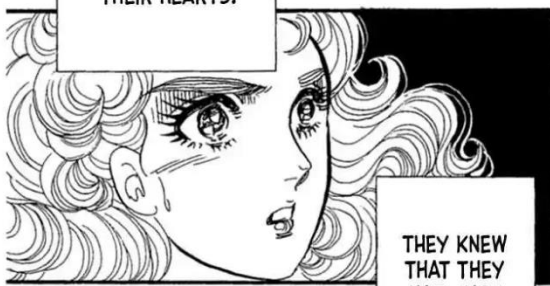




A NEWFOUND AND MYSTERIOUS SENSE OF AWE FILLED THEIR HEARTS.

THE AUDIENCE WAS LEFT SPEECHLESS.

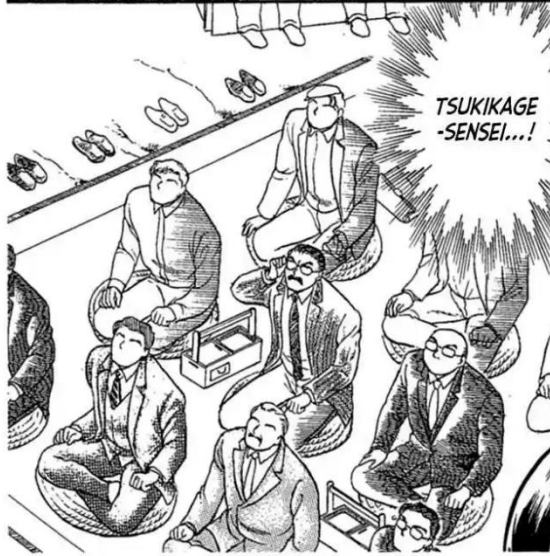


THEY KNEW THAT THEY HAD JUST WITNESSED A MIRACLE.



WITH THE SETTING HERE IN THE SCENIC VALLEY OF THE PLUM TREES, IT'S AS IF WE TRULY SAW THE REAL GODDESS FOR A MOMENT!

I CAN'T BELIEVE IT! SHE DROPPED THE FAN TO GRAB OUR ATTENTION AND DISAPPEARED AS WE WERE DISTRACTED!



TSUKIKAGE -SENSEI...!





SPLENDID!
TSUKIKAGE CHIGUSA
IS AS IMPRESSIVE
AS EVER.

MUCH LIKE
THE LINGERING
SCENT OF FLOWERS,
THE AWE REMAINS
IMPRESSED IN OUR
HEARTS EVEN
AFTER SHE
LEAVES!

NOW
THEN,

IN THE
OUTSKIRTS TO
THE WEST OF KYOTO
WAS A DARK, DENSE,
AND OVERGROWN
BAMBOO FOREST
THAT EVERYONE
KNEW TO
AVOID.

ROAR

ROAR

CROWS
COVERED
THE SKIES
AT DUSK LIKE
SO MANY DARK
CLOUDS.

A DUMPING
GROUND FOR
THE DEAD.

THIS WAS
AN OPEN AIR
CEMETERY.



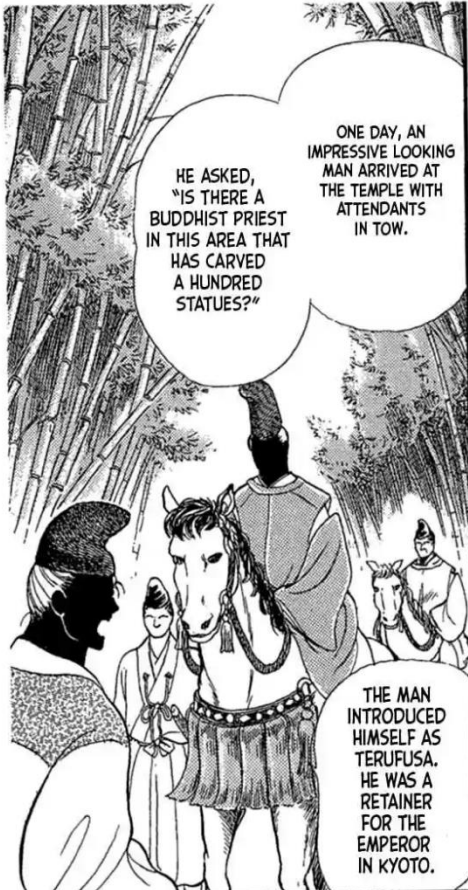
CROWS CAME
IN FLOCKS TO
PECK AT FLESH
AND BONE.

HALF-
EATEN
LIMBS LAID
STREWN
ABOUT.

WILD
DOGS
FEASTED
ON THE
BODIES
OF THE
DEAD.

NO ONE
GRIEVED
FOR THEM.

IT WAS WHERE
THE NAMELESS, THE
DESTITUTE, THE WRETCHED
VICTIMS OF DISEASE, AND
ALL THEIR LIKE WERE
THROWN AND LEFT
TO ROT.



HE ASKED, "IS THERE A BUDDHIST PRIEST IN THIS AREA THAT HAS CARVED A HUNDRED STATUES?"

ONE DAY, AN IMPRESSIVE LOOKING MAN ARRIVED AT THE TEMPLE WITH ATTENDANTS IN TOW.

THE MAN INTRODUCED HIMSELF AS TERUFUSA. HE WAS A RETAINER FOR THE EMPEROR IN KYOTO.



BUT BY LEAVING BEHIND THE WORLDLY LIFE HIS HEART WAS MUD-DLED

HE WAS TRYING TO ACCEPT FATE.



DEEP IN THIS BAMBOO FOREST LIVED A MAN.

HE WAS A FORMER MEMBER OF A BANDIT GANG.



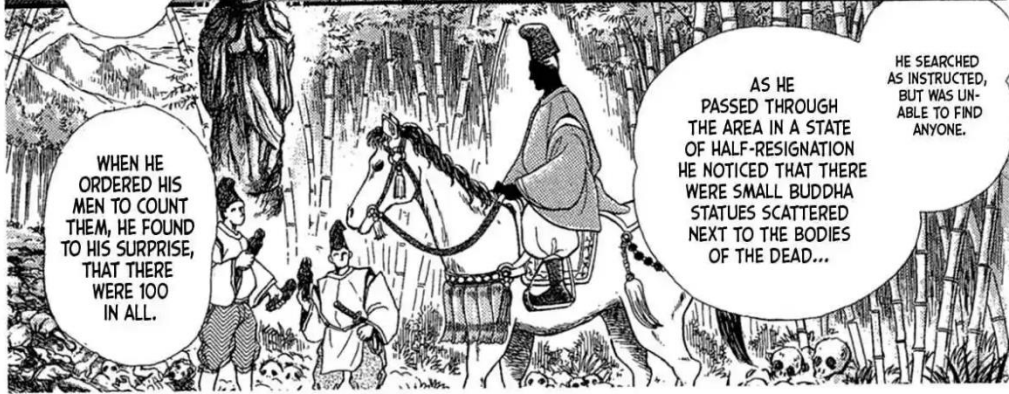
TERUFUSA EXPLAINED THE CAUSE FOR HIS JOURNEY.

THAT HE WOULD BE THE ONE TO CARVE THE STATUE."

WE WERE TOLD THAT HE WAS A PRIEST WHO HELD ONE TRUTH.

THE ORACLE DIVINED THAT THERE WAS SOMEONE IN THE BAMBOO FOREST TO THE WEST OF KYOTO WHO HAD CARVED 100 STATUES OF BUDDHA.

"THE EMPEROR IS LOOKING FOR A BUDDHIST PRIEST TO CARVE A STATUE OF THE GODDESS AND PRAY FOR PEACE IN THE LAND.



WHEN HE ORDERED HIS MEN TO COUNT THEM, HE FOUND TO HIS SURPRISE, THAT THERE WERE 100 IN ALL.

AS HE PASSED THROUGH THE AREA IN A STATE OF HALF-RESIGNATION HE NOTICED THAT THERE WERE SMALL BUDDHA STATUES SCATTERED NEXT TO THE BODIES OF THE DEAD...

HE SEARCHED AS INSTRUCTED, BUT WAS UN-ABLE TO FIND ANYONE.



THE MAN TOLD TERAFUSA HIS TALE.

THE MAN COULD NOT HIDE HIS SURPRISE.

"TRUE AS IT MAY BE THAT I MADE THOSE WOODEN BUDDHAS, I AM NOT WORTHY OF CARVING THE GREAT STATUE THAT YOU SEEK."

THAT IS HOW WE CAME TO FIND YOU HERE."

"SOMEONE FAMILIAR WITH THE AREA TOLD US THAT THERE WAS A MAN LIVING ALONE IN A RUINED TEMPLE NEARBY.

"WE WERE CERTAIN THAT IT WAS THE WORK OF THE PRIEST WHO COULD CARVE THE TRUE STATUE OF THE GODDESS."



BEFORE LONG, HE PREPARED TO DEDICATE HIS LIFE TO PRIESTLY WORK.

A FEW YEARS LATER A CERTAIN PRIEST RECOGNIZED HIS SKILLED HANDIWORK AND INVITED HIM TO BECOME A PUPIL.



THE HEAD PRIEST OF A LOCAL TEMPLE TOOK HIM IN AS AN ASSISTANT AND RAISED THE BOY,

BUT HE WAS LEFT UNABLE TO SPEAK OR SMILE FOR A LONG TIME.

SO BEGAN THE MAN'S STORY.



WHEN HE WAS SIX YEARS OLD, HIS VILLAGE WAS CAUGHT UP IN A BATTLE. HIS PARENTS AND SIBLINGS WERE KILLED, AND HIS VILLAGE WAS BURNED DOWN IN A SEA OF FLAME.

HE WAS BORN THE SON OF RURAL PEASANTS.



HE ONLY CREATED VAGUE FIGURES FROM SCRAPS OF WOOD FOR THE POOR."

"EVEN THOUGH HE CARVED GREAT STATUES FOR NOBLES, SAMURAI FAMILIES, AND THOSE OF WEALTH AND POWER,

"IN TIME, I BECAME SKILLED ENOUGH TO CARVE STATUES FOR THE PRIEST, BUT AT THE SAME TIME, BEGAN TO HAVE DOUBTS ABOUT HIS CONDUCT."



"A THING LIKE THAT COULD NEVER SAVE PEOPLE."

"IT'S NOT BUDDHA HIMSELF."

"A STATUE OF BUDDHA IS NOTHING MORE THAN AN OBJECT CARVED IN HIS SHAPE."

"HOW IS THAT DIFFERENT FROM SELLING MERE MERCHANDISE?"

"SO BUDDHA CAN BE PAID FOR WITH GOLD?"

"WHAT VALUE COULD IT POSSIBLY HAVE!?"

AND SO THE MAN WAS EXPELLED FROM THE TEMPLE.

"JUSTICE BELONGED TO THOSE WHO HAD POWER.

"IN THE END THE WORLD BELONGED TO THE WARRIORS."

"IF THAT'S HOW THE WORLD WAS, THEN WHAT WAS TO STOP ME FROM LIVING THAT WAY TOO?"

TRUE MORALITY WAS NOWHERE TO BE FOUND."

"THAT WAS HOW I CAME TO JOIN A BANDIT GANG.", THE MAN EXPLAINED.

"WE STOLE MONEY AND GOODS FROM THE NOBLES AND THE RICH, AND HAD ALL THE FUN WE COULD EVER WANT.

EVENTUALLY FRIENDS WERE ALL CAPTURED OR KILLED, AND I WAS LEFT BY MYSELF."

"I CAME TO KNOW THE WIND THROUGH THE RUSTLING OF THE BAMBOO GRASS."

"I THREW ASIDE DESIRE AND PROFIT TO WATCH THE SUN RISE AND SET."

"I LEARNED TO STOP AND LOOK AT BUDS AS THEY BLOSSOMED INTO FLOWERS."

AND SO I CAME TO LIVE ALONE IN THIS DILAPIDATED TEMPLE."

"I WAS WELL AND TRULY SICK OF WORLDLY LIFE



"AND THOUGHT THAT I OUGHT TO CARVE STATUES AGAIN IN PLACE OF A MEMORIAL SERVICE."

"WHEN I THOUGHT ABOUT IT THAT WAY, I BECAME FILLED WITH THE DESIRE TO DO SOMETHING."

"I RECALLED HOW I HAD CARVED STATUES OF BUDDHA ALL THOSE YEARS AGO,

"THEY MAY HAVE BEEN TOSSED ASIDE LIKE DISPOSABLE TOOLS, BUT UNTIL RECENTLY, THEY WERE PEOPLE WITH HEARTS LIKE ME."

"IT WAS AROUND THAT TIME THAT I BECAME CONCERNED ABOUT THE BODIES BEING ABANDONED AT THE NEARBY MOUNTAIN."

"AND SO I TOOK TO COLLECTING SCRAP WOOD AND CARVING STATUES OF BUDDHA AS OFFERINGS FOR THE DEAD."

"PERHAPS THERE WAS SOME MEANING TO ME BEING HERE IN THIS TEMPLE."



"DO YOU THINK THAT WORDS THAT NOT EVEN THE LIVING CAN UNDERSTAND WOULD BE COMPREHENSIBLE TO THE DEAD?"

"I'LL ASK YOU THIS. CAN PRIESTS SAVE ANYONE BY THROU THE READING OF SUTRAS?"

THE MAN RESPONDED WITH HIS OWN QUESTION.

"IF YOU SAY THAT STATUES OF BUDDHA CANNOT SAVE ANYONE, THEN WHY DO YOU CARVE THEM?"

TERAFUSA WANTED TO KNOW,



"IT IS HOW I MOURN THEM."

"THAT IS ALL."

"THEY HOLD MY EARNEST WISH FOR THE DEAD TO BECOME ENLIGHTENED SOULS."

"THE STATUES ARE THE MANIFESTATION OF MY HEART."

"IF THERE IS ANYTHING THAT THE DEAD MIGHT KNOW, IT IS THE HEART."

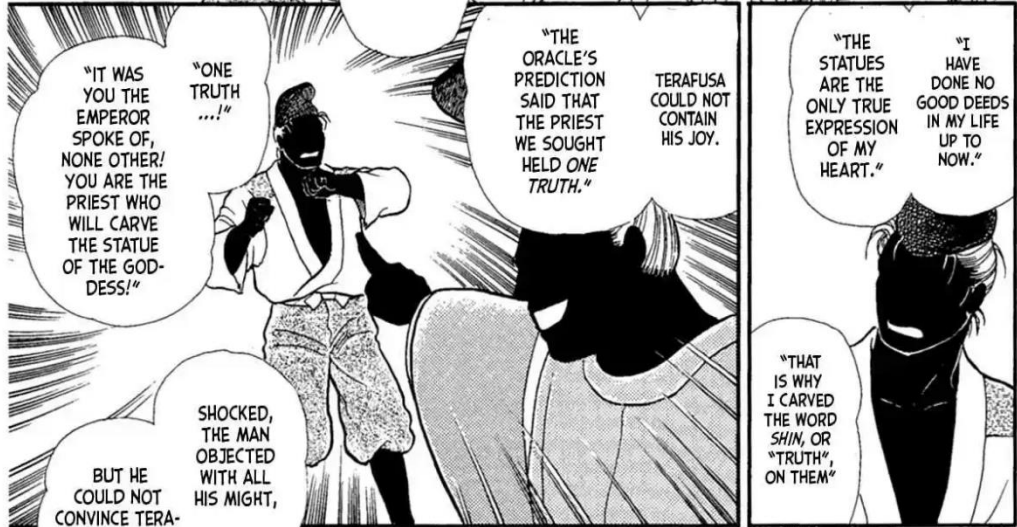


"WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?"

AT THAT MOMENT, ONE OF TERAFUSA'S ATTENDANTS HANDED HIM A STATUE

AND INFORMED HIM THAT THE WORD "TRUTH" WAS INSCRIBED ON THE BOTTOM.

TERAFUSA ASKED.



"IT WAS YOU THE EMPEROR SPOKE OF, NONE OTHER! YOU ARE THE PRIEST WHO WILL CARVE THE STATUE OF THE GODDESS!"

"ONE TRUTH ...!"

"THE ORACLE'S PREDICTION SAID THAT THE PRIEST WE SOUGHT HELD ONE TRUTH."

TERAFUSA COULD NOT CONTAIN HIS JOY.

"THE STATUES ARE THE ONLY TRUE EXPRESSION OF MY HEART."

"I HAVE DONE NO GOOD DEEDS IN MY LIFE UP TO NOW."

"THAT IS WHY I CARVED THE WORD SHIN, OR 'TRUTH', ON THEM"

SHOCKED, THE MAN OBJECTED WITH ALL HIS MIGHT, BUT HE COULD NOT CONVINCE TERAFUSA TO LOOK ELSEWHERE.



THEN, TERAFUSA MADE AN ANNOUNCEMENT.

TOOLS OF THE HIGHEST QUALITY WERE SENT TO THE TEMPLE ONE AFTER ANOTHER, ALONG WITH THREE ATTENDANTS TO SERVE HIM.

BUT BECAUSE HE INSISTED THAT HE COULD NOT GO TO THE CAPITAL NO MATTER WHAT,

"FROM THIS DAY ON, YOU WILL BE KNOWN AS ISSHIN, THE PRIEST."

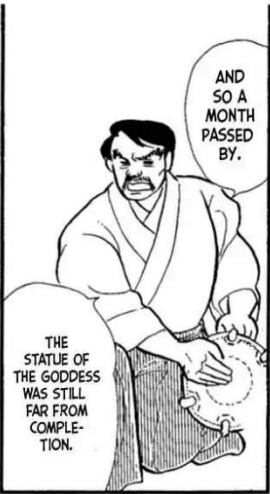
"THE ONE WHO HOLDS A SINGLE TRUTH."



HE BEGAN TO FEEL THAT PERHAPS HE WAS NOT SKILLED ENOUGH AFTER ALL. THAT SURELY THERE HAD BEEN SOME MISTAKE.

THE MAN MOCKED HIMSELF AS HE SUFFERED.

THERE WAS NO WAY THAT HE, WHO HAD GONE SO LOW AS TO STAIN HIS HANDS WITH BANDITRY, COULD CARVE A GODDESS STATUE TO PRAY FOR PEACE IN THE LAND.



AND SO A MONTH PASSED BY.

THE STATUE OF THE GODDESS WAS STILL FAR FROM COMPLETION.



NO MATTER HOW HARD HE TRIED, HE COULD NOT CARVE A STATUE WITH A SOUL.



HE TOILED IN ANGUISH.

BUT AT THE SAME TIME FELT PATHETIC THAT THE STATUE WASN'T COMING OUT THE WAY HE WANTED.

THE MAN DID NOT HAVE THE WILL TO FIGHT BACK.

HE INTENDED TO WAIT FOR AS LONG AS IT TOOK. STUBBORNLY AND PATIENTLY.

BUT TERAFUSA WOULD NOT LET HIM GO.



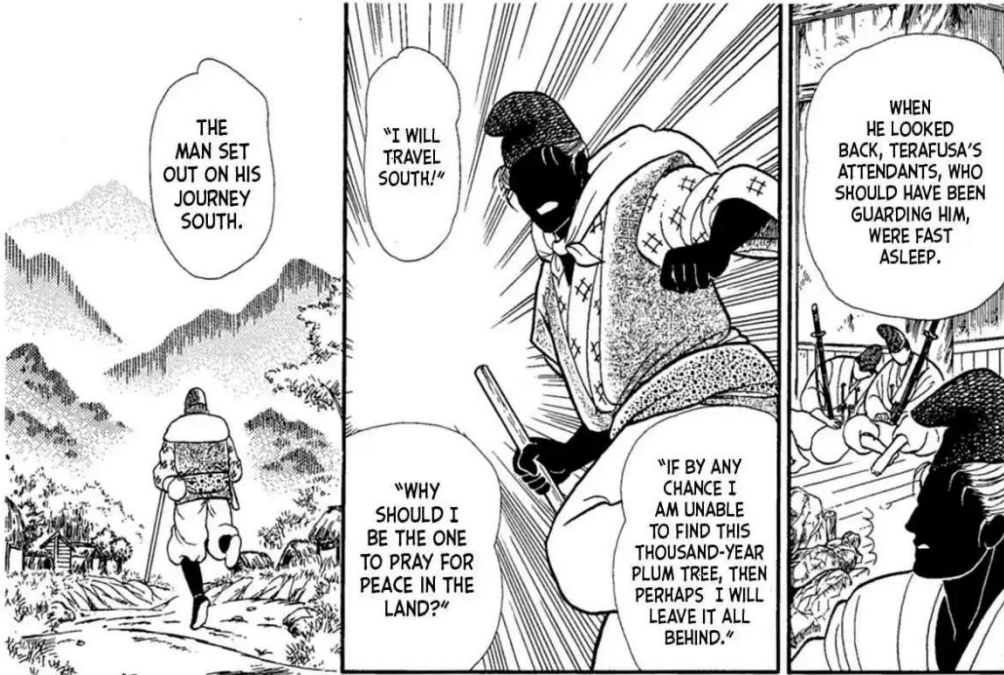
THE MONK FELL SILENT AND POINTED SOUTH.

WHEN THE MAN TURNED BACK THE MONK WAS GONE, AND ALL THAT REMAINED IN HIS PLACE WAS A DRY WIND...



"SEEK THE THOUSAND-YEAR PLUM TREE AND CARVE THE STATUE FROM ITS WOOD. YOU MAY CREATE A TRUE STATUE OF THE GODDESS WITH A SOUL."

ONE DAY, A MONK APPEARED IN THE MAN'S GARDEN.



THE MAN SET OUT ON HIS JOURNEY SOUTH.

"I WILL TRAVEL SOUTH!"

WHEN HE LOOKED BACK, TERAUSA'S ATTENDANTS, WHO SHOULD HAVE BEEN GUARDING HIM, WERE FAST ASLEEP.

"WHY SHOULD I BE THE ONE TO PRAY FOR PEACE IN THE LAND?"

"IF BY ANY CHANCE I AM UNABLE TO FIND THIS THOUSAND-YEAR PLUM TREE, THEN PERHAPS I WILL LEAVE IT ALL BEHIND."



"DOES ANYONE KNOW OF A THOUSAND-YEAR PLUM TREE?"

NO ONE COULD TELL HIM YES.

THROUGH RAIN AND WIND. ON AND ON, HE WALKED. SOUTH, EVER SOUTH...



THE MAN'S HOT-BLOODED PASSION WELLED UP IN HIS HEART DESPITE HIMSELF. THAT WAS WHEN IT HAPPENED.

A GANG OF BANDITS CAME TO ROB THE MAN.

BUT RIGHT AROUND THE TIME HE WAS ABOUT TO GIVE UP.

"I'VE HAD ENOUGH. I NEVER HAD THE POWER TO DO THIS IN THE FIRST PLACE."



"I CAN'T
CARVE ANY
STATUES WITH-
OUT IT!"

"WAIT!
I DON'T
CARE ABOUT
THE OTHER
THINGS!
BUT
PLEASE
AT LEAST
LEAVE MY
CHISEL!"

THE MAN
FOUND
HIMSELF
SHOUTING.



HIS VOICE
TREMBLED
AS HE
SHOUTED

"ISSHIN
IS MY
NAME!"

THE
MAN'S
OWN WORDS
SURPRISED
HIM.

"I AM A
BUDDHIST
PRIEST!"

THE
LEADER
OF THE
BANDITS
ASKED.

"I WANT
TO KNOW
WHO YOU
ARE."

"I HAVE
BEEN ORDERED
BY THE EMPEROR
TO CARVE A STATUE
OF THE GODDESS
FOR THE SAKE
OF PEACE IN
THE WORLD!"



"THIS
MUCH I
CAN DO
WITHOUT."

THE
BANDIT
LEADER
GAVE THE
CHISEL
BACK.

"I
SUPPOSE
THAT'S
FINE."

THE
BANDITS
LAUGHED AND
SCORNFULLY
MOCKED HIM.



"IN EXCHANGE, IF YOU ARE INDEED A PRIEST, I'D LIKE YOU TO CARVE A TATUE FOR ME ONE DAY."

"I DOUBT I'LL MEET A DECENT DEATH WITH THE WAY I LIVE."

"I'M SURE TO FALL INTO HELL WHEN I DIE."

"MAYBE THAT BUDDHA WOULD GUIDE ME, AND EVEN SOMEONE LIKE ME COULD END UP IN THE PURE LAND OR WHATEVER YOU CALL IT."

"BUT PERHAPS IF YOU WERE TO CARVE A STATUE FOR ME."



THE BANDITS WENT AWAY LAUGHING.

ISSHIN, THE PRIEST, WENT BACK TO HIS JOURNEY ONCE MORE.
SOUTH,
EVER SOUTH...



IT WAS AT THIS VERY MOMENT THAT HE TRULY UNDERSTOOD WHAT HE WAS MEANT TO DO.

THE MAN COULD NOT TOP SHAKING AT THE WORDS THAT HAD COME OUT OF HIS MOUTH.

"I AM A BUDDHIST PRIEST."

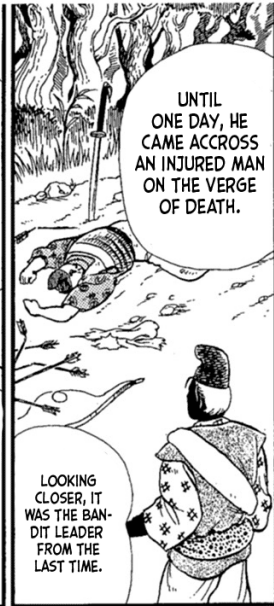




"ARE YOU ALRIGHT?
IT'S ME, THE
PRIEST FROM
BEFORE."

"I'M GLAD TO
SEE YOU STILL
ALIVE. IF I DIE
HERE, PLEASE
CARVE A STATUE
FOR ME."

WHEN
THE BANDIT
NOTICED ISSHIN,
HE LET OUT A
PAINED BUT
HAPPY SIGH.



UNTIL
ONE DAY, HE
CAME ACCROSS
AN INJURED MAN
ON THE MERGE
OF DEATH.

LOOKING
CLOSER, IT
WAS THE BAN-
DIT LEADER
FROM THE
LAST TIME.



ISSHIN
PASSED
THROUGH
BATTLE-
FIELDS

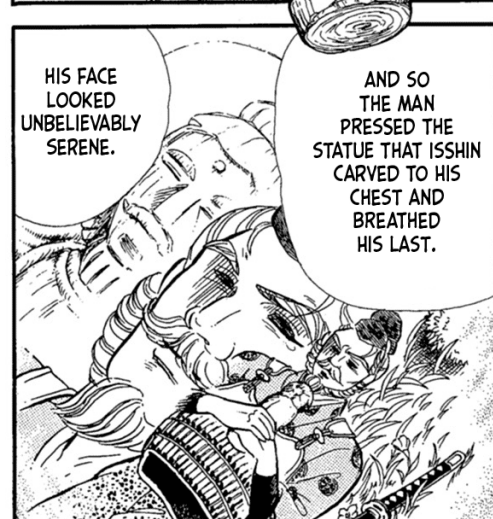
AND
VILLAGES
DEVASTATED
BY DROUGHT.



THE STATUE
HAD A STRIKING
RESEMBLANCE TO
THE BANDIT.

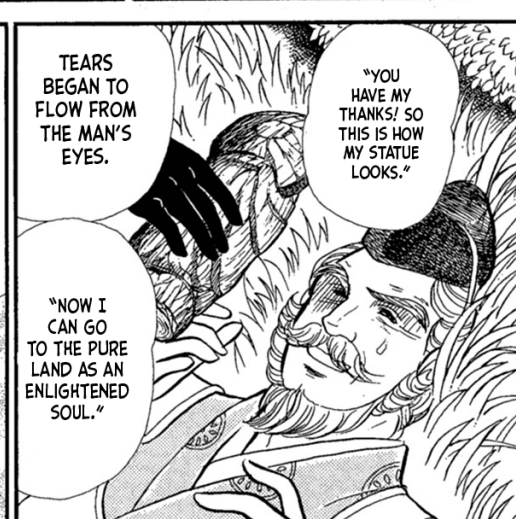
ISSHIN
QUICKLY
PULLED OUT A
STATUE FROM
HIS BREAST
POCKET.

HE HAD
CARVED IT
WHILE ON HIS
JOURNEY.



HIS FACE
LOOKED
UNBELIEVABLY
SERENE.

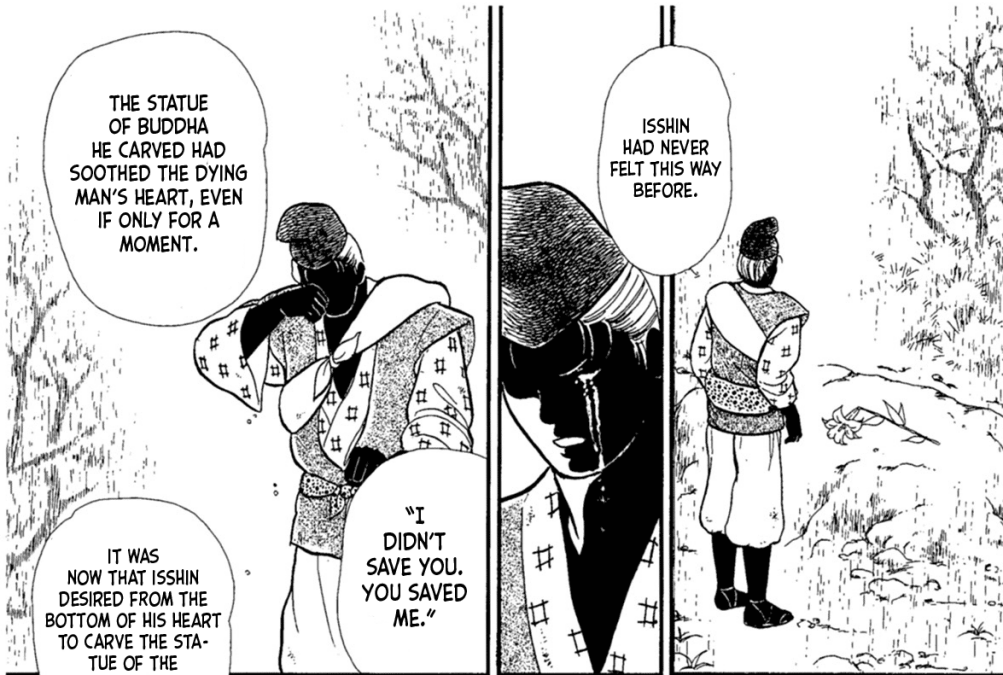
AND SO
THE MAN
PRESSED THE
STATUE THAT ISSHIN
CARVED TO HIS
CHEST AND
BREADED HIS LAST.



TEARS
BEGAN TO
FLOW FROM
THE MAN'S
EYES.

"YOU
HAVE MY
THANKS! SO
THIS IS HOW
MY STATUE
LOOKS."

"NOW I
CAN GO
TO THE PURE
LAND AS AN
ENLIGHTENED
SOUL."



THE STATUE OF BUDDHA HE CARVED HAD SOOTHED THE DYING MAN'S HEART, EVEN IF ONLY FOR A MOMENT.

ISSHIN HAD NEVER FELT THIS WAY BEFORE.

IT WAS NOW THAT ISSHIN DESIRED FROM THE BOTTOM OF HIS HEART TO CARVE THE STATUE OF THE GODDESS.

"I DIDN'T SAVE YOU. YOU SAVED ME."



"NOT TERAFUSA AND NOT THE EMPEROR!"

"I WILL NO LONGER THINK OF EARNING PRAISE FROM OTHERS!"

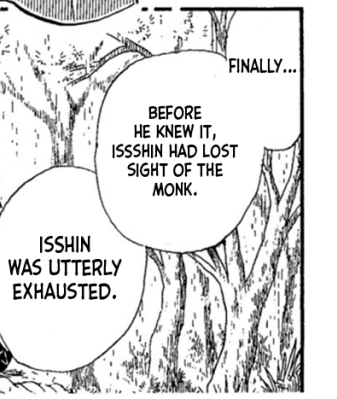
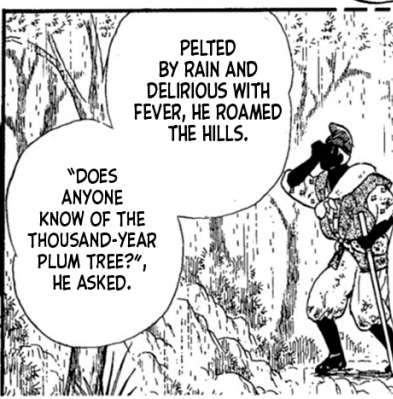
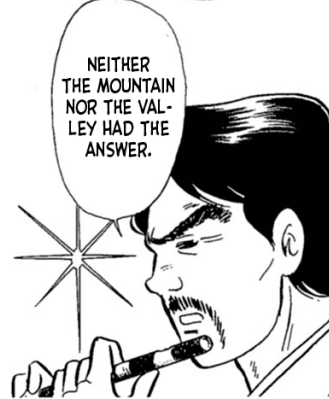
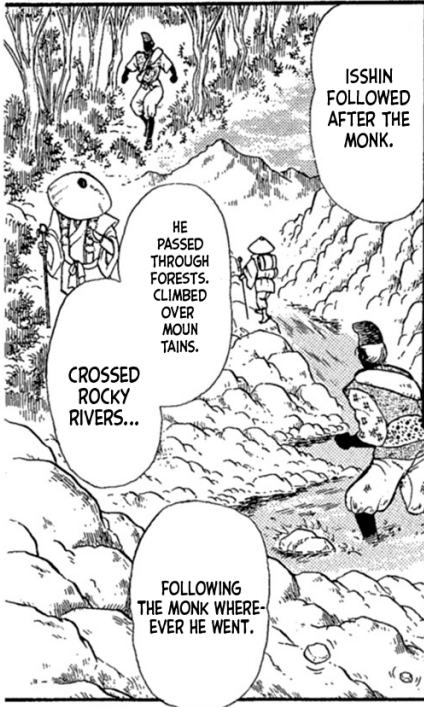
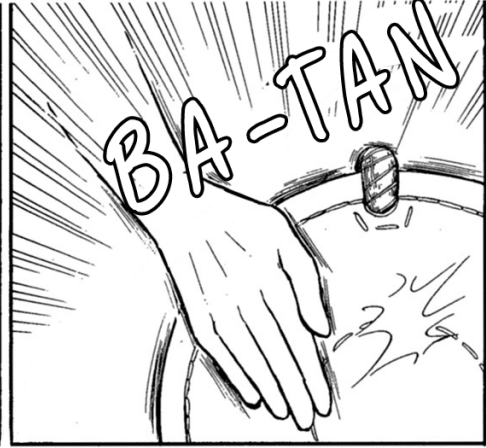
"I WILL NO LONGER WORRY ABOUT CARVING WELL!"



"THEN I WILL PUT MY LIFE INTO CARVING THE STATUE OF THE GODDESS!"

IF THAT IS SOMETHING I CAN ACHIEVE WITH BY OWN HANDS..."

"IF I CAN SAVE THE HEARTS OF THOSE WHO SUFFER IN THIS TEMPORAL WORLD..."



NEITHER THE MOUNTAIN NOR THE VALLEY HAD THE ANSWER.

"DOES ANYONE KNOW OF THE THOUSAND-YEAR PLUM TREE?", HE ASKED.

PELTED BY RAIN AND DELIRIOUS WITH FEVER, HE ROAMED THE HILLS.

ISSHIN WAS UTTERLY EXHAUSTED.

BEFORE HE KNEW IT, ISSHIN HAD LOST SIGHT OF THE MONK.

FINALLY...

ISSHIN FOLLOWED AFTER THE MONK.

SUDDENLY, THE MONK FROM BEFORE APPEARED BEFORE ISSHIN AGAIN.

HE PASSED THROUGH FORESTS. CLIMBED OVER MOUNTAINS.

SILENTLY HE POINTED SOUTH.

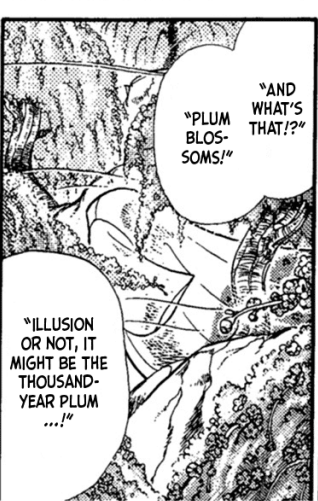
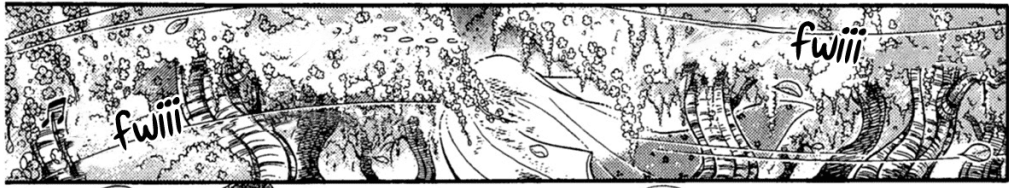
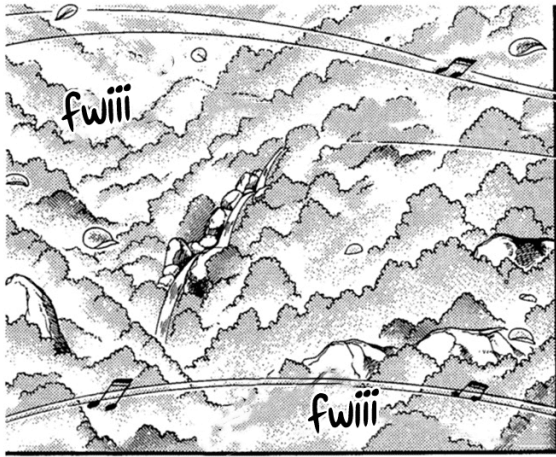
CROSSED ROCKY RIVERS...

FOLLOWING THE MONK WHEREVER HE WENT.

rustle

BA-TAN

GENZO-SAN





ROAR

ROAR

flap

flap

flap

ALONG WITH THE SOUND OF FRIGHTENED BIRDS BURSTING OUT OF THE TREES INTO THE AIR.

BEFORE LONG, A FAINT SCREAM WAS HEARD ECHOING THROUGH THE MOUNTAINS.

ISSHIN DISAPPEARED DEEPER INTO THE MOUNTAINS CHASING AFTER ILLUSIONS.

THAT WAS THE LAST TIME ANYONE SAW HIM.



"IT'S A SACRED, FORBIDDEN LAND, AND THE PEOPLE THERE HAVE PROTECTED THE GODS OVER GENERATIONS."

"IT'S IN A PLACE CALLED THE CRIMSON VALLEY, WHERE THE GODS WHO RULE HEAVEN AND EARTH DWELL."

WHERE A TRIO OF TRAVELING ENTERTAINERS HAD COME IN SEARCH OF WORK.

NOW THEN.

LET US MOVE TO A CERTAIN VILLAGE IN THE MOUNTAINS.

TWO MEN AND ONE WOMAN. THEIR APPEARANCE SUGGESTED THAT THEY WERE CIRCUS PERFORMERS.



A FRIENDLY VILLAGE MAN EXPLAINED.

"MAYBE THEY'LL EMPLOY YOU IF YOU SPEAK TO THE VILLAGE CHIEF."

"THEY NORMALLY REFUSE ALL OUTSIDERS EXCEPT ON THE DAY OF THE FESTIVAL."

"IF IT'S A FESTIVAL YOU WANT, VISIT THE VILLAGE ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE MOUNTAIN."

"ARE THERE ANY NEARBY VILLAGES HOLDING FESTIVALS IN THE COMING DAYS?"

A VILLAGE WOMAN TOLD THEM.





"OH MY!
THE EMPEROR,
YOU SAY!?"

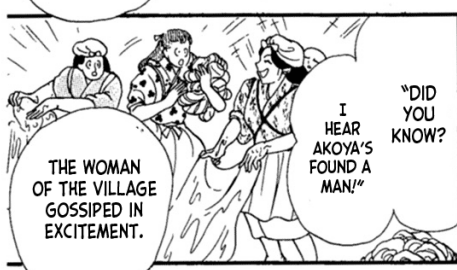
"I HEARD
SHE EVEN
CURED THE
EMPEROR IN
YOSHINO."

THE MAN
SHOUTED
IN SURPRISE.



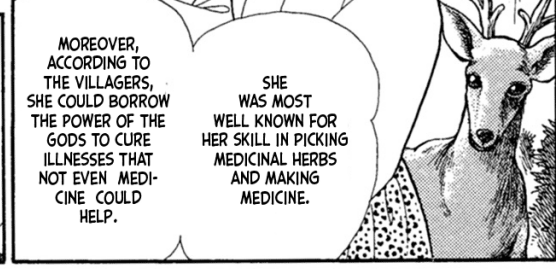
RUMORS
HAD IT THAT
SHE UNDERSTOOD
THE HEARTS OF THE
GODS, AND COULD
SPEAK WITH THE WIND,
THE TREES, AND
PLANTS, AND
THE ANI-
MALS.

IN THAT
VILLAGE THERE
WAS A MYSTERIOUS
GIRL NAMED AKOYA WHO
WAS SAID TO BE ABLE
TO HEAR THE VOICES
OF THE GODS.



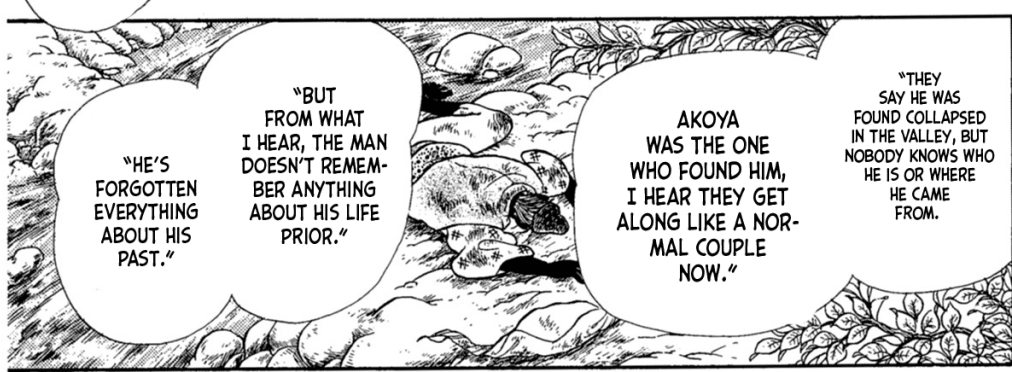
THE WOMAN
OF THE VILLAGE
GOSSIPED IN
EXCITEMENT.

"DID
YOU
KNOW?"
I HEAR
AKOYA'S
FOUND A
MAN!"



MOREOVER,
ACCORDING TO
THE VILLAGERS,
SHE COULD BORROW
THE POWER OF THE
GODS TO CURE
ILLNESSES THAT
NOT EVEN MEDI-
CINE COULD
HELP.

SHE
WAS MOST
WELL KNOWN FOR
HER SKILL IN PICKING
MEDICINAL HERBS
AND MAKING
MEDICINE.

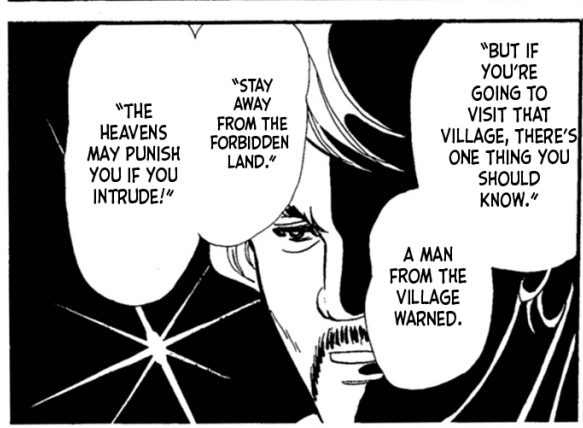


"HE'S
FORGOTTEN
EVERYTHING
ABOUT HIS
PAST."

"BUT
FROM WHAT
I HEAR, THE MAN
DOESN'T REMEM-
BER ANYTHING
ABOUT HIS LIFE
PRIOR."

AKOYA
WAS THE ONE
WHO FOUND HIM,
I HEAR THEY GET
ALONG LIKE A NOR-
MAL COUPLE
NOW."

"THEY
SAY HE WAS
FOUND COLLAPSED
IN THE VALLEY, BUT
NOBODY KNOWS WHO
HE IS OR WHERE
HE CAME
FROM."

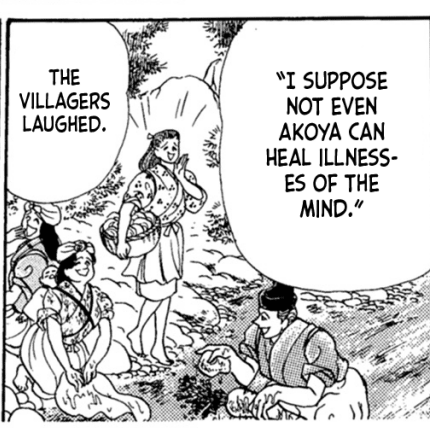


"THE
HEAVENS
MAY PUNISH
YOU IF YOU
INTRUDE!"

"STAY
AWAY
FROM THE
FORBIDDEN
LAND."

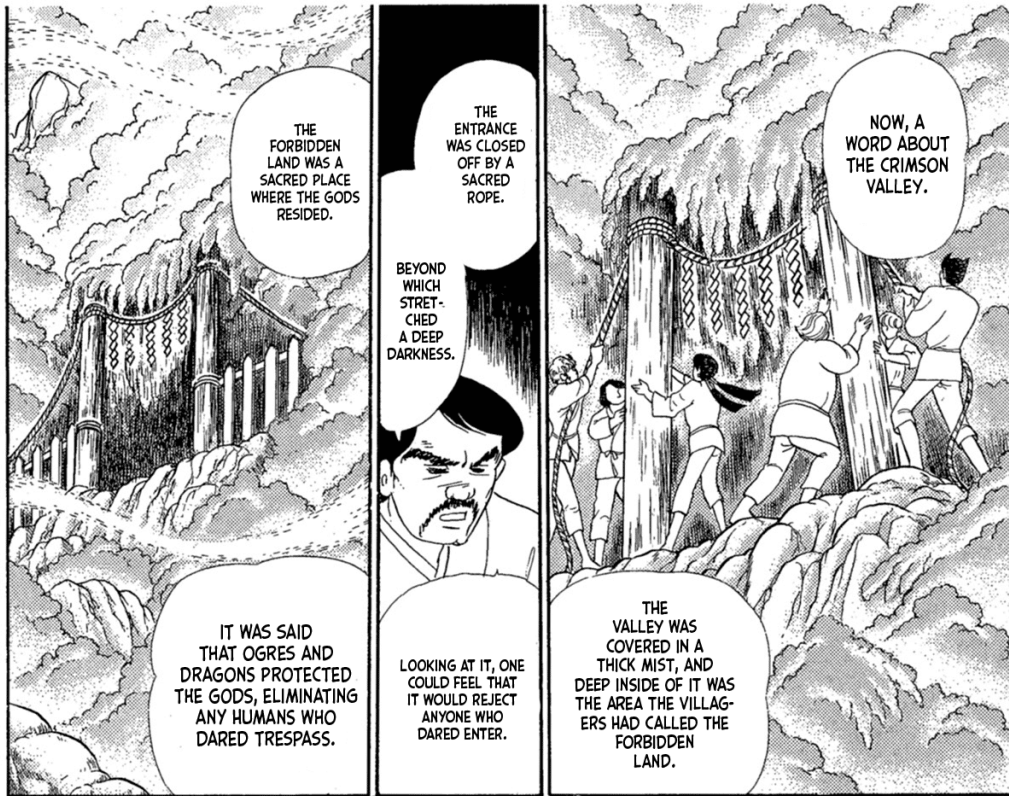
"BUT IF
YOU'RE
GOING TO
VISIT THAT
VILLAGE, THERE'S
ONE THING YOU
SHOULD
KNOW."

A MAN
FROM THE
VILLAGE
WARNED.



THE
VILLAGERS
LAUGHED.

"I SUPPOSE
NOT EVEN
AKOYA CAN
HEAL ILLNESS-
ES OF THE
MIND."



THE FORBIDDEN LAND WAS A SACRED PLACE WHERE THE GODS RESIDED.

THE ENTRANCE WAS CLOSED OFF BY A SACRED ROPE. BEYOND WHICH STRETCHED A DEEP DARKNESS.

NOW, A WORD ABOUT THE CRIMSON VALLEY.

IT WAS SAID THAT OGRES AND DRAGONS PROTECTED THE GODS, ELIMINATING ANY HUMANS WHO DARED TRESPASS.

LOOKING AT IT, ONE COULD FEEL THAT IT WOULD REJECT ANYONE WHO DARED ENTER.

THE VALLEY WAS COVERED IN A THICK MIST, AND DEEP INSIDE OF IT WAS THE AREA THE VILLAGERS HAD CALLED THE FORBIDDEN LAND.



RUMORS SWIRLED THAT HE HAD BEEN EATEN BY OGRES.

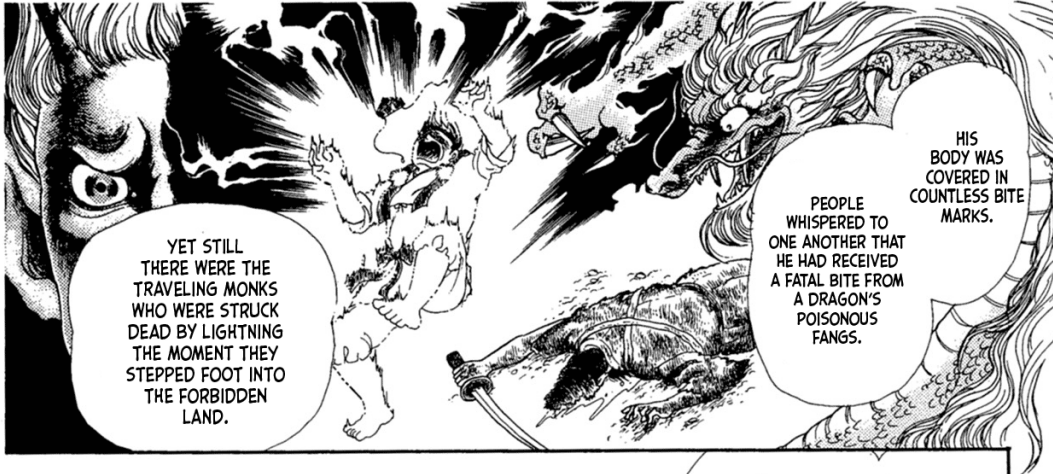
SOME TIME LATER, VILLAGERS WERE SHOCKED TO DISCOVER WILD DOGS GNAWING ON THE BANDIT'S FRESHLY SEVERED HEAD.

THERE WAS ONCE A BANDIT WHO FLED INTO THE FORBIDDEN LAND AND NEVER RETURNED.

HE MANAGED TO ESCAPE AFTER A LONG AND PAINFUL STRUGGLE, ONLY TO COLLAPSE AND DIE SHORTLY AFTER.

HE ENTERED THE FORBIDDEN LAND, IGNORING THE VILLAGER'S PLEAS FOR HIM TO STOP.

ANOTHER TIME, A SAMURAI PROUD OF HIS SKILL HEARD THE TALES AND BOASTED THAT HE COULD KILL THE OGRES.



YET STILL THERE WERE THE TRAVELING MONKS WHO WERE STRUCK DEAD BY LIGHTNING THE MOMENT THEY STEPPED FOOT INTO THE FORBIDDEN LAND.

PEOPLE WHISPERED TO ONE ANOTHER THAT HE HAD RECEIVED A FATAL BITE FROM A DRAGON'S POISONOUS FANGS.
HIS BODY WAS COVERED IN COUNTLESS BITE MARKS.



IN ANY CASE, THESE STORIES WERE MORE THAN ENOUGH TO INSPIRE FEAR.

AND THAT THE SAMURAI WASN'T KILLED BY A DRAGON, BUT BY A SWARM OF POISONOUS INSECTS.

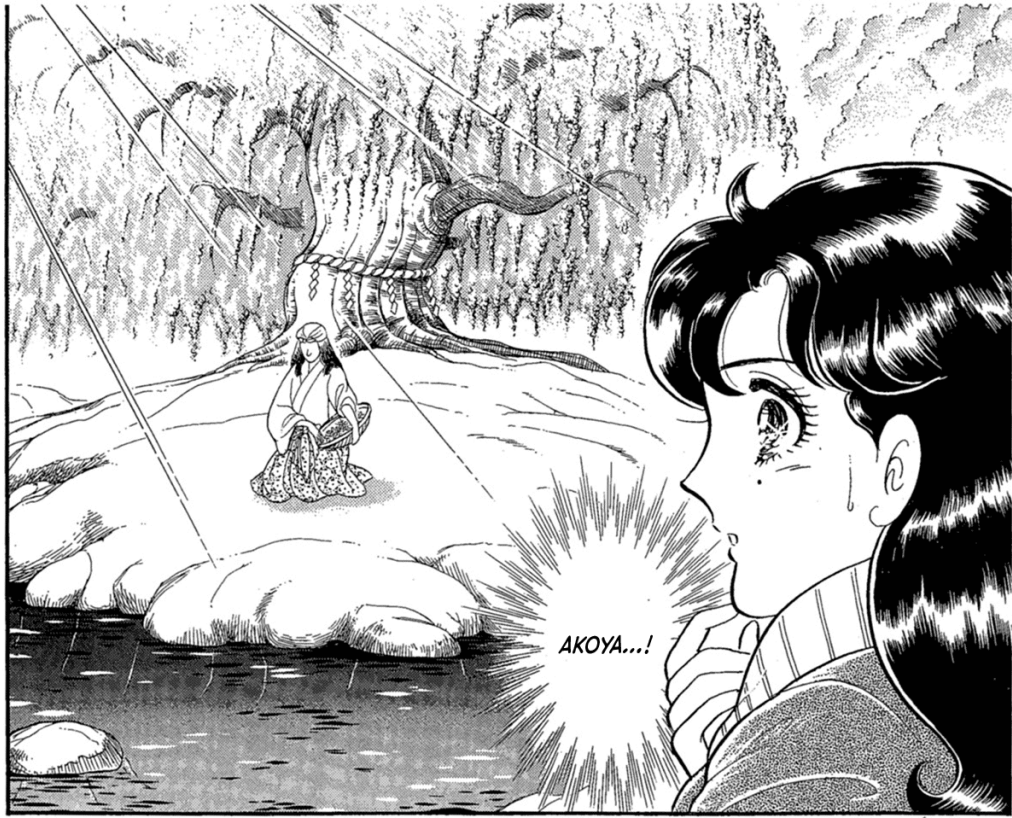
OF COURSE THERE WERE SOME WHO ARGUED THAT THE BANDIT WASN'T KILLED BY AN OGRE, BUT BY A PACK OF WILD DOGS.



BA-TAN



NOW NO ONE DARED APPROACH THE FORBIDDEN LAND.



"IN FACT, I THOUGHT THAT YOU WERE WHAT A CELESTIAL MAIDEN MIGHT LOOK LIKE."

"AS MY BODY WAS WRACKED BY THAT THROBBING, BURNING PAIN, THE FIRST THING I SAW WHEN I OPENED MY EYES WAS YOUR BEAUTIFUL FACE."

"THAT DAY ..."

"BUT I CANNOT REMEMBER ANYTHING FROM MY PAST, NOT EVEN MY OWN NAME..."

"WHEN I ASKED AROUND, I WAS TOLD THAT YOU WERE THE ONE WHO SAVED ME WHEN I COLLAPSED IN THE VALLEY."

AREN'T YOU ALWAYS DOING THAT?

"I'M LOOKING AT YOU, AKOYA."

WATCHING ME.

WHAT IS IT THAT YOU'RE LOOKING AT, MY DEAR?

"SOMETIMES I WONDER HOW I EVEN LIVED BEFORE I MET YOU."

"IT'S BECAUSE I ALWAYS WANT TO LOOK AT YOU, AKOYA."

YOU ARE THE ONLY ONE FOR ME.

THEY HEALED FASTER THAN I COULD HAVE IMAGINED ..."

"SOMEHOW THE PAIN DISAPPEARED FROM MY WOUNDS WHENEVER YOUR KIND HAND TOUCHED THEM."

"BUT YOU WARMLY LOOKED AFTER ME."

"I DRANK THE MEDICINE YOU MADE FOR ME."

ATE THE FOOD YOU CARRIED TO MY MOUTH."

"LIKE A CHILD WHO RELIES ON HIS MOTHER, I DEPENDED ENTIRELY ON YOUR KINDNESS."



WHY MUST YOU LEAVE ME?

DON'T SAY SUCH UPSETTING THINGS.

"AKOYA ..."

WHERE DO YOU INTEND TO GO NEXT?



"AND IF ONLY I HADN'T HEALED YOUR WOUNDS."



"AND THOUGH I MUST LEAVE NOW THAT I AM HEALED IT FEELS AS THOUGH MY BODY IS BEING TORN IN TWO."

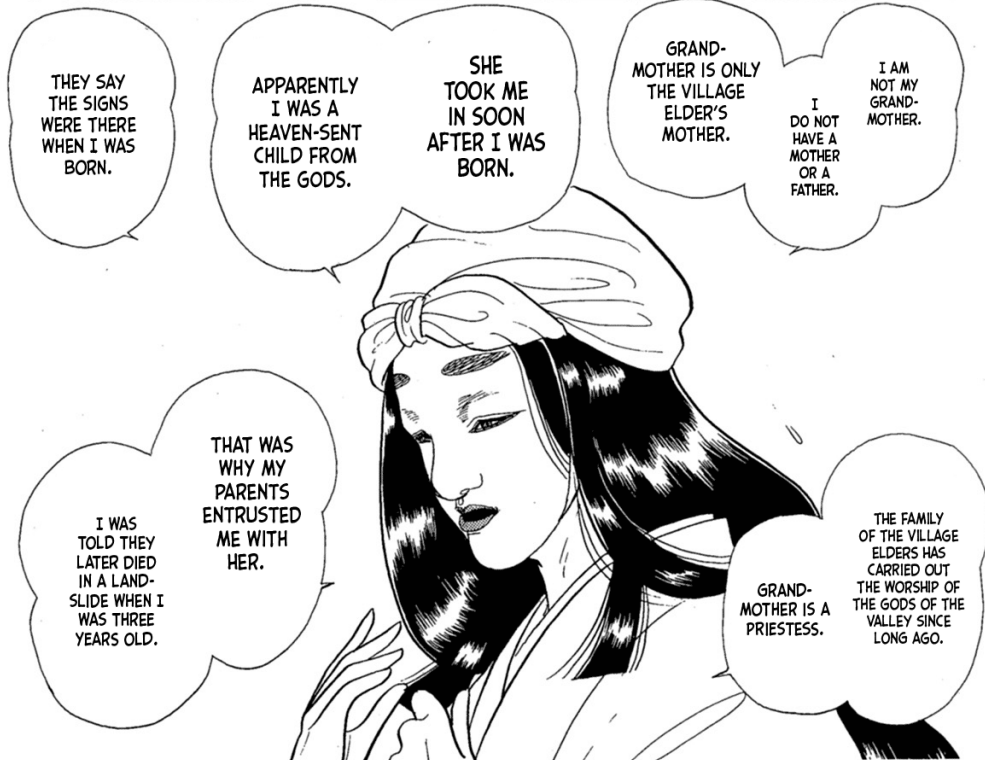
"IF ONLY MY WOUNDS HAD NEVER HEALED."



"YOUR GRANDMOTHER ALSO DISLIKES ME."

THE VILLAGE ELDER DOES NOT TAKE KINDLY TO ME."

"I AM BUT AN OUTSIDER."



THEY SAY THE SIGNS WERE THERE WHEN I WAS BORN.

APPARENTLY I WAS A HEAVEN-SENT CHILD FROM THE GODS.

SHE TOOK ME IN SOON AFTER I WAS BORN.

GRAND-MOTHER IS ONLY THE VILLAGE ELDER'S MOTHER.

I DO NOT HAVE A MOTHER OR A FATHER.

I AM NOT MY GRAND-MOTHER.

I WAS TOLD THEY LATER DIED IN A LANDSLIDE WHEN I WAS THREE YEARS OLD.

THAT WAS WHY MY PARENTS ENTRUSTED ME WITH HER.

GRAND-MOTHER IS A PRIESTESS.

THE FAMILY OF THE VILLAGE ELDERS HAS CARRIED OUT THE WORSHIP OF THE GODS OF THE VALLEY SINCE LONG AGO.



OR DO YOU MEAN TO TELL ME THAT YOU DON'T FEEL THE SAME?

WHY WOULD YOU SAY SOMETHING LIKE THAT?

THE NARRATOR, GENZO, HAD SMOOTHLY INSERTED HIMSELF INTO THE PLAY.

IT IS ONLY WHEN I IMAGINE YOUR ABSENCE THAT A DARK LONELINESS OVERTAKES MY HEART.

I HAVE EVER FELT LONELY IN MY LIFE.

I HAVE NEVER FELT LIKE THIS BEFORE...

HE PLAYED ISSHIN WITHOUT LETTING UP HIS ROLE AS NARRATOR.

"PERISH THE THOUGHT, AKOYA."

"HOW COULD THAT EVER BE TRUE!?"

"IT'S A DREAM COME TRUE."

"HOW CAN THIS BE! A BEAUTIFUL GIRL LIKE YOU HAS COME TO LOVE A MAN LIKE ME..."



HALF OF YOUR SOUL?

I KNEW RIGHT AWAY.

ON THAT DAY ...

THE DAY I FIRST SAW YOU IN THE VALLEY ...

THAT YOU WERE THE OTHER HALF OF MY SOUL THAT GRANDMOTHER HAD TOLD ME ABOUT.

HE HAS TO EXPRESS ISSHIN'S FEELINGS WITHOUT OVERSTEPPING HIS BOUNDS AS THE NARRATOR!

HE IS FORCED TO BE BOTH THE NARRATOR AND THE CHARACTER, ISSHIN!

HE DOES IT SO NATURALLY!

WHAT A DIFFICULT ROLE!

NOTHING ABOUT HIS PERFORMANCE FEELS OFF!



BACK WHEN THE WORLD WAS STILL A SEA OF CHAOS, THE GODS HAD CHILDREN AND SENT THEM TO THE WORLD BELOW.

IT WAS THEN THAT THEIR SOULS WERE SPLIT INTO YIN AND YANG AND MADE TO DWELL IN DIFFERENT BODIES.

AND BRING ABOUT NEW LIFE...

THEY WOULD BECOME GODS

SO THAT WHEN THEY REUNITED ONE DAY, THE TWO HALVES WOULD JOIN TOGETHER AND BECOME ONE.



IT IS THE POWERFUL DESIRE FOR THE SOUL OF ANOTHER...



"A STRANGE POWER?"



GRAND-MOTHER SAID THAT A STRANGE POWER WOULD MANIFEST WHEN THAT TIME CAME.

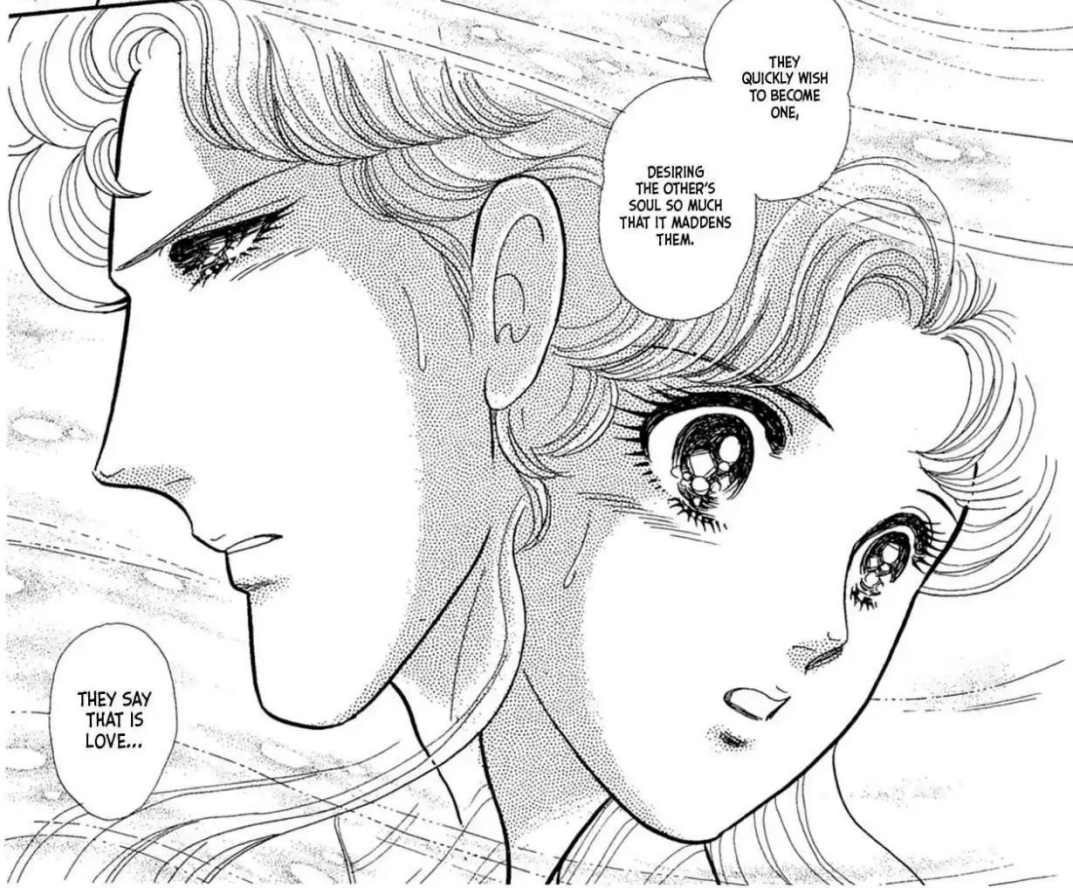


THE TWO SOULS ARE DRAWN TO ONE ANOTHER.

NEITHER AGE,
NOR OUTWARD FORM,

IT IS SAID ONE CANNOT HELP BUT LONG FOR THEIR OTHER HALF.

NOR SOCIAL STATUS MATTER.



THEY QUICKLY WISH TO BECOME ONE,
DESIRING THE OTHER'S SOUL SO MUCH THAT IT MADDENS THEM.

THEY SAY THAT IS LOVE...



TO LOVE IS TO DESIRE THE SOUL OF ANOTHER.

IN ORDER TO BECOME DIVINE.

"NO, IT'S I WHO IS UNEASY."
"I DO NOT THINK I AM A VERY SUITABLE MAN FOR YOU."

"BUT I AM A MAN WHO KNOWS NEITHER HIS NAME NOR HIS ORIGIN."
"I HAVE NOTHING."
"NOT A NAME, AND NOT A PAST."
"TO HAVE A PARTNER LIKE THAT?"
"DOES THAT NOT MAKE YOU UNEASY?"

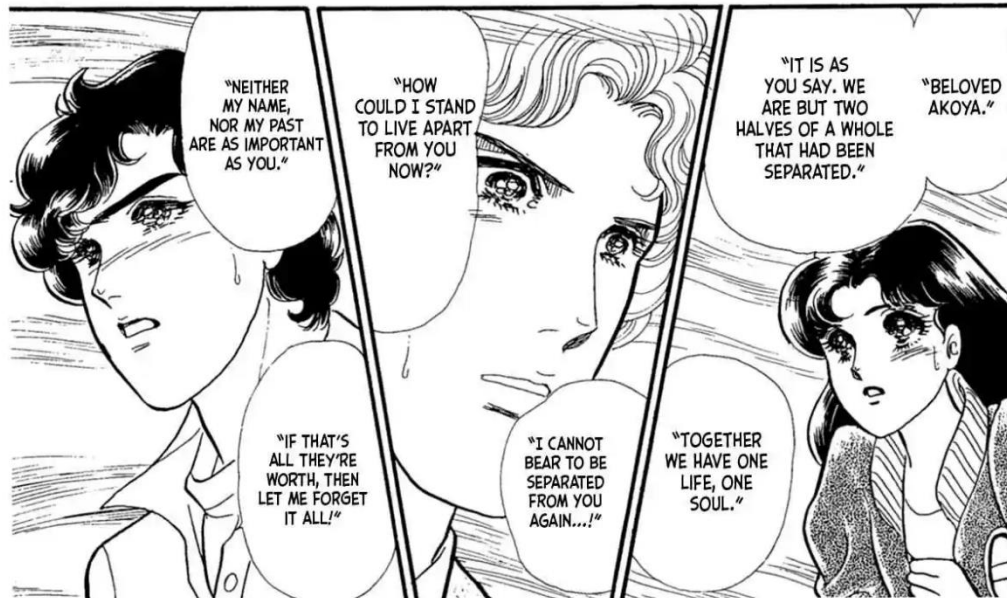
THE FEELING OF MY HEART LEAPING AT THE THOUGHT OF YOU.

HOW STRANGE IT IS TO EXPERIENCE IT FOR THE FIRST TIME.
TRUTHFULLY, NOT EVEN I COULD BELIEVE IT,

"ALL I HAVE IS THIS BODY, AND THESE TWO EYES WITH WHICH TO SEE YOU..."



THE EXHILARATION OF MY HEART AT THE SOUND OF YOUR VOICE.
OH THE HAPPINESS I FEEL AT YOUR TOUCH!





"I'M SO HAPPY... DEAR,"

LEAN

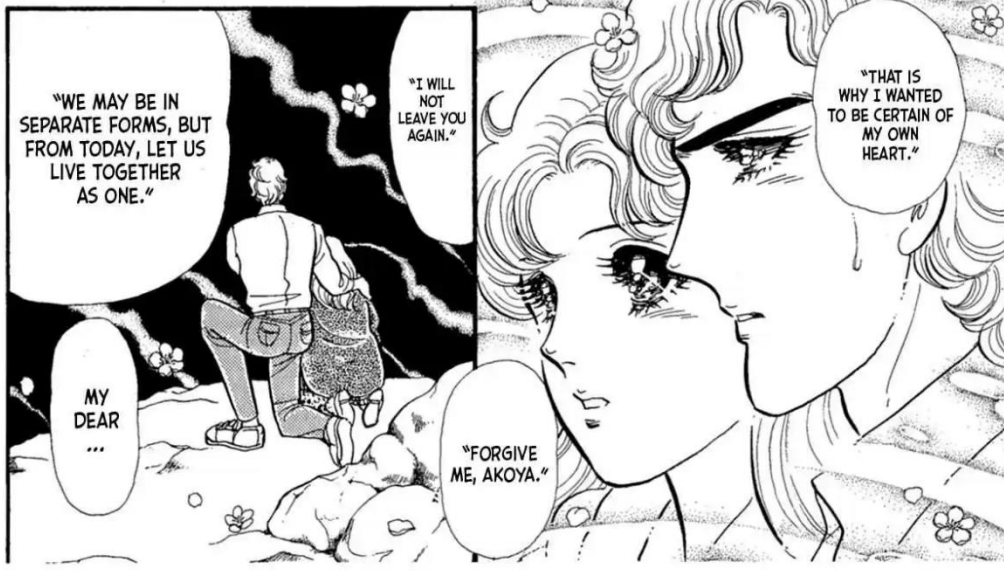
"EYES THAT CAN SEE YOU"
"ARMS THAT CAN EMBRACE YOU."

SO LONG AS I HAVE A BODY WITH WHICH TO LOVE YOU, I NEED NOTHING ELSE.



"WHY IS IT THAT WE CANNOT LIVE AS ONE?"

"WHAT MAKES ME UNEASY IS THAT OUR BODIES WERE BORN APART."



"WE MAY BE IN SEPARATE FORMS, BUT FROM TODAY, LET US LIVE TOGETHER AS ONE."

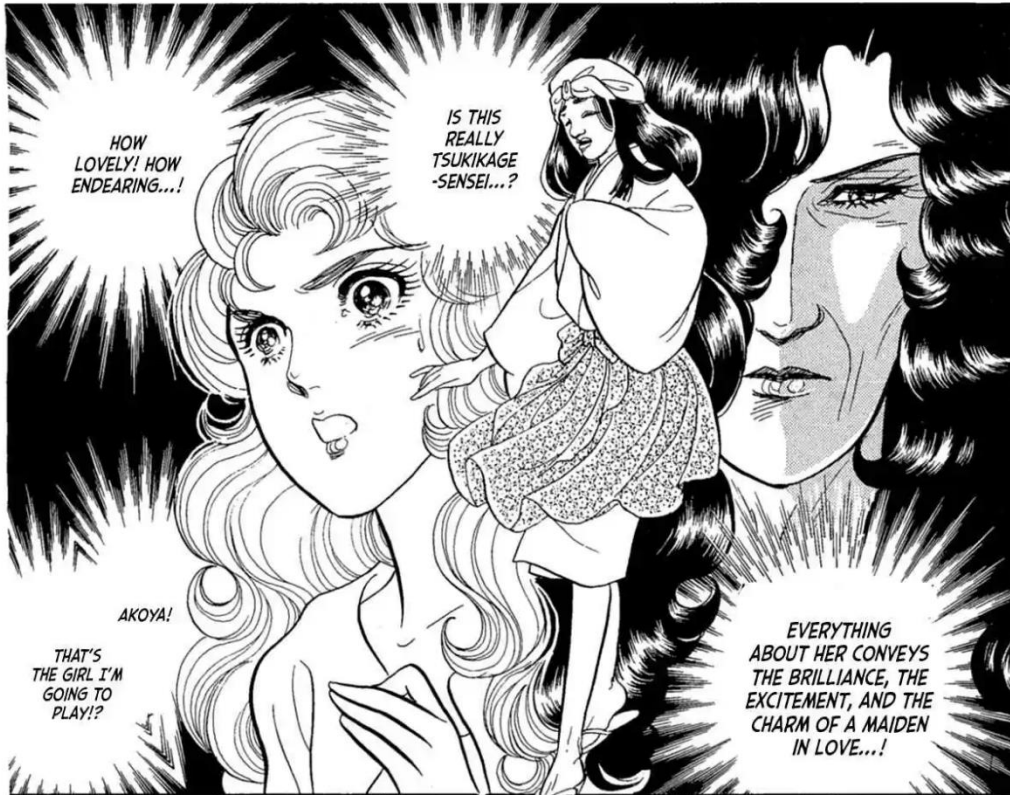
"I WILL NOT LEAVE YOU AGAIN."

"THAT IS WHY I WANTED TO BE CERTAIN OF MY OWN HEART."

MY DEAR ...

"FORGIVE ME, AKOYA."





HOW LOVELY! HOW ENDEARING...!

IS THIS REALLY TSUKIKAGE -SENSEI...?

AKOYA!

THAT'S THE GIRL I'M GOING TO PLAY!?

EVERYTHING ABOUT HER CONVEYS THE BRILLIANCE, THE EXCITEMENT, AND THE CHARM OF A MAIDEN IN LOVE...!



TAKE YOUR TIME TO THINK OF ONE FOR ME. IT DOESN'T HAVE TO BE NOW."

"STILL, I MUST HAVE A NAME."

YOU ARE YOU."

"WHAT YOU ARE CALLED MATTERS NOT."



"I'M ALWAYS SURPRISED TO SEE HOW LIVELY THE PLANTS ARE HERE."

"MAYBE IT IS MY IMAGINATION, BUT I NEVER SEEM TO SEE A WITHERED TREE OR PLANT AROUND YOU."

"THIS IS BEAUTIFUL VILLAGE."



"AND FOR YOU ..."

"I WILL ALSO HAVE TO BEG THE VILLAGE CHEF AND YOUR GRANDMOTHER FOR PERMISSION."

"FOR MY SAKE."



"IT WILL BE DIFFICULT TO LIVE HERE WITHOUT ONE."

"THAT'S RIGHT, AKOYA, CAN YOU GIVE ME A NAME?"

"THIS IS WHERE I HAVE BEEN REBORN!"





AS IF HE WERE RIGHT IN FRONT OF ME!

I SEE HIS EXPRESSION, HIS FACE, HIS MOVEMENT!

I CAN SEE ISSHIN!



YES, OLD CEDAR HAS BEEN ALIVE FOR OVER SIX HUNDRED YEARS, SO HE'S VERY KNOWLEDGEABLE.

"THIS CEDAR TREE, YOU MEAN?"

"CEDAR?"

OLD CEDAR TAUGHT ME,

WE SPEAK THROUGH OUR HEARTS, MY DEAR.

WE DON'T TALK.

"HOW DO YOU TALK TO HIM?"



THROUGH GENZO AND AKOYA'S ACTING, EVERYONE CAN SEE ISSHIN!

"HOW DO YOU KNOW WHICH PLANTS ARE GOOD FOR WHICH ILLNESSES?"

"TELL ME, AKOYA. HOW DO YOU KNOW ALL OF HIS?"



IF YOU PUT YOUR SELF ASIDE, THEN YOU CAN UNDERSTAND THE HEART OF THE TREE.

PEOPLE AND TREES BOTH HAVE THE SAME LIFE.

IT IS A SIMPLE THING, YOU NEED ONLY TO LET GO OF YOUR SELF.

I CAN FEEL WHAT THE HEART OF THE TREE CONVEYS.



"INCREDIBLE! YOU CAN EVEN TALK TO BIRDS?"

YES. THEY WERE THE ONES WHO TOLD ME WHEN YOU COLLAPSED IN THE VALLEY.

AH! LOOK, IT WAS THAT TURTLE-DOVE!



EVEN IF THEY AREN'T AS TALKATIVE AS PEOPLE, EVERY TREE HAS A HEART. OLD CEDAR IN PARTICULAR TAUGHT ME A LOT ABOUT MEDICINAL HERBS.

WHEN I CANNOT FIND THE PLANTS I NEED, I ASK THE BIRDS TO HELP.



THIS TREE HAS A QUICK TEMPER. HE GETS ANGRY WHEN THE WOOD-PECKERS PECK AT HIM IN THE MORNING.

"YOU KNOW THAT MUCH?"



IF YOU ASK WHICH PLANTS GO IN WHICH SOIL, HE WILL TELL YOU. FOR THE FIELDS IT IS BEST TO LISTEN TO THE GOD OF THE EARTH.

WHETHER THE WEATHER IS CLEAR OR CLOUDY DEPENDS ON THE DRAGON GOD'S MOOD. FOR THE SKY, IT IS BEST TO LISTEN TO THE DRAGON GOD.

IT IS NOT A DIFFICULT THING. IF YOU OPEN YOUR EARS AND OPEN YOUR HEART, YOU WILL UNDERSTAND.



"I HEARD FROM THE VILLAGERS THAT YOU CAN EVEN SPEAK TO THE WIND AND THE SKY. IS THAT TRUE?"

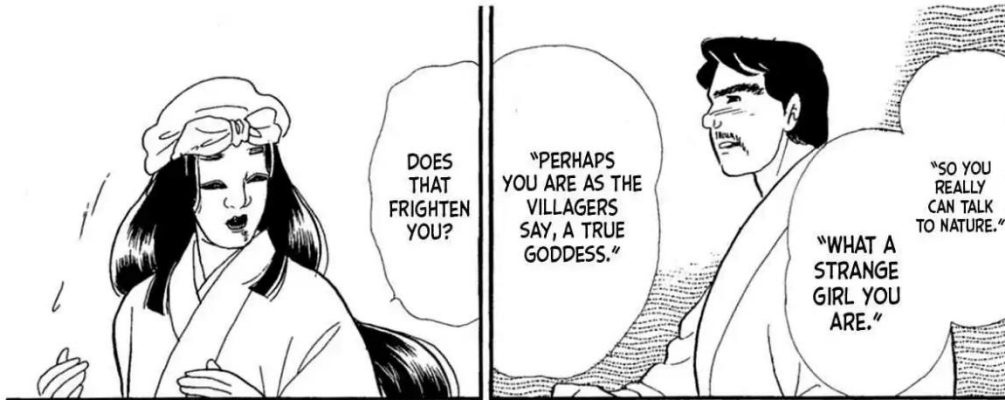
"I ALSO HEARD THAT THE GODS OF THE EARTH TELL YOU ABOUT THE FIELDS."



THE EARTH HAS ITS WHISPERS. THE WIND HAS ITS VOICE... AND THE WATER HAS ITS HEART.

OF WHAT USE ARE THE WORDS OF MAN? IT IS BETTER TO MATCH ONE'S HEART WITH THE HEART OF THE WIND, THE FEELINGS OF THE EARTH, AND THE SOUL OF THE WATER.

DO THAT, AND YOU WILL UNDERSTAND THEIR JOY, THEIR SADNESS, AND THEIR RAGE.



DOES THAT FRIGHTEN YOU?

"PERHAPS YOU ARE AS THE VILLAGERS SAY, A TRUE GODDESS."

"SO YOU REALLY CAN TALK TO NATURE."

"WHAT A STRANGE GIRL YOU ARE."



"IN THE SAME WAY THAT ONE GIRL MAY BE UNCOMMONLY SKILLED AT WEAVING, YOU ARE SKILLED AT SPEAKING TO THE TREES, THE BIRDS, THE WIND, AND THE DRAGONS."

"MY FONDNESS FOR YOU WILL NEVER CHANGE."

"NO, I WAS JUST SURPRISED, THAT'S ALL."

"NO MATTER WHAT, YOU WILL ALWAYS BE YOU..."



YOU ARE THE FIRST.

NO ONE HAS TREATED ME LIKE AN ORDINARY GIRL BEFORE.

IT WAS ONLY AFTER I MET YOU THAT I COULD FEEL LIKE AN ORDINARY HUMAN GIRL...

"AKOYA."

"I LOVE YOU..."



HER YOUTHFUL,
VIGOROUS
MOVEMENTS,
CHILDLIKE
INNOCENCE

AND OCCASIONAL
OTHERWORLDLY
MANNERISMS ADDED
A MYSTERIOUS CHARM
TO HER CHARACTER.

THEY HAD ALL
FORGOTTEN THAT
IT WAS TSUKIKAGE
CHIGUSA BEHIND
THE MASK.

ALL THEY SAW WAS
A LOVELY GIRL, WHOSE
SINGLE-MINDED LOVE
FOR ISSHIN COULD BE
FELT IN HER WORDS
AND HER ACTIONS.



PEOPLE SAW
THE MOST BEAUTIFUL
AKOYA THEY COULD
EMAGINE BEHIND
THE MASK.

THEIR
HEARTS WERE
DRAWN
TO HER.

WITH
FEELINGS
THAT SEEMED
ALMOST LIKE
LOVE.