejoiced so deeply that they had held a little green-field festival in thankfulness, resting from work for one day in order to look upon the young rice and celebrate the change together. Then, on the very next morning, Musashi and Iori had simply disappeared. No farewell, no demand for thanks, and no sign of where the road had taken them. They had gone as quietly as men leaving a camp after finishing the labor that had called them there.

The monk then told Sado what had happened in the district since the night of the raid. Once the mountain bandits had been broken and peace had settled again over the villages, no one there had spoken Musashi's name carelessly. People no longer called him only that ronin on the waste. They called him "the ronin of Hoden" or more simply "Musashi-sama." He had shown them how to stand against fear, but he had also shown them how to return to their proper work once fear was broken. Because of that, the villagers respected him not as a mere killer of enemies, but as a man who had taught them where strength belonged and where it did not.

As the monk spoke, Sado looked out over the transformed fields. It was hard to connect this green order with the old memory of wet ground, mud, and useless labor. He felt more strongly than before that Musashi was no ordinary swordsman wandering outside service from lack of opportunity. There were many masterless men in the land, but few could build, teach, restrain, fight, and vanish without asking reward. The recommendation of Sasaki Kojiro, which had seemed so pressing in the city, now felt smaller to Sado, not because he doubted Kojiro's blade, but because he had once seen another kind of greatness and could no longer measure men by technique alone.

He stood for a while in silence, and the monk, thinking perhaps that his visitor wished to hear more, added small details that only deepened the impression. Musashi had worked beside the peasants like one of them. He had thought hard

over soil and water like a governor thinking over a province. He had carried weapons when needed, but after danger passed he had put them down and made the people take up hoes again. And when the new field was at last secure, he had not remained there to gather honor. Sado listened to all this and felt something like regret. A man he had once intended to call into service had slipped away again into the wide country.

Still, he did not yet wholly give up the thought. Before returning to Edo, he walked as far as the place where the hut had stood and looked over the land in person. There was no trace now of the first poor shelter or of the rough beginning. The field itself had swallowed the memory of struggle, just as a well-governed province often hides the toil that made it possible. Sado thought that perhaps this too suited Musashi. A man who worked toward form rather than fame might naturally depart at the very moment when others began to praise him. He turned away at last, holding the name again with new force in his mind.

When he returned to Edo, the city felt more crowded and younger than before. Men were still hurrying to recommend talent, still boasting of sword teachers and schools, still searching for advantage in the house of every rising lord. Sado did not dismiss such talk, because a great family needed many kinds of ability. Yet somewhere inside himself a standard had changed. The name Musashi no longer stood in his memory as that of a curious ronin digging in a marsh. It had become the name of a man he wished, sooner or later, to bring before the young lord if fortune allowed. But fortune had its own movement, and Musashi, as before, had already stepped beyond the place where ordinary hands expected to find him.

Part 23

More than a year passed after Nagaoka Sado’s first visit to the wild ground at Hoden-ga-Hara. The new field settled, the work reached a point where it could live without Musashi’s hand on it every hour, and the road began to call again. So at last Musashi left that place, taking Iori with him. They traveled slowly, as he always did, by roads that taught as much as they carried, and by the time they

came toward Edo, the child was no longer the lonely funeral boy of the marsh hut, but not yet a full young samurai either. He was something between the two, sharpened by labor, hunger, weather, and watchfulness, yet still quick to stare at every new thing with open life in his eyes.

The closer they came to Edo, the thicker the road became. Packhorses, merchants, laborers, samurai, pilgrims, carriers, and country people all pressed forward in one moving stream, and Iori kept turning his head from side to side, trying to take in everything at once. The city itself still looked young and half-made, yet that very incompleteness gave it an energy unlike the older western cities. Roads were crowded with timber, new walls, fresh mud, and growing noise. Musashi watched all this without outward excitement, but he felt at once that this place was not merely large. It was a center where ambition, order, confusion, and force were all being mixed into a new shape.

At the gate into the city they were stopped and questioned in detail. The officials wanted to know not only who Musashi was and where he had come from, but what purpose he had in entering Edo, who paid his expenses, what relation the child had to him, and whether he had any place at all to stay. Musashi answered plainly that he was a man of training and wandering, born in Miyamoto village in Mimasaka, with no master over him. He said that he had spent more than half a year in the far north, then about two years in Hoden-ga-Hara in Shimosa, living almost like a farmer, and that when he lacked travel money he carved images, painted, stayed at temples, taught sword skill to those who asked, or else slept on stone and ate roots and nuts from the road.

The officials showed no sign of being moved by such honesty. On the contrary, they pressed harder. When Musashi told them that Iori was an orphan he had taken up in Hoden-ga-Hara and that the boy was now fourteen, they only asked more sharply where they meant to sleep in Edo and what house would answer for them. A city like this, they said, could not simply open itself to any masterless man without ties. Musashi, seeing the line growing longer behind him and feeling the foolishness of such endless questioning, gave the one answer that would cut through the matter at once. He said that he had a place to go and named

Yagyu Tajima no Kami Munenori.

The effect was immediate. The tone of the questioning changed. Men who had moments before been peering into him as if he were a suspicious stray now drew back a little and lost their sharpness. Musashi almost smiled, though not from pride. He found it quietly amusing that a gate which would not open to a nameless traveler could be eased at once by the sound of a powerful name. Yet he had not spoken it entirely without right, for the Yagyu house was not unknown to him, and if the matter truly came to it, he could in fact present himself there. So he and Iori were allowed through, stepping at last from the edge of Edo into the broad movement of the city itself.

Once inside, Iori could no longer hide his excitement. Everything drew him. A noise in one direction pulled his face there, a troop of mounted men pulled it another way, and every cluster of shops seemed to contain some marvel never seen in a country field. He walked close at Musashi's side because he had been taught to do so, yet his whole body leaned outward toward the city. Musashi let him look. He did not waste many words warning him that cities were dangerous, because the boy would learn that soon enough. Better now to let the first blow of wonder strike full, for wonder too was part of knowledge.

Then Iori saw a great crowd ahead and cried out that there was a horse market even in the middle of the town. They had come near the quarter where horse traders gathered in such numbers that the place had begun to take its name from them. Horses stood in long rows, men shouted in many rough eastern accents, and the noise of buyers, sellers, flies, harness, and hooves mixed into one living roar. A samurai was just then stepping away from the animals with a dissatisfied face, saying that there was not one horse fit to recommend to his lord. As he turned sharply from the line, he found himself face to face with Musashi.

The man started, then his expression opened at once. Musashi too broke into a different face from the one he wore before gate officers and city crowds. The samurai was Kimura Sukekuro, one of the strong disciples of old Yagyu Sekishusai and a man Musashi had known in Yamato. Sukekuro greeted him warmly and said that they had met in an unexpected place indeed. Musashi

answered that he had only just come up from Shimosa and then at once asked after the great teacher in Yagyu no Sho. Sukekuro replied that Sekishusai still lived, and from his tone Musashi heard both relief and respect, as if the old man's continued life was a pillar all younger swordsmen still quietly leaned upon.

Standing there among horse traders, dust, and the loud disorder of Bakurocho, the two men spoke with the quick warmth of those who know each other from a better field than the common street. Sukekuro's eyes took in Musashi's worn traveling state at once. He saw that Musashi was still on the road, still poor in appearance, and still carrying the look of a man who had not yet allowed himself to settle under any roof. Yet there was no contempt in him for that. If anything, his respect seemed to rise. Iori watched the exchange closely, learning without being told that a true meeting between men of the sword could begin in only a few words and still carry real weight.

Thus, in the thick young city of Edo, just after passing the officials by the force of a great name, Musashi found himself unexpectedly before a living link to the Yagyu world. The noise of the horse market still rose around them, buyers still shouted over animals, and the city still hurried in all directions, but for a moment that place narrowed into a single meeting. Sukekuro had not expected to find Musashi there, and Musashi had not expected to see a known face so soon after entering the city. Yet the road often worked in that way, crossing lives again not in silence, but in the very middle of confusion.

Part 24

After passing the gate by the force of the Yagyu name, Musashi and Iori entered Edo fully and let the city take hold of their eyes. Roads crossed in noisy confusion, half-finished walls stood beside ditches and new shops, and every face seemed to be hurrying after gain, duty, pleasure, or power. Iori could not keep still even while walking. He pointed at everything, asked quick questions, and looked so widely from side to side that Musashi had to remind him once or twice not to lose the road under his own feet. Yet Musashi himself, though calmer, felt the

same pressure of the city. It was young, unfinished, and restless, but it had already begun to gather the whole age into itself.

Then they came upon the horse market in Bakurocho. Horses stood in long lines, traders shouted in rough eastern voices, flies swarmed around manes and bridles, and men of rank moved between the animals looking for one creature fit to recommend to a lord. Just there, among horse backs, noise, and dust, Musashi saw a samurai turning away with disappointment, saying that not one horse in the market was worthy of his master. The man looked up, stopped, and cried out in surprise. It was Kimura Sukekuro, one of the best disciples of old Yagyu Sekishusai and a man Musashi had known in Yamato. Their meeting in such a place, after so long, made both faces open at once.

Sukekuro looked Musashi over in one quick glance and understood at once that he was still living the wandering life. Musashi asked after the old master in Yagyu no Sho, and Sukekuro answered that Sekishusai still lived. They spoke only a short while there because the market was no place for long talk, but the warmth between them was real. Sukekuro asked whether Musashi had a place to stay in Edo, and when he heard how newly he had arrived, he took the matter seriously. He could not leave the horse business at once, yet it was plain that he did not intend to let Musashi vanish into the city without some thread leading back toward the Yagyu house. After another exchange of respectful words, they parted for the moment, with the understanding that the matter was not ended.

Musashi and Iori then took rooms in a cheap horse traders' inn near the market. The place was exactly what such a quarter produced: dark stairs, bad smells, rude company, and food served with more noise than care. When buckwheat was set before them, the black things lying on the noodles were not beans but flies, and Musashi's chopsticks caught them as easily as food. Iori carried the chopsticks out to be washed, and in that short moment even the swaggering horse men in the next room found reason to slip away elsewhere, as if they did not care to remain too close to the traveling swordsman after all. Musashi laughed with the boy over the ugly meal, yet the whole place repelled him. Across the way, however, he had already noticed a sword polisher's shop,

and that interested him far more than the inn.

He had just taken up one worn blade and said that he might go across to speak with the polisher when the landlady called from below and held up a letter. The back bore only the single character “Suke,” and Musashi knew at once that it had come from Kimura Sukekuro. He broke the seal standing on the stairs and read the note there. Sukekuro wrote briefly but with feeling. He said that a man like Musashi should not rot in a horse inn, that he had already given some word at the Yagyu side, and that Musashi should present himself when convenient, since the house would not refuse him. The message was plain, neither humble nor proud, but written by one warrior to another with respect.

Musashi smiled a little at the speed of it. Sukekuro had met him only moments before in the market, yet already the matter had moved forward like an arrow. He did not rush at once to the Yagyu gate. That was not his way, and he had no taste for appearing too eager before powerful houses. But he did not ignore the kindness either. Since the inn disgusted him and the polisher across the street interested him, he chose first the simpler road. He crossed over, spoke with the sword polisher, and by the end of that first exchange had decided that the man and the place suited him better than the traders’ lodging behind.

The polisher’s name was Ko-suke, and there was an honest severity in him that Musashi liked immediately. Swords, wood, filings, lampblack, oil, and patient handwork filled the place. It was poor, but not dirty in spirit. Musashi arranged to move from the horse inn into a room above or behind the sword shop, and there he and Iori settled for the time being. The city outside remained loud and unstable, but this place had the inward air of craft rather than trade. To Musashi, who had more love for tools, skill, and quiet labor than for boasting men, that difference mattered.

Thus the first day in Edo ended not in some grand hall, but between a noisy horse market and a craftsman’s shop. Still, the line leading toward the Yagyu house had already been thrown. Sukekuro had seen him, recognized him, and sent the first sign. Musashi, without hurrying toward favor, had accepted the sign and moved a little nearer. Iori, for his part, had seen enough in one day to fill a month

of country talk: the great city gate, the roaring horse market, the rough inn, the swarm of flies, and now the quiet mystery of swords being brought back to life by a craftsman's hands. Under that new roof, with Edo still murmuring outside, master and boy stood at the beginning of another turn in the road.

Part 25

Across from the dirty horse traders' inn stood the sword polisher's shop. The light inside was dim, and for a while, even after Musashi called out, no answer came. He called again, louder this time, and at last the sleepy man within raised his head as if he had only now returned from a hundred years of sleep. His face was thin and slack with drowsiness, and there was still a trace of drool at the corner of his mouth. He looked at Musashi in a slow, empty way and asked what business had brought him there. At first Musashi wondered whether such a man could polish even a kitchen knife properly, much less the soul of a warrior.

Yet the moment Musashi held out one of his swords and asked for it to be polished, the man changed. His name was Kosuke, and though he had seemed half asleep for human company, he woke fully for steel. He bowed to the blade before he even knew whether it was famous or worthless. Then he took it gently, with one hand on his knee and the other stretched out with careful respect. He drew it from the scabbard in a measured way and held it upright, letting his eyes pass from the base to the point. As he looked, his dull face sharpened, and his eyes began to shine as if some different light had been set inside them.

When he had finished looking, he slid the sword back into the scabbard and, only then, invited Musashi to come in and sit. This too told Musashi something. The man had not welcomed the traveler, but he had welcomed the sword. Musashi took the seat without refusing, because this was exactly the kind of thing he liked to learn from. In truth, he had not come only to ask for polishing. The sign on the shop had said that the man belonged to the Hon'ami line, and Musashi had hoped he might hear some news of old friends from Kyoto, especially Koetsu and Koetsu's mother, who had once shown him much kindness.

Kosuke, however, knew nothing of those people. His first concern was the blade before him. He asked whether it was an old family sword handed down through the house. Musashi said no. Then the polisher asked whether it had often been used in battle, or whether it was only a sword for daily wear. Musashi answered that it had not been carried through great battles, but it had long been his working sword on the road. Kosuke nodded at that and looked again at both sword and man, as if now he were studying not one thing, but two that belonged together.

He said that a sword took into itself the life of the one who wore it. A man who used a blade carelessly made it dull in more than one way. A man who lived straight and watched his hand, his step, and his spirit could leave even an ordinary blade with a cleaner feeling. Musashi listened closely. He had met swordsmen who talked endlessly about schools, secrets, and famous names, yet this thin sleepy craftsman spoke as if the truth of a sword lived first in use, not in boasting. For that reason alone, Musashi felt more respect for him with every sentence.

The two then spoke long into the evening. Musashi asked about steel, about damage, about the way a sword's body changed under rough use, and Kosuke answered with the patience of a man whose hands had spent years correcting the mistakes of others. He said that many warriors demanded brightness in a blade but did not understand what kind of life kept a sword truly alive. A sword was not saved by shining alone. It had to be understood, rested, cleaned, and brought back again and again to right condition, just as a man's own spirit had to be. Musashi said little in return, but the talk pleased him more than any noisy supper in the horse inn ever could.

By the time the conversation paused, the evening moon had risen thin above the roofs. Musashi knew then that he would not stay long in the foul traders' lodging. This small shop, with its patient light, its quiet labor, and its strange master who cared more for steel than for men, suited him far better. So he arranged to leave the inn and settle there for the time being with Iori. Outside, Edo still shouted, bargained, built, and pushed itself toward the future. But inside the sword polisher's place, another kind of time moved, slower and more exact, and Musashi

felt that his first true footing in the city had at last been found.

Part 26

Kosuke first bowed to the sword before he even knew its name. Then he drew it out slowly, not with the hungry excitement of a collector, but with the careful respect of a man touching something alive. He held it up, turned the blade toward the light, and let his eyes travel from the base to the point as if he were reading a face. The sleepy weakness had already left his body. His shoulders had become sharp, his fingers steady, and even the silence around him had changed.

Musashi watched him with growing interest. When a man came to the shop, Kosuke hardly seemed to wake from sleep, but when a sword came, he woke completely. It was not only skill. It was devotion. Musashi had seen many men bow before rank, gold, or famous names, yet this poor craftsman bowed before steel with a sincerity few warriors showed even to their own teachers.

At last Kosuke slid the blade back into the scabbard and looked up. He asked whether the sword had long been in Musashi's family. Musashi answered that it had not. Then Kosuke asked whether it had passed through many battles, or whether it was only a sword of daily wear. Musashi said that it had not gone through great wars, but it had worked hard on the road and had not been carried for show.

Kosuke nodded, as if that answer pleased him more than a famous story would have done. He said that a sword taken through life by a man's real hand changed in ways no idle blade ever did. It gathered not only scratches and dullness, but also the mark of the one who used it. If the owner was careless, the sword became tired in spirit as well as in edge. If the owner was exact in body and mind, even an ordinary blade began to show that discipline.

Musashi asked quietly whether a sword could truly hold such things. Kosuke said yes without hesitation. He had seen blades that had lived beside lazy men, and they always seemed somehow cloudy, even after skillful work restored their surface. He had also seen blades from men of true discipline, and those swords

seemed to breathe differently when drawn. Steel, he said, did not speak with words, but a patient hand could still hear it.

That answer pleased Musashi more than loud talk from swordsmen usually did. He sat down and asked further questions, not only about sharpening, but about damage, shape, balance, and what long use did to a blade's body. Kosuke answered as one who had spent years correcting the mistakes of others. Many warriors, he said, demanded brightness, but brightness alone meant nothing. A sword was not kept alive by polish only. It needed understanding, restraint, rest, cleaning, and proper use, much as a man's own life needed those same things.

Musashi listened with real respect. Here was a man who did not speak of schools, secret cuts, or empty fame, yet who understood something just as deep. Kosuke spoke as if sword and spirit were not separate. To care for one truly, a man had to care for the other. Musashi, who had lately been thinking more and more about the sword as a way rather than as a mere weapon, found in the craftsman's words another quiet agreement with his own growing thought.

For some time they spoke in this way, with Iori sitting near and listening hard though he could not follow all of it. Outside, Edo still roared with carts, traders, and rough voices, but inside the little shop the evening had become still. At last Musashi asked whether Kosuke belonged to the Hon'ami line. He said that he had hoped, if so, to hear some news of old friends in Kyoto, especially Koetsu and Koetsu's mother, who had once shown him kindness. Kosuke answered with some regret that he knew nothing of them.

Even that did not disappoint Musashi greatly. The talk itself had already given him what he wanted. By the time the moon rose thin above the roofs, he had decided that he would not stay another night among the filthy horse traders if he could avoid it. The sword shop, poor as it was, held a better spirit. So he told Kosuke that he wished to move there for the time being, if a corner could be given him and the boy.

Kosuke, who had shown so little warmth at the door, accepted the matter with simple ease. He did not flatter Musashi or pretend delight. He only said that if they could bear a poor place and the dust of work, they might stay. That answer

suited Musashi perfectly. He had no desire for soft treatment. Thus, while the great city shouted and built itself outside, Musashi and Iori found their first true footing in Edo under the roof of a man who honored swords more than men, and honored them in the right order.

Part 27

After Musashi and Kosuke had agreed that he and Iori might stay there for a while, the talk did not end. Kosuke took up Musashi's sword again and looked at it longer than before. Then he asked several strange questions in a grave voice. Was it a sword handed down through the family? Had it been used in war? Was it only worn daily, or had it truly worked in a man's hand? Musashi answered plainly that it was no famous heirloom, that it had not passed through great battlefields, and that it was simply the sword he kept at his side because carrying it was better than going without one.

Kosuke listened and then asked a still stranger question. Did Musashi want it polished so that it would cut better, or would it be enough if it were made not to cut too sharply? Musashi looked at him and thought he had not heard right. A sword was a sword. To sharpen it so that it cut well was surely the whole task of a polisher. So he answered that, of course, if it was to be polished at all, it should be polished to cut as well as possible.

At that answer, Kosuke drew back a little and stared at the blade again. Then, to Musashi's surprise, he pushed the sword back across the space between them and said that he could not polish it. He told Musashi to take it somewhere else. The refusal was so sudden and so flat that it could not help but offend. Musashi's face hardened, and for a moment the quiet respect he had begun to feel for the man was shaken. It sounded like nonsense. A polisher who said he could not polish a sword because it would become too sharp seemed either foolish or insolent.

Yet Kosuke did not answer insolence with insolence. He only sat there in his drowsy, stubborn way and kept silent until Musashi's first displeasure had passed. Then he explained. This sword, he said, was already sharpened too far in another

sense. Its edge was not the matter. It was the life in it. There are blades, he said, that can be safely made keener because the hand behind them is ordinary. But there are also blades in which the force of the owner has already entered too deeply. To polish such a sword carelessly toward greater killing power would be like feeding too much wind into a fire already near the roof.

Musashi listened without interrupting. The words were odd, but they were not empty. Kosuke said that some men carried a sword as decoration, some as insurance, and some as a thing half dead at their side. But now and then a man came whose blade had taken on the mark of his living use so strongly that the sword and the man must be handled together, not separately. In such a case, polishing for greater killing alone was not simple work. It was almost like sharpening the owner's hunger as well. Kosuke did not say this to flatter him. If anything, he said it as a warning, and that was why Musashi could not dismiss it.

When the first sword was put aside, Kosuke later brought out another blade that had been left in his care through the Hosokawa house. This one had fine fittings and a long body, a sword first mounted like a great tachi and only later changed so it might be worn at the waist. Musashi looked at it with real interest. Under the lamp the fittings showed careful taste, and the long blade had the kind of presence that made the hand imagine immediately what sort of man could carry it well. Kosuke said that an order had come to alter the mounting because its future owner wished to wear it at the waist, but that unless the man were very large or very sure in his arm, such a long weapon would be more burden than strength.

From there the talk deepened into the nature of swords themselves. Kosuke spoke about old blades and new ones, and on this point his whole body seemed to wake more fully than ever. He said that old swords, even when rusted, often suffered only a thin skin of decay, while many newer blades, once badly rusted, rotted inward like a sickness and lost the very heart of their steel. That, he said, was one proof among many that the old masters of the forge and the newer makers could not be measured on the same line. Musashi turned the long blade in the light, looked closely at the steel, and understood that for Kosuke such judgments were not matters of fashion, but of lifelong seeing.

The lamp burned lower. Little by little the sake in Kosuke's body made his tongue slower, and even Musashi, who had not meant to remain so long, realized that the hours had passed far deeper into the night than he had guessed. He returned the long sword carefully, edge toward himself, back toward the craftsman, as proper handling required, and asked one or two last questions. Kosuke answered them in a quieter voice now, and then both men let the talk come to rest of its own accord. No formal close was needed. They had already understood enough of one another for a single evening.

Musashi rose and stepped outside. The street was dark, far darker than he had expected, and not one house in the neighborhood still seemed awake. He had thought he was only passing a short while in the sword polisher's shop, but he had in fact remained there deep into the night. Even so, there was no real trouble. The lodging stood just across from the shop, and he only had to cross the narrow street to reach it. Yet before doing so, he stood one moment in the darkness and felt that, in this new city, one useful meeting had already been made. Under the poor roof of the sleepy polisher, he had found not only a place to stay, but another voice telling him that a sword was never only steel, and that how a man carried his life could enter even the blade at his side.

Part 28

After settling for the time being in Kosuke's sword shop, Musashi did not hurry at once to the Yagyu house. He had no wish to look like a needy wanderer running after favor. Yet he also did not mean to ignore Kimura Sukekuro's kindness. So after some thought, he wrote a short and proper reply and decided to send it by Iori. The boy was overjoyed to be trusted with such an errand. To carry a letter from his master into the great city and up to the gate of the Yagyu house seemed to him almost like stepping into the world of true warriors at last.

Musashi warned him not to waste time, not to stare open-mouthed at every sight in Edo, and above all not to lose the road. Iori promised all this at once and meant it when he said it. But the moment he stepped into the streets with the letter

safe in his robe, the city pulled at his eyes from every side. Men were rebuilding walls, dragging stone, lifting timber, driving carts, and singing work songs. New earthworks around the castle stretched farther than he had imagined possible, and the sight of so many things being made at once stirred him deeply. He forgot, as boys do, that promises made under a master's eye grow weak when wonder begins to speak.

He walked first in the right direction and asked boldly when the streets grew too large for him. One gate man, hearing that he sought the Yagyu residence, even sketched a rough little map and explained how he should go. Iori tucked this precious guide into his breast and went on, very proud of himself. Yet the city was bigger than any map made in a moment at a gate could truly hold. One road divided into three. Three became five. Water, embankments, bridges, storehouses, new mansions, and building grounds all crowded together until the whole city felt like something still moving under his feet.

He crossed near the works below the castle and could not help stopping again and again. On Hibiya plain the sound of chisels and adzes rang in the air as if the new government itself were singing through tools. Men hauling great stones shouted in rhythm, and some even sang a song about the many flowers of Musashi plain. Iori listened with delight and stood watching far too long. The world there did not feel old and fixed, as village life had felt. It felt as if anything might still be built, and that feeling matched the quick shape of his own heart.

By the time he pulled the little map out again, the sun had already begun to slope. He came into quieter roads with high walls and fine gates, then into still stranger places where a lonely little shrine stood hidden under green shade, looking poorer than many farmers' houses. After seeing the grand works of the shogun and the glittering gates of great lords, that humble shrine filled him with a child's serious question. Was Tokugawa greater than the gods themselves, if men could build so richly for one and so poorly for the other? He decided he would ask Musashi later, folded that problem away in his mind, and turned again to the more urgent one of finding the Yagyu house.

Yet the more he looked from the map to the road and from the road back to

the map, the less the two agreed. He began to feel that the city was playing a trick on him. The streets seemed too bright and yet somehow hard to see clearly, as if he were standing inside a sunlit paper room while evening mist slowly drifted into his eyes. He rubbed them, stared harder, and found that the edges of things glimmered strangely. Then, suddenly, something moved in the grass behind him, and every old tale of the countryside leaped up in his mind at once. “You devil,” he cried, and sprang sideways, striking with his short field sword.

A fox shot out of the grass with a sharp cry. Blood and loose hair flew in the colored light of evening, and the animal fled at once. Iori was convinced in that moment that this was no ordinary creature. Since early childhood he had heard more stories about foxes than about any other beast. Boars, rabbits, and flying squirrels might be wild, but foxes deceived men, twisted roads, darkened eyes, and led travelers into trouble. Had he not been walking straight enough until now? Had not confusion thickened around him little by little, exactly as the old stories said? The thought took hold of him so strongly that he chased after the wounded fox at once, determined to kill it before it could work worse harm.

The fox ran swiftly despite its wound, limping only now and then before leaping ahead again in sudden bursts that seemed almost unnatural. Iori followed it into grass, through brush, and toward a bank where the creature vanished among thicker growth. He beat through the weeds, kicked at clumps of grass, and searched with real fear as much as anger in his heart. He told himself that if he let it go, it would only circle behind him and trick him again. Then from not far off he heard a voice call warmly through the deepening dusk, “Otsu-dono.” Another voice answered, soft and glad. Looking from his hiding place, Iori saw a horsewoman and a young samurai coming together on the road.

The woman was Otsu, though he did not know it at once. The samurai, Yagyu Hyogo, came up with a slight limp, and that was enough to overturn the boy’s mind completely. The fox he had slashed had limped. Now here was a limping young samurai appearing at the very moment the fox vanished, speaking with a beautiful lady at twilight. To a boy already lost, already frightened, and full of old country tales, the conclusion was immediate and terrible. The fox had changed

shape. He watched them speak and pass close by the grass where he crouched, and when the young samurai suddenly turned and looked straight toward his hiding place, Iori felt a sharper fear than he had ever known in open country. He flattened himself into the grass and even wet himself a little before they moved on.

For a while he could not rise. Then shame and duty pulled him up together. He still had Musashi's letter. He still had to find the house. Stumbling on in the dark, he came at last beside long white storehouses where a clear crest shone even in the failing light: the double-bamboo-hat mark he knew from songs was that of the Yagyu. "Here," he said aloud in relief. Beside the storehouses stood a black gate. He hammered on it with both fists and shouted that he was a disciple of Miyamoto Musashi and had brought a letter on urgent business.

The gatekeeper was suspicious at first and opened only a little, peering out in annoyance at the child's voice and rough clothes. But Iori thrust the letter forward at once and said, in the firmest words he could manage, that if there was an answer he would carry it home, and if not, he would leave the letter and go. The gatekeeper took it, still doubtful, and stared at the boy as if he were some strange little creature sent in human shape. Yet the name on the letter and the seriousness in the boy's face kept him from laughing. So at last he admitted that the message would be taken in, while Iori stood there in the dark road, tired, frightened, proud, and still half certain that somewhere not far away a wounded fox with a human face was watching him from the evening shadows.

Part 29

The gatekeeper took the letter at last, still looking at Iori as if he were not sure whether he was a messenger or only some bold little street child. Iori stood in the dark road waiting, his tired legs trembling a little now that the errand was no longer moving under him. He expected that a great house like this would at once send out some grave samurai with a reply, or perhaps call him in through the gate and make him sit in some splendid waiting room. But nothing of the kind

happened. The gate closed again, and only after a long time did a servant return and say that the message had been received. There was no written reply that night, and the boy might go.

Such a poor ending to so great an errand disappointed him more than he wished to admit. He had carried the letter through half the city, fought with fear, bled a fox, and found the right gate at last, only to be sent away with nothing more than a few dry words. Yet even while disappointment stung him, another feeling pressed harder. He was hungry, very tired, and no longer sure of the way back. The city at night was not like the country after sunset. It did not sleep into silence, but changed its face. Some roads grew empty and black, some filled with drinkers and lanterns, and some seemed to vanish into alleys that looked alike to a country boy.

He tried to return by memory, but memory failed at once. The road he thought he knew opened onto another wall. The bridge he was sure he had crossed seemed to lead nowhere he remembered. He took out the rough little map again, but it only made the trouble worse. At last he reached, by luck or instinct, the old horse traders' inn where Musashi had first lodged after entering Edo. There he burst in almost crying with relief, only to be told by the landlady, after first laughing at him cruelly, that his teacher was no longer there. She watched him run out into the road in panic, looking west and east and up at the dark sky, and laughed again before calling him back.

Then, still amused by his tears, she told him the truth. Musashi had moved to the sword shop just across the street, up in the middle room above it. At that, Iori flew across as if his sandals had caught fire. He climbed the narrow stairs and entered quietly at last, but the room he came into was not lively or bright. It had a strange dark feeling to it. There were wood shavings scattered around the place, an oil lamp burned low and nearly dry, and from deeper in the house came the still air that hangs near a sickroom. Musashi was lying down, not asleep as in ordinary rest, but with the heavy, half-waking look of a man who had kept watch too long.

Iori knelt carefully by his feet and said, "I am back." Musashi opened his eyes and stared a moment before answering, and when he saw that the boy was

safe, something in his face loosened at once. He sat up quickly and said only, “Iori?” Then he said no more for a while. That silence frightened the boy more than scolding would have done. He had expected blows or sharp questions for returning so late, but instead he felt that his master had spent the evening in real worry, and that was harder to meet.

At length Musashi asked where he had been and why he had taken so long. Then the whole miserable story came spilling out. Iori told of the city’s size, the roads that broke into many roads, the map that would not match the streets, the poor shrine that made him wonder whether the gods were less honored than the Tokugawa, the fox he had cut, the limping samurai, the horsewoman whom he had not known was Otsu, and the great fear that had driven him into the grass. He told even of wetting himself from fright. Musashi listened without laughter. When the tale ended, he only told the boy that Edo had already begun teaching him his first lesson: a road is not mastered merely because one wishes to walk it bravely.

After that, when the shame had gone a little out of him, Iori gave the real report. The letter had reached the Yagyu gate and had been taken inside. There was no answer that night. Musashi nodded as if that was enough. He had never expected the great house to open its heart at once because of one note sent by a wandering swordsman. The important thing was that the line had been cast. Then, perhaps because the boy had gone through fear honestly and returned instead of hiding somewhere until morning, Musashi did not rebuke him further. He only told him to eat what little there was and sleep.

Days passed after that, and the sword polisher’s place became their true lodging. Kosuke worked in his quiet fever over steel, speaking little to men and much, it seemed, to blades. Musashi went out often on his own business, leaving Iori sometimes to wait, sometimes to help in small ways, and sometimes simply to remain still under another man’s roof and learn patience. But patience was not the boy’s natural gift. One day, while Musashi was out, Iori heard a slight rustle beside the house and, looking down from a plum tree in the yard, saw someone peeping into the alley near the drying pole. Angry at once, he flung plums toward the sound so hard that the drying rod fell with a great crash and some startled

figure ran into the road.

Kosuke looked up from his work and asked what had happened, but by then the thing was gone. Iori could only glare into the alley and mutter that some fool had been spying. Whether it was really a spy, a thief, or only a passerby frightened by the noise, neither of them knew. Yet the whole little event suited Edo. Even under a roof that felt calmer than the horse inn, the city would not leave them in perfect peace. Eyes watched, feet passed, whispers moved, and somewhere beyond their walls names like Yagyu, Otsu, Hyogo, and Musashi were all beginning to drift toward one another again.

So the boy's errand had not ended in glory, and the city had already mocked his courage with fear, confusion, and laughter. Even so, he had done what mattered most. He had carried the letter, delivered it, and come back. Musashi, who had watched stronger men fail in simpler duties, knew that such things were not small. Therefore he said nothing grand to comfort the child and gave him no open praise. But from that night on, Iori felt that the bond between them had grown a little stronger. Edo had frightened him, fooled him, and made him cry, yet he had not been broken by it, and the road before them, though still dark in places, had moved one step farther into the city's heart.

Part 30

The peeper had not come for plums. He had come to see whether Hojo Shinzo was still lying wounded in the back room. Iori jumped down from the tree at once and told Kosuke what he had seen. Kosuke wiped his hands and came out from the workroom, and the two of them looked into the narrow side alley where the sound had been. No one remained there. "What sort of fellow was he?" Kosuke asked. "One of those lawless men," Iori answered at once. "Like the ones who came shouting the other night." Kosuke nodded grimly and said that the men from Han-gawara's place had been prowling around again and again, watching for a chance to take revenge on the wounded guest.

Shinzo heard the voices from inside and called Kosuke to him. He had grown

much better by then. The bandages could almost be removed, and though weakness still remained in him, he could sit up, eat porridge, and speak without much strain. When Kosuke came to the bedside, Shinzo thanked him again for all the care he had received and said that now, seeing how much trouble his presence was bringing on the house, he could no longer stay. Kosuke tried to stop him, saying that Musashi was out and should at least be consulted when he returned. But Shinzo shook his head. He said he could already walk again, and that if he stayed longer, the peeping in the alley would turn into something worse.

Kosuke argued that the men outside were waiting exactly for this, hoping to catch him once he left the shelter of the house. Shinzo answered that such danger could not be helped. The two thugs killed earlier had died for reasons that were clear enough, and if the others still clung to revenge, then the matter would only keep growing unless he stepped out and faced what followed. He asked for Kosuke's wife too, thanked her for the food and nursing, and rose to make himself ready. By the time he had straightened his clothes and taken up his sword, there was no stopping him. So husband and wife could only escort him to the shop front in anxious silence.

At that very moment Musashi came back from outside, his face dark with heat and road dust. He stopped short when he saw Shinzo at the door and asked where he was going. When he learned that the injured man meant to return home by himself, he refused the idea at once. Shinzo said again that he was strong enough, but Musashi would not hear it. Since fortune had brought him back at the right instant, he declared, he would go with him at least as far as Hirakawa Tenjin. To spare Shinzo's strength, he called a town palanquin and forced him to get into it, though Shinzo still protested that he did not mean to return first to the Obata school, but to his father's house in Ushigome.

Musashi himself did not ride. He walked beside the palanquin, one hand loose at his side and his eyes watching the road ahead and behind. Before long the trouble showed itself. At a street corner a knot of rough men appeared, sleeves rolled high and eyes shining with eagerness. They did not rush at once, but followed close, then closer, waiting until road and light suited them. When the

party came near the water of Ushigome moat, a small stone struck the carrying pole with a sharp crack. Another flew toward Musashi. The palanquin bearers, already frightened, dropped the load and ran. Shinzo sprang out, clutching his sword, but Musashi stepped in front of him and called toward the men in a cold voice, “State your business.”

The gang spread out as if testing shallow water. They shouted back that the answer was simple enough: hand over Hojo Shinzo, and there would be no more talk. The courage of numbers was in them, yet even then no one wished to be first to come within Musashi’s reach. So they barked from a distance while Musashi and Shinzo stood silent and watched. Then Musashi asked whether their boss, Han-gawara, was among them. One old man stepped forward instead, dressed in white with a great rosary hanging at his chest, and named himself Nenbutsu Tazaemon, keeper of the house in Han-gawara’s absence. He said that if there was any greeting to be made, he would hear it.

Musashi asked him why these men held hatred against Shinzo. Tazaemon answered without shame that two of their own brothers had been cut down, and if they let such a thing pass, the name of lawless men would be stained. Musashi replied that, as Shinzo told it, those two dead men had first helped Sasaki Kojiro in the treacherous killing of Obata’s disciples. Tazaemon shrugged and said that was another matter. Whatever the justice before, two men of their own had died, and they had to answer blood with blood. Musashi nodded once, then said that such reasoning might stand in the world of street gangs, but not in the world of samurai. Among samurai, he said, revenge had meaning only when tied to duty and right. Mere counter-hatred, or hatred upon hatred, was childish and shameful.

Tazaemon flared at once. He said that lawless men did not live by samurai speeches. They lived by the face of their own house, and face had to be paid for. Musashi answered that if both samurai and outlaws insisted on different laws inside one city, then only endless blood would follow, and such matters should be judged at the magistrate’s office. Tazaemon spat out that he would sooner eat filth than take the affair there. When Musashi asked his age and wondered aloud how an old man could stand at the front of young fools and still long to watch useless

killing, the old outlaw lost all patience. He drew his short blade and shouted forward. The whole gang cried out with him.

Before they could close, Musashi slipped past the old man's thrust, seized him by the head or collar, and carried him several great steps as if he weighed nothing. Then he hurled him into the moat. At the same instant, while the others still cried out in shock, Musashi plunged into their loose formation, snatched Shinzo bodily from the middle of it, and carried him sideways under one arm. The men stood stunned for one breath, unable even to understand how their prey had vanished from among them. By the time they found their voices again, Musashi was already running hard over the open ground, with Shinzo in his grasp and the distance between them widening.

At last Musashi set Shinzo down and urged him to run with what strength he had left. The outlaws behind them recovered then and filled the slope with abuse. They shouted that he was a coward, a shameful samurai, a disgrace to the warrior's way. They cried out that he had run from them, that he had thrown their old man into the moat, that he should stop and face them if he had any honor left. Their insults flew after him like stones. Musashi did not even turn his head. He told Shinzo quietly that there was nothing better than running when running was right, and then, half laughing, added that escaping too had its own difficulty and therefore its own pleasure. They ran until the voices faded and no more pursuers could be seen.

Shinzo's face had gone pale from the effort. Musashi asked whether it pained him to endure such abuse without stopping to answer it. Shinzo said nothing. Musashi laughed more openly then and told him that once he had time to grow calm, he would understand that running could sometimes feel better than standing on empty pride. They stopped by a stream, washed their mouths, and went on until the woods of Akagi were in sight. There Shinzo begged Musashi to come into the house and meet his father, but Musashi refused at the foot of the red earthen wall and said that another time would do. Then he turned away alone and left the recovering man to go on home.

That should have ended the matter, but in truth it gave the city a new and

ugly story. From that day Musashi's name became even more widely known in Edo, yet not in honor. He was called a crafty coward, a disgrace to the samurai name, a man who had made his reputation in Kyoto only by running cleverly from danger. No one spoke in his defense. Han-gawara's men spread the tale everywhere, and soon public placards appeared at the street corners all over the city. They called Musashi out by name, accused him of showing his back and fleeing, reminded the world that old Osugi too was seeking him for revenge, and demanded that if he were truly a samurai, he should come out and answer at once to the men of Han-gawara's house.

So, in the young noisy streets of Edo, Musashi's fame did not rise on a clean wind. It spread like weed seed, carried by mockery, anger, and the shouting mouths of others. Yet the road had now truly reached the end of this volume. The city knew his name. Otsu, Hyogo, the Yagyu house, Kojiro, Han-gawara, Shinzo, and Musashi were all moving within the same widening circle. What had been scattered across roads and provinces was now being drawn inward toward Edo. And there, beneath bad talk, hidden grudges, and half-understood meetings, the next stage of Musashi's life was already preparing itself.

Book 6: Sun and Moon

Part 1

Lord Tadatoshi lived a busy life, but he was still a young man, and he did not want to spend every hour in cold formality. In the morning he studied serious books. In the daytime he looked after the work of the Hosokawa house, and sometimes he went to Edo Castle. He also practiced martial arts whenever he had time. But at night, after supper, when he wore a light robe and sat at ease, he liked to call the young samurai around him and hear the talk of the world.

On such nights, the men around him were careful in their manners, but the air was warm and open. Tadatoshi did not wish to frighten them. He wanted them to relax, because he too wished to relax. He felt that such talk taught him many things that old Chinese books could not teach. When men spoke freely about the streets, the camps, the rumors of the city, and the ways of other warriors, he felt that he was learning living knowledge.

That evening he looked around at the young retainers and said, “Well, have you heard anything interesting lately?” At once the men began to answer. One of them, a bold young samurai named Okaya, was praised for his skill with the spear, and Tadatoshi turned toward him with a smile. “I hear your spear has improved,” he said. Okaya bowed and replied, “It has.” Tadatoshi laughed and asked, “Who praises himself so quickly?” Okaya answered without shame, “If everyone says it and I alone pretend not to hear it, that too would be false.”

The room filled with laughter. Tadatoshi liked such bold answers when they were not cruel or foolish. He teased the young man and said that he would judge the matter with his own eyes one day. Okaya, still full of youth, said that he prayed for a battle to come soon, so that he could show his worth. Tadatoshi answered at once, “You are happier if no battle comes.” But another young retainer broke in and said, “My lord does not know the new song in the streets.” Tadatoshi asked what song he meant, and the others laughed as they tried to sing a line that praised the greatest spear in the land.

Tadatoshi smiled, but then his face grew more thoughtful. He asked the men a question that mattered more to him than a street song. “Among you,” he said, “who studies the spear, and who studies the sword?” There were seven men in the room. Five said that they trained with the spear. Only two said that they trained with the sword. Tadatoshi looked from one face to another and asked the five why they had chosen the spear.

They answered almost as one man. The spear, they said, had greater use in battle. It could strike from farther away. A spear could thrust, beat, and pull. Even if the blade or shaft was damaged, it still might serve in some way, while a sword that bent or broke might become useless. Battle was the true field of a warrior, they said, so the longer weapon had the greater value. They spoke with confidence, as young men do when they believe that plain sense is enough to settle every matter.

Then Tadatoshi turned to the two who trained with the sword. “And you?” he asked. One of them answered carefully, “The sword is useful in battle, but not only in battle. A samurai carries the sword always. If he trains the sword, he trains his spirit at the same time.” The other added that true mastery in one art opened the way to all others. If a man truly learned the deep law of fighting through the sword, then when he took up a spear or even a gun, his mind and body would already know how to act. The words were calm, but they had more thought in them than the first group’s answer.

Tadatoshi listened without joining either side. Then he fixed his eyes on one of the sword men, Matsushita Mainosuke, and said, “Those words do not sound entirely like your own.” Mainosuke stiffened at once and said, “They are my own thought, my lord.” Tadatoshi shook his head. “No. Someone put those words into your mouth. Who was it?” The young man could not stand against that steady gaze. At last he bowed lower and confessed that he had once heard the same question discussed at the house of Iwama Kakubei, and that the answer had been given there by a certain Sasaki Kojiro, a guest or dependent of that household. “Still,” Mainosuke said, “his view agrees with mine, so I spoke it as I felt it.”

Tadatoshi gave a small bitter smile and said nothing for a moment. In truth,

that name had already been in his mind. Iwama Kakubei had recommended this Sasaki Kojiro to the Hosokawa house and had suggested that, because the man was still young, a stipend of two hundred koku might be proper. Tadatoshi had not decided. The matter was not simply one of money. To accept a new samurai into a great house was always serious. His father had taught him that the first question was the man's character, and the second was whether he would fit in peaceably among the stones already laid in the wall of the clan. A great stone might still be useless if it could not join with the others.

So Tadatoshi had been thinking for some time about men of talent who wandered the land after Sekigahara. Some were too rough, too proud, or too sharp to be placed within an ordered house. A young man, not yet fully formed, might sometimes be easier to shape. For that reason Kojiro's youth was not a fault. Yet another name rose in his mind beside Kojiro's, and that name was Miyamoto Musashi. He had first heard of Musashi from the old retainer Nagaoka Sado, who had once spoken of a strange and able warrior he had found in the fields of Hoden. According to Sado, that man was not only skilled in arms but also wise in practical things, able to guide poor villagers and teach them work and order. Tadatoshi had wanted to meet him, but Musashi had disappeared again before that could happen.

Now the two names stood side by side in his thoughts. Kakubei praised Kojiro as a brilliant young swordsman, born of a good family, deeply learned in the art of war, and bold enough to call his own school Ganryu. Many stories in Edo supported that praise. People spoke of Kojiro cutting down several men of the Obata school by the Sumida River and defeating others elsewhere with ease. But Musashi's name came to the ear in a different way. There had once been loud stories about his victory at Ichijoji in Kyoto, yet soon after, people had begun to mock those tales, calling them false or exaggerated. Some even said Musashi had fled and hidden himself when danger grew real. Wherever his name appeared, it seemed to gather mud.

Suddenly Tadatoshi struck his knee lightly and looked around the room. "Tell me," he said, "does any man here know Miyamoto Musashi? Have you heard anything of him?" The young retainers glanced at one another. Then several

answered at once that they knew the name because it had lately appeared on signboards in the streets. Tadatoshi looked surprised. “In the streets? Why?” One man replied that rough fellows had posted public notices mocking Musashi and calling him out. Another had copied the words onto paper and now read them aloud. The language was low and rude. It said that Musashi had once shown his back and run away, and that even an old woman named Honiden’s grandmother sought him as an enemy. If he did not appear, it said, he could no longer call himself a samurai.

The room shook with uneasy laughter, but Tadatoshi did not laugh. The words displeased him. They did not match the image he had formed in his mind. When he asked whether Musashi was really such a man, most of the young samurai answered quickly that he must be worthless, or at least a coward, since common townsmen could shame him so openly and still he did not appear. Yet Tadatoshi was not satisfied. Even after the men withdrew at the sound of the clock, he kept thinking about the matter. Lying down later, he thought not, “What a fool,” but rather, “What an interesting man.”

The next morning, after his usual lesson, he stepped out to the veranda and saw old Nagaoka Sado in the garden. He called to him at once. When the old retainer came near, Tadatoshi said, “Have you still kept Musashi in mind?” Sado looked puzzled until Tadatoshi added, “I mean the man you spoke of before.” Sado bowed. Tadatoshi then said, “If you find him, bring him to the residence. I want to see him with my own eyes.” On that very same day, when Tadatoshi later went to the archery ground, Iwama Kakubei quietly renewed his request about Kojiro. This time Tadatoshi nodded and said, “Very well. Bring this Sasaki Kojiro to the practice ground one day. I will decide after I have seen the man.”

Part 2

Halfway up Isarago Slope stood the private house of Iwama Kakubei, and inside its red gate, in a small separate building, Sasaki Kojiro lived by himself. One hot day a visitor called from outside. Kojiro was seated in the inner room,

quietly looking at his beloved long sword, the Monohoshizao. He had asked Kakubei to send it to the sword polisher Zushino Kosuke, who worked for the Hosokawa house, and after the trouble that had lately risen between them, he had expected little from that request. But when the sword came back that morning and he drew it from the scabbard, he saw at once that it had been polished with great care.

The blade flashed with a cold and living light. The pale marks of rust had vanished, and the fine patterns in the steel, once hidden under old blood and oil, now floated up softly like clouds in a dim spring sky. Kojiro sat still, deeply pleased, and kept turning the sword so that the light changed upon it. His room stood on high ground, and from there he could see far out over the Shinagawa sea, the summer clouds rising over Kazusa, and the bright air above the shore. It seemed to him that all those colors had entered the steel. At last, while he was still gazing at it, the voice at the gate called again.

Kojiro answered and told the visitor to come around to the veranda. A moment later old Osugi and one rough underling from Han-gawara's gang appeared before him. Kojiro greeted the old woman with easy politeness and joked that the day was too hot for such a visit. She replied that greetings could wait and asked first for water to wash her hands and feet. Kojiro pointed to the stone well in the yard and mockingly told the gangster to help her, since the well was so deep that she might fall in. The man obeyed, and after they had washed, Osugi climbed into the room and sat down with an air that was half familiar and half demanding.

The wind ran through the house, and Osugi narrowed her eyes with pleasure. She said that a man might grow lazy in so cool and quiet a place. Kojiro smiled and answered that he was not like her son Matahachi. That name darkened her eyes for a brief moment, but she hid the feeling and took out a copied Buddhist text, saying that she had written it herself and wished to give it to him as a gift. Kojiro looked at it only lightly, for he knew already of her pious vow, and then he turned at once to the gangster behind her and asked whether the notice he had ordered was now set up in the streets.

The man leaned forward and repeated the words proudly, the very notice that mocked Musashi and demanded that he show himself. Kojiro asked whether it had been posted at the main places in town, and the man answered that he and the others had spent two full days putting it up where everyone would see it. Kojiro said he had no need to look at it with his own eyes. Osugi broke in and said that on her way there she had seen people gathered around one of the signs, laughing and talking, and that it had given her real pleasure to hear Musashi shamed in public. Kojiro told her that if Musashi still did not appear after such insults, then his name as a samurai was already dead.

But Osugi was not satisfied. She said that shame alone could not wound a face as thick as Musashi's, and that until she saw more with her own eyes, her heart would not rest. Kojiro laughed at the strength of her old hatred and praised her for keeping firm to her purpose even at her age. Then he asked why she had truly come. Growing more serious, Osugi explained that she had lived for more than two years under Han-gawara's roof and had grown tired of the rough company there. She had found a small house near the Yoroi Ferry and wished to move there, to live alone for a while with money sent from her home province, since Musashi was not likely to appear soon and her son Matahachi, though surely somewhere in Edo, could not be found.

Kojiro had no objection. In truth, he too had begun to feel that his ties with Han-gawara's men had become troublesome. For a time they had been useful and amusing, but he now thought it wiser not to become too deeply mixed with that world, especially if his own path toward advancement was to continue. He called for watermelons from the field behind the house and treated Osugi and the gangster generously. Then, as though already pushing them away, he told them to send word at once if anything came from Musashi, but added that he himself had become busy and might not visit them for some time. Before the sun had set, he sent them off.

After they left, Kojiro swept his room, sprinkled water over the ground in the garden, and watched the evening come. Vines of yam and moonflower twined around the fence and the stone basin, and the white blossoms began to move

gently in the dusk wind. He looked toward the main house, where smoke from a mosquito fire drifted in the air, and asked if Kakubei would be staying at the domain mansion again that night. Hearing that he would, Kojiro stretched out in his room and let the evening cool his body. He did not trouble to light a lamp, for the wind would only put it out, and before long the rising moon laid its pale light across the floor and over his face.

At about that same time, a young samurai came climbing secretly up from the graveyard below the slope, breaking through the hedge and groping his way along the dark edge of the cliff. Earlier that evening, when Kakubei returned from duty and stopped at the flower seller's shop below the hill to leave his horse as usual, the old shopkeeper had come running from behind the temple and told him that a suspicious young warrior had crossed the graveyard and gone up where there was no path. The old man feared he might be one of the thieves now rumored to slip into great houses, but Kakubei only laughed. He said such stories were usually no more than talk, and if the man was real, he was probably no great master thief, only some low rogue or wandering killer. Proud of Kojiro's fame, he even joked that if trouble came, they should call his guest, who longed for such a chance.

Kakubei entered his own house, bathed, changed into a light robe, and had sake prepared. Then he called Kojiro to him and spoke again of the good news. Tadatoshi, he said, had heard enough of Kojiro's name and wished to see him at the practice ground. Kakubei expected delight, but Kojiro listened with cool silence, touched the cup to his lips, and showed no joy at all. When Kakubei explained further that the lord wished to see the man first before deciding, Kojiro's pride was hurt. He put down his cup, stared straight at Kakubei, and said in a hard voice that he would refuse service to the Hosokawa house after all. When Kakubei, astonished, asked why, Kojiro answered only that it did not suit his feelings, then rose and returned at once to his own room.

There, in the moonlit quiet, he lay on his back and laughed to himself. He called Kakubei an honest man and smiled because he knew very well that his patron would be troubled before his lord and yet would not truly become angry

with him. Kojiro often said that he did not care for stipend or rank, but in truth his whole body burned with ambition. He trained because he wanted fame, advancement, and the full reward of being born with rare natural talent. In his own mind, the sword was the straight road to success, and he believed he had been given uncommon gifts for that road. Men like Kakubei, older and decent and ordinary, seemed soft to him. Thinking such thoughts, Kojiro drifted into sleep while the moon crossed the tatami and the wind touched the bamboo by the window.

Then the shadow that had hidden all this time in the dark below the eaves decided that the moment had come. The figure crawled forward like a toad, reached the veranda, and crouched there in silence, watching the sleeping man inside. Kojiro's faint snoring could be heard. The insects, which had gone quiet for a while, began again in the grass. Suddenly the intruder rose, drew his sword, leaped onto the veranda, and struck downward with a fierce cry. But in the same instant a black object flew from Kojiro's left hand and struck the attacker's wrist. The blade still cut down with terrible force and sliced into the mat, yet Kojiro himself had already slipped away like a fish from under a blow and now stood by the wall facing his enemy, his long sword in his right hand and the scabbard in his left.

"Who are you?" he said, and even in that moment his breathing was steady. The attacker, whose voice had already broken with fear and rage, answered that he was Yogoro Kagemasa, son of Obata Kagenori. Kojiro repeated the name and mocked him at once for creeping in like an assassin while a man slept. Yogoro cried that Kojiro had shamed his father, spoken evil of the Obata school, lured disciples to duels, and cut them down one after another. Kojiro answered coldly that if men died in contests of swordsmanship, it was because one skill was greater than another. Yogoro tried to speak of Han-gawara's rough men and of unfair help, but Kojiro only stepped forward with growing impatience and said that if Yogoro had truly come ready to die, then he should stand and prove it. The moon struck white along the length of the freshly polished Monohoshizao, and Kojiro fixed his eyes on the young man before him as if he were looking at prey.

Part 3

For several days after that night, Iwama Kakubei did not go near Kojiro's room. At first he was angry and ashamed. He had spoken for the young man before his lord, and Kojiro had answered with pride and refusal. Yet as the days passed, Kakubei's anger weakened. He began to tell himself that perhaps such stubbornness was not foolishness but spirit, and that a man who did not jump quickly at favor might in fact be worth more than a man who did.

Kakubei was the kind of retainer who loved youth and admired talent. He liked to keep promising young men near him, and he liked even more to think that he had helped raise them. So after four days he went again to Kojiro's building and tried once more to persuade him. He spoke gently this time. He said that Lord Tadatoshi still remembered him and had even asked again whether he would come, and that the meeting would be easy, only an appearance at the archery ground, not a harsh examination in some formal hall.

Kojiro listened with a smile that showed neither gratitude nor haste. Kakubei tried to explain that it was common for a lord to see a man before taking him into service, and that no shame lay in that. Kojiro asked what Tadatoshi had truly said. Kakubei admitted that he had not given a full answer to his lord, and that Tadatoshi seemed to be waiting. At that, Kojiro laughed lightly and said that he should not trouble an old friend so much. Then, as if he were granting a favor rather than accepting one, he nodded and said, "Very well. I will go."

Kakubei was pleased at once and asked whether he would come that very day. Kojiro answered that he would. The hour was fixed for a little after noon, when Tadatoshi would be at the archery ground and the meeting would be less stiff. Kakubei repeated more than once that he must not fail to come, and then left early for the Hosokawa mansion. As soon as he was gone, Kojiro rose slowly and began to dress, not in the careless manner of a rough masterless swordsman, but with the careful vanity of a handsome young man who knew the effect of cloth, color, and bearing.

Though he often spoke as if outward show meant nothing, Kojiro was in truth a great lover of display. He chose a light summer kamishimo, fine trousers of imported weave, fresh sandals, and a new hat. He asked for a horse, and one of Kakubei's household men told him that a white horse stood at the flower seller's hut below the slope. So Kojiro went down in full dress to fetch it. But when he reached the hut, the old flower seller was nowhere to be seen, and voices were rising from the temple grounds nearby.

Looking over, Kojiro saw the old man there among priests and neighbors, all gathered together in a knot. Their heads bent close over something on the ground. He understood at once what had happened, or near enough. The young man who had crept in by moonlight had not gone home alive. Kojiro did not step closer to ask questions. He only turned his face aside a little, as if such noise and such sorrow belonged to another world, and then took the horse and rode on toward the Hosokawa residence.

By the time he arrived, the summer day had grown bright and hard. At the archery ground Lord Tadatoshi was still shooting. He had made a practice of shooting a hundred arrows day after day through the hot season, and this was one more such day. Attendants ran to pull the arrows, to bring the bow, to stand aside, and to watch with held breath each time the string sang. Kojiro was announced, but neither Tadatoshi nor the men around him gave him so much as a glance. Tadatoshi merely set another arrow on the string and went on as if no visitor had come.

Kojiro had expected attention, and this neglect bit him more sharply than open insult might have done. Still, he kept his face smooth and waited. At last the hundred arrows were finished. Tadatoshi, sweating heavily, asked for water, and a great basin was brought. There, before everyone, he stripped his upper body, washed his face and feet, and wiped the sweat from himself with the easy roughness of a field man rather than the grace of a noble brought up among screens and perfumes. Kojiro, who had expected some elegant young lord in the style of the court, watched this with real surprise.

Tadatoshi pulled on his sandals again before his feet were even dry and came

back toward the shade. Then, as if only now remembering the matter, he said to Kakubei, “Shall I see him?” A stool was set beneath a hanging curtain, with the Hosokawa crest behind it, and Kojiro was called forward. He bowed on his knees in the proper way, and Tadatoshi at once had another stool brought for him. Kojiro accepted it with a small polite motion and sat facing the young lord. The manners were correct on both sides, but the air between them was not warm.

Tadatoshi looked at him closely. Kojiro’s beauty, his careful dress, and the long self-possessed line of his body could not be denied. He was young, but he did not bend like an uncertain youth. He carried himself like a man who had already measured the world and found himself equal to it. Yet there was something in that same calm bearing that troubled Tadatoshi. It felt less like discipline than like pride. The retainers standing around, many of them the same young men from the evening talk, also stared at him with sharp and unfriendly eyes.

Some short words passed between lord and guest. Tadatoshi asked about his training, and Kojiro answered without confusion and without modesty. He spoke of swordsmanship as if he were speaking of something already settled. That manner only made the watching men more restless. They had heard stories of Obata disciples cut down, of quarrels and challenges, of a man who seemed always to leave blood and talk behind him. One among them, Okaya Goroji, whose spear had lately been praised, could no longer hide his anger.

Okaya stepped forward and asked that he be allowed to test the stranger’s skill. The request was bold, but many eyes had already turned in the same direction. Tadatoshi did not stop it. In truth, some wounded feeling had also begun to move in his own breast. Kojiro did not refuse. He answered as though such a thing were beneath excitement. Okaya then prepared a long battle spear, winding wet cloth around the blade so that the trial would not become a killing in the lord’s presence. The spear was a fine Kikuchi spear, more than nine feet in the shaft, deadly enough even half-covered.

Kojiro looked at it and said with faint contempt, “A real spear is better.” Okaya, stung, asked whether the cloth was unnecessary. Kojiro fixed his eyes on him and repeated that it was. The retainers seemed almost to burn where they

stood. Their faces said plainly what their lips could not say before their lord: let the man be struck down if he dares so much. Okaya then asked that if he must use a true spear, Kojiro should also take a real sword, but Kojiro refused. He said that as a man from outside the clan, he could not with proper respect draw a live blade before another lord. Tadatoshi then said in a hard voice that it was no cowardice and that Okaya should proceed as the other man wished. The two exchanged a formal glance, and in that instant the air in the archery ground grew tight as wire.

Part 4

The men standing behind Tadatoshi had all heard stories of Sasaki Kojiro, yet now that they saw him before them, many were surprised. He was younger than they had imagined, and far more handsome. But that surprise did not soften their feelings. When Tadatoshi suddenly asked whether any man would rise and face him, the retainers looked at one another, and almost at once their eyes returned to Kojiro. He did not seem troubled by the challenge. On the contrary, a slight color came into his face, as though he had expected and desired this very moment.

No one stepped forward at once of his own will, and then Tadatoshi spoke a single name. “Okaya.” Okaya Goroji answered at once and bowed. Tadatoshi reminded him that he had once argued most strongly that the spear was better than the sword, and then ordered him to prove it now. Okaya accepted the command, turned toward Kojiro, and asked with proper courtesy whether there was any objection to his standing as the opponent. Kojiro gave one large, calm nod and answered, “Please.” The exchange was polite, but a sharp and dangerous feeling passed between them like cold wind over bare skin.

Men who had been sweeping the sand by the target ground or putting bows in order left their work and gathered behind their lord. Even those who spoke every day of war and skill knew that a true match outside practice was a rare thing in a lifetime. In war, a man fought among others, but in a match he stood alone, and all his life rested in his own body. There was no pause, no chance to draw

breath while another man held the danger away. A single slip could mean death or a crippled body forever. So the friends of Okaya watched in silence, and though they feared for him, his calm bearing let them hope that he would not lose.

The Hosokawa house had many men skilled with the spear, though no special spear master had long been kept there. Most of the retainers had seen real battle since the days of Lord Yusai and Lord Sansai, and even among the foot soldiers there were many who handled the spear well. Yet among them all, Okaya Goroji had a special name. He was known throughout the clan as a foremost spear man, seasoned in battle and steady in practice. Before the match began, he bowed and asked for a little time. Then he withdrew quietly behind a curtain to prepare himself, and in that brief moment the thought came to him, strangely cool and clear, that at least he wore clean underclothes and a fresh loincloth, as a samurai should on any day he might leave in the morning and return as a corpse by evening.

When he came back, Kojiro was already waiting in the open place. He stood with his body loose and uncovered, his borrowed wooden sword hanging in one hand, the folds of his hakama left as they were, not even tucked up for easy movement. He looked strong and fearless. Even men who disliked him had to admit that he was splendid to look at. His profile was beautiful and hard, like a bird of prey that feared nothing. That very beauty stirred the loyalty of the household men more strongly toward Okaya, and many of them looked toward the curtain from which he came with unspoken worry in their hearts.

Okaya's preparations were not hurried. He had taken up his long Kikuchi spear, the weapon he trusted most in battle, more than nine feet in the shaft, with a fine polished surface and a deadly blade at the head. Now he was wrapping wet cloth carefully around the point so that the fight would not end at once in blood. Kojiro watched him and said in a voice that sounded simple, though the insult in it was plain, "Okaya-dono, what is that for? If it is concern for my safety, there is no need." Okaya looked up sharply. All around him the retainers' eyes burned as if to say, Let him die if he speaks so. Kojiro stared back and said again, more sharply, "That is right."

Okaya slowly unwound the wet cloth. Then, gripping the spear at the middle,

he strode forward and said that if he must use a true spear, then Kojiro too should take a real sword. Kojiro refused. He answered that as a man outside the clan he could not, with proper respect, draw a live blade before another house's lord. Okaya still wished to object, but Tadatoshi's voice cut across him. "Okaya," he said, "it is no cowardice. Leave the matter as the other man wishes. Begin at once." There was now emotion in Tadatoshi's voice as well. The two men exchanged a formal glance, and in that instant the blood seemed to rise into both their faces.

Then Okaya leaped back. He meant to open distance at once and bring the spear into full life. But Kojiro's body moved with terrible quickness, gliding along beneath the shaft like a small bird clinging to a pole, and in the same motion he entered deep into Okaya's space. Okaya had no time to thrust. He turned sharply and struck downward with the butt of the spear toward Kojiro's collar. The blow cracked in the air, but Kojiro's wooden sword met it in an instant, and almost in the same movement his own blow came low and fierce toward Okaya's ribs like a beast biting at flesh. Okaya sprang back, then sideways, then back again, avoiding one strike and then another without time even to breathe.

But already he was like a falcon driven to the wall by an eagle. The wooden sword stayed with him without mercy. The spear, pressed again and again, suddenly snapped with a hard sound. In that same moment a groan broke from Okaya, as if his soul had been torn by force from his living body. The match was over. The men who watched felt the end before their minds could understand it. Okaya fell with his bones broken in the hip or thigh, and though he lived, no one could see him lying there without fear. Tadatoshi had expected perhaps to watch one contest and then another. Instead he had seen enough. "I have seen," he said. "That is enough."

When Kojiro returned to the house at Isarago, he asked Kakubei almost lightly whether he had gone too far before the lord. Kakubei answered that the display had been excellent, yet his own feeling toward the young swordsman had changed. Until then he had loved him like some proud young bird in his care. Now it felt as though that bird had turned into an eagle inside his sleeve. Kojiro asked what Tadatoshi had said after he left, and when Kakubei answered that the lord

had said almost nothing and had only gone back to his chamber in silence, Kojiro showed disappointment. He spoke of Tadatoshi with respect and said that if he were to serve any lord, such a man would be worthy, but he also made plain that whether he was taken or not, he would not beg.

In truth, he still cared very much. He judged domains as another man might judge roads, always with an eye to the future. The House of Hosokawa seemed to him a strong ship for dangerous times, especially while the old Lord Sansai still cast his long shadow from the province. Kojiro thought far ahead. He knew that a careless choice of master could win a few months of stipend and lose a whole life. A few days later, moved by some new idea, he announced that he would pay a visit to Okaya Goroji. He went on foot to the house near Tokiwabashi, and there he offered a courteous visit to the man he had ruined. Okaya, still unable to rise from his bed, smiled through pain and said that in a match the stronger arm must prevail, and that he could not hate Kojiro for his own lack of skill. When Kojiro left, Okaya turned to a friend beside his pillow and said, with tears in his eyes, “He is a noble samurai. I thought him arrogant, but he has feeling and good manners after all.” Kojiro, of course, had known very well that he would say exactly that.

Part 5

Every two or three days Kojiro went again to visit Okaya Goroji. In all he went four times. Once he even sent living fish from the market as a gift to comfort the wounded man. Summer had now entered its hardest time. The grasses in empty lots grew high enough to hide whole houses, and on the dry roads crabs crawled slowly through the dust. The rude signs that Han-gawara’s men had raised in the streets to shame Musashi had already begun to disappear. Some had fallen in the rain, some were hidden by weeds, and some had been stolen for firewood. The city forgot quickly.

One day, after leaving Okaya’s house, Kojiro suddenly felt his hunger and looked about for somewhere to eat. Edo still had none of the tea houses one found

in Kyoto. But in a patch of dusty ground he saw a rough screen of reeds with a flag before it. On the flag was written the word donjiki. Kojiro knew the old word as a name for rice balls from another age, but what kind of food was sold in this place he could not tell. Smoke crawled from behind the reed screen and clung low in the grass. As he came nearer he smelled cooked food and knew that, whatever the name meant, it was at least a place where a man could fill his stomach.

He stepped into the shade and asked for tea. Two men were already there, one with a sake bowl, the other with a rice bowl, both eating with the rough greed of men who had worked or fought hard. Kojiro sat down across from them and asked the old owner what was ready. The man answered that it was only a simple rice place. Kojiro had not yet begun to eat when a disturbance outside drew every eye toward the open side of the stall. Harsh voices rose. Something heavy fell. Then came the sound of anger that was one breath away from blood.

Outside, among the grass and dust, men were quarreling with a poor hawker of watermelons. In another moment the quarrel turned sharp and ugly. Kojiro rose and went out. What followed ended almost as soon as it began. His sword flashed. When it was over, two bodies lay in the empty lot. The old stall keeper trembled with fear, but Kojiro, as cool as if he had only cut reeds, brought the watermelon load in from outside and told the man to keep it safe. Then he took out his writing case and wrote a notice beside the hanging shutter so that no one would trouble the stall owner later.

The note said that the two dead men had been cut down by Sasaki Kojiro of Moon Cape at Isarago Slope, and that he left the fact there for all later questions. He told the owner that if any kin of the dead men came seeking revenge, they should be told that he would not hide and would meet them at any time. Then he turned to the watermelon seller, who had stood bent with shame and fear through all of it, and struck him lightly on the back. “Come,” he said. “Do not look so crushed.” When the man still kept his face lowered, Kojiro laughed and called him by name. “Matahachi. Lift your head.”

The man did so slowly. It was indeed Honiden Matahachi. Kojiro said that it had been a long time and mocked him for his strange trade. Matahachi could only

answer that it was shameful. Kojiro led him away from the stall, and as they went, Matahachi still looked at the ground. In those days he earned what he could by carrying watermelons to the many laborers, carpenters, plasterers, and men of the works around Edo Castle. When he had first come to Edo, he had wanted at least to show Otsu that he could become a real man by some training or some work of weight. But his old weakness remained. Whatever task he took up, his will soon sank, and he changed his work again and again.

Now he lived in a poor row house near the shore, and Akemi lived with him there. Their life was narrow, but it had fallen into a kind of rough habit. In the evening the old digging-master Unpei, who was their neighbor and something like a father to the younger people around him, sat out under the loofah vines in a light robe and spoke to Matahachi after the bath. He said that selling watermelons would never make a life and that day labor in well-digging was better. Matahachi answered that once a man entered work inside the castle grounds, he could not freely return home when he pleased. Then, half shy and half proud, he added that Akemi told him not to do such work because she would be lonely. Unpei laughed and accused him of boasting about love. Just then a green persimmon dropped from above and struck Matahachi on the head, and the old man laughed harder still.

Yet what looked from outside like a poor but settled life was already beginning to break. Akemi's mind had never become quiet in that little house. She wanted more than fish from the shore, rice from a cracked pot, and nights spent listening to Matahachi' s empty dreams. A man named Okura, dark and practical, spoke to her in hints. He said there was work for a woman and that a pair of hands like hers would be useful. Akemi did not stop to question him closely. She followed at once into that new path, as if she had been waiting for just such a door to open. To Okura, both she and Matahachi were useful. He had already been speaking for some time of dealing with Matahachi one day, and now it seemed that the day had come.

Matahachi himself knew none of this. With foolish secrecy he had hidden away money, going back to his own place, taking a hoe, and in the night burying

the gold in the brush behind the house. Akemi watched and learned where it was. She went and told Okura. Before dawn he dug it up and counted it in his storehouse. Of the thirty gold pieces, however, two were missing. That troubled him more than the theft itself, and he sat with his head bent, counting once more and then again, as if by force of looking the two lost pieces might return.

One morning, when Matahachi discovered that Akemi was gone, he went from one house to another in growing alarm. He looked into Unpei's place. He asked in the row houses and at the street corner. At last a charcoal seller's wife told him that she had seen Akemi early that morning, dressed more finely than usual, and that when asked where she was going, she had answered, "To relatives in Shinagawa." Matahachi repeated the place in surprise. He did not truly burn with love enough to chase her at once, yet bitterness spread through him like bad taste in the mouth. He spat and muttered, "Do as you like." Still, with a blank face and no clear purpose, he wandered toward the beach.

There the poor life he had shared with her met him in small cruel signs. Fishermen's huts stood scattered along the shore. On many mornings he had come there while Akemi cooked the rice, gathered a few fish dropped from the nets, and carried them home on a reed string so that the meal would be waiting just as he arrived. Even now some fish still flopped weakly in the sand where they had fallen. Matahachi looked at them and felt no wish even to pick them up. The sight only deepened the empty feeling in him. A hand touched his back, and when he turned, a thick, cheerful townsman with smiling eyes stood before him. But even before the man fully spoke, Matahachi's thoughts had already gone elsewhere, half lost between shame, loss, and the old habit of drifting wherever the next voice might lead.

At the same time, in another quarter of Edo, Osugi too had begun to move through the city once more. She had heard that her son was somewhere in Edo, though she did not know where. Men from the Ono school, also hunting for Matahachi, crossed her path and, after angry questioning, seized her when they learned who she was. They thought that if they held his mother, the son would have to come. Osugi fought like a hooked sea creature, twisting her thin body and

crying out in rage that her son was no common melon seller but a man of proper family from Mimasaka. Yet her fury did not change their purpose.

As for Kojiro, he too had become dissatisfied with many things. He lay about in his room at Moon Cape, not sleeping at proper hours but throwing himself down whenever disgust overcame him. Holding the Monohoshizao across his chest, he muttered that even the great sword must weep to be carried by a man of such skill who still rotted as a dependent, unable to secure even a stipend of five hundred koku. Now and then he struck the hilt sharply, drew the blade in one swift shining curve, and slashed the air as if cutting blindness itself. Then the steel slipped back into the scabbard like a living thing. His pride had only grown. His fame had grown too. But the place he wanted in the world had not yet opened, and that was more than he could calmly endure.

Part 6

The wide fields of Musashino were already beginning to feel the touch of coming autumn. The grasses rose higher than Iori's shoulders, and when he hurried after Musashi, his body vanished almost completely in the green waves. Again and again he lost the narrow path and cried out, "Master, wait for me." Musashi would stop, turn, and look back over the moving grass. "Come quickly," he said. Iori asked where they were going, and Musashi answered, "To any place that feels fit for living." When the boy asked in surprise whether they truly meant to live out there, Musashi only looked up at the broad sky and said that when autumn came, the dew, the clear air, and the endless plain would show their true beauty.

Iori was not able to answer simply yes or no. The place seemed too large, too empty, and too far from the world of houses and people. Yet Musashi did not fear emptiness. He liked what had no walls. For him the plain itself was a house, and the sky was a roof high enough for any man who wished to breathe deeply. He went on through the grass with his usual sure steps, and Iori followed, half wondering and half obeying, as he always did. At last they came to a place where

the ground lifted a little, where a tree stood near, and where the open field spread in all directions like a sea.

There Musashi stopped and looked around for a long time. He tested the ground with his foot, studied the way the wind moved through the grass, and listened to the silence. Then he said that this would do. It was no more than a lonely patch in a vast field, but to him it was enough. They cut reeds, brought brush, and made a poor hut for themselves, hardly more than a grass shelter. Yet when it was finished, Musashi seemed pleased. He sat before it as if he had found a palace. Iori, who had known worse places in his life, still felt the loneliness of it more than the peace.

Their days soon found a shape. Musashi rose early, moved little, spoke little, and practiced without waste. He did not care whether the hut was poor, whether the food was plain, or whether the nights grew cold. To him such things were part of the training of a man. Iori gathered fuel, fetched what they needed, cleaned the place, and trained when he was called. Often, in the middle of practice, Musashi would stop and say only one word: “Eyes.” The boy knew what that meant and yet did not understand it. Whenever Musashi’s gaze fixed on him over the wooden sword, Iori felt his own courage melt away first in his knees and then in his chest.

This troubled him more deeply than a bruise or a cut. He could bear pain, but he could not bear that weakness in his spirit. So even after practice he kept turning the matter over in his mind. Why was it that he could not hold his master’s eyes? Why did his own strength go out of him before a blow had even begun? Musashi explained nothing beyond that single word. Perhaps he believed that the answer had to be found in the boy’s own body, not handed down in speech. Iori, being young, felt both admiration and stubborn anger. He wanted not only to learn from Musashi but also one day to stand before him without shrinking.

Time passed quietly in the field, and the hut grew familiar. When evening came, the plain changed. The sky stretched like clear water above them, and the first dew began to gather on the grasses. The silence was not empty silence. Tiny cries, wing sounds, moving leaves, and the small hidden life of the field filled it. To Musashi, this was good company. To Iori, it was at times beautiful and at times

frightening. Yet even he could not deny that the place entered the mind. Looking over that endless plain, he would sometimes remember the lonely house on Hoden Plain where he had once lived before meeting his master, and the memory made the present loneliness feel less strange.

One evening, when the dew had grown thick and the air had turned cool, a visitor came. It was Hojo Shinzo. He arrived with a horse left tied in the cedar grove behind the hut and called out with unusual excitement. Musashi came to the edge of the veranda, and Shinzo bowed and said that someone wished very much to see him. Musashi asked who it was, but Shinzo answered awkwardly that he had been told not to give the name until Musashi arrived, because the joy of meeting would be greater if it came as a surprise. Hearing this, Musashi's thoughts began to move. A person from long ago? An old face from his youth? Perhaps, somewhere at the edge of the thought, Otsu herself? He did not believe it, yet he could not keep the thought from rising.

At last Musashi said that he would go. He told Iori to sleep before him and not to wait if he returned late. Shinzo quickly brought the horse around. The saddle and stirrups were wet with dew, and the whole evening smelled of grass and cool earth. Musashi mounted without further question. Iori walked out beyond the hut to see him off. He watched the figure of his master on horseback and the figure of Shinzo at the bridle move away through the field, sinking little by little into the pale sea of reeds and pampas grass. Soon the two shapes were gone into the dew and the night.

Left alone, Iori sat down on the bamboo edge of the veranda and felt the loneliness at once. It was not the first time he had stayed behind in the hut, yet that night the emptiness seemed larger than before. The field, the sky, and the silence all pressed in upon him. Still, there was also a kind of excitement in being alone in such a place. He sat with his knees up, looking into the dark and thinking again of the question that troubled him most. "Eyes," he thought. Always that same word. Looking up into the silver river of stars, he asked himself why he could not bear the gaze that Musashi turned upon him in practice. Shame, pride, and childish determination all moved together in him.

Then, from the leaves of a wild grape vine twined around a tree before the hut, he saw two bright points fixed on him. They were not stars. They were eyes. At first they seemed almost unnatural, so hard and bright they shone in the dimness. Then he recognized the creature. It was a flying squirrel, one of the little night animals that came often to the wild grapes. Yet at that moment, because of the lamp light from the hut and the strange stillness of the field, it did not look small or harmless. Its amber eyes seemed to burn with the same sharp life that he had seen in his master's gaze.

Iori felt anger rise at once. "So even you are staring at me," he muttered. "Do you think I will yield to you too?" He planted his elbows wide and stared back. The animal did not flee. Rather, it seemed to gather more force in its tiny body and look at him even more fiercely. Boy and creature remained that way for a long time, without breathing, as if all the plain had narrowed to those two pairs of eyes. Then suddenly the vine leaves shook, and the little beast vanished into the dark. Iori jumped up proudly and laughed under his breath. His shirt was wet with sweat, but he felt lighter than before. Perhaps, he thought, if he could do this, then one day he might hold even Musashi's gaze.

He let down the reed blind and lay down inside the hut. The pale dew-light still came through the gaps, staining the floor with a faint blue-white glow. He thought that he had fallen asleep at once, yet in his half-dream a bright shining thing kept floating in his mind, and little by little it took the shape of the flying squirrel's face. Several times he groaned and turned over. At last he became certain that those eyes were there again at the foot of his bedding. He sat up quickly, and indeed on the dim mat before him crouched a small creature glaring at him. With a cry he seized the sword by his pillow and struck, but the moving shadow sprang aside, clung to the blind, and then flew out again.

Iori slashed at the reed blind, at the wild vine, and at the empty dark outside, his heart beating wildly. By the time he stopped, the hut was torn, the vine was cut, and the field lay silent as if nothing had happened. He stood breathing hard and searched the darkness once more. Then he saw where the two bright eyes had gone. High in one corner of the sky, a large blue star shone over the plain. He

stared at it for a long time, his sword still in his hand, until his fear and anger slowly changed into something calmer. Alone in the wild field, under that vast sky, the boy felt more strongly than ever that the path beside Musashi would not be an easy one.

Part 7

Musashi rode for about an hour beside Hojo Shinzo and reached the foot of Akagi Slope in Ushigome. On one side stood the wide grounds of Akagi Shrine. Across the road spread another great property behind long earthen walls. Shinzo said, “Here,” and Musashi got down from the saddle at once. The gate was open, and when the horse’s shoes rang on the stones inside, servants with paper lanterns came forward as if they had been waiting for that sound.

They greeted Shinzo first, then bowed to Musashi and led him through the dark garden. Trees stood close on both sides, and between them the lights from the house shone warm and still. At the great entrance more servants were kneeling in order, heads lowered. Musashi went in without asking further questions. The house was built in a strange way along the slope, so that he seemed to climb from level to level, from stair to stair, as though the rooms had been piled one above another against the side of the hill.

At last he was shown into an upper room open to the night air. The place was broad and cool. From there he could look out over the dim city roofs and the darkness beyond. The sound of festival flutes seemed to float from somewhere far away, and red sparks from a shrine fire touched the tops of the trees. Before Musashi had long to wait, the master of the house entered with young pages behind him. This was Hojo Awanokami Ujikatsu, Shinzo’s father.

Awanokami greeted him without stiffness. Perhaps because Musashi was near the same age as his own sons, the old lord spoke to him almost as if to a younger man of the family rather than to a formal guest. He said that he had heard how deeply Shinzo was in his debt and that to call him there to offer thanks was almost rude in itself, since true thanks could not be spoken so lightly. Musashi

bowed and answered with equal ease. Looking at the old warrior, he saw at once a man worn by age and yet still strong in spirit. Several front teeth were missing, but the skin on his face still held force, and the white mixed in his great moustache only made him look more alive.

Musashi then asked directly who it was in the house that knew him and wished to see him. Awanokami smiled and said, “You shall meet him soon. He knows you well.” Yet he added something else. He said that before the meeting, he wished to ask Musashi one question. The words sounded light, but there was a careful purpose under them. Musashi understood that some small test had already been prepared for him. Still, he only nodded and waited.

Awanokami then said, “Suppose one man wished to strike down another from behind a screen, in darkness, without being seen. If you were that hidden man, where in this room would you choose to sit?” Musashi did not answer at once. He looked slowly around the room, at the pillars, the sliding doors, the hanging lamp, the angles of the floor, and the open space between one chamber and the next. Then he pointed calmly toward a place where the shadows fell thickest and where the eye of an entering guest would be least likely to rest. Awanokami’s face changed at once, and he gave a low laugh that admitted defeat.

“So,” he said, “you saw through it.” Musashi answered that he had not seen anyone, but only thought that if a man wished to hide and still control the room, that spot would be the natural one. Awanokami shook his head and said that the inventor of the little plan had now lost his game. The trick, it seemed, had been meant not to harm Musashi but to see how he looked at space, danger, and the mind of another man. At those words, another voice, deep and easy, sounded from within, and a monk came forward smiling. It was Takuan.

Musashi bowed more deeply to him than he had bowed to Awanokami. Takuan laughed and said that they met again in a place far finer than the wild hut on the plain. Then he sat down and at once began to talk in the free way that was natural to him, half jest and half truth together. He told Awanokami that men in religion often made a mistake. They took a living man and raised him too quickly into the air, as if he were already some holy being, and by doing so they robbed

him of the hard road that still lay before him. Musashi listened in silence, not because he did not care, but because he knew Takuan never spoke empty words.

Food and sake were then brought, and Musashi noticed that four places had been set, though only three men were visible in the room. Takuan, seeing that he had noticed it, turned to Awanokami and said, “Well then, host, call the other guest and let Musashi meet him.” Awanokami hesitated a little and looked embarrassed, as if the small plan of the evening had not ended as cleverly as he had hoped. Takuan only laughed more and said that once a trick had failed, the best thing was to confess it openly. Awanokami then admitted that the unseen guest was no ordinary man and that he himself had wished to surprise Musashi by bringing the two together without warning.

Musashi already knew who it must be. He had felt it from the moment Awanokami spoke of a man who knew him well, and the hidden presence in the room had only made that feeling stronger. So he kept still and waited. At last the fourth guest appeared. It was Yagyu Tajima no Kami. Musashi rose at once, and so did the others. No loud words were spoken. The men looked at one another quietly, and the air in the room changed, as if each person there now understood more clearly the weight of the meeting.

They sat again under the single lamp, four men of very different paths and minds. Takuan was the monk who saw through pride and fear. Awanokami was the old warrior and lord of a house. Yagyu carried the power of the shogun’s service and the deep law of an old sword line. Musashi sat among them in plain clothes from the field, neither lord nor temple man nor official master. Yet for that very reason the lamp seemed to shine equally on all four faces. And as sake was poured and the night deepened over Akagi Slope, the talk began that would draw Musashi, whether he liked it or not, a step closer to the center of the world he had long tried to stand apart from.

Part 8

Hojo Awanokami did not answer Musashi’s question at once. He smiled, as

if he enjoyed holding the matter back for a few breaths more, and then said, “You shall meet him soon. He knows you well.” Yet before giving the name, he added that he wished to ask one small question first. The words sounded light, but Musashi understood at once that this too was part of the evening. He did not object. He only looked calmly around the room and waited for the question to come.

Awanokami asked where a hidden man should sit if he wished to strike another from behind a screen without being seen. Musashi did not answer quickly. He studied the room, the corners, the dim places, the paths by which a person entering would move his eyes, and the places where a body might remain unnoticed and yet control the whole space. Then he pointed quietly toward one part of the room and said that if he himself had such a purpose, he would choose that place. Awanokami gave a low laugh and shook his head, half pleased and half defeated. The little trial had failed before it had even begun.

At that, a broad-shouldered monk stepped forward with a smile on his face. It was Takuan. Musashi bowed lower to him than before, and Takuan laughed at once, saying that they met now in a far grander place than the poor grass hut on Musashino Plain. Awanokami admitted the trick openly and seemed not ashamed, for the matter had not been meant as insult. He had only wished to see how Musashi’s eyes worked when danger was still no more than an idea. Musashi answered that he had seen no man at all, only the shape of the room.

Then the fourth guest appeared, and the whole air in the chamber changed. It was Yagyu Tajima no Kami. Musashi rose at once. So did the others. Tajima no Kami spoke first, and his manner was plain, warm, and very different from the stiff greatness Musashi might have expected from a man of such high standing. He apologized almost as if he himself had caused needless trouble and said that he had long wished to meet Musashi face to face.

Musashi could only answer with deep respect. Tajima no Kami was not merely a famous master of swordsmanship. He was a lord, the instructor of the shogun’s house, and a man from an ancient and honored line, while Musashi himself was still little more than a wandering fighter living in a poor hut on the open plain. By every rule of rank, they were far apart. Yet in that room there sat

also Takuan, a wandering monk, and Awanokami, a scholar-warrior who did not cling to distance and form. Because of them, Musashi did not feel crushed. He felt instead that this meeting was not a reward to a person, but honor given to the Way itself.

Cups were brought, and soon sake passed from hand to hand. The talk was cheerful. There was no heavy discussion of strategy, no long speech on Zen, no proud showing of sword knowledge. Though the room held men famous in war, religion, and swordsmanship, they spoke as men who needed no display among themselves. Laughter rose often. Musashi listened more than he spoke, but now and then he answered, and each time he felt more strongly that the true greatness in such men was not noise, but ease.

Suddenly Takuan put down his cup and turned to Musashi with a teasing look. “And what of Otsu?” he asked. The question came so quickly that Musashi’s face colored at once. He answered that he did not know how she was, that after a certain point he had heard nothing. Takuan frowned, though not in anger, and said that such an answer was hard and pitiful. Tajima no Kami then asked whether this was the same young woman who had once stayed in Yagyu Valley at his father’s place, and when Takuan said yes, Tajima no Kami replied that she should now be in the province with his nephew Hyogo, helping to care for old Sekishusai.

Musashi looked honestly surprised. Takuan laughed to see it and said that these two had known one another far longer and more deeply than most people guessed. Then, half in jest and half in earnest, he began to speak of Otsu’s life, her long waiting, and Musashi’s long habit of walking away from any place where the heart might try to stop him. He said that a monk was the wrong man to settle such matters, but that perhaps the other two lords in the room might one day lend their strength in bringing some order to Musashi’s wandering life. The words were light on the surface, but Musashi felt the true point under them.

The talk moved on, yet it came back more than once to the same hidden question. A man could not live forever only as a lone blade moving through the grass. However high his art rose, the world of human ties would still ask something of him. Takuan said with a smile that Musashi was no longer a raw

youth and that even one who sought the Way might someday need a fixed place from which to walk it. Awanokami added that talent, if left always outside walls and laws, was too easily wasted. Tajima no Kami did not press him. He only watched Musashi with eyes that seemed to ask whether he himself had begun to understand this yet.

Musashi answered carefully. He said that the Way still stood before him unfinished, and that he feared taking shelter too soon lest comfort weaken him. Yet he did not answer with the hard pride of refusal. The room and the men in it made that impossible. He felt too clearly that each of them, in his own way, had passed through struggle, fame, and loneliness already. They were not trying to bind him like merchants buying a blade. They were looking at his life as men who understood what it could become.

The lamp burned steadily between them, and one by one the servants drew farther away, leaving the four men more quietly to themselves. Outside, the night over Akagi Slope deepened. The festival sounds had grown faint. The red of the distant fire no longer leaped above the trees. Still they talked on, not as priest, lord, swordsman, and wandering fighter, but as four men gathered around one light. And Musashi, though he had come from a poor hut in the field and would return to it before dawn, felt that this night had already placed one more unseen turning in the road before him.

Part 9

While Musashi was spending that night among great men, Matahachi was living in a very different world. Inside the work grounds near Edo Castle he had become one more dirty laborer among many, a man with no shape to his days except fear. He had been drawn into a dark promise by Okura and had helped hide a gun beneath a great pagoda tree near the West Rear Gate. Since then he had thought less of money and more of death. Whenever he had a break from work, in the morning or at the noon rest, he would drift near that place and feel relief only if the tree still stood untouched.

He had already begun to wish he had never listened to Okura at all. The gun under the tree felt to him like a buried snake that might come alive at any moment. If the tree were moved, if the roots were dug up, if any worker struck the earth there with a tool, the weapon would be found. Then questions would begin, and the questions would reach him. So he kept thinking that if only he could get there alone, dig it up, and throw it far away, his life too might be thrown free of danger. But fear does not give courage. It only makes a man go again and again to the edge of the danger that terrifies him.

One day his fear nearly destroyed him. He had wandered once more into a place where he had no business, among carpenters and plasterers working near the wall by the West Rear Gate. There, by bad luck, he stepped squarely on a carpenter's metal rule. The men shouted at once. A slap struck his face, and angry hands seized him. Yet even while they beat and cursed him, Matahachi was not most afraid of pain. What froze his blood was the thought that they would ask why a well-digger kept creeping into that part of the works where no well-digger had any task.

That was exactly what happened. A work inspector came, caught him by the collar, and ordered him to raise his head. The man recognized at once that Matahachi belonged to the well-diggers and had no reason to be there. The carpenters explained that this fellow had been seen hanging about the place before and had now stepped on the rule and answered back when struck. The inspector stared at Matahachi's pale face and asked in a sharp voice what business he had there. Matahachi could barely breathe. In his mind he saw the earth under the pagoda tree breaking open, the gun rising out of it, and his own neck laid bare to the sword.

After that, the fear never left him. He was shut in a dark hut, and day after day he sat there with sweat on his skin even when the air was cool. He imagined that the tree had perhaps already been moved and the buried gun found. He imagined that men were speaking of it somewhere beyond the wall, that names were being gathered, that one more question and one more witness would bring them to him. At night his mind did not rest. He dreamed again and again of the

land of the dead, and in that land pagoda trees grew everywhere.

One night he saw his mother in a dream so clearly that he woke crying like a child. She did not pity him. She raged at him. She threw a silkworm basket at him, and white cocoons poured over his head while her white hair rose like the hair of some ghost and she chased him without end. In the dream he leaped from a cliff, but his body never reached the bottom and only floated through endless dark. When he woke, the dream seemed less terrible than the waking world. He wiped the sweat from himself and felt that if he remained where he was, he would soon lose his reason.

So he made one desperate plan. Even if he could not escape the castle, perhaps he could at least reach the tree and see whether it still stood where it had stood before. The hut was locked, but no guard watched him every instant. He dragged a pickling barrel under the small window, broke the opening, and climbed out. Then, crawling behind timber piles, stone heaps, and banks of freshly turned earth, he made his way like a frightened animal through the dark toward the West Rear Gate. At last he saw the tree. It was still there, rising in the same place as before.

Relief struck him so strongly that his knees almost gave way. If the tree had not moved, then perhaps his life too had not yet ended. He found a hoe somewhere in the works and came back with it. Then he began to dig under the tree like a dog scraping at the ground for a bone. After every stroke he stopped and looked around. No one came. Emboldened, he dug faster. The hole deepened, and a little mound of fresh soil rose beside it, but from the earth came nothing except more earth and stones.

The deeper he dug, the wilder his thoughts became. Had someone already found the gun and taken it away? Had Okura tricked him from the beginning and moved it elsewhere? Or had he himself remembered the place wrongly in his confusion? He kept digging until his arms shook and his breath rasped in his throat. Then, before he could find an answer, his luck failed again. He was discovered, seized, and from that moment events rushed forward faster than his dull mind could follow. When he next found himself outside under open sky, it was not as a

free man but as one held and watched.

He sat crouched in misery while officials moved around him, and for one bitter moment, looking up into the air, he thought how enviable the wild geese must be, able to cross the sky and go anywhere. The urge to run suddenly filled his whole body. He saw the gate across the way and thought that if he tried at once, perhaps even capture would be better than this waiting. Takuan had stepped away for a moment, and no one seemed to be looking straight at him. Matahachi rose and ran. But before he had gone far, a shout struck him like a club, and an execution officer leaped out and beat his shoulder down with a staff.

Then Takuan returned, not alone, but with more officers behind him. Another prisoner, bound with rope, was also led in by harsh-faced men who smelled of the jail. A chief officer chose the place of punishment and ordered two rough mats spread on the ground. The officers gathered around. Takuan was given a stool to sit as witness. Matahachi, dragged forward by the neck of his robe because his legs no longer wished to carry him, was thrown down onto one of the clean new mats. The cry of quails in the field did not even reach him now. He heard only a far confused noise, as if the world were speaking from behind a wall.

Then a woman's voice beside him said, "Matahachi?" He turned and stared. On the mat beside his own sat Akemi, also under arrest. Before either could say more, long hardwood poles were thrust between them and the officers barked that prisoners were not to speak. The chief officer stood and read out their crimes in a cold formal tone. Akemi did not cry, but tears spilled helplessly from Matahachi's eyes. He scarcely heard the words. He only saw the rods, the men who held them, and Takuan sitting there, watching everything with grave stillness. Then the order came. "Beat them." And all the fear that had haunted him in dreams passed into the hard daylight at last.

Part 10

The order had scarcely left the official's mouth before the two attendants who had been crouching behind the prisoners sprang forward with split bamboo

rods in their hands. They began to count aloud as they struck. Matahachi cried out at the first blows, his whole body jerking across the mat. Akemi did not cry out. Her face turned white, and she pressed it down against the rough straw while her teeth held tight against the pain. The bamboo hissed through the air again and again, and with every stroke the count rose higher.

At first Matahachi still knew where he was. He knew the smell of trampled grass, the eyes of the officials, the cold nearness of Takuan, and the terrible fact that Akemi was lying beside him under the same shame. But pain soon broke all that apart. The beating was no longer a number or a punishment. It became only fire. The rods seemed to tear the skin from his back and strike deeper, into the bones and the breath inside him. He heard the counting, yet it sounded far away, as if someone were shouting numbers across a river.

Akemi's suffering was no less, but she met it in another way. Her fingers clawed the mat until the straw came loose beneath them. Once or twice a low sound escaped her throat, not quite a cry, not quite a groan, but still she would not beg or call for mercy. The men who struck them were sweating before the count had reached its middle. The split bamboo frayed at the tips and began to look like brushes. Still they kept on, because the order had been given, and no man there intended to soften it.

Outside the place of punishment, people had begun to stop on the road and look from a distance. They asked one another what was happening. Someone said it was an official beating. Someone else answered that it must be a hundred strokes. Men shook their heads and said it would hurt beyond bearing. Others, curious and half excited, tried to count how far the punishment had gone. Then one of the lower officers strode toward them, struck the grass with his stick, and shouted that no one was to stand there. The onlookers moved away, but many turned their heads as they walked.

By the time the beating ended, the men who had carried it out were themselves rubbing their elbows and breathing hard. The bamboo rods had nearly come apart in their hands. The chief official exchanged formal words with Takuan, and together they observed the proper courtesy of men finishing an ordered duty.

Then the officials and attendants went back within the gate in a loud group, their work now done. Takuan alone remained for a little while near the two fallen figures. He stood silent, looking down at them without pity in his face and yet without cruelty either.

He did not speak to Matahachi. He did not speak to Akemi. After a few moments he turned away and crossed the field by himself. Above the grass a pale sunlight had broken through a slit in the clouds. Quails began to cry again from somewhere among the weeds, as if the world had already forgotten what had just happened. On the two mats, however, neither of the prisoners moved. They had not lost consciousness completely, but their bodies felt like masses of pain, and shame pressed on them more heavily than the blows had done.

At last Akemi stirred first. Her lips moved, and in a cracked whisper she asked for water. Before each mat stood a small hand bucket with a bamboo dipper beside it, as though even a place of punishment wished to show that it still possessed one handful of mercy. Akemi reached for it and drank with desperate greed, almost biting at the water. Only after that did she turn the bucket toward Matahachi and ask whether he wanted any. He stretched out his hand slowly, as if he were not yet fully returned to himself, and then drank long and heavily.

When the water had gone down his throat, some small part of his mind cleared. Akemi looked at him through her loosened hair and asked in wonder whether he had really become a monk. Matahachi answered poorly, hardly knowing what he said. Then she asked the question that mattered most to her. “Is that all?” she said. “Was that the punishment?” Matahachi stared at her. He remembered now that the official had indeed read out their sentence before the beating began. He told her that they had been driven from Edo, not from life, and that they had escaped with their heads still on their shoulders.

Joy flashed up in Akemi at once. She gave a strange little cry of relief and repeated that their lives had been spared. But Matahachi did not share her happiness in the same way. His first thought was not of Akemi, nor of where they would go together, nor even of gratitude. It was only that he was free to leave that place. He pushed himself up unsteadily, swaying with pain, and began to walk

away at once. He did not offer her a hand. He did not ask if she could stand. He did not even turn to look at her face.

Akemi remained on the mat a moment longer. She lifted her hands to her hair, pushed it back into place, straightened her collar, and pulled her sash together again with slow, careful fingers. All the while Matahachi's figure was growing smaller across the field. When at last she looked up fully, he was already far off among the grasses, moving away as if the woman who had lain beside him under the rods had nothing more to do with him. Her mouth twisted with contempt. "Coward," she whispered. Then, after one more moment, she rose too, carrying her pain, her anger, and her life in a different direction.

Part 11

For a while after that, the talk in the upper room stayed light, but the lightness did not mean that the matter was small. Takuan had thrown Otsu's name into the room almost like a joke, yet no one there took it as a joke only. Musashi sat very still. He was a man who could face swords, hunger, rain, and cold without change of color, but this was another kind of test. The sight of him growing silent over a woman's name seemed to amuse Takuan, but the monk's eyes were warm, not cruel.

Takuan asked again whether Musashi truly knew nothing of Otsu now. Musashi answered that after a certain point he had heard no sure news of her, and that he had kept moving from place to place without looking back. Then Yagyu Tajima no Kami said calmly that if this was the same young woman who had once stayed in Yagyu Valley, then she was now in the province still, helping Hyogo care for old Sekishusai. Musashi raised his face at once. The answer struck him more strongly than he had expected, and for a brief moment his calm broke.

Takuan watched that change closely. He said that this was just like Musashi, always walking forward so hard that he forgot who was still standing behind him. He added that Otsu had not forgotten. The words were spoken with a smile, yet they carried blame. Hojo Awanokami and Tajima no Kami did not laugh. Both

men looked at Musashi as if waiting to see what sort of answer he would make when the road before him was no longer only a road of fighting.

Musashi did not defend himself quickly. At last he said that he had never believed he had the right to pull another life into the harsh path he had chosen. If he had kept away, it was not only from coldness. It was also because he feared what would happen if he began to rest in human comfort before his own Way was clear. Takuan answered at once that a man can use the Way as an excuse just as easily as he can use pleasure. Those words landed heavily, because Musashi knew there was truth in them.

Then the talk widened. Takuan said openly that a monk was not the right man to settle the affairs of a woman and a household, but that the two lords before him were well able to help if the matter ever came to that point. Awanokami nodded and said that a man like Musashi should not remain forever in a poor grass hut like a bird sleeping on a branch. Tajima no Kami added that even one who walked the sword's deepest road might one day need a house, a wife, and a fixed place from which his strength could spread into the world.

Their meaning was plain now. It was not only Otsu they were speaking of. They were speaking of Musashi's whole life. Up to that time he had moved like a free blade through fields, roads, inns, and mountain places, owing little to anyone and belonging nowhere. But such freedom had another face. It could keep a man pure, yet it could also keep him cut off from the work that only a settled life makes possible. The three older men were trying, each in his own way, to bring him nearer to the center of the age.

Awanokami said that Edo was growing into the heart of the country and that the men who shaped it now would leave marks for generations to come. Tajima no Kami said that the time of endless war was ending and that in the coming years the sword would need not only strength, but form, law, teaching, and order. If Musashi vanished forever into wild places, that too would be one kind of life, but perhaps not the fullest one. Takuan smiled and said that if Musashi stayed in Edo, took Otsu back into his life, and planted himself like a pine instead of drifting like grass, much good might grow from it.

Musashi listened with his cup untouched in his hand. He did not reject them, yet neither could he accept all at once what they were offering. He said that his training still felt unfinished and that he could not yet tell whether he stood near the top of the mountain or only at its lower slope. To stop now, to take rank or home or ease too early, seemed to him dangerous. But even as he spoke, he felt that these men were not trying to weaken him. They were asking whether the thing he called training had become too narrow in his own mind.

The night deepened, and the lamp between them burned with a steadier light as the wind outside grew quiet. More than once Musashi thought how strange this meeting was. A monk sat there who spoke of marriage and human duty. A lord of high birth sat there who cared less for rank than for the shape of a man’s future. A great master of the sword sat there and said almost nothing about killing, striking, or victory. In such company, Musashi felt that he was seeing another side of power, one that came not from force, but from width of mind.

At last the cups were lowered and the voices softened. No final decision was asked from Musashi that night. The three men were too wise for that. They had said what they wished to say, and they knew that a man like Musashi must carry such words alone for a while before they could become part of him. When he rose to leave, each of them treated him with the same quiet respect as before, and that respect itself weighed on him more than command would have done.

Outside, the air before dawn was cool and clear. The trees on Akagi Slope stood dark against a paling sky, and somewhere far away the last notes of a flute died into silence. As Musashi stepped down through the strange rising house and out toward the waiting horse, he no longer felt as he had when he entered. Nothing had been decided. He was still the same wandering swordsman in plain clothes. And yet, as he rode back toward the wet fields of Musashino, he knew that the talk of that lamp-lit room would not leave him soon, for it had reached a place in him deeper than pride and closer than ambition.

Part 12

The road of Musashi and the road of Kojiro did not run side by side for long. While Musashi rode back through the clear dawn with the words of great men still working in his heart, Kojiro was already moving toward another kind of meeting. He had no wish to waste himself against the Yagyu house. The Yagyu school stood too near the shogun, too protected by rank and policy, and it would never step down into the dust at the call of a masterless swordsman. But the Ono house was different. People said that Ono Jiroemon Tadaaki, though a direct instructor to the shogun, still answered strength with strength and did not hide behind his position.

So one day Kojiro climbed Saikachi Slope with a young man from Hangawara's band as his guide. Through the trees they could see the stream of Ochanomizu below. The guide had first imagined some grand place like the Yagyu residence, but when he went to ask around and returned, he pointed to an old wall halfway back down the slope and said that was the place. Kojiro stopped and looked carefully. The clay wall was old, left from the days when some horse official had lived there, and beyond the gate stood a main house and a newer wooden building that looked like a practice hall. Kojiro told the guide to go back and send word that if by evening he did not return with old Osugi, then Hangawara should think him bones already.

His coming had more than one purpose. Osugi had indeed fallen into the hands of the Ono men, and that gave him a reason to enter. But the deeper reason lay in his nature. He wished to test himself against the strongest hand he could reach. Men in the city said they respected the Yagyu school, but when they spoke of pure strength, they named Ono. The Ono house held only a few hundred koku, yet in swordsmanship no man laughed at it. Kojiro therefore entered with the sharp inward joy of a gambler who believes he has chosen the right table at last.

The household did not refuse him. Ono Tadaaki received him without noise and without pride. He was no longer young, but the old force had not left him. His face was plain and honest, his manner simple, and his straightness only sharpened Kojiro's own hard brilliance by contrast. At first their words were courteous. Kojiro spoke in the tone of a man who did not know how to bend much, and Tadaaki answered each word with patient good humor. Yet under that quiet surface,

the older man was measuring him. He saw at once that this was no ordinary challenger. There was something fierce and uncommon in Kojiro, something that could become either a great light or a terrible evil.

While they spoke, some of Tadaaki's disciples, hearing that Sasaki Kojiro had come, grew uneasy and angry in the practice hall. They knew his name already and did not trust his purpose. If he had come directly to their master's private rooms, then surely he meant to flatter, trick, or force his way into a trial. One of them muttered that they should drag him out and settle the matter openly. At that very moment Omitsu, Tadaaki's pretty young niece, came running from the residence in alarm. She cried that her uncle and the guest had drawn blades and gone out into the garden. Before she had finished speaking, the leading disciples were already rushing through the gate between the two parts of the house.

By the time they broke through, the fight had already become something they could not interrupt. In the flat garden, near a great jujube tree, the two men stood facing one another, and neither seemed to move at all. Yet to eyes trained in swordsmanship, the stillness itself was terrible. Sweat ran along both faces. Their breathing had changed. The color had gone from their skin. Kojiro stood in fierce youth, long sword alive in his hand like a living creature. Tadaaki stood in age, yet not in weakness, and the old master understood even then, with something like pain, that a new beast had risen from behind the age he knew. He thought that if such a man were a disciple, he might still be guided. But as an enemy or a wild talent, he was dangerous beyond easy measure.

The disciples could do nothing but stare. The two swords held one another in a kind of burning balance. No one could say how long that balance lasted. It may have been a few breaths, but to those who watched, it seemed far longer. Then suddenly Tadaaki cried, "I yield!" At the same instant he leaped back with blade and body together. Yet Kojiro's body flew after him almost like an animal springing in the air. The long Monohoshizao swept down in a storm-like arc. Tadaaki twisted just enough to save his life, but his topknot snapped loose, the binding cord cut clean. At that same instant Tadaaki's own rising blade clipped away several inches of Kojiro's sleeve.

Fury broke over the disciples at once. What Tadaaki had said made clear that this had been a match, not a street quarrel, and yet Kojiro had taken advantage of that single yielding moment to strike without mercy. To them it was a shameful act. A shout rose from all sides, and the whole group rushed him together. Kojiro moved as swiftly as a cormorant changing direction in flight. In a blink he had shifted his place and stood half hidden by the trunk of the great jujube tree, glaring at them with blazing eyes. “Did you see?” he shouted. “I won.” From farther off Tadaaki, who had already lowered his sword, answered quietly, “I saw.” Then, turning toward his disciples, he said only, “Hold back.”

His command stopped them, though their anger did not cool. Tadaaki sheathed his sword and went back to the veranda of his study. There he sat down and called for Omitsu to tie up his fallen hair. Only then did his true breathing begin to show, and his chest rose heavily under the sweat. Yet even in that state he remained composed. Over his shoulder he told the girl to take water to the young guest, let him wash, and show him back to the room where he had first been received. He himself did not return at once. Instead he ordered all the disciples to gather in the dojo, and he went there before them. They followed him with pale faces and wounded pride, unable to understand how their master could speak so quietly after what had happened.

Later, when Kojiro and Tadaaki spoke again, the old master did not rebuke him openly. Because Kojiro was not his disciple, the words that rose once or twice to his throat stayed there. He felt the weight of his own years more sharply than ever and remembered with pain a saying he had once heard: it is easy to pass those who came before, but hard not to be passed by those who come after. So he answered Kojiro with calm politeness and even spoke of other matters. In the course of that talk he happened to mention a rumor that Hojo Awanokami and the monk Takuan were recommending an obscure swordsman named Miyamoto Musashi for a new teaching place near the shogun. At that name Kojiro’s face changed, though only for a moment. When the west light began to fade, he rose and said simply, “I go.”

Tadaaki told Omitsu to take the old woman by the hand and see her down the

slope with the guest. Kojiro left as he had come, proud, beautiful, and dangerous. Not long after that day, people in Edo began to say strange things. They said that Ono Tadaaki, though once so close to the shogun and with so much room left before him in the world, had suddenly stepped away from active life because he had been defeated by Sasaki Kojiro and his mind had broken. That was how the city changed truth into rumor. The truth was more severe and more silent. An old master had seen the edge of youth pass close before him, and the sight had taught him not madness, but the bitter knowledge that even the strongest blade must one day feel age in its own steel.

Part 13

Not long after Kojiro left the house on Saikachi Slope, strange stories began to move through Edo. People said that Ono Jiroemon Tadaaki, though he stood close to the shogun and still had much honor before him, had suddenly turned away from the world because Sasaki Kojiro had defeated him and broken his mind. Such was the way of rumor. It took one sharp moment and stretched it into a whole false life. Men repeated the story with eager voices, though few of them knew anything of the truth.

The truth was quieter and more painful. Tadaaki had not lost his reason. He had only felt, more clearly than before, the bitter law of all skill and all years. It is easy, someone had once said, to pass those who came before, but hard not to be passed by those who come after. The old master had seen that law standing alive before him in the body of a younger man, and the sight had entered him deeply. While Edo turned that inward wound into gossip, Musashi and Iori were far away from the city, living under a rough roof on the wide plain and knowing nothing of such talk.

The night before had brought a storm so violent that even Musashi said he had never seen such wind and rain in all his life. Iori had thought more than once that the whole plain would be torn up and blown away. Their poor hut had bent like grass under a foot. The reed walls had rattled, the roof had groaned, and the

darkness had felt alive with wild power. Even after morning came, the fear of it still remained in the body.

When they stepped outside at dawn, they found their small dwelling half broken and the place around it changed. The field was full of wreckage. Branches had been snapped and thrown down. The wild vines were torn, and the ground was strewn with leaves and broken reeds. Water stood in low places, and the wet smell of earth rose everywhere under the pale sky. Iori looked at all this in silence, still feeling that the night had shown him a force larger than swords, larger than men, and larger even than the loneliness of Musashino.

Musashi, however, did not complain. He looked at the damage, nodded once, and began at once to think what could be repaired and what must be made again. Such was his way. Yet even he did not move as if the storm had meant nothing. He stood a little while looking far across the field, and his face had the quiet of a man who has been reminded that all things made by hand can be broken in a single night. Iori watched him and waited, thinking perhaps his master would speak of rebuilding or of moving elsewhere.

Instead Musashi spoke of something else. He said that this too was part of life and that one must learn not only strength, but feeling. The hut had seemed, only the day before, like a settled place. Now it was half gone. That was why men spoke of the sadness in things, he said, not because they were weak, but because even what is dear and beautiful cannot remain untouched. Iori listened without fully understanding, though the sight before him made the words enter him more deeply than usual.

The boy had felt fear in the storm, and now he felt another kind of heaviness while looking at the broken place they had made together. It was not only fear of loss. It was a strange tenderness toward the poor hut itself, toward the cut reeds, the bent bamboo, and the little order they had tried to make in the wild field. Musashi saw that feeling in him and did not mock it. He only said that a man should not turn away from such feeling, because it too teaches him something true. Strength without that knowledge grows hard and empty.

Later, when the morning had risen higher, Iori remembered the far-off music

he had heard in the night between the blows of the storm. It had stayed in his mind strangely. So he asked one of the old farmers nearby, and the man told him that from old times there had been musicians in Asagaya who played for the monthly rites of Mitsumine Shrine in Chichibu. That, perhaps, was the sound that had drifted over the plain. When Iori heard this, his face brightened at once. Of all grand things, he knew almost nothing except such sacred music and dance, and the thought of the great shrine seized him at once.

He went to Musashi and asked, in a way almost childlike, whether they might go there and see it. He added, as if trying to make the request modest, that the hut could not be repaired fully in only a few days anyway. Musashi looked at him with some surprise. Iori did not often beg for anything. He was not like Jotaro, who would quickly ask, complain, cling, and push with a child's open heart. Iori usually held himself back so much that at times Musashi felt a kind of distance in him, and so this sudden request stirred a softer feeling in the master's breast.

For that very reason, Musashi did not refuse at once. He thought of Jotaro, thought of the road, and thought too that there was no harm in letting the boy see something old and great. So the matter was left open between them, and the day moved on. But the storm, the broken hut, and the talk of the sadness in things did not leave Iori's mind. They mixed together with the memory of the night sounds and the thought of the shrine far away in the mountains, and by evening he felt that some new turn in their journey was already drawing near.

Part 14

The next morning Iori spoke of Mitsumine Shrine again. He had asked the old farmer about the music he had heard through the storm, and now his wish had grown even stronger. The farmer had told him that in nearby Asagaya there was an old family of kagura musicians, and that every month, for the rites at Mitsumine in Chichibu, they played there before going on to the shrine. To Iori, who knew almost nothing grand in music or dance except kagura, this was enough to set his whole heart moving. He begged Musashi to take him there, saying that

the hut could not be repaired in only a few days anyway.

Musashi looked at him with some surprise. Iori did not often ask for things in that way. Jotaro would have pleaded, sulked, and clung to him without shame, but Iori was usually reserved, almost too reserved for a boy his age. Sometimes that self-control made Musashi feel a quiet sadness, as if the child had hidden himself too early. So when Iori now asked openly, Musashi felt a softer warmth than he expected and did not refuse.

They left the broken hut behind and set out toward Chichibu. The road took them away from the wide level plain and into rougher country. The air changed, and the mountains began to rise around them. By the time they reached the district of Mitsumine, the world of Musashino seemed far off, and the shrine stood in a place where cedar woods, steep paths, and old stone ways gave everything a grave and ancient feeling. Iori forgot his tiredness at once.

The place was full of life because the monthly rite was under way. Travelers, villagers, shrine men, dancers, musicians, and worshippers moved in and out among the buildings and trees. There was music from the kagura hall, and sacred songs rose and fell under the high wooden roof. Iori, unable to stand still, soon climbed up into the fork of a tree where he could look down more clearly on the dance and the players below. Musashi did not call him back. He himself stood with folded arms and watched.

The old music entered him in a different way than it entered the boy. Iori watched the masks, the movements, the brightness of the performance, and the changing shape of the dance. Musashi listened also to the songs and remembered that some of them were known to him from childhood. He had once worn a mask himself and danced in the kagura hall of the shrine in his home village. Those old memories came back to him with unexpected force as the sacred words went on and the drums and flutes joined the voices.

Then a line of song rose before him, and while he listened, his eyes fixed on the drummer’s hands. The two sticks moved and struck in turn, yet no confusion came from them. The sound was one sound. The right hand and the left hand worked apart and together at the same time. Suddenly Musashi gave a low cry

that seemed almost torn out of him. “That is it,” he said. “That is what the two swords are.”

Iori leaned down from the tree in surprise and called to him, but Musashi did not even look up. His eyes were still fixed on the floor of the kagura hall. He was not watching like a man pleased by music alone. His whole face had changed. For years, deep inside him, one question had remained unresolved. Now, in that hall, through the two drumsticks beating one rhythm, the answer had opened.

He had believed for a long time that two swords were natural. At Ichijoji, when he had fought the men of the Yoshioka school, he had later realized that his body had taken up a long sword in one hand and a short sword in the other without conscious thought. It had happened because danger itself had forced the truth out of him. A man has two hands, and in the moment between life and death, both hands had acted to protect the one life. Since then he had felt that two swords were not strange at all. Rather, it was the old habit of using only one that was unnatural.

Yet feeling this and proving it were not the same thing. A battle could drag truth out of the body for one instant, but the deepest art was to make that same truth live freely in ordinary action. The two hands must not merely seize two swords in fear. They must act with full awareness and yet with the same freedom as if there were no thought at all. As Musashi watched the drummer, he understood it clearly. The two sticks were two, but the sound they made was one. The right and left were separate, but the rhythm was whole.

A sense of release spread through him. The cloud that had long hung in his mind broke apart. He saw that the law of two swords was not a trick, not a desperate measure for a moment of danger, and not a show against many enemies. It was a natural law of the human body and of action itself. He stood as though rooted where he was, hardly breathing, while the kagura went on changing dancers and verses before him. But he was no longer merely attending a shrine performance. Inwardly he had received something that would shape the whole rest of his Way.

When the sacred dances finally ended, he was still quiet. Iori came down from the tree and stood near him, wondering at the strange look on his master’s

face. Musashi said little, but the hardness that usually sat in his brow had loosened. He seemed both calmer and more deeply alive. The boy did not fully understand what had happened, yet he knew that the journey had not been in vain. Somewhere in the mountain shrine, among old songs, masks, cedar shadows, and the sound of two drumsticks striking one rhythm, Musashi had found the form of something he had long been seeking.

Part 15

The joy that came to Musashi in the kagura hall did not make him careless. His heart had opened, but the mountains around Mitsumine were not gentle mountains. Sacred places often stood close to dangerous men, and in the deep country beyond the shrine there still lived rough fighters harsher than common bandits. The treasure storehouses of the shrine and temple lands were always in danger, for offerings were kept there not only as holy objects, but also as money. Because of that, the keepers of such places were sometimes strange men, half guard and half outlaw.

Among them was Shishido Baiken. He was a master of the chain-and-sickle, famed as the creator of the Yatsugaki style, and he knew the habits of mountain raiders as well as any man alive. If not for the black blood behind him, he might have found service under a proper lord. But his family had long lived in violence. His elder brother, Tsujikaze Tenma, had once led wild robbers from the Ibuki region, and years before he had died vomiting blood under the blow of Takezo's wooden sword. Baiken never forgot that death. In his heart the name Musashi was cut like a scar.

So when news reached him that Musashi was in the Mitsumine district, he did not let the chance pass. He gathered men who lived by dark work and set them to watch the roads, the temple grounds, and the wooded paths. Some were swordsmen, some little better than hunters, and at least one carried a gun. Their purpose was simple. They would not challenge Musashi openly before the shrine. They would strike from cover, from trees, from bends in the road, and from the

gray edge of dawn, until even a man like him must fall.

Musashi did not know every part of that plan, but he felt danger close at hand. He and Iori came down from the shrine district by mountain roads, and all through that wild country the air seemed too still, as if men were hiding inside it. More than once Musashi stopped and looked into the cedars. Once or twice he moved Iori aside with a short word and went first where the path narrowed. The boy felt the tension without being told. He kept close, his eyes large, his small body trying hard not to show fear.

Before dawn, when the world was still gray and the bridge at the valley stream lay half hidden under mist, the attack began. A shot was meant to open it. But before the man with the gun could fire well, another figure had already slipped behind him in darkness. A heavy staff struck, and the gunman went down. Then swords flashed from more than one side, and the bridge, the trees, and the bank below it all seemed suddenly full of enemies. Musashi pulled Iori back from the worst of it and drove him toward safety, shouting for him to climb and stay out of the way.

The fight then broke wide and fast. Baiken himself came in with the terrible force of his chain-and-sickle, while other men rushed at Musashi together, hoping numbers would do what courage alone could not. But Musashi had become even more dangerous after the insight of the kagura hall. His body moved with fierce freedom. He cut through one, turned, drove off another, and never lost the center of himself. The clash of iron, the cry of men, and the wild spinning of the chain weapon filled the dark air under the trees.

In the middle of that struggle Musashi saw his opening. Baiken’s hand went toward the hilt of his sword, but Musashi’s hand struck first and beat his wrist aside. In the same instant Musashi seized the blade that Baiken lost. There was no time for pity. With Baiken’s own long sword in his hand, Musashi split him down in one terrible stroke, from the head deep through the body, so that it seemed less like cutting flesh than like splitting green wood under lightning. Someone behind him gave a cry of awe and horror at the sight.

Musashi turned sharply and saw a broad-shouldered young country warrior

standing there with a staff in his hands, his round face wet with sweat and his teeth showing in excitement. It was Muso Gonnosuke. He said that he had come ahead before dawn because he had learned of the plot and had hidden behind the gunman, waiting for the moment to strike him down with the staff. Musashi stared in real surprise, and the two men exchanged only a few hurried words. When Musashi asked about Iori, Gonnosuke pointed upward and said that the boy had been saved and placed in a tree. Looking there, Musashi saw Iori high above them, staring down in fear and confusion.

When the fighting at last ended and they looked around them, the ground told the count. Seven men had been killed by Gonnosuke's staff, and five by Musashi's sword. But even victory did not bring ease. This had happened in sacred lands, and blood had been spilled in a place that would not let such a matter pass quietly. Musashi said at once that, though the wrong had not begun from their side, he must report himself to the officers of the shrine domain and let the whole matter be examined properly. He wished first to return to Kannon-in, but before they could do so, armed officials were already waiting at Tanigawa Bridge.

Musashi went to them alone and gave himself up plainly, speaking as a man who had nothing to hide. The officers seemed surprised for a moment, but their answer came at once. They ordered him bound. Musashi was angered by such treatment, for he had offered himself honestly and thought it lawless to answer honesty with rope. Yet anger changed nothing. He was driven forward like a prisoner, and as he was led on, he saw how large the net around him really was. Capturing parties stood waiting along the road in groups of ten and twenty. By the time they reached the town at the shrine gate, more than a hundred men were guarding one bound swordsman as if he were an army by himself.

Part 16

After Musashi had been led away under rope and guard, Iori could no longer hold himself together. He cried with his whole body, as children do when fear is too large for silence. Gonnosuke pulled the boy close against his chest and told

him not to cry, not to cry so loudly, not to forget that he was a boy and must be brave. But Iori only answered, through tears and shaking breath, that it was because he was a boy that he cried. His teacher had been taken. His teacher had been tied and marched away before his eyes, and there was nothing in him strong enough to bear that quietly.

Gonnosuke tried again to calm him. He said that Musashi had not been seized like a hunted thief, but had gone forward and given himself up. Still, even while he spoke, his own heart was not at ease. The officers at Tanigawa Bridge had looked too ready for violence. Small groups of capture men had stood waiting all along the roads, ten here, twenty there, as if an army were to be met and not one man. Such preparations told Gonnosuke that the matter would not end in a simple hearing. So he held Iori more firmly, not because his own mind was calm, but because the child's grief had to be steadied somehow.

When Iori's crying had grown a little less wild, Gonnosuke thought first of shelter. The mountain air still carried the smell of blood, broken grass, and fear. The place where the fight had happened was no place to keep a child. So he led Iori away and turned toward Oko's tea hut, since he knew that place and had already spent the previous night there. Along the way he kept looking back once in a while, not because he hoped to see Musashi return, but because danger often remains on the road after the first violence has passed.

As they went, sounds still came out of the woods behind them. A black dog, maddened perhaps by the smell of blood, barked so harshly that the cries seemed to wake echoes in the cedar valley itself. Then the dog broke loose and ran in the direction where a woman had fled. On its way it crossed the path of a wounded monk who, thinking perhaps that the beast meant to attack him, raised a spear and struck at its face. The dog gave a sharp cry and vanished into the trees. From high up, where he had earlier been placed for safety, Iori shouted down that the woman had escaped and that another wounded holy man was also stumbling away beyond the cedar grove.

By then Gonnosuke had already told enough of the matter for Musashi to understand how the trap had been formed. Gonnosuke had spent the previous

night half asleep on the bench at Oko's tea hut and had, by what seemed almost heaven's own arrangement, overheard the whole plan. That was how he had known to come ahead before dawn and hide near the gunman. When Musashi thanked him deeply and asked whether it had been he who had killed the man with the gun, Gonnosuke answered with a laugh that it had indeed been the work of his staff. He said that if lesser men intended to hunt Musashi, then Musashi would no doubt survive most of it, but the gun had troubled him. So he had crouched behind the shooter in darkness and struck from behind just as the man prepared to aim.

Those events already lay behind them now, but they still burned in Iori's mind as Gonnosuke brought him down the road. The boy no longer wept aloud, yet from time to time his chest shook and his mouth trembled. He asked once whether they ought to chase the escaping woman. Gonnosuke said no. Another time he asked whether Musashi would surely come back. Gonnosuke did not answer quickly. At last he said only that a man like Musashi does not break easily and that they must wait to see what would follow. That was the most honest comfort he could give.

At Oko's place they found no peace. The tea hut looked the same from outside, poor and low and ordinary, but the air inside had changed. There was bitterness there now, and something poisonous under the words. Oko came out with anger on her face rather than welcome. She called Gonnosuke a meddler and asked how he dared spoil their plan and even kill her husband Toji. Gonnosuke answered bluntly that if Toji had died, then it had been through his own evil choice, and that there was nothing more to say of it. Iori, still hurt and raw from everything he had seen, shouted from behind Gonnosuke that she was wicked.

Oko drew back a little, but the anger did not leave her. From farther inside the hut she laughed in a thin, ugly way and called them thieves. If she was a villain, she said, then they were great thieves, the very men who had broken into Byodobo's treasure storehouse or served such thieves. Gonnosuke stared at her in real surprise and stepped into the earthen floor to demand that she say the words again. She answered that the truth would become clear soon enough. Then, as suddenly as a snake showing its fangs, she pulled out a dagger she had kept hidden

and struck at him.

Gonnosuke still held his staff in his left hand, but he did not need even that. With a swift motion he tore the dagger from her grasp and flung her back toward the eaves. Oko staggered out into the road, screaming for the mountain men to come, shouting again and again that accomplices of the great storehouse thieves were there. The whole force of her cry was not only fear. It was also hatred, spite, and the desperate wish to wound others before she herself fell. Gonnosuke's face changed at once. In that narrow mountain place, such a cry could bring fresh blood upon them in an instant.

Without another thought he hurled the dagger after her. It struck deep in her back and passed into the lung. Oko gave one short cry and fell forward into the road, red spreading under her at once. Iori stared, unable to move. He had seen killing before, but never in such a sudden human way, in a quarrel that only a moment earlier had still been words. Gonnosuke too stood still for one breath after the throw, as if the end had come faster even than his anger expected. Then he stepped forward, looked down once, and knew there was no help left to give her.

The hut, the road, the cedar shadows, and the whole rough mountain district seemed to grow still around them. Gonnosuke was not a cruel man, but he was a direct one, and now he understood that they could no longer remain there even a little while. Whatever Oko had meant by calling them treasure thieves, whatever half-truth or lie lay behind those words, the danger of them was real enough. If mountain men or shrine officers came upon them in that moment, with Oko lying dead outside her own hut, explanations would only deepen the trouble. So he lifted Iori down from his back, gripped him by the shoulder, and told him they were leaving at once.

Iori obeyed, though he kept turning his head toward the road where Oko lay. He did not yet understand how quickly one dark deed could lead to another, nor how people already mixed in crime often spoke of robbery, loyalty, and revenge in the same breath until no clear line remained between them. What he did understand was simpler and more painful. His master had been led away in rope. The kind mountain visit had ended in blood. The adults around him had all begun

to speak in hidden ways, with accusations that opened doors into other crimes he had never heard of. The world had suddenly become larger and dirtier than he had known.

Gonnosuke, for his part, felt another kind of burden. He had come out of chance, duty, and gratitude to help Musashi. Instead he now held the child, had killed more men than he intended, and stood in the middle of matters that were still spreading outward. Yet he did not regret coming. If he had not come, Musashi might have fallen under a gun before ever reaching the bridge. That thought gave him one hard piece of certainty to stand on. He tightened his grip on his staff and began to lead Iori away from the hut and back toward the roads that would decide what they must do next.

Part 17

While Musashi was under guard and the mountain roads still carried the smell of blood, another thread of the same dark web was being pulled tight elsewhere. Takuan had not remained idle. He had already begun to see that what had happened at Mitsumine was not the work of a few wild men alone. There were deeper connections, hidden hands, and foolish youths moving inside plans far larger than their minds could hold. Among those youths was Jotaro.

Jotaro had not meant to become part of anything evil. He had grown fast in body, but his heart had not grown as clearly. Like many boys standing at the edge of manhood, he had begun to dream of large deeds before learning how small his own understanding still was. Proud words about saving the country, striking at power, and serving some higher cause had entered his ears and taken fire there. By the time Takuan found him, the boy was already mixed into matters that frightened him and excited him at the same time.

Takuan did not begin with soft words. He spoke to Jotaro as one speaks to a child standing too near a cliff. He asked whether Jotaro truly thought that by forgetting his own small life he had become fit to carry a great cause. The boy answered with the boldness of the half-taught, saying that a man must not think

first of himself if he wished to do large work in the world. Takuan's face changed at once. He struck him hard across the cheek and barked, "Fool."

Jotaro clutched his face and stared, too shocked even to cry out. Takuan said that all work begins from the self. A man who does not understand his own weakness, his own desire, his own narrow sight, cannot possibly act for others in any true way. To forget oneself is easy to say, he told him, but often it means only that one has never looked honestly at oneself in the first place. The words fell one after another like blows.

Jotaro tried to defend himself. He said that he did not mean desire or pleasure, but only that he wished to serve something larger than his own comfort. Takuan cut him off at once. He said that boys who have seen nothing of the world and yet speak grandly of the world are the most dangerous kind. Their minds are still sour and unripe, yet they run after huge words as if such words alone could make them men. Jotaro had nothing left to answer. The tears came then, not because he wished to cry, but because shame had broken through his stubbornness.

They were in the woods, and dawn had not yet fully opened. The wet smell of cedar bark and cold earth hung in the air. Takuan stood over the boy and let the silence grow heavy. Jotaro felt that the monk could already see far more than he himself had confessed. At last he was told to lie down and sleep, since there was nothing more to be said until morning. Jotaro obeyed because he could do nothing else. He wrapped himself in a rough mat and lay there, but true sleep did not come to him easily.

Takuan also lay down, and so did Iori. Yet the monk's mind did not fully rest. He knew that the business around Musashi's arrest, the shrine lands, the violence, and the hidden actors behind it all could not be settled by force alone. Somewhere, under all the confusion, there was still a plain line of cause and effect. If that line could be found early enough, then some greater evil might yet be prevented. So even before the birds began to call, Takuan rose again and went a little way into the dark among the trees.

There, by chance or by the strange law that often brings men together when the time has ripened, he met a wandering straw-mat monk. The figure was thin,

worn, and almost ghost-like. At first Takuan did not know him. But the other man, peering through the dim light, looked harder and asked whether he might not be Takuan of Tajima, who had once stayed long ago at Shippōji in Mimasaka. Takuan lifted the wick of a poor little lamp and stared at the ruined face before him. Then recognition came over him with sudden force. It was Aoki Danzaemon.

Time had destroyed almost everything in the man's appearance. The old strength was gone. The once-proud warrior's air had dried away until almost nothing remained but bone, beard, and repentance. Danza bowed low and asked Takuan not to look at him as the man he had once been. He said that he was already little better than a white bone wandering before death. Yet one desire still held him to life. He wished to see his son once more before he died.

Takuan was surprised at this. When he asked what son he meant and where that son now lived, Danza answered with deep shame that rumor had told him the boy had become the disciple of a man once called Takezo, now known as Miyamoto Musashi. At those words Takuan's eyes widened. Danza confessed that when he first heard this, shame had nearly driven him into the earth. Long ago he had hunted that same Takezo like an animal and had done him great wrong. After such a past, how could he show his face before either Musashi or the boy? Even so, the wish to see his child had proved stronger than pride or fear.

"Then Jotaro is your son," Takuan said at last. For a moment he could only look at the man in silence. Many things that had never been clear before now took on a new shape. Danza bowed his head and admitted it. He said that he had wandered east only for that reason, to catch one sight of the son who must now be almost eighteen. It did not matter, he said, whether the son despised him, whether Musashi turned him away, or whether he himself died the next day. One glance would be enough.

Takuan had no easy words to give him. The monk had seen many human changes, yet the sight still struck him. The proud warrior of former years had been worn down by time, failure, and remorse into a bent and thirsty old seeker. Takuan felt not pity only, but something heavier. Men throw stones into the world when they are strong, and years later those same stones return by strange roads to wound

their own feet. He told Danza to remain hidden a little longer and not rush forward blindly.

Then he went back to Jotaro. The boy had not slept well. Even before Takuan spoke, he could see that something in the monk's face had changed. When Takuan mentioned the flute sound Jotaro had heard the day before and asked if he knew whose breath had been inside it, the boy stared without understanding. Then Takuan told him. The flute had been his father's. That single truth broke the last hard knot in Jotaro's chest. Tears rushed out of him all at once.

He seized Takuan's sleeve and begged him to wait. He said he would tell everything now, though he had once sworn to Narai Okura that he would never speak. He no longer cared about such a vow. He would confess it all before Buddha, before heaven, before any witness. Takuan led him a little farther into the woods, where the first pale light was beginning to spread through the cedar trunks, and there he listened. Jotaro poured everything out in a long broken voice. He spoke of Okura, of secret plans, of foolish dreams of great acts, of names, errands, promises, and hidden links.

Takuan did not interrupt him once. He listened from beginning to end without inserting even a word. When Jotaro had finished and said there was nothing more to tell, Takuan asked only, "Is that all?" The boy answered yes. Then silence fell again. Crows began to cry above the trees. The wet whiteness of dawn spread wider. Takuan at last said that it was well the thing had been uncovered before the plot itself had ripened into open action. Foolish boys, he thought, had been pulled into a movement whose size and danger they could not even see.

By the time the sun had truly risen, Takuan's face no longer showed confusion. The confession had given him something solid to stand on. Musashi's trouble, Jotaro's foolishness, the hidden political madness behind Narai Okura and his kind, and the restless movements beneath the surface of the age had all begun to join into one picture. Jotaro, looking at him, felt both fear and relief. He had been struck, shamed, and made to speak, yet for the first time in many days he no longer felt trapped inside a darkness he could not name.

Part 18

That same day Takuan took Iori with him to the house of Hojo Awanokami on Akagi Slope. The maple by the entrance, which had still been green not long before, was now red with autumn. Takuan asked at the gate whether the lord was at home. A young page ran inside, and after a short wait Hojo Shinzo came out instead. He said that his father had already gone to the castle, but begged them to come in all the same. Takuan nodded and answered that the timing was good, because he too must go into the castle at once, and he asked Shinzo whether Iori might be left there for a while.

Shinzo agreed easily. He already knew Iori, and there was nothing strange in the request. Takuan then spoke a few more quiet words, looked at the boy, and went off without delay. Iori watched him go and felt a little lonely, though he tried not to show it. He had been moving from one troubling thing to another ever since the trouble in the mountains, and now, left suddenly in a great warrior's house, he did not know whether to feel safe or only uncertain in a new way.

Shinzo, however, treated him kindly. He did not ask too many questions at once, and that helped the boy. He let him sit in a side room looking out over the garden and brought him small things to eat. The house itself felt rich and quiet, very different from the wild plain or the mountain roads. Yet because of that very quietness, Iori found himself thinking more clearly of Musashi. He wondered where his master was, what men were deciding about him, and whether Takuan's face that morning had meant hope or danger.

While he sat there in such thoughts, another visitor came to the gate. It was old Osugi. Her body was bent, but her will was not bent at all. She had come there on purpose, and from the moment she entered, it was plain that she had not come to ask after anyone's health or bring any polite greeting. She said that she must speak with Awanokami. When she was told that he was absent, she answered that then the son would do. What mattered, she said, was that her warning be heard.

Shinzo received her because he could not simply drive an old woman away before she spoke. But from the first words she began pouring poison into the room.

She spoke of Musashi with bitter skill, making him sound not like a warrior, but like a low and crooked man. She said he was false, dangerous, and covered in dark deeds. She said that men of good family must take care not to be tricked by his clever tongue. In the end she made plain the real reason for her visit. She had heard that Awanokami and others were trying to raise Musashi toward high service, and she had come, as she proudly said, to stop such a thing for the good of the whole realm.

Shinzo listened with all the patience he had, but he was growing angry. He believed in Musashi. He had seen the man himself, and he knew also what his father and Takuan thought of him. So to sit there and hear this old woman spit slander again and again was bitter work. Still, he understood that shouting at her would only make her cling more tightly and speak longer. For that reason he swallowed his anger and said only, “I understand. I will tell my father what you have said.” Even then she would not stop quickly. She still wagged her head, repeated her warnings, and urged him again and again not to be taken in.

Iori had not stayed away from the room. He had come near and heard enough to know what she was doing. Each word against Musashi struck him like a stone. He was still young, and in a young heart love and anger move fast together. He could bear hunger, cold, and even fear more easily than hearing his master called a cheat and a coward. So while Osugi was at last dragging herself out through the gate, pleased that she had done her work, a sharp little voice sounded from the shade of the trees. “Rotten old woman,” it said.

Osugi stopped at once and turned. “What was that?” she cried. Looking about with sharp, hateful eyes, she soon found the speaker. Iori was half hidden in the garden shade, his face fierce and wild with childish rage. Then, before anyone could stop him, he bared his teeth like a little animal and threw a hard thing at her. It struck her painfully. Whether it was a fruit from the garden or some other hard object lying near him, it flew with all the force his small body could give. “Take that too,” he shouted, trembling with anger.

The old woman cried out. She was not truly harmed in any great way, yet the insult and the shock shook her more than the blow itself. She lifted her hands and

began to weep loudly. The sound filled the gate with a kind of ugly sadness. Only a moment earlier Iori had felt hot triumph. Now, seeing her bent back, her thin shoulders, and the tears of old age, he became confused. He still hated what she had said of Musashi. That anger had not vanished. But another feeling rose beside it. She was old, poor, and crying before him, and the sight troubled him against his will.

Shinzo stepped in at once and brought the matter to an end. He sent Osugi away firmly, no longer with patience, and she went out at last, still muttering and sobbing together. Then the garden grew quiet again. Iori stood where he was, biting at his fingernails and unable to settle his heart. He was ashamed, yet not fully sorry. He wanted to run after the old woman and say something softer. At the same time he remembered every cruel word she had spoken against Musashi and felt the heat rise in him again.

It was Shinzo who saved him from that misery. From a room high above the slope he called out cheerfully for Iori to come at once and see something beautiful. The boy ran up almost in relief. There, from the edge of the room, the evening sky was opening wide, and in the far distance Fuji stood red under the setting sun. “Look,” Shinzo said, “the mountain is burning.” Iori’s eyes widened. In a moment the whole trouble below seemed to loosen its hold. The red of the great mountain, the autumn light on the sky, and the cool air on the high slope drew his mind away from tears, anger, shame, and slander.

Shinzo too appeared to forget everything at once. He did not speak again of Osugi or of the foolish scene at the gate. Iori was grateful for that kindness. So the two boys stood there together, one the son of a great house and the other a wandering swordsman’s disciple, looking westward as the red light slowly faded from Fuji’s side. For a little while, all the bitterness of the day sank away. Yet somewhere in Iori’s chest the wound remained. He had struck an old woman, had felt sorry for her, and had still not forgiven her. That mixture of pain and anger stayed in him like a bruise that does not show on the skin but hurts whenever the heart touches it.

Part 19

Shogun Hidetada was still only a little past thirty. His father, the retired great lord at Sunpu, had already finished almost all the work of one age and had placed the office of shogun upon his son while he was still young. The father's life had been one long road of war. Study, family, marriage, discipline, statecraft, and ambition had all been mixed with battle. Yet now people felt that the country stood near the end of that violent age, as if one last great struggle still waited somewhere ahead and then, after that, the land might at last grow quiet.

From the time of the Onin War, fighting had rolled on for generations, and every family in the warrior class had been shaped by it. Even now, though peace showed itself in forms and buildings and law, men still felt another storm hidden beyond the horizon. The struggle between Tokugawa and Toyotomi had not been ended in men's hearts. It remained like thunder held far away behind clouds. So Hidetada ruled in a strange time, not wholly war and not wholly peace, standing between an old world of swords and a new world that had not yet fully taken form.

Takuan moved through that uneasy age in his own way. Some people said he had ambition because he spoke too freely about matters greater than temple walls. Others said he had already been drawn into Tokugawa service and carried news from one side to another like a secret agent under black robes. But Takuan himself did not look at the rise or fall of one castle and one lord as other men did. He cared more for the suffering and happiness of the people who worked in the soil. The fate of Edo Castle or Osaka Castle seemed to him, at times, little more than the opening and falling of flowers before the larger sky.

Even so, he had gone to the castle and spoken again with the shogun. And when he came out, he did not come alone. Before leaving the grounds, he had turned aside to the work inspector's hut and ordered a back shed opened. There, inside the dim little place, sat a young novice monk with a freshly shaved head and a borrowed robe. When light from the doorway touched the bowed face, the man looked up weakly. It was Honiden Matahachi.

Takuan stood outside and crooked one finger. "Come," he said. Matahachi

tried to rise, but his legs shook so badly that he nearly fell. Takuan stepped forward, caught him by the arm, and held him up. Matahachi thought this meant he was being taken out at last for the final punishment, and his whole body gave way under that belief. In his mind he already saw the execution mat, the blade, and the end of all things, and tears rolled down his thin cheeks as if his body could no longer hold them back.

“Can you walk?” Takuan asked. Matahachi tried to answer, but no voice came. He only nodded faintly, hanging almost all his weight on the monk’s arm. Then the two of them began to move. They passed through one gate, then another, crossed bridges over moats, and went step by step out of the great castle space. Matahachi followed behind Takuan like a sheep led to slaughter, whispering “Namu Amida Butsu” under his breath with every step, because saying the prayer dulled the terror a little and gave his mind something to hold.

At last the outer moat lay behind them, and the houses of the upper city came into view. Still Matahachi thought only that the place of death must be somewhere ahead. Then Takuan stopped before a small street-side stall where an old woman sold kusa-mochi. The smell of roasted tea drifted in the air, and everything about the place was ordinary and peaceful. Matahachi stared in confusion. Takuan seated himself as though there were nothing unusual in the world, and when tea was brought, he told Matahachi to sit and drink.

The novice monk could not understand it. He looked around as if the executioners must leap from behind the tea jars. But no one came. Takuan sipped his tea and then said, almost lazily, “You will not be cut down today.” Matahachi kept staring. The words entered his ears slowly, because fear had filled him so long that hope itself now seemed impossible. At last he whispered, “Not killed?” Takuan answered that he had already been beaten and punished, and that his life had now been spared.

Relief did not come to Matahachi all at once. First came emptiness, then trembling, then a deep shame that made him lower his eyes. He had lived foolishly, lied, drifted, joined dangerous men, and let himself be used like a toy. Yet there he sat alive, drinking common tea in the city after believing each step from the

shed had been his last. Takuan told him that life spared once is not a gift to waste twice. He said that if Matahachi truly wished to live, then he must begin by standing on his own feet as a man and not as a reed blown by every passing wind.

Matahachi listened like a child after fever. He did not argue. He had no strength left for excuses. Takuan then told him that his robe and shaved head were not a joke but a chance. He was to remain quiet, obey, and follow where he was led. There were still many dark matters moving under the surface of the age, and foolish youths had already gone near enough to them. If Matahachi wished to save even the little that remained of his life, he must now keep away from such men as Narai Okura and all their talk of gold, revenge, and great deeds.

While they sat there, the city moved as always beyond them. Men carried goods, horses went by, and people spoke of market things, weather, and work. No one looking in would have guessed that one of the two figures at the stall had a short while before believed himself on the road to death. Yet that was how the world often worked. Great fear ended, and common life stood waiting in the next breath. Matahachi held the tea bowl with both hands, still unable to feel that he truly remained among the living, while Takuan, calm as ever, looked out over Edo as if he were already thinking three or four turns farther along the road.

Part 20

The chamber of the elder councillors was itself a kind of sealed box. Around it ran more rooms, passages, verandas, and screens, so that talk born there would not easily escape into other ears. In those days Takuan and Hojo Awanokami were often seen entering that place and staying there from morning until evening. Sometimes they went in before dawn and came out after dark. Sometimes messages passed again and again between that chamber and the inner quarters, until even the pages grew tired of carrying them.

The matter before them was not a small one. More than one thread had become tangled together. There was the dark movement around Narai Okura and those who dreamed foolish dreams of striking at high power. There was the

question of Musashi, his arrest in the mountains, and the deeper truth of what had happened there. And above all there was the question of what kind of men should be drawn near the center of the age as the long time of war was slowly turning into another kind of world. Men in high place did not speak lightly of such things, even when they were forced to speak quickly.

On one day, when the room had already been heavy with waiting since morning, a report came in from the outer side. “The messenger has returned from Kiso,” someone said. At once the elders answered that he should be heard directly, and the man was brought not into the chamber itself, but into another room near it. He was a retainer of the Matsumoto domain in Shinshu. Only a few days earlier, fast riders had carried orders from Edo that a man called Okura, of the herbal-goods house at Narai Post Station in Kiso, must be seized without delay.

But the news he brought back was bad. The Narai house had already been closed. Okura’s family had folded up their old business and left the post town altogether. They were said to have gone west, but no one could say where. The line of pursuit had broken in dust. When the report was carried into the sealed room, it deepened rather than ended the worry there. A man who flees so neatly has already prepared his road. That was plain to all. The plot around him was not merely the foolish noise of hot young men. There had been planning, money, hiding places, and more than one hand at work.

Takuan listened in silence. He had never thought otherwise. The confession torn from Jotaro, the terror of Matahachi, the hidden gun, the road from Narai to Edo, and the violence at Mitsumine had already told him enough to understand that the matter would not disappear by seizing one or two broken youths. Hojo Awanokami too understood this. Yet neither man allowed himself to be pulled wholly into that darkness. Both still kept their minds on another matter as well, and that other matter was Musashi.

For some time they had been speaking of him in those same hidden rooms. The Yagyu house was already established. The Ono line also stood near the shogun. But both Takuan and Awanokami had believed that there was room for one more way to be raised, if that way had true life in it. They had therefore spoken

for Musashi not as one speaks for a favorite servant or some useful tool, but as one speaks for a rare tree that should not be left to grow wild and unseen on a remote hillside. Whether the age would understand such a tree was another question.

Takuan had already gone in person before Shogun Hidetada and said what he wished to say. He had told him not only of human matters and the unrest still moving under the surface of the country, but also of old Yagyu Sekishusai, who now lay near death in the province. Then, after all that, he had spoken of Musashi. Hidetada had heard the matter out and answered that he knew something of it already. Since there were Yagyu and Ono, he said, perhaps it would do no harm to raise one more house or one more man in the arts of the sword. Those words were not full command, but they were enough to lift hope in the hearts of the men who had labored for it.

When Takuan came away from that audience, rich gifts had been pressed on him as tokens of favor. Yet he did not change his dress, his staff, or his way of living. He placed all those things in trust at a Zen temple in the city and returned to his old single-hat, single-staff figure, as plain as ever. Even so, the tongues of men did not spare him. Some said he was now deep in Tokugawa favor. Some said he was half monk and half political broker. Others, because they could not see a straight line in any free man's conduct, said he must surely be serving hidden interests. Takuan neither denied nor explained. Words such as those fell around him like dust on sandals.

Yet in the sealed chamber, among men who had weight enough to matter, the talk remained more serious. Musashi's name did not rise alone. It came always with questions. What was his birth? What enemies followed him? What story had the world attached to him, fairly or unfairly? How much of his life had become legend, and how much could be trusted? Men who build government do not like shadows. They do not like rumor. They do not like unresolved blood. For that reason, even while hope for Musashi rose, danger also rose with it. Awanokami and Takuan knew this very well.

Outside those rooms, however, life went on in ordinary ways. Pages ran.

Horses came and went. Guards changed. Autumn light fell across the stones and then faded. Few who moved through the castle grounds could have guessed how much rested on the words passing behind those layered walls. Yet there it was. The country was quiet on the surface and restless underneath. One man had fled from Narai. Another sat somewhere under suspicion because an old woman's hatred had followed him for years. A monk walked between temple and castle with a staff in his hand and politics clinging to his shadow whether he liked it or not.

By the time evening thickened over the city, nothing outward had been settled completely. Narai Okura was still gone. The whole hidden line behind him had not yet been dragged into the light. And Musashi, though favor had touched his name, still stood at the edge of acceptance rather than at its center. Yet something had changed. The men in power were now looking at him not as at a rumor from the roads, but as a figure who might be brought nearer. In an age such as that, such a change was no small thing. A flower had not yet opened, but the bud was no longer shut.

Part 21

Musashi could not hold only to his own wishes any longer. Takuan had shown him unusual kindness, and Hojo Awanokami too had opened his house and his good will. Even in the prison at Chichibu, Musashi had thought deeply about what road might now lie before him. During the years he had spent working in the fields at Hoden, living close to the soil and among farming people, a bold hope had truly grown in him. He had begun to think that the law of swordsmanship, if understood in its deepest spirit, might be brought into larger matters, into rule, order, and the guidance of men.

Yet when he looked at Edo and at the whole shape of the country, he could not deceive himself. The age had not ripened to that point. The struggle between Tokugawa and Toyotomi still stood like a storm not yet broken. Men's minds, public ideas, and the hidden movement of power were all still mixed together in

violence and uncertainty. Until the land was truly settled under one rule, the wisdom of sages and the art of governing could not simply be spoken into life by one man's belief, however sincere that belief might be.

So as he rode that morning in formal dress, on a fine horse with splendid saddle fittings, toward the gate that seemed to promise advancement, he still felt no complete satisfaction in his heart. He asked himself, if another great war began tomorrow, which side would he join. Would he fight for the East, run west, or turn his back on all camps and wait in the mountains like a beast living on grass? If he accepted a post now, and let himself rest there as one instructor under the shogun, would that not also mean that his own Way had already reached its limit? Such thoughts walked beside him even while the city road shone in the morning light.

At last he reached the gate of the transmitters' residence. A board there ordered riders to dismount, and Musashi did so at once. He gave his name formally to the officials and said that he had come in response to the summons from the elder council. After a short delay another attendant appeared and led him inward. He was taken to a broad waiting room whose sliding doors were painted with orchids and little birds. Tea and sweets were brought, and then nothing else happened. The painted birds did not sing, the painted orchids gave no scent, and Musashi, left alone there through nearly half a day, felt even his patience begin to yawn.

At last he was called. The man who received him was Sakai Tadakatsu, one of the elder lords, a figure of true weight in the government. Musashi did not show surprise, but he understood at once that matters had shifted from what he had expected. Tadakatsu's words were neither cold nor insulting. In fact, they were almost warm. He told Musashi the decision plainly. The appointment would not go forward. Materials had been brought in, unpleasant reports, old rumors, and talk that could not be ignored at such a moment. The world, he said without saying it directly, had proved smaller and dirtier than the merit of one man.

Musashi listened without bitterness. He was human, and the change entered him deeply, but he did not feel humiliated. A strange clarity had already begun to rise in him. If the post had been granted, perhaps large pay, fine robes, and a settled

station would slowly have dried the green life out of his path before it had fully grown. So he bowed and said naturally that he understood the order and was grateful for it. There was no irony in that gratitude. Inwardly he felt that something greater than the command of a government had spoken to him that day.

Tadakatsu looked hard at him and seemed to read some part of this feeling. Then he said that there was one more thing. He had heard, he said, that Musashi had interests beyond the sword, interests in the arts. A man of high spirit need not answer slander by argument. But at a time like this, to leave behind some silent sign of one's true heart through an art one truly possessed might be worthy. These words were not openly explained, yet Musashi understood them. If he let his own name sink into mud, that was one thing. But the men who had recommended him should not be left stained with him.

In a corner of the broad hall stood a pure white six-fold screen. Musashi's eyes stopped there. He remembered at once the paintings he had loved in former years, the strength of old Chinese brushwork, the deep ink of great masters, the plain force that could live in a few strokes if the hand behind them were true. Since childhood he had liked painting. The love had once slept in him, then awakened again through years of travel, temple lodgings, and chance meetings with fine works. Now, without speaking further, he moved toward the screen.

What he painted came all at once. It was Musashino. Not the crowded city, not lordly halls, not armor, banners, or the false brightness of worldly success, but the open autumn plain he knew with his own body and breath. Across the screen he spread the wide field in black ink alone. Only one thing he touched with color. A great rising sun stood there in red, as if that one disc alone carried the whole heat of his heart. The rest remained all in ink, the lonely grassland under the sky. When the work was done, he washed the brush quietly, did not even turn to admire it, and walked out at once.

Crossing the great gate, he paused only once and looked back. He seemed to ask himself whether this had been the gate of advancement or the gate of glory. Inside, no person remained near the screen, only the painted plain still wet with ink. Sakai Tadakatsu sat before it for some time in silence. At last, as if speaking

not to any man but to himself, he murmured that a tiger had been let go back to the fields. Then Musashi rode away.

He did not return to the Hojo house. For some reason of his own, he went straight back to the grass hut on Musashino Plain. There Gonnosuke, who had been absent, ran out at once to take the horse and congratulated him before hearing anything at all. Seeing the formal robe, the splendid saddle, and Musashi's calm face, he naturally believed that the matter had gone well and that service would begin at once. When Musashi sat down, Gonnosuke knelt beside him eagerly and asked whether he would now go to the castle every day.

Musashi smiled and said, "No. It has been stopped." Gonnosuke stared at him in disbelief. Musashi then said, almost cheerfully, that the order had been canceled that very day and that Gonnosuke ought rather to be glad. When the younger man asked how such a thing could be, Musashi told him not to trouble himself over reasons that would change nothing. Better, he said, to thank heaven. Did Gonnosuke too think that all his advancement lay only beyond the gate of Edo Castle? The question silenced him.

Still, Musashi went on speaking, more openly than usual. He admitted that for a time he too had carried ambition. But the ambition was never for rank or stipend alone. He had truly wished to test whether the spirit of swordsmanship might also enter government, whether the awakening gained through the sword might help in bringing peace to the people, whether sword, human duty, the Buddha's way, and even art might all be seen as one road. Because he had believed that, he had thought of entering service. Gonnosuke, grieved for him, asked whether someone's slander had ruined the matter. Musashi told him not to look at it so poorly.

He said that the thought itself had already changed within him. What he once believed with force, he now saw as something too close to a dream. Good government and the highest truth of the sword may indeed share one spirit, he said, but that is theory. The world before them was not yet ready for such practice. The land was still moving through confusion, and a man who mistook his own inward vision for the age's true condition would only end by binding himself too

early. Gonnosuke still wished to argue, but Musashi's face had grown quiet in a way that discouraged easy comfort. He had lost a place that others would have called the door of fortune. Yet sitting there in the poor hut at day's end, he seemed already to be hearing another sound beyond human praise and human refusal, as if some clearer call had reached him from farther off than the castle.

Part 22

Something in Musashi's heart had already turned away from the road behind him. After speaking with Gonnosuke in the hut, he asked for inkstone and brush. When none was ready at hand, he told the younger man to lend him a traveling writing set instead. Then he sat down at once and wrote a letter. His face was calm while he wrote, but the speed of his hand showed that the decision had already been made before the words touched the paper.

When the letter was finished, he folded it and handed it to Gonnosuke. "Take this to the Hojo house in Ushigome," he said. "Everything I wish to say is written there. Tell Takuan and Lord Awanokami also that I offer them my respect." Then he brought out another small thing and placed it beside the letter. It was the old leather pouch that Iori had once entrusted to him, the keepsake of the boy's dead father. Gonnosuke looked from the pouch to Musashi's face and felt unease rise in him.

He asked why such a thing should be returned so suddenly. Musashi answered that he wished once more to go off by himself, away from people, into mountain places or wherever the road might lead. Gonnosuke at once said that if Musashi went to the mountains, then he and Iori should follow there; if Musashi went into towns, then they should follow there too. But Musashi shook his head. He said it would not be forever, only for a few years at most, and that during that time Iori must be left in Gonnosuke's care. The younger man stared at him and asked whether this meant true withdrawal from the world. Musashi laughed and answered that such a thing would be far too early for a man still so green.

He said that he still had ambition, still had desire, still had many errors to

burn through, and that therefore this was not the retirement of a tired old man, but the leaving of one road in order to seek another. Then, half smiling, he recited an old poem about how a person who searches too deeply in the mountains may find that human life has somehow come near again. Gonnosuke lowered his head and listened. He did not understand everything, but he understood enough to know that Musashi had already gone inwardly, even before his body left the hut.

At last Gonnosuke rose, tucked the letter and the pouch into his robe, and prepared to leave. Musashi reminded him that the horse and saddle had been borrowed and must be returned properly. He added one more message that had not been written in the letter. Since the shogun's house had now looked upon him with suspicion, he said, it would not be right for him to come and go openly through the Hojo residence any longer. Such closeness might only cause trouble to those who had shown him kindness. Therefore he had purposely returned straight to the hut instead of going back there in person. Gonnosuke said he understood and set off at once through the red light of evening.

By the time he reached Akagi Slope, the night was already deep. The people of the Hojo house had been wondering why Musashi had not yet returned, so Gonnosuke was taken in without delay. Takuan himself opened the letter as soon as it was brought. The people gathered there had already heard, from another source, that Musashi's appointment had been stopped. They also knew the reason now, or at least the shape of it. Reports had gone up to the shogun about Musashi's birth, conduct, and reputation, and worst of all, the rumor had spread that he was a man pursued by an old woman who had long suffered at his hands. Because of that, sympathy had gathered around the old woman and turned against him at the very moment when his name stood before power.

Hojo Shinzo then spoke of Osugi's visit to the house and how fiercely she had poured out slander there. At once Takuan and Awanokami understood more clearly how the poison had reached so far. Yet what lay open in Musashi's letter was not complaint. There was no bitterness in it. He wrote only that the matter would be explained by Gonnosuke's mouth, and then he copied two poems, one an old verse he had lately come to love, and the other a short poem of his own

about seeing the whole world as a garden and standing himself at the threshold of no fixed house. When they heard also Gonnosuke's spoken message that Musashi had purposely kept away for their sake, the men in the room were moved more deeply than if he had sent angry words.

Awanokami rose at once and said that this would not do. If Musashi stayed away out of concern for them, then all the more reason existed to go to him themselves. Takuan agreed. But before they could set out, Gonnosuke remembered the second object in his keeping and asked that Iori be called. When the boy came, he saw the old leather pouch lying there and recognized it before anyone spoke. Gonnosuke told him that Musashi had returned it and that from now on, for a while, he himself might have to care for him. Iori was not pleased, but because Takuan and Awanokami were present, he forced himself to bow and accept the words.

Takuan, however, had caught another point. When he heard that the pouch had belonged to Iori's dead father, his interest sharpened. He began to question the boy about his family. Iori answered directly, as always. He said that his people had once served the Mogami house and that for generations the men had been called Misawa Iori. Later, after the fall of their lord and the scattering of the family in troubled times, his father San'emon had at last taken a little piece of land on Hoden Plain in Shimosa and lived there as a farmer. Iori added one more thing. He had once been told that he had an older sister, but his father had never explained clearly where she was, whether she still lived, or even in what province she might be found.

While the boy spoke, Takuan had already opened the pouch and was carefully examining the old papers and amulets inside. At length he drew out one worn sheet and read it with growing surprise. Again and again he looked from the writing to Iori's face and back to the writing. Then he said that he understood it now. The paper, written in the hand of Iori's father, told of the parents' long wandering after the ruin of their house, of their refusal to serve a second master, and of their poverty. It also told of a year when, in the western provinces, they had been forced to leave a baby girl at a temple, laying beside her a family heirloom,

a flute called Amane, and praying for her future before going on into exile once more.

The room fell quiet when Takuan finished reading. He said that he knew who this elder sister must be, and that Musashi too knew her. He did not speak the name at once, but his certainty was complete. Turning to Iori, he said, “You can meet her.” The boy stared at him without breathing for a moment. Hope, confusion, and fear all rushed into him together. Awanokami was already on his feet. Takuan too rose and said there was no time to lose. If Musashi had truly gone off at once from the hut, then perhaps he might still be reached before daybreak.

So that night they hurried toward Musashino. Men were called, horses made ready, and the road was taken in haste. Iori went too, carried along by emotions too large for speech. Gonnosuke rode with them, and Takuan urged the pace more than any of the others, as though he felt that one more thread in the pattern had suddenly shown itself and must not be missed. Yet the plain at night is wide, and a man who wishes to disappear into it can do so more easily than into any crowded city.

When at last they reached the grass hut, Musashi was no longer there. The poor shelter stood in the fading dark, but the man they sought had already gone. They searched the place and looked out across the long field, where night was just beginning to loosen its hold on the world. No voice answered them. No figure moved in the grasses. At the far edge of the waking plain they saw only one white cloud hanging in the first pale light of dawn.

Book 7: The Perfect Light

Part 1

This was Yagyu, a place known for bush warblers in early spring. The white walls of the castle stood quiet in the soft light of February, and the branch shadows of the plum trees lay dark and still upon them. The first songs of the birds were not yet common, but spring was coming closer every day. As the snow melted on the roads and hills, another kind of visitor came more often. They were wandering swordsmen, men traveling the country to test their skill. Again and again they came to the closed gate below the stone slope and called for a match.

“Please open the gate. Let me meet Master Sekishusai for one bout.” “I have come from far away.” “I follow such-and-such a school.” The guards heard the same voices every year, and they answered with the same calm refusal. “No matter whose letter you carry, our old master is too aged to receive guests.” Some men went away at once, but some argued in anger. They said there should be no high or low in the true way of skill, no difference between a great master and a beginner when both seek the same road. Yet all their words were useless. The gate stayed shut, and the callers had to leave.

What they did not know was the real reason. Yagyu Sekishusai had already died the year before. His death was being kept secret because his eldest son Munenori was away in Edo and could not return until spring. Until then, the house remained in hidden mourning. The old castle, which seemed to belong to a far older age than the present world, had a strange cold silence over it. Though the hills around it were beginning to wake into spring, the heart of the place felt as if winter still held it fast.

In the inner yard of the castle, a young page stood looking from building to building. He called softly, “Lady Otsu. Lady Otsu, where are you?” At last one sliding door opened, and a faint line of incense smoke drifted out with the woman who stepped into the light. She looked pale, as though she had not stood long in the sun for many days. Sorrow rested quietly upon her face, and its softness made

her seem even more delicate. When the boy said Hyogo wished to see her, she answered gently and followed the long wooden passages across the inner buildings of the castle.

Yagyu Hyogo was waiting by the veranda. He turned when she came and gave a tired smile. “You have helped me again by coming,” he said. “I ask one more favor. Will you please go and greet a guest in my place?” Otsu asked who had come, though she already guessed from his face that this was no ordinary visitor. Hyogo sighed and said that Kimura Sukekuro had been speaking with the man for some time, but he could no longer escape the matter. “It is Hozoin again,” he said. “And I fear there will be another long talk about skill, pride, and the right way of arms.”

The Hozoin temple in Nara was not far from Yagyu, and the two houses had long been linked. The late Sekishusai and the first Hozoin master had once been close. Now the second master, Inshun, had taken his place and had made the spear school of Hozoin famous through the land. In the guest room he sat with two young monks behind him, speaking in a calm but strong voice, while Kimura Sukekuro sat below and answered with great care. Inshun had come many times before. Because of the old friendship between the houses, no one could easily turn him away.

But there was something beneath his courtesy. He clearly wished to meet Hyogo face to face and test him. People said Sekishusai had loved his grandson dearly and had given him the deepest teachings of the Yagyu line. That made Hyogo a man other warriors wished to measure themselves against. Inshun, with his great confidence in the spear, seemed eager for such a meeting. Hyogo understood this well. For that reason, he had avoided him on earlier visits by saying he was unwell or occupied, and he meant to do the same again.

Otsu entered quietly with sweets and tea. She bowed and gave Hyogo’s message with perfect grace. “Lord Hyogo is at work on papers that must be sent to Edo Castle,” she said. “He is deeply sorry, but today he cannot come.” Inshun’s face showed disappointment at once, though he tried to hide it. He accepted the tea, looked at her for a moment, and then said that he had come because there was

an important matter he wished to report. If Hyogo could not hear it directly, then Sukekuro must listen well and carry the words to him later.

The matter concerned the border near Tsukigase, east of Yagyu, where streams, hills, and scattered villages made the land hard to divide clearly. Inshun said that since Todo Takatora had taken control of Iga Ueno, his men had been active in the border area. There were rumors that they had cut plum trees, built huts, stopped travelers, and pushed beyond the proper line into Yagyu land. He warned that Todo's house might be taking advantage of Yagyu's hidden weakness during this season of mourning. If Yagyu did not protest soon, even a small loss of land might grow into a greater one.

Sukekuro listened with respect and thanked him seriously. As a retainer of the house, he could not take such a warning lightly. Land was not a small thing in a warrior family. Even one narrow strip could become the cause of future shame or trouble. So after Inshun and his followers left, Sukekuro went straight to Hyogo and repeated every word. Yet Hyogo only smiled a little and said, "Leave it. When my uncle returns, he will deal with such matters." His answer seemed careless, but it came from a deeper calm. He did not like needless movement, and he refused to be pushed by rumor.

Still, Sukekuro could not let the matter rest so easily. Todo was a great lord, and even a false report could lead to danger if ignored. He thought the border should be checked at once and the truth learned before anyone took a wrong step. Hyogo remained still, but those around him felt the uneasiness that had begun to spread through the house. It was the same uneasiness that filled all Yagyu now: the master was dead, the world did not yet know it, spring was coming, strangers were at the gate, and every small disturbance seemed larger than it really was.

Otsu left Hyogo's room and walked back through the quiet passages. The smell of incense still clung lightly to her sleeves. She had spoken only a few words, yet she felt tired, as if even simple duties had become heavy during these months. The castle sheltered her, but it also pressed upon her heart. She lived among kind people, and Hyogo treated her with a respect that never once crossed its proper line. Yet she remained like a bird in winter, safe but unable to fly. There was one

name deep in her heart, and because of that one name, all peace felt incomplete.

Outside, the plum branches moved a little in the faint wind. Somewhere in the hills, a warbler gave a small, uncertain note, not yet a full song. Otsu stopped and listened. The sound came only once, then ended. It seemed to her that spring itself was hesitating at the edge of the world, unsure whether to enter. Yagyu, too, seemed to be waiting for something that had not yet arrived. The gate was closed, the truth was hidden, and every person in the castle carried some silent thought that could not yet be spoken.

Part 2

The next morning, after Sukekuro had finished giving instruction at the training hall, a village boy followed close behind him and bowed at his side. This was Ushinosuke, a mountain child of thirteen or fourteen from a far place beyond Tsukigase, where he came sometimes with charcoal or wild boar meat for the castle. He often looked into the training ground with shining eyes, and Sukekuro knew well that the boy loved fighting arts more than a farmer's son should. So he laughed and asked him, "No mountain yam today?" Ushinosuke shook his head at once and lifted the straw bundle hanging from his hand.

"I did not bring yams," he said. "I brought this for Lady Otsu." Sukekuro guessed at once that it might be some spring food from the hills and asked whether it was butterbur shoots. Ushinosuke looked almost hurt by the guess. "No, not that. It is alive." When Sukekuro asked what he meant, the boy answered proudly that he had caught a warbler, one that always sang with a fine voice in the Tsukigase hills. He had been watching it for some time and had caught it only because he wanted to give it to Otsu.

Sukekuro's face changed a little at those words. Since the boy passed through Tsukigase every time he came to Yagyu, here was a witness worth asking. So before sending him onward, he began to question him about the men said to be gathering there. Were there many swordsmen in the district now, and what were they doing? Ushinosuke answered simply, as one who had no thought of danger

or politics. Some men were there, yes, but not a great force. They had huts, they slept there, and they had cut wood for building or for fire, but he had seen no fence, no border post, and no stopping of travelers.

Sukekuro pressed him harder, for this did not match Inshun's warning. Ushinosuke then explained the matter more plainly. The men in the hills, he said, were not retainers of Lord Todo at all, but masterless men driven away from Nara and Uji after the war. They had nowhere to live and had gone into the mountains. At once Sukekuro understood. So that was the truth behind the rumor. He felt relief, but he also saw how quickly a false alarm could have shaken the house. Then the boy tugged at him again and asked in impatience where Otsu was, for he wanted to give her the bird before he went home.

Sukekuro warned him not to run wildly through the castle, though he softened the words with a smile. Ushinosuke had already found favor with many in Yagyu, and his rough honesty made him welcome where a more careful child might have been turned aside. Just then he saw Otsu at a distance among the inner trees. She turned at the sound of his feet and smiled gently when she recognized him. To the mountain boy she seemed almost like a being from another world, too beautiful and too sad for common life. He ran to her, held out the straw bundle, and said with great joy, "I caught a warbler for you."

Otsu looked surprised, then troubled. She did not reach out for it. Ushinosuke had expected delight, and disappointment showed at once on his face. He told her the bird sang beautifully and asked whether she did not like to keep small birds. Otsu answered in the kind voice he knew well. She said she did not hate birds at all, but she felt sorry for one shut into a bundle or a cage. There was no need to keep such a creature close, she said, when the wide world was open and full of branches from which it could sing freely to anyone willing to listen.

Her words entered the boy's heart more easily than Sukekuro's warnings ever had. "Then I will let it go," he said. Otsu thanked him and told him that the kindness of his thought was enough. At once he tore open the straw wrapping. A small warbler sprang out, flashed once in the light, and flew beyond the walls like an arrow. Otsu watched it with a softness almost like relief. Ushinosuke laughed

and said, “See how glad it is.” Then he added proudly that people also called the warbler the bird that announces spring. Otsu asked who had taught him such a thing, and he answered, almost offended, that he knew at least that much by himself.

“Then perhaps it will bring spring to me too,” Otsu said, half smiling and half speaking from a place deeper in her heart. “There is something I have long been waiting for.” She had already begun to walk, and Ushinosuke walked beside her. He asked where she was going, for this was already the mountain side of the inner castle. Otsu said she had spent too many days shut indoors and had only come out to look at the plum blossoms nearby. But the boy answered at once that the castle plums were nothing. If she truly wished to see blossoms, she should go to Tsukigase. It was near, he said, only a short distance, and he had his ox below with a load of firewood.

The thought moved her more than she had expected. All winter she had lived like the bird in the bundle, safe, guarded, and still. Now, with the image of the freed warbler still in her mind, the idea of going outside the castle walls suddenly felt sweet and dangerous at once. Ushinosuke told her she could ride on the ox while he led it. Otsu hesitated, then gave way. Together they went down from the inner hill toward the lesser gate. The gate guards knew them both. They only nodded and smiled. Ushinosuke had his pass, but he hardly needed to show it. He was already treated like a familiar little creature of the place.

Once she was seated on the back of the ox, Otsu murmured that she ought to have brought a veil. As they passed through the lower town, people looked up from their doors and greeted her with deep respect. She answered as she could, though the open air and the eyes of strangers made her feel both exposed and alive. After a while the houses grew fewer, and when she looked back she saw the white castle of Yagyu growing small at the foot of the hills. “I came out without telling anyone,” she said. “We can return before evening, can we not?” Ushinosuke answered at once that of course they could. He would bring her back safely, and a single ri meant little to him.

They talked as they went. Ushinosuke spoke of roads, villages, and the places

he knew. Otsu listened with more pleasure than she had felt in many days. The path, the wind, the smell of earth, and the sight of distant plum trees began to lift the weight that had sat upon her heart in the castle. Yet even in that lightness there was unease. She was leaving behind safety, and spring itself seemed uncertain, as if one soft step might bring either joy or sorrow. The boy, innocent and full of motion, did not notice this. He walked ahead with the rope in his hand as if all the hills belonged to him.

At the edge of the town, a rough-looking masterless man who had been trading salt for young boar meat under a roadside roof came shambling after them. Otsu noticed him only because his pace slowly matched theirs. There was nothing clear in his manner that she could call an insult, and yet something in it made her uncomfortable. Ushinosuke paid him no mind. The road ahead followed the valley toward Tsukigase, growing narrower and worse as it went. Behind them the castle had already sunk far into the hills, and before them lay the lonely mountain path, the plum country, and whatever waited there unseen.

Part 3

The road followed the stream toward Tsukigase, and the farther they went, the worse it became. Snow had only lately melted from the hills, and almost no travelers came this way at such a season. No one but people of the mountain villages had reason to pass there, and even they walked carefully. Otsu asked whether Ushinosuke always came by this road from Araki Village. He said yes, and when she wondered why he did not go instead to the castle town of Iga Ueno, which was nearer, he answered with a boy's full honesty. "Because there is no sword school there like Lord Yagyu's," he said.

Otsu smiled and asked whether he loved swordsmanship so much. Ushinosuke answered that he did. When she said there was little need for a farmer to love such a thing, he quickly said that he had not always been a farmer. Long ago, his people had been warriors. He spoke as if he believed the old name of his family still lived inside him, waiting only for the right day to rise again. Then he

ran down toward the stream, fixed one end of a rough log bridge that had slipped, and came back as lightly as a wild animal. At that moment the rough-looking ronin who had followed them from the town crossed ahead and looked back more than once at Otsu as he went.

"Who was that?" Otsu asked in a low voice. Ushinosuke laughed and said there was nothing to fear. The man was surely one of the wandering ronin hiding in the hills. Yet Otsu felt cold in spite of the mild spring light. The plum blossoms were beginning to appear on the slopes, but she no longer looked at them with pleasure. Her mind had turned back toward the safety of the town and castle. Still the ox walked on, and Ushinosuke, not seeing her fear, began to talk of his own future. He begged her to ask Sukekuro to let him work in Yagyu, even if only sweeping the yard or carrying water.

He had a whole dream prepared in his heart. Once he entered the service of the castle, he would learn the sword, become a true man of arms, and take a new name. He said there had never been a great man in his line before, so he would be the first. He would make a house for himself by skill alone. Listening to him, Otsu suddenly thought of Jotaro. How old must he be now? Nineteen, perhaps twenty. The memory brought not comfort but a painful softness. When she counted Jotaro's years, she could not help counting her own. The spring in the hills was only beginning, yet it seemed to her that the spring of her own life had already moved too far along.

"Let us go back," she said at last. "Please turn the ox around." Ushinosuke stopped in surprise, but he obeyed at once and began to pull the rope back the way they had come. Just then a voice called from somewhere behind. The same ronin had returned, and with him were two more men dressed in the same poor and dirty way. They came up quickly and stood around the ox on which Otsu was seated. Ushinosuke looked from one to another and asked in a clear voice what they wanted. Not one of them answered him. All three were staring at Otsu with ugly, hungry eyes.

One of them muttered that she was indeed a fine-looking woman. Another said he had seen her before, perhaps in Kyoto. The first man answered that he too

remembered her and thought it might have been at the Yoshioka school. They spoke over and around Otsu as if she were a thing, not a person. Ushinosuke, anger rising in him, told them to speak quickly if they had business. Daylight would not last forever, and they had to return. At last one of the men turned his eyes on the boy and said he knew him, the charcoal boy from Araki Village. Then he ordered him to go home alone and leave the woman there.

Ushinosuke said no at once. One of the ronin seized the ox's rope and told him again to hand it over. The boy held fast and asked what they meant to do. "We are borrowing the woman," the man said. "Where we take her is none of your concern." Ushinosuke cried out that they would not take her anywhere. The three men closed around him, their shoulders hard and their fists raised. Otsu clung to the ox's back and shook with fear. She saw something change in the boy's face. He was only a child, yet his whole body became sharp with one sudden will. She cried out to stop him, but too late.

In one wild moment he struck. He kicked the nearest man, drove his head into the chest of another, and tore a sword free before any of them could understand what had happened. Then, without even turning fully, he swung backward with all the strength in his body. The speed of it was so great that Otsu thought he had lost his senses. But his attack touched all three men at once. One was thrown aside, one staggered back, and the blade struck the third man hard across the body. A cry burst out, and blood splashed across the ox's face and horns. The smell of it, and the pain and shouting all around, drove the beast mad.

The ox gave a terrible roar. Ushinosuke struck its back with the sword, and the beast leaped forward in blind pain, carrying Otsu with it. The two unhurt ronin rushed after the boy first, but he had already jumped down into the stream and was springing from rock to rock. Realizing at once that he was not the true prize, they turned and ran after the ox instead. Ushinosuke shouted after them that he had done no wrong, then raced after them too. The ox no longer followed the road it had come by. In fear and pain it left the stream path, crossed low ridges and narrow tracks, and ran wildly toward the road people called the Kasagi way.

Otsu shut her eyes and could do nothing but hold on. Had there not been a

rough saddle frame for firewood on the ox's back, she would surely have been thrown to the ground. She heard the shouts of people as the beast burst out onto a road with more traffic. Men and women cried that a woman was on the ox and begged someone to stop it. Voices rose and fell behind her, but the mad animal never slowed. It passed from one frightened group to another, leaving only dust and noise behind. By then they were nearing Hannyano, and still the ox ran on as if it would never stop while life remained in it.

Then, at a crossing ahead, a servant came walking straight toward the beast with a message box hanging on his chest. Someone shouted a warning, but the man did not move aside. Those watching thought he would be caught on the horns and tossed away. Instead there was a loud sound like a slap. The servant had struck the ox hard across the face with his open hand. The animal swung half around, snorting, lifted its head again, and tried to rush forward once more. But before it had gone even a short distance, it stopped all at once and could not move another step.

"Lady, get down quickly," the servant said from behind. People gathered in wonder, for the man had trapped the rope under one foot and held the raging ox still by pure strength. Otsu slipped down to the ground and bowed, though she was still half out of her senses. The servant tied the ox to a tree and then saw the great wound on its back, where the sword had struck it. "No wonder," he said. "It ran because of this." Even as he spoke, a samurai pushed through the crowd, driving people aside. It was Kimura Sukekuro, breathless from haste. He saw the servant and cried out in surprise, for he knew him as the sandal-bearer who served Hozoin Inshun.

Part 4

Sukekuro came up to the servant and thanked him first for saving Otsu. The man bowed and took off the leather message box hanging from his chest. He said he was on his way to Yagyu with a letter from Inshun and had been fortunate enough to meet Sukekuro on the road instead. Sukekuro opened the letter at once

and read it there by the roadside. In it, Inshun withdrew what he had said the day before. The men at Tsukigase were not Todo's soldiers after all, but drifting ronin, and his warning had been based on false information.

Sukekuro folded the letter and told the servant that Yagyu also had already learned the truth. Then, just as the man was about to leave, Sukekuro stopped him and looked more closely at his face. He asked how long he had been serving at Hozoin and what name he used. The answer was that he was new there and was called Torazo. Sukekuro kept looking and then said quietly that he seemed instead to be Hamada Toranosuke, a leading pupil of Ono Jiroemon, master of swordsmanship to the Shogun.

The man blushed deeply and lowered his head. At last he confessed that Sukekuro had seen correctly. Because of matters already known in the world, his master Ono had withdrawn in shame to the mountains, and Toranosuke himself had hidden his name and entered Hozoin in low service. He wished to train there, carrying water and splitting wood if he must, until he could wash away the disgrace that had fallen on his teacher's house. Sukekuro did not press him any further. He only nodded and promised that the matter would remain private, then watched him go with greater respect than before.

Soon after, Otsu returned to Yagyu with Sukekuro. Men who had gone toward Tsukigase also came back, bringing Ushinosuke with them. The boy looked as if he had committed some terrible crime. He bowed again and again, asking forgiveness from everyone he met. Yet before long he also began to say that his mother would be anxious and that he wanted to go back to Araki Village at once. Sukekuro scolded him and told him that if he tried to cross Tsukigase by night, the ronin might catch him and kill him. So the boy was sent with the servants to sleep in the outer storehouse and wait until morning.

In another room, Hyogo sat with Otsu and showed her a letter that had just come from Edo. It was from Takuan. Though the letter had been written months before, it had only now reached Yagyu. Hyogo had first gone searching for Otsu because he had wished to place it in her hands at once. He had known, even before seeing her face, that the words inside would change her heart in a single moment.

The letter said that Musashi was about to enter the service of the Shogun as one of the official masters of swordsmanship. It also said that once he took up that post, he would have a house in Edo and would need attendants and people close to him. Takuan urged that Otsu be sent on ahead if possible, even if she traveled first with only a little company. When Otsu heard this, the very scent of the ink seemed dear to her, because it had come from one who knew Musashi. But it was the news itself that shook her most. After so many years of separation and uncertainty, Musashi was no longer only a name in her heart. He was suddenly real and near.

Hyogo watched her carefully as she read. He knew very well whom she loved, and because he knew it, he had always kept his own feelings pure and hidden. His love for her had never become a greedy wish to take what belonged to another. Instead he had often thought that one day, if fate allowed it, he must place her safely in Musashi's hands. That thought had pain in it, but it also had honor. So now, seeing the joy rise through her face even while she tried to contain it, he felt both loneliness and deep relief at the same time.

He asked whether she wished to wait until his uncle Munenori returned in the fourth month and then go east under proper care, or whether she wished to leave sooner, even alone. Otsu did not answer at once, but her silence told him much. She had lived too long on hope alone, and now that hope had changed into direction. To wait another month seemed impossible. At last, in a low voice that still trembled with feeling, she said that she wished to go the very next day if she might. Hyogo nodded gently and said that such a wish was only natural.

He warned her, however, that the roads were not yet peaceful, though they often looked so on the surface. Even the late arrival of Takuan's letter proved how uncertain travel still was. A woman alone on the road could not be called safe. But if she had truly made up her mind, he would not stand in her way. Otsu thanked him from the bottom of her heart and answered that she knew something of the world's hardship already and would not let fear turn her back. That night the women helped her make ready, and the house gave her a small farewell gathering, quiet and warm under the shadow of hidden mourning.

Morning came clear and bright again, a day fit for plum blossoms. Retainers who knew Otsu stood on either side of the middle gate to see her off. Sukekuro suddenly thought of Ushinosuke and said it would be good if the boy's ox could take her at least as far as Uji. Men agreed and went at once to call him, but they soon came back with surprising news. Ushinosuke had already slipped away during the night and crossed Tsukigase alone to return home. Even those who had seen his courage the day before were struck again by the boldness of such a thing.

Since the boy was gone, Sukekuro ordered that a horse be brought. Farewells were spoken, though no one found many words equal to the moment. Otsu bowed to them all and passed out through the gate to begin the long road toward Edo and toward Musashi. Hyogo stood and watched her become smaller and smaller along the town road, carrying with him both the ache of loss and the prayer that her happiness would be complete. Even after the others had gone back inside, he remained there alone, looking after the place where she had vanished from sight.

Part 5

More than twenty days passed after Otsu left Yagyu. Spring grew deeper each day, and the one who had gone away seemed farther away with every sunrise. One fine day Hyogo and Kimura Sukekuro went quietly to Nara in disguise. Hyogo wore a broad travel hat, and Sukekuro had his face half covered like a wandering priest. With them came Ushinosuke, now more trusted at the castle than before, carrying food on his back and a spare pair of sandals for Hyogo like a little servant.

The roads were full that day, and all the people seemed to flow toward one wide field near Kofukuji. There were monks, samurai, townspeople, women, and idlers who had come only because the weather was fair. Yet this was not a simple spring outing. The Hozoin spear monks were holding their public matches, the yearly day when men fought before a crowd and their standing in the school was judged. Because of that, the field held a quiet excitement beneath its peaceful sky, as if everyone were waiting for the first hard sound of wood or iron.

For a time, however, nothing fierce was happening. The monks were eating

their midday meal near the curtains set up at one side of the field. Hyogo, Sukekuro, and Ushinosuke spread a mat and opened their own simple lunch, rice balls with pickled plum and miso. Hyogo ate with real pleasure, as if food beneath the open sky tasted better than any feast indoors. When Sukekuro said it would be good to fetch hot water, Ushinosuke jumped up at once and said he would bring some from the monks' place. Hyogo warned him not to reveal that men of Yagyu were there, because formal greetings would only bring trouble.

At that same moment, not far away, another pair of travelers were looking for a mat they had set down earlier. One was Muso Gonnosuke, strong and broad, carrying his staff. The other was Iori, now fourteen, small and sharp-eyed, careful in all things beyond his years. Gonnosuke soon gave up the search and sat down on the grass, but Iori would not let the matter go. To him, even one mat was not a small thing. A traveler needed such a thing for rain, for sleep, and for daily life, and whoever had taken it without a word had shown a mean heart.

At last Iori found it. He saw three men sitting on it and eating their lunch as if it belonged to them. He ran over in anger, though he still stopped a few steps short to gather the right words. Just then Ushinosuke rose with the kettle and met him chest to chest. Iori said at once that a man who took another person's mat without permission was a thief. Ushinosuke flared up, saying he had only found it lying there, but when Iori demanded it back and spoke of drawing it by force if needed, the mountain boy' s pride answered at once.

They were nearly the same age, but Ushinosuke looked older and rougher. Iori looked smaller, but he would not yield an inch. Ushinosuke told him to come later to the base of the five-storied pagoda, away from the crowd, and face him there alone. Iori agreed at once. For the time being they separated, but only in body. Each kept his anger alive and waited for the right moment. When the spear matches began and dust rose from the trampled field, they exchanged a look over the heads of the crowd that said plainly, "Do not forget."

The matches themselves soon grew fierce. One monk after another was struck down by a strong fighter named Nanko-bo, a man of the Juurin-in line who stood opposed to Inshun's side. He defeated those who came out against him and

then shouted for more challengers. When none came, the crowd thought the day was finished. Then a mountain ascetic stepped forward and politely asked whether an outsider might join the match. He borrowed a wooden sword and faced Nanko-bo, but the monk looked once into the man's body and eyes and suddenly refused. It was clear even to Hyogo that the yamabushi was no ordinary wanderer but a hardened man shaped by battle, one whom skill alone would not easily master.

Not long after that, the crowd began to break apart. Sukekuro looked around for Ushinosuke and found that he was gone. The boy had slipped away during the noise of the fighting, and Iori had done the same without telling Gonnosuke. They met beneath the tall pagoda and faced each other at once. Iori drew his sword the moment he stood still. Ushinosuke had only picked up a stick, but he did not fear the blade in front of him.

Iori attacked first. He rushed in without calm or measure, forgetting everything Musashi had taught him about watching with the eyes before striking with the hand. Ushinosuke sprang aside and, in the same movement, kicked Iori hard in the face. Iori fell, leaped up again in anger, and came on once more with his sword raised. But the second attack was as wild as the first. Ushinosuke dodged and struck him down heavily with the stick. Iori fell face forward and did not move at once, and Ushinosuke, who had only been proud a moment before, was suddenly frightened by what he had done.

He ran for the gate, but Gonnosuke had already come searching for Iori. He shouted and threw his staff, striking Ushinosuke as the boy fled. At that same instant, Ushinosuke crashed into Sukekuro, who had come from the other side. The boy hid behind him at once. Then Sukekuro and Gonnosuke faced one another without warning, hands ready on sword and staff. For a breath it seemed certain that the foolish fight of two boys would become a deadly fight between two men. Yet both had quick eyes and good judgment, and both held back long enough to ask the truth.

The truth came first from Iori himself. Though sore and shaken, he rose and called out that it had been a proper match and that he had simply lost. Sukekuro looked at him with admiration, for the boy did not hide behind excuses.

Ushinosuke then confessed that he had taken the mat without knowing whose it was and that the quarrel had begun there. Hearing that, the two grown men could only smile at their own danger. A moment more of pride and they might have stained the temple ground with blood over nothing.

Once the tension was broken, they spoke more openly. Gonnosuke then asked the road to Yagyu Castle, and at that question Sukekuro stopped short. Hyogo also came up and soon learned who the travelers were. Gonnosuke had brought Iori all the way from Edo to find Otsu, after hearing from Takuan that she was Iori's elder sister. But Otsu had already left Yagyu nearly twenty days before to seek Musashi, and from Gonnosuke they learned in return that Musashi too had already disappeared from Edo and that even those near him did not know his present path.

Hyogo sighed more than once at the cruel crossing of missed chances. If only they had come sooner. If only Otsu had remained a little longer. Iori stood nearby and listened to all of this with a face that changed little, yet his whole heart had fallen. Until recently he had thought of his sister as someone almost not of this world, a distant name only. But once he learned she lived, and that she had been in Yagyu, hope had rushed into him with such force that he had carried it all the way there. Now that hope was taken from him again just when it had seemed close enough to touch.

He did not cry where the adults could see him. He only drifted away a little, looking down at flowers and grass, trying to swallow what rose in his chest. Ushinosuke followed after him, half awkward and half kind. He asked whether Iori was crying, and when Iori shook his head too sharply and tears flew from his eyes, Ushinosuke pretended not to notice. Instead he pointed out a wild yam vine and asked if Iori knew how to dig the root without breaking it. In a moment the two boys were crouched apart, scraping at the earth in rivalry again, their grief and pride turned into something their hands could manage.

The older men watched them from behind without speaking. Both boys dug deeply and carefully, each wanting to win in front of the other. At last Ushinosuke pulled out a long yam and threw it up in triumph. Iori had dug far enough but

stopped, saying his root would take until evening. Ushinosuke laughed and offered to help, but Iori refused, then pushed the earth back into the hole as if burying his unfinished hope. Ushinosuke lifted his own yam proudly onto his shoulder, but its end was broken and white juice ran from the cut. Hyogo smiled and pressed a hand down on the boy's head. "You won the fight," he said, "but in digging yams, you lost."

Part 6

Hyogo's words made Ushinosuke grin, though he still held the long yam like a prize won in battle. Iori drew his arm slowly out of the earth and looked into the deep hole he had made, as if some answer might still be waiting there below the roots. Then he covered it again with quiet hands and stood up without complaint. The two boys had quarreled, fought, and then become rivals in play almost in the same hour. The grown men looked at them and smiled, for childhood can turn more quickly than the hearts of older people.

After that, Gonnosuke spoke of his own road. He said that, though he lived only for training and travel, there was one thing still lying heavily on his mind. Since his mother had died in their home country of Kiso, he had carried her memorial tablet and a lock of her hair with him. Chance had now brought him into Yamato, and he wished to go either to Koyasan or to Kongoji, called Women's Koya, and leave those things there in prayer. If a woman named Oan, whom he knew from his home district, could be found near Kongoji, he hoped she might help him arrange it.

Hyogo and Sukekuro listened with respect. There was nothing in such a purpose that a man of feeling could lightly refuse. So they parted in peace. Hyogo returned toward Yagyu with Sukekuro and Ushinosuke, while Gonnosuke set out with Iori toward the south. Though they had met by chance and spoken only a little, each side felt that something true had passed between them. In those unsettled times, even a short meeting among honest people had the force of an old promise.

On the road, however, there was one thing that troubled them. Iori noticed first that a yamabushi was following behind at a distance. It was the same mountain priest who had stepped into the Hozoin match the day before and had been refused. He did not come close, yet he did not disappear, and there seemed no reason for him to take the same road unless he meant to watch them. Gonnosuke did not like it, but he could find no excuse to turn on the man and challenge him.

They walked on until evening and found shelter in a farmhouse in Katsuragi Village. By then the yamabushi had vanished from sight. Iori looked back more than once and at last said that the man must have become tired of following them. Gonnosuke answered that this was likely so, though he did not fully believe it himself. Still, the night passed without danger, and before dawn they were again on the road.

Early the next day they entered Amano in southern Kawachi, where clear water ran beside a small temple town. The houses there stood low under the mountain, and the place had an old, deep quiet in it. Gonnosuke and Iori went from house to house asking whether anyone knew of a woman named Oan from Narai in Kiso who had married a sake brewer in that district. It was a thin hope, but luck came sooner than they expected. A kindly woman told them at once that Oan did indeed live there, in the long row house used by the brewers serving Kongoji.

She led them to the right place and told them to ask for Fujiroku, Oan’s husband. When they reached the house, they were received not as strangers but almost as people sent by memory itself. Oan was surprised and moved to hear a voice from her home country after so many years. Gonnosuke told her of his mother’s death and showed her the tablet and the lock of hair he had kept with him all this time. Oan’s eyes filled at once, and she called her husband to hear the matter too.

Fujiroku was a brewer employed by the temple, and that evening he explained many things to them. In most temples, he said, meat and wine were shut firmly outside the gate, but here at Kongoji sake was still made in the temple

houses. It was not sold openly to the world, yet the old fame of Amano sake remained from the time when great lords had praised it. He and other brewers had been hired there for that work, and because of his place among them, he was able to help arrange what Gonnosuke desired. Hearing this, Gonnosuke felt that his long burden might at last be laid down in the right place.

Yet sleep did not come easily to him that night. The wind circled the mountain roofs with a great dull cry, and every sound seemed to enter his thoughts. Half waking and half dreaming, he remembered words he had heard about the old days of the land, about the troubled ages when the realm had been broken and yet men of true loyalty had still appeared within the confusion. He thought of the present age too, of warlords and claimants, of the restlessness left after Nobunaga and Hideyoshi, and of the heavy shape of new power rising in the east. The world seemed busy and bright on the surface, yet something at its root still felt troubled and unfinished.

The next day they went to the temple to ask that Gonnosuke's mother be remembered there. Iori drew his collar close and walked with unusual seriousness. The mountain air, the wide buildings, and the deep silence between halls had already entered him. Gonnosuke too felt himself grow still inside, though he did not know what kind of priest or official he was about to face. He imagined a splendid abbot in rich robes and formal dignity. Instead, from the main hall above them came the easy voice of a large, plain monk who looked almost like any rough man of the road.

He was broad, heavy, and great-footed, with nothing grand in his dress at all. Yet when Fujiroku bowed flat to the ground before him, Gonnosuke understood at once that this was truly the chief priest. Gonnosuke also moved to kneel, but the monk had already stepped down into his worn straw sandals and said in a simple tone, "Come, then. Let us go to Dainichi." With only a rosary in his hand, he led them away between the temple buildings until they reached the Golden Hall and the pagoda beside it.

A young monk came running with a large key and opened the great doors. Gonnosuke and Iori entered and sat in the wide hall alone. Above them rose the

golden image of Dainichi Nyorai, vast and calm, smiling faintly from the high darkness. Soon the abbot came out again in full robes and sat before the image, chanting in a voice so full and deep that he seemed a different man from the rough monk they had just followed. Gonnosuke joined his hands and thought so strongly of his dead mother that her face came before him as if she still lived. Then other images passed through his mind as well: mountain roads, white clouds, the wind across Shiojiri Pass, and Musashi standing with drawn sword while he himself faced him with a staff.

When the chanting ended, Gonnosuke slowly opened his hands and found that the priest had already withdrawn. Beside him, Iori was still staring up at the great face above. Gonnosuke asked why he looked so lost in thought. Iori answered with perfect seriousness that the face of Dainichi looked like his sister Otsu. Gonnosuke burst out laughing and told him that he had never even truly seen her, and that no woman in this world could look exactly like that great, merciful image. But Iori kept looking upward, unwilling to give up what he felt. In the still hall, beneath the calm golden smile, each of them held his own longing in silence.

Part 7

Gonnosuke and Iori slept little that night. The mountain wind moved around the roof in long cries, and the sounds of the dark place would not let their thoughts rest. Gonnosuke kept remembering the words of Koetsu and the old history of the mountain, and his mind moved from the wars of long ago to the troubled world of the present. Iori, for his part, could not forget the white-robed yamabushi who had attacked them on the bridge. Again and again he saw that sudden figure in his mind, and every time he thought of the next day’s road, a cold fear touched him. So when morning came, both were already awake before the light had fully risen.

Oan and Fujiroku had prepared breakfast and a travel meal for them while it was still dark. They sent the two travelers off with real kindness, and Oan even gave Iori a little packet of baked sake lees to eat on the road. The air was full of

pale mist rising from the river, and the clouds over the peaks had a soft color like wet cloth in early light. Gonnosuke thanked their hosts and stepped away from the brewer’s row house with Iori close behind. They had not gone far when a lively peddler came quickly from one of the houses and called to them as if he already knew them well.

Gonnosuke answered with polite distance, but the man did not seem to notice. He said he had often been helped by Fujiroku and spoke warmly of Fujiroku and Oan as good people. Then he added that he sometimes even visited Yagyu Castle on business and knew Kimura Sukekuro by name. He guessed aloud that, after visiting Kongoji, the two travelers must be planning to go on toward Koyasan. The man knew the roads, the snow, the condition of the mountain paths, and even the best place for them to stop that evening. His knowledge was so exact that Gonnosuke at last asked what trade he followed.

The man answered easily that he was a seller of cords, carrying patterns of braided strings to gather orders across many provinces. He explained that through Fujiroku he had many customers among the temple supporters and had meant to sleep at Fujiroku’s house the night before, but had been turned away because guests were already there. He laughed and said that his true sorrow was not losing a bed, but losing the chance to drink Fujiroku’s fine sake. Hearing this, Gonnosuke’s doubt began to soften. A traveling man who knew every household and every road in the district was nothing strange. So he began to speak more freely and even asked questions of his own as they walked.

Before long another man came running from behind and shouted at the first one, whose name seemed to be Sugizo. This second man, Gensuke, wore the same kind of merchant’s clothes and complained that Sugizo had promised to wait for him at the village edge. Sugizo laughed and said he had forgotten because he had fallen into such pleasant talk with the travelers. The two peddlers then went on chatting together about trade, prices, and the troubles of life on the road. Their talk sounded natural enough. Even Iori, though still quiet after the night before, found nothing to seize upon as clear danger.

Then, as they crossed the high ground near Amami, they came to a broken

place in the earth like the scar of some ancient shaking. Two rough logs had been laid across the gap. Sugizo and Gensuke stopped at once and warned Gonnosuke not to hurry forward, saying the bridge had become loose after the snowmelt. They bent down with great energy and began pushing stones and earth beneath the ends of the logs, saying they wished to make the crossing safe for all travelers. Gonnosuke, who understood the hardships of roads and mountain paths, felt respect for such care. Iori too was moved and began carrying stones to help them.

The gap was deep, perhaps more than two man-heights, though it held no water. Its bottom was filled with rock and brush. After a little while Gensuke stood on the logs and tested them with his feet, then crossed lightly to the other side. Sugizo waved Gonnosuke forward and said it was safe now. Gonnosuke stepped onto the logs, and Iori, as always, stayed close to his side. They had gone only three or five steps, just enough to reach the middle above the empty gap, when both of them cried out and froze together.

Gensuke had taken a spear from the grass on the far side and pointed its shining head straight at Gonnosuke’s chest. At the same instant, when Gonnosuke turned in shock, he saw that Sugizo had done the same behind them. Front and back were both blocked. The two narrow logs under their feet were hardly enough to hold them steady over the open drop, and there was no room to leap safely aside. Iori clung to Gonnosuke’s waist and cried his name again and again. Even Gonnosuke, strong as he was, felt the shock pass through his whole body like cold iron.

He cursed them for tricking him, and then a voice from somewhere above answered sharply, telling him to be silent. Gonnosuke looked up and saw on the bank the yamabushi from the night before. The left side of the man’s face was still swollen where Iori’s stone had struck him. At once everything became clear. The attack at Kongoji had not been a passing quarrel. This had been planned from the beginning, and the smiling peddlers had only been part of the trap.

Gonnosuke tried to speak calmly to Iori first, telling him not to panic. Then he shouted up at the yamabushi and demanded to know the reason for such cowardly work. The yamabushi replied that they were no roadside thieves and had

no interest in the travelers' money. He called Gonnosuke a man from the East and said they already knew he had come secretly into the region under orders from a military scholar in Edo. They even believed he had met in secret with Yagyu Hyogo and Yagyu men before coming there. Gonnosuke denied it with all his strength and declared his name openly. He said he was Muso Gonnosuke, a wandering man of the staff, and no spy.

The yamabushi paid no attention. He ordered Gonnosuke to throw down his staff and his swords and submit to being bound and taken away. Gonnosuke asked where they meant to carry him, but the man only said that he would understand once he arrived. When Gonnosuke answered that he would not go by his own will, Sugizo and Gensuke pushed their spear points closer and said they would kill him where he stood if he refused. The thin bridge shook beneath them. There was not one clean direction in which to move.

In that one breath between thought and death, Gonnosuke chose. He struck Iori hard on the back and sent the boy off the logs. Iori cried out and fell down into the gap below. At the same instant Gonnosuke roared like a beast and hurled himself sideways with his staff against Sugizo. On such a narrow crossing, a spear could not work as it should. Sugizo thrust, but Gonnosuke crashed into him before the point could truly bite. Both men went down in a heap on the bank, and in the next instant Gonnosuke's fist smashed straight into Sugizo's face. Blood burst out, and Gonnosuke sprang up onto the open ground, wild-haired and fierce, ready to fight the rest.

For one short moment it seemed he had broken free. But that moment was false. From the grass around him several weighted cords flew out at once, low and quick like snakes through leaves. One wrapped his neck, another his legs, another his arm and the staff in his hand. These were not common ropes, but strong flat cords, the kind sold widely from Sanada country. Gonnosuke fought them with all the force in his body, but men rushed in from hiding on every side. In a flash five or six hands were upon him. He was dragged down, twisted, pinned, and tied so tightly that when they stepped back he looked like a bound ball lying on the earth.

Only the yamabushi stood apart in a different dress. All the others were men

in merchant clothing, false cord sellers from the start. One of them asked for a horse, saying it would be troublesome to march such a prisoner on foot and better to tie him across a saddle under straw. The rest agreed and hurried Gonnosuke away across the high ground in a dark cluster, moving fast toward the next village. Their voices and feet soon faded into the open country.

After they were gone, another sound remained. From the bottom of the gap below came a boy's voice carried up by the cold air. It was Iori, crying out from among the rocks and brush where he had fallen. He was alive. But above him the road was empty, Gonnosuke had been taken, and the spring morning that had begun so gently had turned without warning into disaster.

Part 8

The cries from the bottom of the broken earth faded into the cold air, and the high plain became empty again. Then the story turned elsewhere, to another mountain world where the sounds of birds seemed to belong not to this earth at all. In the deep cedar woods of Koyasan, even common birds sounded clear and holy. A gray-haired samurai stood on the bridge called the Bridge of Delusion and Awakening and looked back over the graves of the dead. He wore plain travel clothes and looked like an old country warrior, but his swords were fine, and the young retainer with him carried himself with the quiet care of one raised in good service.

The old man said softly to his attendant, "How empty all things are." He spoke of the graves they had just seen, graves of famous men and forgotten men alike. There, all enemies and all allies had become only stone covered with moss. Great names that once shook the land now lay silent together. The young attendant said the place made the whole world seem like a false dream, and the old man answered that perhaps both delusion and awakening were real in their own way. Yet he also said a warrior must not fall into a useless emptiness. His own Zen, he said, must be a living Zen, one that still returned to service, action, and the painful world of men.

They left the holy mountain and hurried toward the lower gate. At the great gate, however, many monks had come to see them off, though the old warrior had hoped to avoid such notice. He thanked them, went on his way, and only later, when the smell of the lower world began to return, did his spirit loosen again. At a bend in the mountain road, a large young samurai stopped short and stared. “You are surely Lord Nagaoka Sado of Kokura,” he said. The old warrior was startled and asked who he might be.

The young man bowed deeply and said he was Daisuke, son of Gesso, a recluse living below at Kudoyama. When Sado could not at once place the name, the young man explained that his father had once been known as Sanada Yukimura. At that, Sado’s face changed. He now understood who stood before him. Daisuke said his father had heard from monks at Koyasan that Sado was passing that way in secret and wished, if he would allow it, to offer him tea at their humble house below the mountain. Sado looked at his attendant, thought a moment, and then agreed to go.

The house stood a little apart from the village, on a rise with stone walls and a low fence of brushwood. It looked like the home of a country landholder and yet also like the dwelling of a man who had chosen silence. Its gate was low, its buildings simple, and everything held a quiet grace. They were led in and seated in a plain room with a view over the roofs of the village below. The sound of water came from bamboo near the veranda, and beyond the room there seemed to be other small buildings half hidden by green. Though nothing in the room was rich, every object had taste and thought in it.

Sado waited there a long while and did not grow impatient. A branch of pear blossom had been set in a vase on the alcove, and in the soft light it seemed to carry spring itself, heavy with hidden rain. Looking at it, Sado remembered an old Chinese line about a single branch of blossom bearing the sadness of spring rain. Then his eyes rose to a hanging scroll, and at once he became alert. On it, in large bold letters, were written the words “Hokoku Daimyojin,” and beside them, in smaller hand, “Written by Hideyori at the age of eight.”

Sado shifted his seat without thinking, as if he should not sit with his back to

such a thing. So this was Yukimura's true heart, he thought. The man might live in a mountain house as a recluse, but he still kept the child writing of Toyotomi Hideyori before him like a sacred sign. Yet why hang such a thing in plain sight before a guest from a lord who stood with Tokugawa power? Was this boldness, carelessness, or a test? While he was still wondering, footsteps crossed the veranda. A small, lean man entered in a sleeveless jacket, bowed low, and apologized for keeping his guest waiting.

This was Sanada Yukimura. Once they sat together, the talk grew easier little by little. Sado spoke first of his own lord Hosokawa Tadatoshi and of the years he himself had served three generations of that house. Yukimura answered with proper warmth and then asked whether Sado still sometimes saw Gudō Oshō of Myoshinji. That question opened an old path between them. They remembered the years when fierce young men, proud lords, and wandering warriors had all sat in Gudō's room to have their horns broken by his words. Gudō, they said, loved true ronin, not idle drifters, but men who held firm purpose, refused low gain, and kept their honor even in hardship.

As they spoke of this, Yukimura suddenly asked whether Sado remembered a young man from Mimasaka who had once sat in Gudō's room wearing rough clothes and saying little. Sado thought for a moment and then answered, "You mean Musashi." Yukimura nodded at once. He said that even when Musashi had been very young, there had been a weight and depth in him unlike that of common men. Later, when news came of the fight at Ichijoji, Yukimura had remembered Gudō's eye and thought again of that silent youth. Sado answered that he too had come to think highly of Musashi, not only because of his sword, but because he had once heard of him opening waste land and helping farmers in Shimōsa.

The two men then spoke more openly still. Sado admitted that he had already spoken to his lord in Musashi's favor and would gladly see such a man in worthy service. Yukimura answered that he too would not hesitate to recommend Musashi if the chance came. Yet Sado, smiling, added that a man like Musashi might care not only for reward, but for the place where his life's work could truly live. "Perhaps," he said, "if he were asked from Kudoyama, he might turn more quickly

than if he were asked from Kokura.” The words were spoken lightly, but they were not empty.

Yukimura smiled back, though with more care. He said such talk was playful and that he had not the means to keep even one great ronin in his poor mountain house. Sado answered that the world did not believe the matter so simple. Everyone said that Hideyori still sent great sums to Kudoyama in secret and that if Yukimura raised one hand, thousands of ronin would gather around him at once. Yukimura lowered his eyes and spoke with a quiet sadness that may or may not have been wholly true. He said times had changed, that he could not bend himself to two masters, and that his wish now was only to grow old in peace, raise crops, eat spring greens and autumn buckwheat, and let tales of war pass by like wind in the pines.

Sado listened with a face of polite surprise, though he did not accept the words at their surface. The talk had become both more open and more dangerous, and each man knew it. Tea was brought again and again by a young woman, likely Daisuke’s wife, and the room held its stillness even while the two old warriors tested one another with memory, laughter, and half-veiled truth. At last Sado made as if to rise, saying he had already burdened the house too long. But Yukimura asked him to remain a little longer. His son and daughter-in-law were preparing buckwheat noodles, he said, and there was still plenty of daylight left before evening.

Part 9

Sado did not answer Yukimura’s invitation at once. He had already heard more than enough to keep his mind busy for many days. Yet the calm tone of the host made refusal feel too sharp, and the mountain house itself had begun to work strangely upon him. So he smiled and said that, if they truly were preparing food, he would trouble them a little longer. Yukimura answered with easy warmth, as if nothing at all were hidden beneath the meeting of two old warriors on a mountain road. Daisuke came in, bowed, and led them by the veranda toward a rear room

that looked out on a stand of bamboo.

There, on low trays, simple food had been set out for host and guest. Fresh soba stood ready, and a wine bottle had been placed beside it out of courtesy. Daisuke's young wife offered the wine shyly, but Sado covered his cup and said that the noodles were enough for him. He had never been a man to mistake politeness for carelessness, and he wished his eyes clear. While the others moved back with proper reserve, a strange sound kept coming from beyond the bamboo grove. At first he thought it might be weaving, but the beat was larger and harder, not the sound of cloth.

At last he asked what it was. Yukimura seemed almost surprised that his guest had noticed it and answered without shame. It was only the sound of cord-making wheels, he said, set to work by his family and household people to help support their lives. Since guests might find the noise unpleasant, he added that he would have it stopped at once. But Sado raised a hand and asked him not to do so. To silence people at their work for the sake of one visitor would make the place harder, not easier, to sit in. Yukimura accepted this without pressing the point and let the sound continue.

The room itself told another story. Unlike the earlier chamber, which had held quiet dignity and careful distance, this place stood closer to the household's ordinary life. Voices came and went behind screens. The kitchen gave out small sounds of pans and fire. Somewhere a person was counting coins. Feet crossed the floor more than once, then stopped when they neared the guest room. Listening to all of this, Sado could not help wondering whether Yukimura's house had truly fallen so low that women, servants, and children must work at cords to keep food on the table.

If there had truly been no money coming from Osaka, then perhaps such a life was possible. A fallen lord with many mouths to feed, little skill at farming, and only his remaining goods to sell might indeed come to this. That thought had some truth in it. Yet another thought rose beside it at once. Sanada cords were known far and wide, strong and useful things carried over many provinces. If such work was being done here on a real scale, then this was not only the poor labor of

a broken house. It might also be a quiet trade, one that brought coin, links, and movement through many roads without noise.

Sado lifted his chopsticks and ate, but he could not taste the soba in peace. He tried to read Yukimura through the man's words, through his laughter, through the look of the room, and even through the humble food set before him. But nothing gave a clear answer. The Yukimura he had once seen under Gudō's eye had seemed one kind of man. The Yukimura before him now seemed another. He looked broader, calmer, and more difficult to grasp. There was no small cleverness in him, no quick display of purpose, and yet that very lack of display made him harder to judge.

The more Sado watched him, the less he knew whether he was looking at a man who had truly let go of the world or a man who had hidden himself so deeply that even old comrades could not find the center of him. Yukimura had spoken lightly of farming, of young greens in spring, of buckwheat in autumn, and of living long by turning away from war. He had even laughed at himself for reading old books and beginning to speak like a man of leisure. Sado had answered with a face that seemed ready to believe such talk. But inside, he believed little. A dragon hidden in deep water does not stop being a dragon because reeds cover the surface.

What troubled him most was not what Yukimura said, but what he did not say. He had not once asked why Sado had gone to Koyasan. He had not probed the will of the Hosokawa house. He had not spoken a word too far. Yet Sado could not escape the feeling that Yukimura had already taken the measure of him through a hundred little things. A careless man asks direct questions. A dangerous man lets another speak and gathers what falls by itself. Sado began to feel that he had spent the afternoon under a quiet net.

He looked again in memory toward the room they had first sat in, where the writing of young Hideyori hung in plain sight. That too was difficult to understand. Why should such a sign be shown openly before a guest from Kokura? Was it boldness, trust, warning, or merely indifference? If Yukimura truly wished to hide his heart, he would have hidden it better. If he wished to reveal it, he had done so

too openly. So perhaps the very openness was the deepest art of all. A thing shown plainly may sometimes be harder to judge than a thing concealed.

Daisuke's wife came once more to see whether the trays needed anything. She moved with the care of one not yet used to serving guests of rank, yet there was nothing poor in her manner. Daisuke himself stood outside the room for a moment, perhaps to wait on his father, perhaps only to be near if called. Sado noticed the strength in the young man's body and the quiet readiness of his feet. This was no broken house in spirit, whatever its outer life might be. The old line still stood upright in the son.

The sound of the cord wheels went on beyond the bamboo. Now that he had been told what it was, Sado listened differently. It was no longer only a noise. It seemed to mark time in the house, steady and practical, turning need into order. He pictured women, servants, and workers joining strands, drawing them tight, making a strong cord from many fine threads. The image stayed with him and would not leave. It suggested poverty, but it also suggested patience, hidden labor, and the power of many small things made into one.

He finished the soba at last and set down his chopsticks. Yukimura did not press him with talk. He only sat there with the same broad, quiet presence, like a man fully at home in whatever life he had chosen. Sado knew he should rise soon, yet he delayed a little longer, as if by staying a few more breaths he might catch some small opening that would reveal the truth. None came. The bamboo moved outside. The wheels turned. The room held its simple peace. And Sado, who had spent his life reading men, found that he still did not know whether Sanada Yukimura had withdrawn from the world or only gone deeper into it.

Part 10

At last Sado rose from the low tray and thanked Yukimura for the meal. Yukimura went with him to the gate, and Daisuke came too, eager to guide the guest safely as far as the road below. The weather had begun to change while they were eating. Fast spring clouds ran over the peaks, and gusts of wind came down

the mountain one after another. Daisuke said this was common in late spring there, that once each day such a hard cloud often crossed the heights and passed on. Even so, all three men walked more quickly, for the rain already seemed near.

The road bent toward Gakumuro, and there, near the entrance to the village, they met a pack horse coming at speed. A yamabushi in white ran before it. Two men dressed like traveling traders came behind, one holding the rope and the other striking the horse with a thin stick to hurry it on. Rough straw mats had been thrown over the load, but beneath them a man's body could be seen tied hard across the saddle, with bundles of firewood fastened to either side to hide the shape. Daisuke looked once and turned his eyes away at once, pretending to speak to Sado as if he had seen nothing.

The yamabushi, however, did not understand his wish. The moment he saw Daisuke, he cried out in a cheerful voice as though meeting a friend on an open road. Sado and his attendant stopped at once and looked closely. They told Daisuke that someone was calling him, and there was no way to pass the matter by. So Daisuke answered at last and tried to keep his face easy. Yet before he could take hold of the scene, the yamabushi had already started explaining with foolish pride what sort of catch they were carrying.

He said the bound man on the horse was a spy from the East. He spoke too loudly and too freely, as if there were no one present except country people of his own side. Daisuke lost patience and cut him short with a sharp rebuke. He reminded the man where he stood and before whom he was speaking. "Use your eyes," he said in effect. "Do you know who is with me?" Only then did the yamabushi look properly toward Sado and understand that this was no roadside meeting among small men.

For a few breaths Sado and his attendant pretended not to hear anything. They let the wind move through the reeds and kept their faces turned elsewhere, though they had heard every word. Daisuke stepped close to the yamabushi and said something low into his ear. Whatever it was, it quieted him at once. Then Sado, with perfect form, thanked Daisuke for his kindness and insisted that he need not come any farther. He bowed and left without looking again at the prisoner,

but the image of the bound body on the horse stayed in his mind like a thorn.

Once Sado had gone, Daisuke turned back and scolded the yamabushi more severely. The man was no stranger in that district, and Daisuke clearly knew him as one of Sanada's people. He told him that in a place like that, and before a guest like Sado, even a joke could become a dangerous mistake. The yamabushi lowered his head in shame and apologized. But the bound man remained tied on the horse, and Daisuke's face showed that he had no power, or no wish, to free him there in the open road. Soon the horse and its handlers hurried on again, and the whole harsh scene vanished into the blowing dust and cloud-shadow.

Far from them, Iori had already climbed out of the deep break in the earth and was wandering alone. He walked without knowing where his feet were taking him. Sometimes he looked into puddles and into still water by the road just to make sure that his face was still his own. He was half sick with fear, loss, and exhaustion. He shouted suddenly at the empty sky, then glared at the ground as if he might force it to answer him. Again and again he called for Gonnosuke, but no answer ever came back.

His mind was so shaken that the world around him felt strange and broken. He no longer knew whether one day had passed or two, or which road led back to the place where Gonnosuke had been taken. He wept, then stopped, then walked on again with dry eyes and a tight mouth. At last he came down from the hills toward villages and roads where more people moved. A woman in travel dress and her young daughter noticed him there, dirty, lost, and plainly without anyone to guide him. They spoke to him kindly and asked who he was, but Iori, still unsure of everything, could barely answer.

The mother saw enough with one look. This was no common beggar's child. His speech, though rough with tiredness, was not low, and his face had good breeding beneath the dirt and tears. So she decided to take him along for the time being. The daughter, who had more quickness and more pride, talked to him as if he were already half under their care. Little by little he began to walk beside them. The road came at last into the busy town of Kishiwada, and there the mother told him that from there they would take a boat onward to Sakai.

At that, Iori woke up a little from his grief. The thought of riding a sea boat filled him with a child's sudden joy. He had crossed rivers often enough, he said, but though he had been born in Shimosa, he had never once ridden on the sea. He repeated this with such simple excitement that even the daughter softened for a while and laughed at him. She told him not to call her mother "old woman" or "auntie," but to say "my lady," and to call her "young lady." When he answered only with a plain "uh-huh," she corrected him again and taught him to say "yes" properly.

Then he asked what kind of house they belonged to. The mother answered that they were merchants of Sakai, owners of ships that carried goods and served great lords along many coasts. The daughter began to speak proudly of storehouses, branch houses, and ships sailing to many ports. But Iori, hearing only that they were merchants, let out a small sound of disappointment. "Oh, merchants," he said, almost looking down on them at once. The daughter flared up at that and stared at him in surprise, while the mother only smiled and took it for the blunt pride of a warrior child.

Part 11

The daughter stared at Iori as if she had just discovered a thorn in a flower branch. She had already begun to think of him as a child picked up by chance, someone who should naturally feel gratitude and awe toward the people who had taken him in. So when he said, "Oh, merchants," in that careless way, it struck her pride at once. She turned to her mother and repeated his words in disbelief. Then she looked back at him more sharply, as if his small body itself had become annoying. The mother, however, only laughed. To her, the boy's bluntness seemed less insulting than charming.

"You think a merchant is only a rice-cake seller or a cloth dealer on some town street," the mother said. There was no anger in her voice, only amusement and a little indulgence. But the daughter could not leave it there. She had the pride of Sakai in her, and she clearly felt that such ignorance must be corrected. So she

lifted her chin and began to explain what kind of merchant house theirs truly was. Her tone changed from wounded pride to eager self-importance, and once she began, she did not stop easily.

She told Iori that their main house stood by the sea in Karajinmachi in Sakai. It had storehouses, several fronts, and many ships under its name. This was not a tiny business with one counter and one clerk. It was a house known in more than one province. Nor did its reach end at Sakai. There were branch houses, she said, in Akamagaseki in Nagato, in Marugame in Sanuki, and at the harbor of Shikama in the Sanyo region. Ships moved under their hand from port to port, and goods followed the tide as naturally as fish move through the sea.

The more she spoke, the more her voice gathered force. Their house, she said, did not merely sell and buy as common traders did. It served great lords. It carried loads for domains and worked under official favor. In Kokura especially, the Hosokawa house had long used their services, and because of that trust, their family had even been allowed marks of distinction not given to every merchant. They could use a shipping seal, wear a surname, and bear swords. Her father, Kobayashi Tarōzaemon of Akamagaseki, was known widely through western Japan, and there were few who had dealings with ships and harbors who had not heard his name.

Iori listened, but not with the wide eyes the girl had expected. He did not understand much of trade, shipping rights, or the ways in which merchants might stand near power without being warriors. To him, the world was still cut into rough lines. Above all stood men of arms. Below them were farmers, craftsmen, and traders. If traders possessed ships instead of baskets, or a seal instead of a stall, that did not quickly change the picture in his mind. So while the daughter spoke with growing heat, he kept his face still, neither convinced nor properly impressed. That only drove her to speak more.

She told him that when the country was peaceful, such houses might appear to be ordinary wholesalers, useful but dull. Yet in times of war, she said, everything changed. A great lord could not move troops, supplies, weapons, or grain with only a few official vessels. Then men like her father suddenly became

necessary to armies and domains alike. Ships that seemed to belong to trade alone could become a part of war itself. The sea routes, the cargo stores, the pilots, the crews, and the knowledge of winds and harbors all turned into power. So, she said, a shipping merchant might do a warrior's work in another form.

There was truth in her words, though Iori only half grasped it. He had been raised in a world where courage showed itself with staff, sword, and body. He had not yet learned that large men may rule from behind storehouse doors, account books, docks, and loading ropes. Still, something in the daughter's tone, and something in the mother's calm silence beside her, made him realize that these were not people to laugh at lightly. They were not poor wanderers who lived by chance. They belonged to a house with weight, servants, ships, and name. Even so, the boy's pride remained stubborn. He would not openly take back what he had said.

The mother seemed to understand that pride at once. She did not scold him, nor did she press him to admit anything. Instead she kept the road moving. She asked whether he was hungry and whether his feet could still bear the day's travel. Kishiwada was not far now, she said, and from there the boat to Sakai would be an easier matter than more walking. At that promise, the heaviness inside Iori shifted again. Whatever he thought of merchants, the thought of riding on the sea still pulled strongly at him. A child's wonder returned to his eyes, and the daughter, seeing it, almost laughed in spite of herself.

"So you truly have never ridden a sea boat?" she asked. Iori answered at once that he had not. He had seen the sea in Shimōsa, but seeing water was one thing, and riding upon it another. He spoke with such honest eagerness that all his earlier pride mixed strangely with boyish innocence. The mother smiled and said that the first crossing often stayed in a person's memory for life. The daughter then told him that if he was to travel under their care, he must learn better manners before they reached the harbor. He must answer properly, bow properly, and remember how to speak to those above him in years and standing.

Iori tried, though not always well. When corrected, he said "yes" instead of "uh-huh," but the change sat awkwardly on him. The daughter seemed to enjoy

the task of remaking him word by word. The mother let it continue, perhaps because it gave the girl something harmless to govern, and perhaps because it helped steady the boy as well. In truth, Iori needed such ordinary correction. He had been wandering in shock, grief, and confusion since Gonnosuke was taken. A mind cannot remain all day on the edge of terror. Sometimes it clings thankfully to small things like names, forms of address, and the promise of a boat at day's end.

As they went on, the air slowly changed. It no longer smelled only of spring earth, brush, and inland roads. Little by little, another scent began to enter it, faint but unmistakable, broad and damp. Iori noticed it without knowing what it was at first. Then the wind opened before them, and the world seemed to widen. Somewhere ahead lay the shore and the harbor life that belonged to these women more naturally than mountain roads or broken ravines. The daughter spoke of storehouses and branch houses; the mother walked with quiet confidence; and Iori, though he still would never have admitted it, began to feel that he had been picked up by people traveling inside a far larger world than the one he had known.

Yet even as the road turned seaward, his heart did not become simple. Behind every new sight stood the memory of Gonnosuke tied like a captured beast on the horse. Behind every kind word from the merchant mother stood the unanswered question of where his companion had been taken. The sea, the boat, the harbor, and even the rich name of Kobayashi Tarōzaemon could not wash that away. Still, the boy walked on beside them. For now he had no better road. And so, between wounded pride, new wonder, and the raw hurt he still carried in silence, Iori moved step by step toward Kishiwada and the boat that would take him on to Sakai.

Part 12

The daughter could not let the matter rest. "What do you mean, 'Only merchants'?" she said, turning sharply toward Iori. "You speak as if every trader were a rice-cake seller or a cloth peddler on a street corner." Her mother only

laughed and told her not to grow too heated, but the girl had already decided to defend the honor of her house. She began to explain, with all the pride of Sakai in her voice, what kind of merchants they truly were. Iori listened with the face of a boy who had said too much and yet was not ready to admit it.

Their house, she said, stood by the sea in Karajinmachi in Sakai, with large storehouses and many ships under its name. It was not only in Sakai that they had strength, but in other ports too. There were branch houses at Akamagaseki in Nagato, at Marugame in Sanuki, and at the harbor of Shikama in Harima. Their ships served great lords, carried cargo from port to port, and took on official work as well. Her father, Kobayashi Tarozaemon of Akamagaseki, she said proudly, was known throughout western Japan.

She went on still more proudly when she saw that Iori did not yet fully understand. “Even a merchant may be of many kinds,” she said. “From the lowest to the highest, there is a wide distance.” An ordinary shopkeeper, she said, sold goods and counted coins, but a shipping house stood nearer to the life of the country itself. In time of peace such a house seemed only a trading concern, but in time of war it could become part of the work of great domains. If armies had to move, if rice, weapons, or supplies had to be carried, then even lords needed men of ships.

Her mother at last told the girl to stop before she frightened the boy away with too much grandeur. By then, however, Iori had already understood enough to feel that he had indeed spoken carelessly. He looked up at the daughter and asked in a smaller voice whether she was angry. Both women laughed. The mother said they were not angry, but that a little frog from the bottom of a well ought not to speak too boldly about the wide world beyond it. Iori bowed his head and apologized, though the girl still looked at him with half-mocking pride.

Soon the smell of the sea grew strong upon the wind, and before them lay the landing place at Kishiwada. A five-hundred-koku vessel was there, loaded with the goods of the district. The daughter pointed at it and said with renewed pride, “We are riding that ship home.” Then she added, with great pleasure, that the ship too belonged to their house. At once three or four men came running from

a nearby tea place, sailors and clerks of the Kobayashi house, bowing deeply and welcoming the women home.

They led them aboard at once and said that, because of the heavy cargo, there was not much open space, but a place had been prepared for them. Iori followed in silence and then stopped in wonder. Near the stern, one section had been set apart with hanging curtains, red felt spread on the floor, and lacquered things of fine workmanship placed neatly within. There were bottles, food boxes, and cushions such as he had never imagined could exist upon water. To him it seemed less a part of a working ship than a rich room floating above the sea.

The voyage was smooth, and by night they reached the harbor of Sakai without trouble. There, when the women crossed into the house that stood near the water, old clerks and young workers alike came out to greet them. The mother stopped at the partition between the front business rooms and the inner part of the house and called to the old head clerk, Sahei. She pointed to Iori and said that he was a boy they had picked up on the road, one who looked quick enough to be useful if put to work. Sahei stared at him and asked whether this dirty child had truly come home attached to their party.

The mother answered calmly that he had, and ordered that he be given someone's old clothes, washed well at the wellside, and put to sleep. Beyond that point, however, there was a strict division in the house between the inner rooms and the front business world, almost like the difference between a warrior's private quarters and the public entrance. Even Sahei could not pass beyond that curtain without leave. So from that first night on, Iori saw neither the mother nor the daughter again. He was kept only in a corner of the shop, fed, ordered about, and counted as one more small body useful for work.

Before long, he began to hate the life. More than gratitude for being saved, he felt the tightness of merchant ways in everything. Everyone called him a shop boy. They ordered him here and there like a dog, and the same grown men who shouted at him all day bent themselves almost double when speaking to customers or to those from the inner house. Morning and night they talked of money, work, accounts, cargo, and profit. Often Iori thought, "What an ugly house this is," and

more than once he seriously planned to run away.

And yet the place held him too. On the days when his heart hurt for Musashi, for Gonnosuke, and for the sister he still had not met, he longed to escape into the sky and open ground. But Sakai itself was a wonder. The harbor glittered with ships, foreigners were spoken of as something real and near, storehouses stood in rows, and rich houses opened into a world more splendid than anything he had seen before. So he remained, torn between disgust and wonder, until one day old Sahei called him sharply from the account room, and the trouble that had long been growing between them finally began to break into the open.

Part 13

Old Sahei's sharp voice came again from the account room before Iori had even finished his last task. The harbor side of the house had grown busy, and a group of important guests had come in to wait for a ship. Men of rank were not unusual at the Kobayashi house, but this party was being treated with special care. Clerks moved faster, sailors spoke more softly, and Sahei himself kept bowing and smiling until his tired face looked stretched thin. Iori was called this way and that, ordered to bring things, ordered to stand back, and ordered again to come closer. He hated such hours most of all, because the whole house seemed to bend like grass before people with power.

The guests were men of the Hosokawa house, waiting to sail back toward Kokura. At their center sat a man whom everyone called Ganryu-sama or simply Master. Iori had not yet seen his face clearly when he first heard the name, but the sound alone made something hard rise inside him. Then the men shifted a little, and he saw. It was Sasaki Kojiro. He looked fuller than before, more settled, more richly formed in face and body, and the sharp wild light he had once shown in his wandering days was now covered by a heavy calm. Yet beneath that calm Iori felt the same man, and his whole body turned cold with hatred.

Kojiro seemed not to notice him at all. He sat with an ease that came from recent honor and from the respect of the men around him. Since entering

Hosokawa service at Kokura, he had grown into the name of Ganryu. Even his very manner had changed. The bright cutting malice that once flashed easily from him now hid itself more deeply, and the warriors near him treated him not as a troublesome ronin but as a true master of arms. To the eye of others, he might well have seemed larger and finer than before. To Iori, that only made him harder to forgive.

Sahei, sweating through his clothes, hurried from the landing place back into the big earth-floored room and bowed again to the guests. He said the sun was turning westward and begged them to rest a little farther back from the open front. Kojiro sat fanning himself and complained of the flies and of a dry mouth. He asked for another bowl of hot barley water. Sahei at first offered cool well water instead, but Kojiro said he never drank cold water on a journey and wanted hot drink only. Then Sahei twisted around from where he sat, stretched his neck toward the boiling place, and shouted for Iori.

Iori heard him clearly, but for a moment he could not move. The room, the dust, the flies, the ship cries from outside, all seemed far away. Only Kojiro's face remained before him. Sahei shouted again, sharper this time, ordering him to serve Ganryu-sama and the others at once. So Iori lifted a tray with several bowls of hot barley water and came forward from one side of the earthen floor. He walked slowly and carefully, his eyes fixed on the bowls. He bowed before one warrior, then before the next, saying, "Your drink," and "Please," in the humble way the house had forced him to learn.

A few of the men waved it away, so when he came at last to Kojiro there were still two hot bowls left upon the tray. "Please take one," Iori said. Kojiro lifted his hand toward the bowl without even looking properly at the boy before him. Then, perhaps because the silence had lasted one breath too long, perhaps because some faint memory stirred in him, his eyes lifted. For a single instant they met Iori's eyes. That was enough. All the rage of old days, all the shame of living under merchant orders, all the pain of losing Gonnosuke and wandering friendless into this house, leaped together inside him in one violent flash.

The next instant two cries broke out together, and the bowls shattered loudly

on the floor. Iori had flung the hot drink straight into Kojiro's face. Kojiro struck at him in the same motion, so fast that no one near them saw clearly how. Iori's small body spun and crashed down at Kojiro's feet like a thrown cat. As he tried to rise, Kojiro pressed him down underfoot and shouted for the people of the house. One of Kojiro's eyes had been splashed, and he held at it with one hand while glaring down with the other. "Is this brat one of yours?" he cried. "Child or not, this cannot be excused. Head clerk, seize him."

Sahei flew down in horror, but before he could grab the boy, Iori had done an even more dangerous thing. From somewhere inside his clothes he tore out the short sword he had always been forbidden to carry there. Still half under Kojiro's foot, he slashed upward toward Kojiro's arm. Kojiro jumped back and kicked him away again, and Iori rolled across the floor, sprang up like a mad little beast, and shouted, "What did you do?" Sahei lunged at him, but Iori shook him off and screamed toward Kojiro, "Serves you right, fool!" Then he turned and ran for the outer yard.

He never got far. Before he had covered even a few body lengths beyond the eaves, he pitched forward and struck the ground. Men were already there. Sailors and workers of the house, shocked by the noise, rushed in from the harbor side and fell upon him at once. Even then he fought, twisting and biting like a trapped animal, until they bound his arms and legs. Someone forced a cloth into his mouth and tied it hard behind his head so he could not shout abuse or call for help. At last they lashed him near the front, like baggage that had turned wild, while the house around him went on with loading and business as if such cruelty were only another task in the day.

After a time his knife was taken away, and the men decided he would be less dangerous if he stopped struggling. Then they left him under watch, tied and gagged, without sword and without even the right to speak. Iori lay or sat there in the strong afternoon heat, his face wet with sweat and tears, thinking only that at least the ropes might be loosened now that he could no longer attack anyone. But no one listened. He could not even beg properly. People passed, glanced at him, and moved on. The busy front of the house only grew louder as cargo came in,

dust rose, and men shouted over the harbor noise.

Then, while he still burned with shame and rage, a woman passed along the road beyond the loading place. She wore a traveler's dress of plain cloth, with a broad hat against the sun and a bamboo stick in her hand. At first he saw only the white line of her cheek as she moved beside a packhorse. Then his heart struck so hard he thought it would burst. It was Otsu. Even before he could reason it out, he knew. Her face had changed with travel and hardship, but no one else in the world could be mistaken for her by him. Fire ran through his whole body. He tried to leap up, but the ropes held him fast.

"Sister! Lady Otsu!" he tried to cry. In his own mind he screamed it with all his strength. But the cloth in his mouth killed the sound, and what came out was no more than a broken animal noise that no one understood. Otsu did not turn. She passed before the house, white profile becoming narrow back, and then moved beyond him down the road toward the harbor. Iori stretched his neck until it hurt and shook against the ropes until the world grew black around the edges. She had come, she had truly been there, and yet she had gone on without knowing he was only a few steps away.

After that, he could do nothing but weep into the cloth that bound his mouth. His shoulders shook, but even that shaking had no sound worthy of his pain. He thought wildly: it was Otsu, it had to be Otsu, she was searching for someone, she passed me, she does not know I am here, where is she going, how can I follow? But the house of Kobayashi cared nothing for a bound boy's heart. Men still ran with loads. The road still filled with heat and dust. The sea wind still came and went through the yard. And Iori, tied there like unwanted cargo, could only watch the place where she had disappeared and feel that hope had once more passed before him and gone on.

Part 14

After that, the yard seemed to close in around him again. The men of the house dragged him toward the boiling place by the storehouse alley, where Kojiro

had come out to have his wet clothes wiped by a servant. Sahei and the younger workers kept bowing, apologizing, and saying that no excuse could cover such insolence. Kojiro stood as if he hardly heard them, wiping his face and shoulder with a cloth and refusing even to look directly at the men who begged him for mercy. Iori, with his arms twisted up behind him, still struggled and shouted that they should let him go if they wished to question him fairly.

"I will not run," he cried. "I did it knowing what I was doing." His voice was full of pain and rage, but he did not beg for his life. Kojiro finally turned after straightening his hair and robe. In a calm voice that felt colder than anger, he said, "Let him go." Sahei and the others stared in surprise, thinking they had heard true generosity. But Kojiro went on at once and said that it would harm the boy's future if he learned that any offense could be forgiven by a quick apology. Then he added, with cruel smoothness, that if the house felt punishment was necessary, they might pour a full dipper of boiling water over the boy's head. It would not kill him, he said.

The men of the house hesitated for only a breath. Then, because Kojiro had left the choice to them in words while binding them to his wish in truth, they began to talk loudly of discipline and proper punishment. Sahei declared that the brat had always been trouble, that such a light punishment was already great mercy, and that no one should blame the house afterward. They cried for rope, for stronger hands, for some way to hold him still. Iori shook them off as best he could and sat upright on the ground by force of will alone.

"I told you already," he said. "I did not do it by mistake, and I will not run away." His face was pale, but his eyes were steady. "I had reason to throw the hot drink at that samurai, and if boiling water is the answer, then pour it. A townsman might kneel and beg, but I have nothing to apologize for." Sahei rolled up his sleeves and dipped a ladle deep into the great kettle. Steam curled upward. He lifted the boiling water slowly over Iori's head as if to make the waiting itself part of the pain.

Iori clenched his mouth shut and opened his eyes wide, refusing to blink. Then, from somewhere beyond the road, a voice shouted to him, "Close your eyes,

Iori. Close them, or you will lose them." The warning came with such force that he obeyed before he even knew whose voice it was. He shut his eyes at once and tried to empty his mind. While he waited for the burning flood, he remembered a story Musashi had once told him of a Zen priest who had remained calm in a tower while flames rose around him. Iori tried to become like that, a shadow without fear, a body without confusion.

But he was too young and too full of life for such emptiness. Sweat ran down his forehead, and he could not tell whether it was sweat or imagined heat. The moment stretched until it seemed longer than a year. Then another voice sounded behind him, and this time it was Kojiro's. "Ah. Elder Sado?" he said. The men holding the ladle turned in surprise, and the boiling water hung in the air above Iori's head while everyone looked toward the road.

The man who had spoken was Nagaoka Sado, a senior retainer of the Hosokawa house. He had come with one attendant and now stood in plain travel dress on the far side of the road, looking across at the scene with a face made wet by his habit of heavy sweating. He walked over slowly and said, almost mildly, "This is a strange game to come upon." Kojiro laughed in a way that tried to make light of the whole matter and said that they were only correcting an insolent boy. Sado looked not at Kojiro first, but at Iori, seated there waiting for the scalding water with his eyes still shut.

"If there is reason," Sado said, "then punishment may be fair enough. Go on, then. Let me see it." The words startled everyone. Sahei looked sideways at Kojiro, uncertain whether to pour or withdraw. Kojiro understood at once that the matter no longer favored him. Before a senior retainer, and with a child as the victim, he could not press the scene farther without lowering himself. So he said quickly that the boy had surely learned enough already, and that there was no need to continue. "Sahei," he said, "put the ladle away."

Iori opened his eyes then and stared hard at Sado's face. Recognition broke across him in the next breath. "I know you," he cried. "You came to Tokuganji in Shimosa on horseback. You gave me sweets there." Sado smiled and said that he remembered him too. He asked after Musashi and wanted to know whether the

boy was still with his master. At that question Iori's courage broke at last. Tears came out before he could stop them, and he rubbed his nose clumsily with the back of his hand.

Kojiro saw enough from this exchange to understand that Sado's link to Iori must come through Musashi. That was something he did not want discussed there. So when the call came from the shipmen saying all was ready, he used the moment at once. He bowed to Sado, said he would go ahead to the vessel, and withdrew with the other Hosokawa retainers before the talk could deepen. Sahei, still ashamed and confused, hovered in the big dirt-floored room, unsure whether to stay with Sado or return to the work of loading. Sado asked when the ship would sail and was told there was still time before dusk.

Just then a woman's voice called softly from behind the curtain dividing the shop from the inner rooms. It was the mistress of the house, summoning Sahei. A little later, Sado allowed himself to be led through the garden gate toward the teahouse at the rear. There the noise and dust of the harbor felt very far away. Water had been sprinkled over the stones and moss, and the little stream in the garden seemed to wash the ears clean. The mistress Osei and her daughter Otsuru received him with tea, sweets, and proper courtesy, though Sado remained seated only lightly, saying he was too dusty and road-worn for such careful welcome.

Osei apologized again for what had happened and thanked him for stopping the punishment. Sado answered that he had once seen the boy before and was only fortunate enough to arrive at the right moment. He then asked how Iori had come to be in their house. Osei told the story of finding him by chance on the road in Yamato and bringing him back with them to Sakai. Sado in return spoke of Musashi, saying that he had long been trying to locate him and had known the boy through that search. He also said, after watching Iori under threat, that such a child ought not to be crushed in a merchant house.

"A spirit like that may twist if shut into the wrong life," he said. "Better give him to me. I will take him back to Kokura and raise him among my own people." Osei at once answered that nothing would please her more. Otsuru too showed real delight, as if she were sending off a younger brother rather than a troublesome

house boy. They rose to call Iori, but he had already been standing near enough to hear every word. When asked whether he wished to go, he answered before anyone had finished speaking. Of course he wished it. He begged to be taken to Kokura without delay.

There was no long delay. Otsuru hurried about with touching eagerness, finding clothes, hakama, a hat, leggings, and all the small things needed for travel. For the first time in his life, Iori was dressed properly as a young samurai attendant. The change in him was so great that even he stood straighter under it. Then, as the evening light reddened and the great sail darkened against the sky, he boarded the vessel with Sado. Standing there in his new clothes, he waved his hat toward the shore where Otsuru, Osei, Sahei, and many others watched him go. The ship spread its black wings of sail and moved out through the tide road toward Kokura in Buzen.

Part 15

In the fishmongers' lane in Okazaki, there was a narrow side alley with a poor wooden signboard nailed at its mouth. On the board were written the words: "Children's School. Reading and Writing. Muka." Anyone could see at once that the writing itself was not good. Men who cared about fine brushwork passed it with a half-smile, and some surely laughed after they had gone by. But the teacher called Muka did not seem ashamed of it at all. If anyone asked, he answered that he too was still a child and still in training.

The alley ended at a bamboo grove. Beyond the bamboo stood a riding ground where men of the Honda house practiced horsemanship all day, and on fair days the dust rose without rest. Because of that, the little house always kept a hanging blind on the bright side, so the one room inside stayed dim even at noon. The place was poor even for a ronin's life. There was no wife, no servant, and no settled comfort there. It was the sort of lodging where a man could disappear from the world for a while if he wished to do so.

The man calling himself Muka was Musashi. For the time being he lived

quietly there and taught children their letters, or at least gave the appearance of doing so. It was not the life anyone would have expected for the swordsman whose name had already spread through many provinces. Yet Musashi himself did not seem troubled by the smallness of it. He lived with little, spoke little, and let the town think what it wished. If this poor work gave him a roof and a few days of stillness, that seemed enough.

One afternoon, it looked as though he had just woken from a nap. The bucket at the well creaked. Then, from the bamboo grove behind the house, there came a loud crack. A bamboo stalk had been cut, and one tall green stem swayed and fell among the others. The sound was large in that small place, so large that even people at the alley mouth turned their heads. Nothing in the house ever happened grandly, and so even one cut in the bamboo could seem like an event.

Life around the lane was never free from eyes. Some of the neighbors truly thought Muka-sensei was only a poor young teacher with bad handwriting and strange ways. Others were not so sure. Little by little, without anyone knowing where the talk had begun, people started saying that the young man was really Miyamoto Musashi. They whispered that the school was only a cover, that the man inside had once defeated the Yoshioka fighters in Kyoto. Such talk spread because ordinary townspeople love mystery, and because a hidden great man gives more color to a street than any plain truth.

There were also harder eyes than those of curious neighbors. The woman next door, and others like her, had more than once warned Musashi that men sometimes came at night and watched the alley or stood half-hidden near the bamboo. Their glances were not the glances of gossiping townsfolk. They were the eyes of men measuring a house, a road, and the habits of the one living there. Musashi heard these warnings, but he did not show much alarm. Whether this came from calm or from weariness, few could tell.

For Musashi himself, the danger was almost more puzzling than frightening. He had enemies in many places, but in Okazaki he had come quietly, lived quietly, and asked little from anyone. Why then should death be waiting in that town too? He did not fully understand who watched him or why. Yet he was a man who had

long lived with attack near his shoulder. To him, the strange thing was not that danger existed, but that it could take so many different forms, some open like a drawn sword, others hidden like a pair of eyes in the dark.

So he went on living there, reading, writing, and making use even of poor things. The cut bamboo was perhaps for some small household purpose, perhaps for a flower tube, perhaps only because his hands could never remain idle long. Those who saw him at such moments could not easily decide what sort of man he truly was. He lived roughly, yet his roughness had order in it. Even the little things he used or made by hand seemed to carry some inward discipline. That was one reason the talk about him did not die.

At times the house, the lane, and the whole poor quarter seemed to float between truth and rumor. To one eye, Muka-sensei was no more than a shabby tutor among common people. To another eye, he was a swordsman hiding his name in plain sight. And to the eyes of certain unseen men, he was something else again: a target not yet struck down. Thus the little alley held more tension than its narrow width suggested. Dust blew in from the riding ground, children came and went, women talked across fences, and still something darker remained near the place.

One night, Musashi was returning through the wind after going out. The town lights were ahead, and the air around the Yahagi River carried the smell of water and bridge timber. Then, without warning, a shot tore through the dark. The bullet passed through the space near his body and struck nothing. At almost the same instant the sound rolled out over the river, and Musashi had already dropped like a bat beneath the bridge frame, pressing himself against the shadowed wood. The weapon had been fired from a distance with strong powder. That much he understood at once.

He waited without moving. A little later, two or three men came running from the direction of the temple hill, carrying the gun and looking at the ground where they had expected him to fall. They had thrown aside caution too quickly. They believed the man they had aimed at must already be lying there dead. One said he could not see the body. Another guessed that perhaps the target had been standing

a little nearer the bridge. In the dark, with the metal of the gun catching a little light, they looked not like brave challengers but like men who had hoped to finish murder at a distance.

Musashi watched them from his hiding place and understood enough. The warnings of the neighbors had not been empty. Someone truly meant to kill him, and not with honorable notice. When at last the men moved away again, he came out from the bridge shadow and stood alone in the night wind. He thought then that he could not remain in Okazaki much longer. Once his name, his presence, and this hidden struggle had begun to stir the town, the little house in the fishmongers' lane could no longer protect either his body or his peace.

Yet there was another matter still tying him there. He had made a promise to Matahachi. Thinking of that, he went on through the wind-dark road, troubled but outwardly calm. Then, just as the lights of Okazaki began to show more clearly ahead, a voice came suddenly from a roadside shelter. "Musashi-dono," it called. "It is I, Matahachi. I have been waiting, worrying for your safety." Musashi stopped at once in the road and turned toward the voice, not with joy, but with caution.

Part 16

The voice in the roadside shelter was indeed Matahachi's. Musashi stepped closer, and in the poor starlight the two men looked at one another with open faces. There was no old hatred between them now, no bitterness sharp enough to stand upright in the night. The years had worn too much away, and suffering had rubbed both men down to something quieter. Musashi asked at once whether the old Zen priest had returned from his travels. Matahachi answered that there was still no sign of him and no letter either.

Then the two men fell into step together and crossed the great bridge over the Yahagi River. Under the stars they must have seemed almost like brothers walking home from some long road. The bridge was wide, the river dark below, and the wind moving over it had a deep sound. It was strange that two men with

such a hard past could now walk so peacefully side by side. Yet there they were, speaking softly, as if some old knot had loosened without either man knowing exactly when it happened.

Across the river, on a pine-covered rise, stood an old Zen temple called Hachijo Temple. Its buildings were worn, its grounds quiet, and it held the kind of silence that gathers where people wait a long time for one thing. The priest they were waiting for was Gudō, and both men had already spent more than half a year in hope of his return. Musashi had rented a small place in town. Matahachi had been allowed to sleep in a rough hut behind the temple kitchen. They had made this strange life for themselves because Gudō had once said, years before, that he might stop there again after returning from the distant north.

When they first heard that, Musashi had simply said, “Then I will wait, however long it takes.” So they waited. The oddness of it might have seemed foolish to others. One was a swordsman already known through many provinces, and the other a broken man whose pride had been worn thin by punishment, shame, and wandering. Yet both were tied to the old priest in different ways, and both felt that without one word from him, some part of their lives could not move forward. Thus the temple and the little town below had become a place of waiting, half empty and half full of hidden pressure.

That night the heat was heavy, and the hut where Matahachi slept was thick with mosquitoes. He had been burning smoke against them, but even then he could hardly bear it. So he asked Musashi to step outside with him where the air moved more freely. Musashi agreed at once, for each time he visited Matahachi he felt he should leave behind at least some small comfort, some little help, as if that were part of what he owed. Together they went to the front of the main hall, where the great doors were closed and no one else was near.

They sat on the steps with their feet stretched out, and for a while only the night wind spoke. Then Matahachi said quietly, “This place makes me think of Shippoji.” Musashi answered only, “Yes,” but the same memory had risen in him too. It was often like that between them. A pine cone, a slope, a dark hall, or a line of river light would suddenly bring back their home village. Yet once the old place

was named, both men usually fell silent. They knew too well what other memories followed close behind.

If they spoke too far of home, then Otsu would rise in the mind. After her would come Matahachi's mother, and after that many bitter things that had nearly destroyed whatever friendship still remained between them. In recent months both men had learned to turn away before reaching that point. But that night Matahachi looked as if he wanted not to avoid that place, but to enter it deliberately. He spoke first of the mountain by Shippoji, saying it had stood higher than this one. Then he said the Yoshino River below it had once looked much like the Yahagi at night. He even tried to smile and added that the great old cedar trees were missing here.

All the while he kept glancing at Musashi's face. At last his courage broke loose. "Musashi," he said, then stopped and began again more formally, "Musashi-dono, there is something I have long wished to say. I have thought many times that I must ask you, but I could never make my tongue move. Will you listen and accept what I say?" Musashi looked at him, surprised by the earnestness in his voice, and answered that he would listen. Then Matahachi said the name they had both been avoiding. "It is about Otsu," he said, and after that his feelings caught in his throat.

For a moment he could hardly continue. His eyes filled, and his whole face twisted with shame and pity. Musashi's expression also changed, for he could not yet guess which way Matahachi meant to turn this talk. Then Matahachi forced the words out. He said he often thought of how much pain he had caused Otsu through the years. He had chased her like a madman, frightened her, tried to draw her back, even kept her once under the same roof in Edo, yet never once had he truly held her heart. Looking back now, he said, he could see that from the day he left for Sekigahara, Otsu had already fallen from his branch like a flower no longer his.

"She blooms now from another soil," he said. "She belongs to another branch." Then he turned fully toward Musashi and made the request that had burned inside him for so long. He begged Musashi to take Otsu as his wife. He said there was no one else in the world who could save her. His own heart, he

confessed, had finally given up that claim. Yet even after giving it up, he could not stop worrying over what would become of her unless Musashi himself answered her life. The words came out of him like blood from an old wound. There was pain in them, but also a strange relief.

Musashi gave no quick answer. He could not say yes, and he could not say no. The matter touched too many hidden things at once. If Matahachi had spoken from jealousy, Musashi could have rejected him. If he had spoken carelessly, Musashi could have turned away. But Matahachi spoke from the deepest pain he had ever shown, and because of that, Musashi could not cut the matter short. He sat still in the night, hearing not only Matahachi's words, but all the years behind them. When at last they parted, there had been no clear decision, only a silence heavier than speech.

Late that night, long after the temple had gone quiet, Musashi walked down from the mountain gate alone. His arms were folded, his head bent, and his steps were slow as if the emptiness he had spoken of so often had now wrapped itself around his legs. Matahachi's plea would not leave his ears. Musashi could imagine how many nights Matahachi must have suffered before speaking it. He could imagine too that after saying it, Matahachi might now feel a kind of release, as if one deep fire had at last found air and gone out. But for Musashi himself the fire had only moved inward.

"Please," the voice kept saying inside him. "Please care for Otsu." He could not answer that it was impossible. He could not say, "I have no wish to make her my wife," because the truth was not so simple. Nor could he say, "She was once your promised woman," because that truth too had already broken and changed. So he walked through the dark pine wind below Hachijo Temple with no peace in him at all. The friendship of two men had become more honest that night, but in becoming honest it had also laid a harder burden across Musashi's path.

Part 17

Musashi went down from the mountain gate in the depth of night with his

arms folded and his head bent low. The pine wind passed through the dark branches above him, but it could not wash Matahachi's words from his ears. Again and again he heard the same plea: "Please. Find Otsu, and give her the life she hopes for." He could not answer it away. He could not say clearly that he would do it, and he could not say clearly that he would not. The burden of the words moved with him like a shadow fastened to his feet.

The more he thought of Matahachi, the less he could despise him. To say such a thing to another man, and to say it honestly, meant that Matahachi had already passed through nights of shame and pain beyond easy measure. Musashi could imagine him struggling alone before he spoke, burning with jealousy one hour and pity the next, then at last forcing his heart to give up its last selfish claim. That made the plea heavier, not lighter. A shallow request can be brushed aside. A request born from true suffering goes deeper than argument.

Yet the greater confusion was not in Matahachi, but in Musashi himself. If his own heart had been clean and simple, the matter would already have been settled. He would have known at once what to say and how to stand. Instead he found in himself the very thing he had long despised in others: hesitation, divided thought, and a restless turning of the mind from one side to another. He could not even walk straight under the stars without feeling that his spirit had become heavy and dull. What he often called emptiness was no true emptiness at all. It was only a hollow place where decision had failed to form.

He walked on until the dark shape of the temple grounds behind him grew small. Then, in the moonlight, he stopped before two stone pillars standing near the way. Their carved words shone faintly, and because he had nowhere else to turn his mind, he began to read them line by line. The teaching spoke of keeping to the root and not troubling over the leaves and branches. It warned against losing one's way by chasing what spreads outward while forgetting what stands at the center. Musashi read those lines once, then again, and the words entered him more sharply than any rebuke from another man could have done.

"Leaves and branches," he thought. "That is exactly it." All at once he saw how many people filled their lives with side matters, multiplying worry over this

thing and that thing, as if the true path lay somewhere in the tangle. Then he looked harder at himself and understood that he too had fallen into the same fault. Why had he not become one with the single sword in his own body? Why had he let his sight move outward and sideways? Why had he not remained clear? “That matter, this matter,” he thought. “All of it is useless right and left looking.”

But the thought did not free him at once. He knew well enough that such side glances do not arise from nothing. A man looks right and left only when he has struck a wall in the road before him. If he were truly moving through the core of his way, he would not keep reaching after branches in impatience. So the question remained: how does one break through such a dead point? How does one enter the core and split it open from within? As that question burned, another memory came to him, a short poem Gudō had once used to mock his own long years of wandering from temple to temple.

The poem laughed at ten years of travel from gate to gate and then ended in plainness: eating when it was time to eat, drinking tea when it was time to drink tea, putting on clothes when it was time to dress. Musashi had heard it long ago, when he first went to Myoshinji in youthful hunger, hoping to be accepted under Gudō’s eye. Back then the old master had not welcomed him with kindness. He had almost kicked him out with one thunderous challenge, demanding to know what ground of understanding he possessed. Musashi had never forgotten the shame of that moment. Yet now, years later, the poem returned to him with a new force.

It was not telling him to become small or dull. It was telling him to stop making false complications where the center should already be clear. If one must eat, then eat. If one must walk, then walk. If one must follow the teacher, then follow. If one must cut, then cut. The truth of such things did not lie in endless thought, but in complete action. Standing in the moonlight before the temple stones, Musashi felt something loosen inside him. He was not yet free, but the heavy knot had shifted. For the first time that night, the air touched his skin with a little coolness.

Then, as if the next step had always been waiting there, he understood what

he must do first. He could not answer the matter of Otsu while his own way remained blocked. He could not reach for one human bond and call it truth while his sword and spirit still stood divided. Gudō was alive and moving westward. That much was certain. So Musashi must follow him, not half-heartedly, not as a man waiting in comfort for wisdom to come to him, but as a man who had already thrown comfort away. He turned at once from the path below the mountain, and before dawn he had already left behind his little lodging, his desk, the bamboo flower tube, the suspicious glances of neighbors, and the tangled grudges of the clan men in Okazaki.

After that, the road drew steadily nearer to Kyoto. Musashi guessed that Gudō must finally be making for Myoshinji, the temple of his own line, and so he followed wherever the old priest's wandering feet seemed to bend. But Gudō's travel was the travel of a man tied to no schedule at all. Some days rain shut him inside a roadside hut and he would not move. On one such day, when Musashi looked in quietly, he found Gudō merely sitting while Matahachi burned moxa on his shoulders. At Mino the old priest stopped. At Daisenji he remained seven full days. At a Zen temple near Hikone he stayed several more.

Musashi followed through all of it. If Gudō slept in a cheap roadside hut, Musashi took whatever poor shelter stood nearby. If Gudō entered a temple, Musashi lay down at the gate. He asked for no comfort and waited for no invitation. More truly, he chased the chance of a single word from the old priest with a patience that was almost violence. Time lost shape. Somewhere along the road the seasons changed without asking his leave, and one night, sleeping at a temple gate by the lake, he realized that autumn had already come.

When he looked at himself then, he scarcely resembled a man. His hair had grown wild, and he had decided not to comb it until the day Gudō's heart opened toward him. He had not bathed, had not shaved, and had left his clothes to sun, wind, and rain until they felt dry and rough like tree bark against his skin. His arms and chest had become lean and weathered. Anyone seeing him there under the falling stars might have taken him for a beggar or a mad wanderer. Yet inside that worn body there was only one fixed wish now: to go on until the blocked core

of his way finally broke open.

So he lay there in the autumn darkness with the voice of the lake wind passing through the temple trees and with no thought now of turning back. Okazaki was gone behind him. The little school, the night attack, the lane, the bridge, and even the troubled plea about Otsu had all sunk far away like things left on another shore. Ahead there was only the old priest's uncertain path, the long road toward Kyoto, and the one question that still stood like a sealed gate in the center of his life. Musashi did not yet know how that gate would open. But at last he was walking straight toward it.

Part 18

The road drew nearer and nearer to Kyoto, yet Gudō's journey never seemed to obey any human plan. One day he would stay shut inside a poor roadside inn because of rain, and when Musashi looked in from outside, he would see Matahachi giving him moxa on his shoulders. Another time he would stop seven days at one temple, then several more at another. If Gudō slept in a cheap hut, Musashi lay down under the eaves nearby. If Gudō stayed in a temple, Musashi took his place at the gate and endured whatever weather came.

By then the seasons had turned without his noticing. One night, sleeping at the gate of a lakeside temple, Musashi understood that autumn had already arrived. The stars seemed to fall through the darkness, and the night insects had changed their voices. His body had become almost unrecognizable to himself. He had let his hair grow wild and had decided not to comb it until the old priest's heart opened to him. He had stopped bathing, stopped shaving, and had left his clothes to wind, dew, and rain until they felt rough against his skin like old bark.

Still the mosquitoes bit him. Their needles no longer seemed to touch his flesh, but afterward his skin rose in countless little swellings. Wrapped in a straw mat like some poor creature living among stones, he lay on his back and stared up into the dark. Again the same thought returned. There was one thing he still did not understand. If only that one thing would break open, then his sword, his life,

and all the hard knots within him seemed as if they might suddenly come clear at once.

What was it he did not understand? Was it only a matter of sword skill? No, it was larger than that. Was it a matter of how to live in the world? No, it was deeper still. Was it Otsu? He refused that answer too. No man, he thought, could be reduced to skin and bone by love alone. The trouble was larger than any single branch of life, and yet from the height of heaven and earth it might be no more than a poppy seed.

Thinking of this, he even envied Matahachi for a moment. Matahachi did not suffer by chasing suffering. He could sleep, complain, eat, and go on. Musashi, by contrast, seemed to pursue pain as if pain itself were part of his training. Then, while lying there in the gate, something caught his eye. He rose and stood looking at the long pair of written boards hanging on the pillars. In the moonlight he slowly followed the old words line by line until one sentence entered him like cold water.

It warned a man not to go wrong by plucking at leaves and searching among branches. Reading that, Musashi suddenly felt his body grow light. Leaves and branches—yes, that was exactly the fault. So many people filled their lives with side matters and turned themselves away from the root. And he too had done the same. Why had he not become fully one with the sword in his own body? Why had he kept looking to this side and that? Why had he allowed needless thoughts to spread where one path should have been enough?

Yet even that understanding did not fully free him. A man only looks right and left when he has come against a wall. If the road before him were open, he would not be so restless. So the true question remained: how was that wall to be broken? How was he to enter the hard core of his own dead point and split it from within? That question stayed with him through the next miles and the next days. He followed Gudō still more fiercely after that, but now there was a kind of desperate clarity in him that had not been there before.

Then one day, at last, Kyoto seemed near enough to touch. Musashi climbed a rise and suddenly saw Gudō and Matahachi standing still ahead of him. For the first time in many weeks, the old priest had stopped without a wall, a doorway, or

a crowd between them. Musashi felt the moment strike him like a blow. If he let it pass, Gudō might soon disappear into Myōshinji and become unreachable again. He tried to call out, but his chest tightened and his voice came badly, like a child who fears the very thing he must say.

Gudō said nothing. He only stood and looked at Musashi, his face hard as dried lacquer, only the white of his eyes alive and sharp. That silence was harder to bear than anger. Musashi cried out again, and this time he lost all restraint. He rushed forward like a burning thing and fell at Gudō's feet, pressing his face to the ground. "One word," he begged. "Only one word." Then he waited with his whole body, as if all the years of hunger in him had become one long stillness.

Gudō made him wait. The old priest stood over him without answer for so long that the waiting itself seemed like punishment. At last, when Musashi could bear no more and was ready to pour out all the questions in his heart, Gudō spoke. "I know," he said. "I have heard it every night from Matahachi-bo. I know all of it. The woman too." At those last words, Musashi felt as though cold water had been thrown over his head. Shame entered him at once. The deepest thing he had hoped to conceal had already been carried to the old priest by another mouth.

Then Gudō asked Matahachi for a stick. Musashi thought at once of blows and closed his eyes, ready to receive them. But no strike came down. Instead he heard the stick moving over the ground around him. When he opened his eyes, Gudō had drawn a great circle in the earth with Musashi seated inside it. The line was plain, wide, and complete. Musashi stared at it without understanding. He felt rebuked, exposed, and yet also as if something had been shown to him too simply for his mind to grasp at once.

Gudō threw the stick away and said only, "Let us go." Then he turned and walked off with Matahachi, leaving Musashi there inside the circle. This time Musashi did not accept being left behind with calm. Here, after so many days, his spirit rose in anger. He had followed, suffered, waited, and stripped himself bare, and still the answer had come in a shape he could not yet seize. Alone on the ground inside the line drawn around him, he felt first humiliation, then fury, and beneath both of them the beginning of something that had not yet found its name.

Part 19

In Harima, by the shore at Shikama, Otsu was staying for a time in the house of a dye woman. The yard was small, the sea wind came in white and sharp from the beach, and all day the sound of cloth beating in water or under the pounding block moved through the place like slow work-song. Otsu helped there with quiet hands, taking up the mallet and striking the dark cloth in the vat as if she had belonged to that yard from the first. Yet even while she worked, her heart was elsewhere. She was waiting for one thing only, some small news that might bring her nearer to Musashi.

That day the owner of a hemp shop named Manbei had come and gone. After he left, Otsu again took up the wooden pounder and worked at the indigo cloth in the mortar. From neighboring yards came the same dull beating and the voices of dye workers singing softly in the spring air. But Otsu's heart was lighter than it had been for many days. Manbei had spoken of a place farther inland where she might hear from Ogin, Musashi's real sister. If she could meet that woman, then surely she could speak openly of the love she had carried so long, and surely through that meeting some true word of Musashi would come.

She worked with more strength after that. The sea before her, which had so often seemed only wide, lonely, and sad, looked bright that day, as if the water itself were carrying hope. When she lifted the cloth and spread it high across the pole, she stood a while in the open gate and looked at the shining shore. At a distance, a man in a rough traveling hat walked along the water's edge without haste. Otsu noticed him only because there was almost no one else on that empty strip of beach. She watched him a moment, then thought no more of it.

By the next dawn, the matter had been settled. The dye woman had spoken to Manbei, and he had agreed to guide Otsu as far as Mikazuki in Sayo district. Otsu thanked them both deeply. The road was not a long journey for a man, but for a woman on foot it would still take care and patience. So with a small bundle and quiet hope in her breast, she left the fishing village beside Manbei and stepped

out toward the Tatsuno road, while behind them the sea lay pale under the morning sky and the smell of salt slowly weakened in the inland wind.

As they walked, Manbei asked whether her feet were strong enough for such travel. Otsu answered that she was used to the road by now. He said he had heard even of her journey to Edo and could not help admiring such courage in a woman traveling alone. Otsu lowered her eyes and said that the dye woman had spoken too freely. But Manbei only shook his head and said there was nothing shameful in such constancy. If a person loved deeply enough to follow one man across so much distance, that was not something to mock. It was pitiful, gentle, and beautiful all at once.

Yet he could not help adding that, from the outside, Musashi seemed a little cold. Otsu denied it at once. She said he was only wholly given over to the road of discipline and training, and that if there was any fault, it lay in her inability to cut herself free from loving him. Manbei asked whether she never felt resentment. She answered no. Far from hating him, she often felt sorry for troubling his path by her own longing. Manbei listened to this with wonder. He said such words should be carried home and made to teach his own wife what a woman's heart could be at its finest.

Otsu then asked about Ogin. Was she still unmarried and living among relatives? Manbei did not answer clearly. Instead he pointed ahead to a tea stall by the roadside and said they should rest there a little. So they went in, drank tea, and opened the small food they had brought. While they sat there, teamsters and rough laborers passing on the road called out to Manbei with easy, shameless familiarity. One asked whether he was not stopping by the gambling place at Handa that day. Another laughed as if such a thing were part of his common habit. Otsu said nothing then, but the words did not pass through her heart lightly.

Once they were back on the road, she felt the question still hanging there. Manbei seemed to notice it and muttered that such fellows always joked too freely because he sometimes hired them to handle loads from the mountains. He spoke as if that explained everything. Otsu wanted to accept the answer, and for a while she did. But there was another matter neither of them fully saw. From near the tea

stall, the same young samurai in the rough woven hat who had been seen by the shore had begun to follow their road at a distance. Manbei, for all his practical eyes, failed to notice him. Otsu too was too occupied with hope and uncertainty to grasp the meaning of that silent shadow behind them.

They stayed that night at Tatsuno and went on again the next day. By the time they reached Mikazuki, the sun was already leaning down the mountain edge, and the evening air had begun to press close with the lonely feeling of autumn. Otsu, tired and walking a little more slowly, called forward to Manbei and asked whether they had now come to Mikazuki at last. He stopped and pointed ahead and around them. Yes, he said, this was already Mikazuki. Beyond that mountain lay Sanumo and Miyamoto Village, and beyond there again stood Shippoji. Those names alone made Otsu's heart beat harder.

To hear them spoken aloud, after so many roads, felt almost like reaching the door of a dream. Musashi's village, the temple, the places tied to the beginning of so much sorrow and so much love, were now only beyond the next rise. Yet the nearness did not bring her pure peace. Hope, fatigue, strangeness, and a faint unease were all mixed together within her. Manbei stood before her as a guide and helper, yet the words of the laborers at the tea stall still remained in memory. Somewhere behind them too, though she did not clearly know it, another man still kept to their road. So as the evening deepened around the foothills of Mikazuki, Otsu stood on the edge not only of a hoped-for meeting, but of something darker that had not yet shown its face.

Part 20

Manbei stopped on the road and pointed ahead into the deepening light. He said again that Miyamoto Village and Shippoji lay just beyond the next mountain, so near now that there was almost no need to speak of distance. Those names struck Otsu's heart with such force that she could hardly answer him. For many roads and many seasons she had carried those places only in thought. Now they seemed close enough to touch, and yet her body, tired from travel, felt weak and

uncertain under the same hope.

The autumn evening had begun to gather around them by then. The hills were no longer bright, and the path, though still clear, had already taken on the lonely feeling that comes before dark. Otsu moved more slowly. Manbei turned back once or twice as if in concern, but there was something in him now that no longer felt as simple as before. Whether it was only the road, or the memory of the rough men at the tea stall, or the strange stillness of the place, Otsu could not tell. She only knew that the hope she had felt all day had grown mixed with a faint dread.

Before long that dread took shape. Men appeared there where she had not expected them, country samurai of the Hon'iden side, hard in face and rough in manner. Everything happened too fast for her to understand cleanly. She was stopped, overpowered, and silenced before she could properly resist or cry out. When at last she grasped what had happened, she found herself no longer a traveler walking beside a guide, but a captive in the hands of men who meant to return her by force to the old net from which she had long struggled to escape.

So Manbei's kindness was shown for what it had been. Whether he had served them from the beginning or yielded later, the road ended in betrayal all the same. Otsu was carried toward the river country under watch. Her hands were not free, and at one point even her mouth was bound so that only broken cries could escape her. The men spoke not as protectors, but as those recovering property that had slipped from them. In their eyes she was not a woman with a will, but someone to be handed back and shut away.

Yet the evening did not belong wholly to them. The young samurai who had once sat outside the dye yard in Shikama, hidden under his woven hat, had followed more truly than any of them knew. He came now into their path with the sudden firmness of one who had already prepared his heart. The river lay near, and the three country men stood on the bank with Otsu under their hands when he called to them and threw down a written note. They read it in surprise. The note said that the old grandmother had been taken and that Otsu must first be returned to Jotaro's hand before any other matter could be settled.

The men looked up sharply and demanded to know who stood before them.

The youth answered plainly, “I am Aoki Jotaro.” At that name Otsu, who had already been staring at him in shock and doubt, could no longer hold herself. She cried out, “Jotaro!” with all the astonishment and relief of one who has seen the dead return. The men cursed at once and tightened her gag again, but the moment had already changed. The years between childhood and now had fallen away in a single breath.

The three men still believed, however, that Jotaro was only a rash boy. They questioned him about the note and demanded to know where the old woman had been taken. Jotaro answered with cool boldness that she was being held as a hostage, and that Otsu would be exchanged for her. The rough samurai laughed at him and named their house with pride, saying that even men of Himeji should know better than to play tricks on the Hon’iden. They thought the matter nearly settled. That was their mistake.

Jotaro moved before their contempt had finished speaking. He had not come there only with words. Steel flashed in the failing light, and the talk at the riverbank broke into violence. The men who had treated him like a child were forced at once to meet his blade and his speed. Otsu, half bound and half thrown aside in the struggle, could do nothing but watch with a heart divided between terror and hope. The river water darkened under the evening sky while feet slipped on stones and angry voices broke apart into curses and cries.

Jotaro fought with the fierce directness of youth, but he was no mere child striking blindly. One man was badly wounded almost at once. Another lost courage when he saw how quickly the matter had turned. The third still tried to press the fight, but the whole balance had changed. Otsu saw then that Jotaro had come not in foolish impulse, but with a true decision to save her whatever the cost. The boy she had once known was gone. In his place stood a young samurai already carrying a man’s danger.

When one of the wounded men began to stumble away, Jotaro started after him with his short blade drawn, burning to finish what had begun. But Otsu threw herself into his path with a cry and begged him not to strike a fleeing man. Her plea was so earnest, so full of pain even for those who had wronged her, that Jotaro

stopped in astonishment. He could not understand how she could pity such people after all they had done. Yet that was Otsu. Even in terror, she would not gladly see the helpless cut down.

She then told him there was no time to remain. If the alarm spread back toward the village, others of the family would surely come out across the fields and hills. Jotaro needed no second warning. He agreed at once, and the two of them fled into the dark, running as they had once run in much earlier years when both were still only children. The path before them was scarcely visible. They ran from shadow to shadow until their breath grew short and their legs shook beneath them.

By the time they reached the inn at Mikazuki, only one or two houses in the little post town still showed light. The innkeeper's people took them, no doubt, for some hurried young pair who had fallen into trouble on the road. They were shown not to a proper guest room, but to a cramped side place where cocoons were boiled and spinning tools were kept by an old woman of the house. Yet even that rough shelter seemed a blessing after the riverbank. There, at last, Otsu and Jotaro could breathe again, though outside the night still carried the threat of pursuit.

Part 21

By the time the two of them had reached the inn at Mikazuki, the noise in the main building was already dying away. Men who had come over the roads from many places had eaten, drunk, talked loudly, and then gone off one by one into sleep. The only light left burned in a narrow little outbuilding apart from the main house. The old inn woman usually lived there alone among her cocoon pots and spinning tools, but for that night she gave the place over to Otsu and Jotaro, perhaps thinking they were a runaway pair because the young man was younger than the woman beside him.

The room was cramped, warm, and full of the faint smell of silk and old wood. A spinning wheel stood in one corner, and an iron pot used for boiling

cocoons still held the day's heat. Outside, the inn had grown quiet, and only distant sounds from the main house came and went through the boards. There, at last, Otsu and Jotaro could sit and speak plainly. Yet even in safety, neither of them could forget how near disaster had been only a short time before.

Otsu asked first about Edo and about Musashi. Since Jotaro had gone there and returned, she had hoped, against reason, that he might at least have seen him. But as he told the whole story from beginning to end, it became clear that he too had failed. He had crossed roads, heard rumors, searched, and still had not come face to face with the one man they both wished to find. Hearing that, Otsu lowered her eyes and said sadly that ever since they had been scattered on the Kiso road, she too had not once been able to meet him.

Jotaro felt a pain that made speech difficult. He had known Otsu before, but now he saw more sharply than ever how long and how deeply she had suffered. Her illness, her wandering, her capture, and her unbroken longing were all there in the quiet way she spoke. So he did what he could. He said that she should not despair yet, because a new rumor had begun to spread in Himeji, and this rumor was stronger than the empty talk of passing travelers.

"Musashi may come to Himeji soon," he said. Otsu looked up at once as if a hand had touched her heart directly. Any rumor, however thin, was to her now something she could not help catching hold of. She asked whether it could truly be trusted. Jotaro answered honestly that it was still rumor, and he could not swear to every part of it, but among men of the domain it was being spoken of as if it had real ground beneath it.

He then told her what he had heard. People were saying that Musashi had been found through Hanazono Myoshinji in Kyoto, and that a challenge from Sasaki Kojiro had reached him through Nagaoka Sado, a chief retainer of the Hosokawa house. If that was true, then Musashi would likely go down to Kokura before long to answer the challenge. From Kyoto to Kokura, Jotaro said, the road by land passed naturally through Himeji. Therefore many in the Himeji domain believed that if Musashi came south, he would surely pass their castle town.

Otsu listened with all her being, but even while hope rose, her clear

understanding of Musashi's nature worked against easy comfort. She asked quietly whether he might not go by sea instead. At first Jotaro shook his head and said he thought not. He explained that in Himeji, in Okayama, and in the other domains along the Sanyo road, many lords and retainers were waiting eagerly for such a chance. They wished to stop him, invite him to stay one night, judge his character, and perhaps even sound him out about service.

Jotaro told her more. He said the Ikeda house of Himeji had already written to Takuan and had made inquiries toward Myoshinji, and even the post-station offices near the castle had been told to report at once if a man like Musashi should pass through. But when Otsu heard this, she did not brighten. Instead she let out a low cry of disappointment and said that such noise was exactly what Musashi hated most. If every castle town on the road were waiting in excitement, she said, then that was all the more reason to believe he would avoid the land road and choose another way.

Jotaro fell silent then. He had told her the rumor thinking it would bring her comfort, and instead her answer showed him how weak their own hope might be. The idea that Musashi would pass through Himeji had perhaps been only the wish of others, not Musashi's own mind at all. Yet Otsu did not remain crushed for long. Once the thought of Hanazono Myoshinji had entered her, it began at once to turn into a road. If the rumor had roots anywhere, she said, then surely the temple in Kyoto would know something certain.

"If I go there," she said, "I may learn the truth." Jotaro answered that perhaps she might, though all of this still rested on rumor and hearsay. But Otsu pressed on at once. A thing like this, she said, could not be entirely without root. If Musashi had truly been traced through Myoshinji, then that temple was now the best place in the world for her to seek. She raised her face and said that if that was so, she wished to leave even the next day.

Jotaro looked at her in surprise. He had changed since the years when he simply followed others. He was no longer a child running on another person's will alone, and he had begun to form judgments of his own about danger, roads, and what Otsu could bear. So when she spoke of setting out at once, he did not

immediately agree. Instead he leaned forward a little and said, “No. Wait.” His voice was not rude, but it held the firmness of someone who had at last learned to think for himself.

Part 22

Jotaro’s “Wait” was not spoken like a child’s answer. He leaned forward a little and told Otsu that the matter should not be decided in heat and tiredness. They had only just escaped from the riverbank, and men from the Hon’iden side might still be searching the roads. If she ran again at once toward Kyoto, she might fall into fresh danger before dawn. Better, he said, to pass the night quietly, think clearly in the morning, and then choose the next road with a cooler head. Otsu listened and saw that he was right. The old boy who had once run wherever feeling pulled him was gone. In his place sat someone who had begun to judge danger like a man.

So they remained where they were. The old woman of the inn brought what poor help she could, and no one questioned them too closely. The room was narrow, but after the fear of the road and the river it felt almost kind. Otsu sat near the lamp and asked Jotaro again and again for every small thing he knew about Musashi, about Edo, and about the rumors moving west through the domains. Jotaro answered all he could, though much of it was no more than uncertain talk carried from temple to castle and from castle to post town. Still, to people who had lived so long on rumor, even uncertain talk had weight.

Outside, the wind began to change. At first it was only a restless stirring under the eaves, but later the weather thickened and turned rough. Clouds covered what little moon there had been, and after a while rain began to strike the roof and shutters with a hard rapid sound. The poor room darkened more deeply around the lamp. Jotaro, who had spent all his strength in the fight and in the flight afterward, soon lay down in his clothes and was overcome by sleep. Even before Otsu could ask him everything in her heart, his breathing had become heavy and deep.

Otsu did not blame him for that. She watched him lying there and felt a quiet tenderness mixed with sorrow. He too had wandered through hardship, and this night had demanded more from him than a young body should bear. She covered him a little better and then sat listening to the rain. The room seemed to draw close around her with the weather. Every time the wind hit the shutters, the little lamp flame bent and shook, and the smell of wet earth and wet wood came in through the cracks.

It was then that another thought began to trouble her. At the riverbank and on the road she had heard pieces of talk that she had not fully followed in the first heat of fear. Now, in the storm and silence, they came back to her one by one. Jotaro had done something severe to old Osugi. He had spoken of punishment, and others had spoken of it too. Otsu did not know the full manner of it, but she understood enough to feel a sharp pain inside. The old woman had caused endless harm, it was true, and yet Otsu could not think of her as pure evil.

The rain grew harder. It beat the shutters with a wild rattling sound, and water began to run in streams from the eaves. Otsu called softly once, “Jotaro.” Then again, a little louder, “Please wake for a moment.” But he did not stir. His sleep was too deep, too complete, like the sleep of one who has used every drop of strength in his body. Otsu hesitated at once. To wake him by force, only to speak of pity for the very woman whose cruelty had driven so much suffering into their lives, seemed almost too harsh.

Yet the thought would not leave her. In such rain and wind, what would happen to an old woman left out under punishment? She might grow soaked and chilled before morning. If no one came upon her, she might lie there not only through one night, but longer still. Otsu’s heart, made for worry and for pity almost beyond reason, could not endure that picture. She thought, “Old Lady Osugi is not evil from the root. Something in her heart twisted, but the root itself cannot be wholly black.” Then she thought again, “If we answer hatred only with more hardness, how will truth ever reach anyone?”

The storm gave no comfort. The harder the rain fell, the more strongly her mind turned toward the old woman. She looked once more at Jotaro and nearly

woke him, but again she stopped. He would surely oppose her, and perhaps even with anger, yet Otsu had already begun to decide. There are times when her gentleness becomes its own kind of firmness, and this was such a time. She told herself that even if Jotaro later blamed her, she could not remain warm and safe while an old woman might be dying in the dark.

At last she rose. The room was almost black except for the weak lamp. She slid open the shutter just enough to see outside, and the whole world seemed made only of rain, darkness, and white spray. Without making more noise than she must, she tied straw sandals onto her feet. She took down the little bamboo rain hat hanging by the wall and set it on her head. Then she gathered up her robe, pulled on a rain cape, and stood a moment with one hand on the frame, listening to the storm as if asking it whether she truly meant to step into it.

She did mean it. The next instant she opened the shutter farther and went out alone. The rain struck her at once in hard white sheets, and the night swallowed her shape almost immediately. Behind her, Jotaro still slept on, not knowing she had left. Before her lay only darkness, wind, and the road back toward the old woman whom no one else that night was likely to save.

Part 23

The rain took her at once with all its force. It struck the little bamboo hat on her head, ran down her sleeves, and beat against the straw cape until it clung to her shoulders like soaked bark. The road out of the inn yard was already mud, and the darkness beyond the weak lights of the post town seemed to have no shape at all. Yet Otsu did not hesitate after that first step. Once she had chosen, her gentleness became something firm, and she went out into the storm as if pity itself were pulling her forward by the hand.

She knew only in a general way where Jotaro had left the old woman. So she listened more than she saw, turning her face against the rain and trying to separate the voices of the storm from any human sound hidden within it. The road, the fields, the low trees, the wet slopes of the hills, all had become one shifting

blackness. At times the wind blew so hard through the cedars that it seemed like a river passing overhead. Then, for a moment, the gust would weaken, and in that brief opening Otsu would stop and call, “Old mother! Lady Osugi!” before the next wall of rain beat the sound flat again.

The place at last began to feel familiar beneath her feet. She came near the temple ground and the dark shape of the hall where so much pain had already gathered around all of them. The boards of the temple eaves groaned, the old trees shook, and the path was slippery with leaves and streaming mud. Otsu called again and again, her voice turning hoarse, but no answer came at first. Even so, she could not believe she had come in vain. Somewhere in that storm there had to be one frightened, stubborn, living heart still clinging to life.

Then a faint cry reached her through the weather. It was so broken by wind and rain that she could not at once tell whether it came from a human throat or from some night bird driven wild by the storm. She stood still, held her breath, and listened with all her being. Again it came, thin, strained, and full of pleading. “Help me,” it seemed to say. “I am here.” Otsu answered at once, raising her own voice into the dark, and now that she had caught even that much, she began to move faster, almost running over the wet temple ground.

She passed the hall and rounded the shadow of a great cedar. There, a little beyond the path toward the upper shrine, she found the place at last. It was a rough opening in the hillside, hardly more than a cave cut into the earth like a bear’s den. But the entrance had been blocked with great stones, three or four of them piled there with a cruel purpose. From within the darkness behind them a voice came out again, broken with fear and prayer. It was Osugi’s voice without question. Otsu cried out in relief and horror together, and at once flung herself against the stones.

She pushed with both hands, then with her shoulder, then braced her feet in the mud and tried with all the strength in her body. The stones did not move even the width of a finger. Rain ran into her eyes. The straw cord of her hat snapped and flew away. Her hair came loose under the storm, and the shredded edges of her rain cape beat against her arms like wet cloth torn on branches. She tried again

and again, feeling the rock skin tear at her fingers, until her hands, chest, and sleeves were all smeared with mud, rainwater, and the cold slime of the hillside.

Still the stones did not move. Then anger touched her at last, though it was not anger for herself. “Jotaro was too hard,” she thought. “Too hard.” If she had not come, the old woman might truly have gone mad in that darkness, or died before morning from fear, cold, or hunger. That thought drove her to fresh effort, and she called into the gap between the stones, telling Osugi again and again to keep her courage and wait just a little longer. But when she pressed her face near the opening, the cave answered first not with speech, but with chanting.

From within the blackness came the low trembling sound of the Kannon Sutra. Osugi, it seemed, had gone beyond ordinary fear and ordinary thought. She could no longer hear Otsu as Otsu. In that buried dark, with wind groaning above and rain striking the stones, she saw only the form of Kannon and heard only the holy voice of mercy. The old woman’s chanting shook and broke and began again, but it carried a strange peace inside it, as though she had already placed herself in other hands than those of the living world. Hearing it, Otsu’s heart twisted with pity so strong that tears mixed with the rain on her face.

She struggled again with the stones until all her strength was nearly gone. At last Osugi must have begun to feel some doubt even inside that half-vision of prayer, for the chanting stopped, and a sharper voice came from within. “Who is there? Who is it?” Otsu, crouched in the rain and nearly spent, answered at once that it was she, Otsu. There was a silence after that, a silence so deep that even the storm seemed to lean in around it. Then the old woman asked again in disbelief, “Otsu?” And Otsu answered again, plainly and gently, “Yes. It is Otsu.”

The words struck like a stone dropped into deep water. All at once the old woman seemed to fall back from her vision and into the hard human world again. She asked how Otsu had come there, whether Jotaro had sent her, whether this was some trick or dream born from fear. Otsu said no. She had come of her own heart, because she could not bear to think of an old woman left in such a place through such a night. She begged Osugi not to hate Jotaro for what he had done, not to hold on any longer to the bitter things that had already ruined too many

lives. “Please,” she said, leaning close to the stones, “let all that has passed flow away like water.”

Then she said something that struck even more deeply. She told Osugi that she remembered only the kindnesses from long ago, the days when she had still been cared for under the same roof, the days before anger and madness had turned everything dark. As for the blows, the abuse, the chasing, and the years of hatred after that, she said she did not keep them as grudges in her heart. Those were not the words of someone acting from fear or duty. They were the words of a person who had truly chosen mercy. In the storm, with mud on her face and her hands torn from pushing uselessly at stone, Otsu spoke them as simply as if she were offering warm tea to a sick person.

From within the cave came only broken breaths for a little while. The old woman seemed unable to understand what she was hearing. “You came to save me?” she said at last. “You?” Otsu answered yes once more, as though there were nothing strange in it. The rain ran down over the blocked entrance. The cedars bent and shook. No great miracle came. The stones still held fast. Yet something had already shifted in the darkness between the two women. Osugi, who had lived so long by anger, suspicion, and blind love for her own blood, now heard from the mouth of the one she had wronged not accusation, but compassion. And Otsu, trembling in the storm, knowing she still could not move the rocks, stayed there all the same, as if her voice alone might keep the old woman alive until some other help came.

Part 24

Otsu stayed there in the storm because there was nothing else she could do. The stones still would not move, and her strength was nearly gone, but she would not leave the blocked cave mouth while Osugi still lived within. She kept speaking through the cracks, telling the old woman again and again not to lose heart. At first Osugi could only answer in broken breaths and cries, as if the human world had not yet fully returned to her. Then, little by little, her mind cleared, and what

she had heard began to enter her at last.

“You came to save me?” she asked again, almost in fear. Otsu answered yes. She said she had come because she could not rest while thinking of an old woman left buried in such a place through such a night. Then she begged Osugi once more not to hate Jotaro, and not to cling any longer to the bitter things of the past. She said she remembered only the kindness once shown to her in childhood, and that the blows, the cruel words, and the long years of pursuit had not become hatred inside her heart.

Those words struck Osugi more deeply than any punishment could have done. Until that moment she had lived like a person burning inside a closed room, seeing only her own anger, her own grief, and the child for whose sake she had destroyed all peace. Now, from the very one she had tormented, she heard mercy instead of blame. The old woman’s voice changed. It trembled, broke, and then turned into the voice of someone falling to pieces from shame. She cried that Otsu must forgive her, and that all the madness of past years had come from blindness and from a mother’s twisted love.

While they spoke, the storm still raged around them. Otsu could scarcely stand, and the rain had gone through every layer of her clothes. Yet she remained by the stones until dawn at last began to whiten the upper air. When the first pale light came through the cedar tops, Osugi, who had passed the night in fear, prayer, and sudden repentance, gathered herself and shouted out toward the hills. Not for help for herself, but for help for Otsu. She cried that there was a woman dying outside the cave, and that the villagers must come at once.

Soon rough voices answered through the trees. Men of the Hon’iden family and others from the village had been searching since night, after hearing of the fighting by the river and of Osugi’s disappearance. They came through the wet cedar wood in straw cloaks and wide hats, soaked through from the storm. At first they cried out with relief to see the old woman alive. But Osugi showed almost no joy for herself. She pointed straight to the blocked cave mouth and begged them to save the woman there first.

The men pulled aside the heavy stones one by one. Behind them they found

Otsu collapsed in the mud and rain, hardly able to move, while Osugi stumbled out after her into the first sunlight of morning. The old woman's eyes were dazzled by the light, and for a moment she covered her face like someone reborn into another world. Then, instead of taking comfort from the people who rushed to support her, she cried out only for Otsu. She said that her own life did not matter, and that the young woman must be cared for at once.

Otsu had spent the whole night in rain, wind, and exhaustion, and the shock of it settled into her body after sunrise like hidden fire. From that morning onward her strength never fully returned. She recovered consciousness, but not the health she had once carried even through long roads and hard fortune. She was taken to Shippoji and laid there to rest. Day after day her fever rose a little toward evening, and a soft cough began to follow her breath. Her body slowly grew thinner, and the beauty of her face became even more delicate, almost too clear to look at without sorrow.

Yet within that weakness there was also a strange new peace. Osugi had changed. The old woman, who had once guarded old promises and old hatred like iron, now seemed almost a different person. She confessed openly that she had been wrong. She said before her own kin and before the villagers that the old promise between Otsu and Matahachi must be broken and forgotten. She told Otsu again and again that if there was any way left to repair the wrong she had done, then she herself would kneel before Musashi and entrust Otsu to him with both hands joined.

Otsu heard these words with tears, but they were not tears of pain alone. To see Osugi changed so deeply, to know that a heart once lost in anger could still awaken, gave her a quiet joy. And along with that joy she carried one more hope, one that did not leave her even while illness held her down. She felt, without knowing why, that the day of meeting Musashi had somehow come nearer. Her body might be weak, but her eyes were often bright with expectation, as if she were already listening for steps that had not yet reached the temple gate.

Thus the months passed after the stormy night in the cave. Otsu remained at Shippoji, living between weakness and hope. Osugi stayed close to her with a care

that was now almost worship, trying in every small act to repay what could not truly be repaid. The villagers too saw the change and spoke of it quietly, for they had known the old woman in her harder days. What had once seemed impossible had happened: hatred had bent into repentance, and pity had drawn it there. But even while that healing went on in the village, the larger road of Musashi still moved elsewhere through the country, drawing slowly toward the meeting that all their hearts awaited.

Part 25

After that stormy night, time moved on, but not in any simple peace. Otsu remained at Shippoji, and though the fever did not always burn high, it never wholly left her. Toward evening her cheeks often took on a faint color, and after speaking too long she would fall into a cough that seemed to rise from somewhere deeper than the throat. She could still sit up and smile, and sometimes she even walked a little in the temple yard, but anyone who looked closely saw that her body had grown thin and fragile. It was as if the life within her had drawn inward and was now shining more brightly only because the body around it had become transparent.

Osugi changed more deeply than her own kin could have believed. She no longer spoke of old promises, nor did she guard Matahachi's name like a treasure stolen by another hand. Instead she served Otsu with a humility that was almost prayer. She warmed water, folded garments, watched over her at night, and more than once was heard whispering apologies to the sleeping woman. If Otsu coughed, Osugi started like a guilty child. If Otsu smiled, the old woman's lined face softened with a strange peace, as though each small kindness she now offered were a little stone laid upon the grave of her former self.

Jotaro came and went between the village and Himeji. He had become a young man of movement and purpose, no longer content to remain where fate left him. At times he carried messages, at times only rumors, but always he returned with some fresh stirring from the greater world. The roads, the post stations, the

castle towns, and the temples all seemed to be murmuring of one thing now. Musashi's name, long carried like a hidden fire through different provinces, had begun to rise openly again. And beside that name, more and more often, another name was heard with it: Sasaki Kojiro.

One evening, when the autumn light had already grown thin in the temple yard, Jotaro came back from Himeji with unusual haste in his step. Otsu was sitting wrapped in an outer robe near the veranda, and Osugi was by her side sorting dried herbs. Jotaro bowed first, then remained kneeling longer than usual before he spoke. He had heard, he said, that the matter was now no longer vague rumor. Through Hanazono Myoshinji in Kyoto, and through the lines of men connected with Kokura, word had begun to spread that a meeting between Musashi and Kojiro was truly drawing near. Not a chance meeting, not a roadside challenge, but one final trial openly prepared.

Otsu listened without moving. She did not interrupt him once, though her fingers tightened upon the edge of her robe. Jotaro said that the place would likely be in Buzen, near Kokura, where Kojiro now stood in full favor. Men of the Hosokawa house were already stirring. Travelers had begun to speak of official notices, of restrictions near the shore, and of the gathering interest of retainers, students, and curious people from many lands. It was still not clear on which exact day the blades would cross, but the thing itself now felt near enough to cast a shadow before it. Once he had finished, silence settled over the veranda like cold evening mist.

Then Otsu said only, "I must go." The words were quiet, but nothing in them wavered. Jotaro answered at once that such a journey would be too hard for her, especially in that state. But Otsu shook her head before he had done speaking. She said that if Musashi's life was about to stand at such a gate, then whether she lived or died afterward meant little beside seeing it through with her own eyes. She did not speak wildly, nor did she ask anyone's pity. Her voice was calm, but inside its calm there was a strength that had already crossed beyond fear.

Osugi began to weep softly before anyone else spoke. Not because she wished to stop Otsu, but because she understood too well what such words meant.

At last the old woman bowed low and said that if Otsu went, she too would go. She had no right to remain behind and pray from warmth while the one she had wronged went forward in illness and danger. Her life, she said, had already passed the age of clinging. If there remained even one service she could do before death, it was to walk behind Otsu and take what burden she could from her. Otsu tried to refuse such hardship to her, but Osugi only lowered her head more deeply and would not be moved.

A few days later another traveler came to Shippoji, and his coming joined yet another broken strand to theirs. It was Muso Gonnosuke. He had passed through many changes since the days when he had first wandered with Iori. He had learned by then that Iori was alive and under the protection of Nagaoka Sado. He had also heard enough from those moving between Kyoto and the western provinces to know that Musashi too had gone on toward the trial with Kojiro. When he saw Otsu's face, he was struck by her illness, yet he was struck even more by the clear fire that still lived in her eyes.

Gonnosuke did not speak idly against her wish. He looked from Otsu to Osugi, then to Jotaro, and at last said that if they truly meant to go, he would not let them travel unsupported. The road westward, and still more the roads near great affairs of warriors, would be no place for women and a single young man alone. He himself had reason to see the matter through as far as he could. He had known Musashi in struggle, and he could not remain at rest while such an end approached. So it was settled among them, not with excitement, but with the grave stillness of people who knew that once such a road was begun, it would not easily be turned back.

The journey west was slow and hard on Otsu. There were days when she rode a little and days when she could only be helped from one resting place to another. At inns and ferry points strangers often took her for a woman already touched by wasting sickness, and perhaps that was not far from truth. Yet whenever anyone suggested delay, she would answer gently that she was improving. She husbanded her strength, spoke little, and kept her eyes always on the next road. What carried her was not the body. It was something in the will

beyond the body, and those traveling with her could only witness it in silence.

Along the way, more exact word reached them. The place would indeed be by the western sea, near the straits, and men were already going down toward Akamagaseki and Kokura in the hope of learning more. Gonnosuke grew more watchful from that point onward. Jotaro too became quieter, less like a youth chasing rumor and more like one moving beside the edge of a real event. Osugi often counted prayer beads in her sleeve while walking. As for Otsu, the nearer they came, the less she seemed to feel either fatigue or fear. It was as though all the years of searching had narrowed now into one single line leading toward the shore.

At last they reached the country near Akamagaseki. There the sea wind returned, but it did not bring the old loneliness it once had brought Otsu. Instead it carried a tautness that all of them felt. Boats moved with purpose. Men on the shore spoke in lowered voices. More than once they heard that common crossing to the island side would soon be restricted, and that official eyes were already upon the water. It was then that Otsu, looking out over the strait, seemed for a moment to forget her own weakness entirely. She said that if the day came and Musashi crossed from that shore, then she too must be there to see him depart.

Jotaro turned sharply and reminded her of her illness. But Otsu only answered that if there was danger, then that was all the more reason not to remain blind and far away. If the worst should come, she said, then she wished at least to bring back his bones with her own hands. At those words Jotaro could say no more. He turned his face aside, and Osugi began to sob under her breath. Gonnosuke stood a little apart, silent before the sea. And there, on the shore of Akamagaseki, with the wind already carrying the smell of the coming day, the four of them waited for the last movement of fate to begin.

Part 26

The waiting by the shore grew longer and harder than any of them had expected. The ship from Sakai should already have shown its sail before evening,

yet the sea lay open and almost empty, with only fishing boats and cargo craft moving slowly across the light. Under the little shelter of mats, Otsu sat propped against a wooden rest while Osugi bent over the fire and watched the thin rice gruel soften in the pot. The old woman kept saying that the ship must surely appear soon and that Otsu should eat a little before the moment came. Otsu thanked her gently, but her eyes kept turning back to the water.

News had run fast along the Sanyo road. Almost as soon as people learned that Musashi had boarded Tarozaemon's vessel at Sakai, messages flew from post town to post town, and Jotaro had lost no time in sending word to the Hon'iden house and then to Shippoji. Osugi had carried that good news to the temple with trembling hands. Otsu, who had long lain there between fever and hope, had heard it and risen at once, though her body was still weak from the sickness that had followed the stormy night in the cave. Since that night, her strength had never fully come back, yet at the sound of Musashi's name, she had found enough life to leave her bed and come all the way down to Akamagaseki.

Osugi saw that life now only too well and feared it at the same time. Otsu's face was pale and fine like a flower grown too long in shade, and every sudden movement brought a little cough from deep in her chest. Yet her eyes did not belong to a sick woman waiting in weakness. They belonged to someone who had finally reached the edge of a road followed over many years. So Osugi tried to turn her mind from the pain in her body by speaking of the ship, of the harbor, of the small things needed for the meeting. But Otsu heard only one thing beneath it all: that Musashi was really near.

At last Jotaro, who had gone ahead to meet the vessel and arrange matters, came running back from the beach with his face full of haste. He said the ship had come in at last, though later than expected, and that Musashi had indeed arrived. Yet there was no time to lose. Men were already around him, the harbor was restless, and many eyes were turned toward his coming. If Otsu wished to see him quietly, she must remain under the mat shelter for a little while longer, and Jotaro would bring him there. Osugi nodded at once and told him to go quickly. Otsu tried to rise with him, but he begged her to stay where she was and save her

strength.

As soon as he had gone, Osugi helped Otsu back onto the bedding. The movement brought on another cough, sharp and deep, and for a little while Otsu could only press her face to the wooden pillow and wait until the fit passed. Osugi rubbed her thin back and spoke in a busy, cheerful voice, saying that Musashi would be there in only a few moments and that she must not waste those moments on pain. When the coughing stopped, Otsu thanked her and quietly put her own hands to her hair and collar. Even through illness and trembling, she could not let the man she had waited for so long find her untidy.

Time then began to move in a strange way. Though only a short while passed, it seemed far longer to Otsu than many years on the road had seemed. She pushed the wooden pillow aside, straightened the edge of her robe, adjusted the knot of her sash, and sat half rising, then lay down again, unable either to remain calm or to spend her strength all at once. Her heart beat with the same fear and brightness it had known when she was still seventeen or eighteen. The years of sorrow, illness, and wandering had not changed that part of her at all. She was still simply the woman waiting for the man she loved.

Outside, Osugi at last left the shelter and stood by the shore, peering into the deepening light. Otsu was left alone for a little while with only the sound of the sea and the small noise of the fire. The smell of salt came strongly across the mats, and that too stirred her cough. She pressed a sleeve to her lips until it passed and then sat up once more, listening with all her being. Footsteps came and went on the sand, but none were his. Each false sound raised hope and then let it fall again. In that waiting, she felt both younger than ever and older than she had ever been.

Then at last there was a shadow at the edge of the shelter, and Jotaro’s voice came low and careful. Behind him another figure stopped. Otsu did not rise at once. For one brief instant she could not move at all. Musashi stood there in the opening with the sea light behind him, changed by years, weather, and inward struggle, yet still wholly himself. The long roads, the battles, the teachers, the victories, and the loneliness were all present in his face, but so too was the same quiet force she had once known in younger days. He looked at her, and the sight

of how thin illness had made her entered him without the need of any spoken word.

No wild words passed between them. That would not have suited either heart. Musashi stepped nearer and sat, and for a little while the three of them, Otsu, Musashi, and Jotaro, seemed to stand outside ordinary time. Otsu tried to speak first of simple things, to ask after the road, to tell him that she had at last come safely there, but her voice trembled and broke. Musashi answered in few words, yet the care beneath them was plain. He asked about her illness, and Osugi, who had come back in, began in tears to explain how the sickness had followed that old night of storm and cruelty, and how Otsu had never once ceased waiting even while lying close to death.

Jotaro, understanding better than ever what belonged to those two alone, kept himself as quiet as he could. He had dreamed often of some great meeting with his master, some moment when he too would speak many things from the heart. Yet when the hour came, he found that giving the time to Otsu brought him no bitterness. It seemed only right. Musashi also understood, and though he looked once toward Jotaro with a depth of feeling that needed no words, he did not draw the young man into long talk. There would be other moments for master and student. What stood before him now was the long road of Otsu's waiting made flesh at last.

Evening settled more deeply over the shore. The sea darkened, and lights began to show in the harbor. Yet none of them wished to move or end the meeting by naming its end. At last practical necessity entered where feeling would not. Musashi could not remain there without drawing more notice, and other duties were already pressing him onward toward Kokura and the trial waiting there. Otsu knew this before he said it, and because she knew it, she did not bind him with tears or pleadings. She had not come across so many years to place one more chain upon his life. She had come to see him, to let him know her heart had never changed, and to stand near him once more before fate carried him on.

So when the time to part came, she gathered what strength remained to her and spoke with quiet steadiness. She said he must not trouble himself over her. He was to go forward without looking back in worry, because that alone would make

her own long waiting worth something. Musashi listened without interrupting. No promise larger than the hour was made, and no foolish comfort was offered. Yet what passed between them in that dim shelter by the sea was stronger than any easy vow. It was the recognition of two lives that had run apart through pain and discipline and had now, even for a short time, reached the same shore together.

When Musashi finally rose, the sea wind moved the hanging mats and touched all their faces alike. Jotaro went with him a little way, and Osugi bowed low with tears she did not try to hide. Otsu remained sitting where she was, one hand resting lightly against the bedding, her eyes following him until the shadows and the harbor lights took his shape away. She was weak enough that the meeting itself felt almost like a dream. Yet no dream had ever left such a clear peace in her. For however brief the hour had been, she had seen him with her own eyes, spoken to him with her own lips, and sent him onward with her own heart unhidden.

Part 27

The moment of parting came sooner than any of them wished. Musashi had already turned to go when Otsu, who had been half supported by the others, quietly shook her head. Though her breath was still rough in her chest, she smiled faintly, as if to say she had not come all that way to fall into foolish weakness at the last moment. “No,” she said softly. “Please let me sit.” Those around her obeyed at once. They lowered her carefully onto the sand not far from the line of waves, and she straightened herself there with a calm that was more moving than tears.

She did not remain in disorder even for that grave moment. Her hair, loosened a little by the wind, she set right with her own hand. The collar at her throat, the fold of the robe across her knees, even the line of her shoulders, she made neat again as if she were receiving an honored guest in a quiet room, not sending a man toward a deadly trial over the sea. Then she turned fully toward the boat and toward Musashi, who had already stepped into it. Her voice was weak, but it did not tremble now. “Go,” she said. “Please go with an easy mind.”

Osugi, hearing those words, sank down beside her as though the strength had gone out of her old body at once. Gonnosuke too sat, and Jotaro, following their example, dropped to the sand without another word. He had not spoken to his master as he had once imagined he would, but the time had not belonged to him. Even that he accepted now. If Otsu's few words at the water's edge could send Musashi onward without weight in his heart, then Jotaro felt no regret at all for giving that moment over to her.

The tide was running strong. The current through the strait moved like a river in flood, and the wind blew from behind as if it too meant to drive the little boat forward. Once they pushed off from the shore at Akamagaseki, white spray began to strike the side planks and sometimes leap over the bow. Sasuke, who held the oar that day, seemed almost proud to row on such an hour. There was spirit in every movement of his shoulders and back. Musashi sat in the middle of the boat with his knees wide apart, steady as if the tossing water were no more than a mat floor beneath him.

He looked ahead and said, "It may take some time." Sasuke answered at once that with this wind and this tide they would not be delayed too badly, though he added that the hour had already grown late. The appointed time had passed. If all went as the water now promised, they would reach the island only in the latter part of the next hour. Musashi answered that it was just as well. No anxiety showed in him, and no shame at being late. The lateness itself seemed only another part of the day's form, something already contained within the whole.

Above them the sky was a depth of clear blue without a stain. White clouds moved over the mountains of Nagato like long thin banners, but nowhere was there any dark shadow of weather. Across the strait the houses of Mojigaseki and the folds of the hills beyond could be seen sharply, and on the slopes the watching crowds looked like black clusters of ants. People had climbed wherever they could, over ridges, beach rises, temple grounds, and field edges, all in the hunger to witness what could not truly be seen from where they stood. The sea itself seemed ringed with human desire, though none of that desire could cross into the true place where two swords would soon meet.

Behind Musashi, on the shore they had left, there were others still watching though he no longer turned to look. Otsu, Osugi, Gonnosuke, and Jotaro remained near the edge of the water. Farther away, Sado and Iori watched from another side. In Kokura, Matahachi and Akemi too were waiting in their own places, each carrying prayer, fear, memory, or hope. Yet on the narrow boat and on the bare island ahead, none of those human feelings could serve as help. Neither tears nor affection, neither old friendship nor pity, could row for him across that last water. Only the sky remained above with its great indifferent fairness.

Musashi sat inside that fairness as if he wished to become part of it. But to become like the blue emptiness overhead was not an easy thing for a living man. Flesh, hair, nails, every smallest part of the body resists death even before the mind begins to move. The heart may seek stillness, but the skin rises against the enemy by itself. The muscles harden, the breath sharpens, and the whole body prepares to strike or defend. To keep the mind clear while sword faced sword was harder than asking the moon to remain unbroken in storm water. Even so, Musashi did not close his eyes or sink into dreamlike thought. He sat with all his life awake.

As the boat went on, the island itself came nearer, small at first and then slowly taking shape. It was little more than a low broken place rising out of the current, with rock, pale sand, and sparse growth bent by sea wind. There was no shelter there, no beauty that comforted the heart, nothing soft enough to distract the eye. It was a place fit only for tide, sky, and death. Musashi looked at it a long while without speaking. Sasuke rowed on and did not disturb him. Even the creak of the oar seemed careful not to intrude upon whatever measure of thought or non-thought was passing through the man seated before him.

Yet thoughts did come, if only as brief flashes. One instant he was aware of the waiting faces on the shores behind and before him. Another instant he felt only the boards under him, the salt wind on his cheek, and the hard nearness of the oar’s rhythm. Then all that too seemed to fall away, and what remained was only movement through space toward the one place where movement would end. He was not thinking of victory in any loud or common way. Nor was he nursing hatred. Rather he seemed to be stripping off one thing after another inside himself, though

the last thing, the living self that must still hold the sword, could not yet be removed.

The island now lay close enough that the color of its rocks could be seen, and near one side there were signs of men already landed there before him. The boat turned a little with the current. Sasuke adjusted the oar and looked once toward Musashi, perhaps hoping for instruction, perhaps only measuring how the other man breathed. Musashi said nothing. He only shifted his weight slightly and let one hand rest nearer the long wooden sword he had brought. That movement was small, but it seemed to sharpen the whole air inside the boat.

Ahead, on the island, someone was waiting. Whether Kojiro stood still or moved, whether he looked toward the water or away from it, Musashi could not yet clearly tell. But the shape of a human presence was there. All the roads, the rumors, the long years of training, the wounded pride of many men, the prayers on the shores, and the strange turns of fate that had carried so many lives westward had narrowed now to that one waiting figure upon a strip of rock in the sea. The waves struck and withdrew. The boat slid on. And as Funashima rose before them in full, the hour that all had feared and desired came near enough at last to touch.

Part 28

The island now stood plain before them. It was low, stony, and almost bare, with a few wind-bent pines and rough places where sand and rock met the tide. There was no softness in it, no tree shade wide enough to comfort a man, no sound except water and wind. Sasuke rowed with all his strength, and Musashi sat in the middle of the boat as if he had become part of the stillness above the sea. When the island was still some distance off, he took up a broken oar blade from the bottom of the boat and asked if he might keep it. Sasuke, surprised, said it was of no use to anyone. Musashi answered only that it was the right size.

Then he drew his knife and shaped the broken oar on his knees until it pleased him. He brushed the shavings from his robe and twisted many paper cords from folded paper. He braided them quickly and made from them a light shoulder band,

then laid a padded coat across his back so the sea spray would not strike him directly. His long sword he left in the boat under a mat, safe from the water. In his right hand he took the oar-blade sword he had made for himself. Sasuke watched all this and felt that the man before him had cut away every needless thing from body and mind alike.

When the boat came near enough, Musashi rose. There was still some distance between the boat and the dry shore, but he told Sasuke it was enough. Sasuke gave two or three hard strokes, and the boat surged forward, struck shallow ground, and lifted with a dull sound under them. Musashi jumped lightly down into the water without raising much spray. The water reached about to his shins. At once he began to walk toward land at a quick steady pace, the tip of the wooden blade cutting through the sea beside the white foam his feet made.

Sasuke, standing stunned with the oar still in his hand, saw then what he had feared most. From the crooked pine on the shore came Kojiro running like a stream of red and silver light. The bright scabbard of his long sword flashed in the sun. He had been waiting too long, and all the stored heat of that waiting now poured into his body at once. Musashi was still in the water when Kojiro reached the tide line and stood across his path, refusing him the dry land. For one breath the sight seemed terrible even to the sky and sea around them.

"Musashi!" Kojiro called. Musashi, standing in the water with the waves touching his legs, answered calmly, "You are Kojiro." Kojiro's anger rose higher at that quiet face. He shouted that the promised hour had long passed, that he had waited there faithfully, and that Musashi's old habit was always to delay, unnerve, and strike at another man's emptiness. He cried that today such tricks would not save him. Then, lifting the great scabbard high behind him, he drew the long drying-pole sword in one glittering motion and threw the empty scabbard into the waves.

Musashi waited until Kojiro's speech had ended and even until the sound of the surf had filled the space after it. Only then did he answer. "Kojiro," he said, "you have already lost." Kojiro shouted back and demanded by what reason such words could be spoken. Musashi said that a man who meant to win did not throw

away his scabbard. By throwing it aside, he had already cast away his own fate. The words struck deep because they came not as noisy mockery, but as something spoken straight into the center of the other man's spirit. Kojiro roared for him to come on, and Musashi answered from the water with a great cry of his own.

Water burst around his legs. Kojiro stepped into the shallows and raised the long sword for a direct killing blow. But Musashi did not meet him straight on. He drove diagonally through the water toward the left bank, drawing a white line of broken foam across the surface. Kojiro instantly turned and ran along the tide line to cut him off. The moment Musashi's feet left the water and touched sand, Kojiro threw his whole body into a descending attack. To Sasuke, watching from the boat, it seemed that Musashi was not yet even in fighting form. His legs must still have been heavy from the sea.

Yet the wooden blade was already there, hidden deep across Musashi's side and back, both hands upon it. What looked like weakness was not weakness. It was stored force. Kojiro felt it at the last instant. The sword that seemed certain to fall through Musashi's skull stopped itself high with a ringing at the guard, and Kojiro bent away by his own effort because he suddenly understood that to drive forward one step more would mean breaking his body upon something harder than rock. For one sharp instant the two men faced each other in silence, their places changed now, their lines altered.

Then came a short pause. It felt long, but it was no more than the time needed for five or six waves to break and withdraw. They stood farther apart than before, too far for common blades to reach. Musashi had the sea across one side of him, and Kojiro faced the sun striking back from the bright water. That reflected light troubled his eye more than he had wished to admit. Neither man wasted words now. Flesh, nails, hair, skin, every smallest part of the body had already risen to protect life and destroy the enemy. Only the heart tried to remain clear in the middle of that storm.

Then both gave voice at once. Kojiro's long sword came from high enough to cut down the very sun. At the same instant Musashi's body angled downward and aside. His left shoulder slipped forward and lower. His right foot drew back a

little. The two-handed wooden blade moved with a violent wind of its own, and Kojiro's steel came cutting down toward the center of Musashi's brow almost in the same instant. There was no space there large enough to call a difference. For one confused flash the two strikes crossed, tangled, and were gone.

After that one flash, the two men were no longer equal upon the shore. Kojiro's body gave way. The force that had lived in him all morning seemed to burst out of him and vanish. The great sword no longer ruled the space before him. Musashi had already moved away, the wooden blade still whole in his hands, while Kojiro's body, struck in the head, lost the upright greatness it had carried only a breath before. The island, the surf, and the sky all seemed suddenly wider and more empty than they had been. The duel had not lasted long enough to satisfy the crowding human desire around both shores. But in that shortness lay its truth.

Musashi did not rush to boast, nor did he cry out in victory. He stood still first, breathing hard, looking at the fallen man from some ten paces away. Then he came back slowly and knelt beside Kojiro's body. Kojiro had been a great enemy, but also a man who had given Musashi a high measure by which to test his own life. For that alone there was something like gratitude in Musashi's silence. He touched lightly below Kojiro's nose and found that a faint breath still remained. At that his face changed. He was relieved. If treatment came quickly, perhaps this worthy rival would not vanish forever from the world because of one brief crossing of blades.

He bowed then. He bowed to Kojiro, and he bowed also toward the place where the officials and witnesses had sat. After that he rose in one motion and ran toward the north side of the island, carrying the oar-blade sword in his hand, clean and without blood. There a small boat was waiting. He leaped into it, and in another moment it was already leaving the shore. No tale remained of Kojiro's followers catching him on the water and forcing a second fight for revenge. The sea took him away as simply as it had brought him there.

Yet the waves of human feeling did not end with that departure. Even while he lived, there were people who were never willing to speak well of what he had done that day. They said he had been badly frightened as he fled, and they claimed

that this was proven by the fact that he had forgotten to finish off Kojiro before leaving the island. Such people always exist. Hatred and attachment do not leave the human heart easily. Time passes, but feelings go on rising and falling like waves under wind.

The noise of those waves is common in the world. Small fish sing in them and dance in them, happy in the shallow unrest near the surface. But who truly knows the mind of the deep water below, or its depth, or its silence? Musashi went on living beneath such talk, and others went on judging him from the shore. Yet what had passed between him and Kojiro on that island belonged not to easy praise or easy blame. It belonged to a deeper place. And like the sea itself, that place could be seen from above, but not measured by those who only watched the surface.