"YOU ARE A GOD OF PESTILENCE!"

GENZO ONCE AGAIN RETURNED TO HIS ORIGINAL ROLE AS NARRATOR AND CONTINUED THE STORY.

CHIGUSA ...!

"LEAVE THIS VILLAGE AT ONCE!"

THE OLD VILLAGE CHIEF'S MOTHER TOOK THE STAGE TO CURSE ISSHIN AND FORCE HIM OUT OF THE VILLAGE.

THE VILLAGE CHIEF HIMSELF ARRIVED NOT LONG AFTER TO WELCOME A SAMURAI TO THE VILLAGE.

HE HAD ONCE RELIED ON AKOYA'S MIRACULOUS POWER AND MEDICINE TO CURE THE YOSHINO EMPEROR'S ILLNESS...

"LADY AKOYA, IN THESE DIFFICULT TIMES...

ONE MUST BE CAREFUL OF STRANGERS."

...AND SPOKE OF HOW HE HAD NEVER FORGOTTEN THE WAY AKOYA'S AID HAD MOVED HIS HEART.

THE SAMURAI WARNED AS HE WATCHED ISSHIN LEAVE.

WHY DO THEY TREAT THEIR OWN LIVES AND THE LIVES OF OTHERS WITH SUCH DISREGARD?

HUMANS. THEY ARE BOORISH CREATURES.

THEY DO NOT SEE THAT WHICH IS TRULY IMPORTANT.

THE CHIEF WARNED AGAIN.

"AKO-YA!"

PLEASE DO NOT HOLD BACK."

"ENOUGH! LADY AKOYA SPEAKS TRUE.

WAS IT NOT TO PRESERVE LIFE?

WHY DID I CURE ILLNESSES AND HEAL WOUNDS?

HOW MEANING-LESS MY MEDICINE WAS.

IT WAS NOT SO THAT PEOPLE COULD KILL AND BE KILLED IN BATTLE.

EVEN THE BLOOD THAT FLOWS THROUGH THEIR VEINS WAS CREATED BY ANOTHER.

NOR WERE THEIR HANDS AND FEET.

...WAS CREATED BY THEIR HANDS.

NOT A SINGLE HAIR OR NAIL...
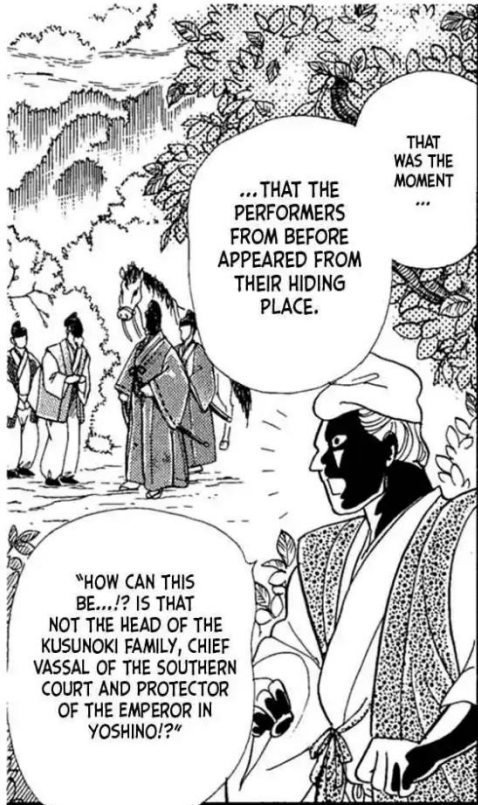
WE ONLY INHABIT THEM.

BUT THEY ARE NOT OURS.

OUR BODIES MAY BELONG TO US

WHO THEN COULD HAVE CREATED THESE BODIES OF OURS?

CAN YOU NOT SEE HOW GRAVE A SIN IT IS TO LEAD ONESELF TO INJURY?

LET ALONE WHAT A DEEP AND TERRIBLE SIN IT IS TO HARM AN-OTHER?

...THAT THE PERFORMERS FROM BEFORE APPEARED FROM THEIR HIDING PLACE.

THAT WAS THE MOMENT...

"HOW CAN THIS BE...!? IS THAT NOT THE HEAD OF THE KUSUNOKI FAMILY, CHIEF VASSAL OF THE SOUTHERN COURT AND PROTECTOR OF THE EMPEROR IN YOSHINO!?"

"LADY AKOYA TRULY IS A MYSTER-IOUS GIRL."

"IT FEELS AS THOUGH MY WORLD EXPANDS WHENEVER I MEET HER."

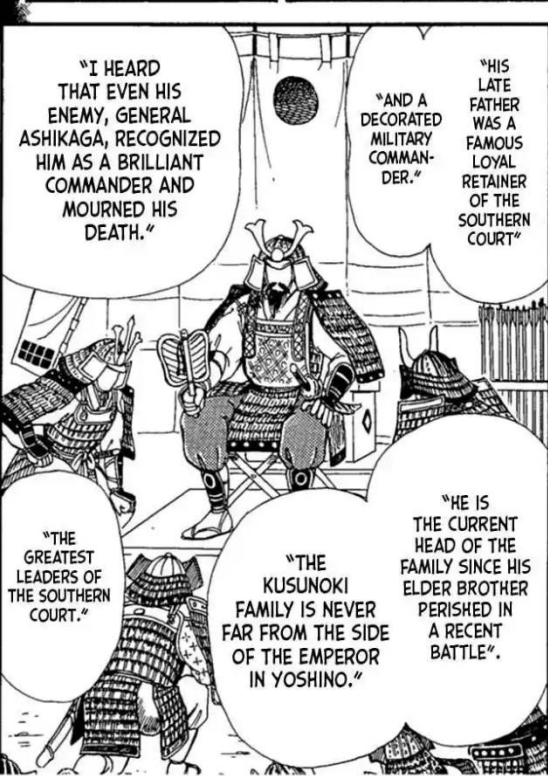"PERHAPS SHE TRULY IS A CELESTIAL MAIDEN THAT SPEAKS OF THE HEART OF THE GODS."

THE ECHOES MAY HAVE DISAPPEARED FROM THE VALLEY, BUT AKOYA'S VOICE REMAINED IN THE PEOPLES' HEARTS.

"PERHAPS WE CAN LEARN SOMETHING OF YOSHINO'S MOVE-MENTS IF WE KEEP AN EYE ON HIM."

"WHY WOULD LORD KUSUNOKI OF ALL PEOPLE BE IN A REMOTE VILLAGE LIKE THIS?"

"I HEARD THAT EVEN HIS ENEMY, GENERAL ASHIKAGA, RECOGNIZED HIM AS A BRILLIANT COMMANDER AND MOURNED HIS DEATH."

"AND A DECORATED MILITARY COMMAN-DER."

"HIS LATE FATHER WAS A FAMOUS LOYAL RETAINER OF THE SOUTHERN COURT"

THE PERFORMERS EXCHANGED MEANINGFUL GLANCES.

"THE GREATEST LEADERS OF THE SOUTHERN COURT."

"THE KUSUNOKI FAMILY IS NEVER FAR FROM THE SIDE OF THE EMPEROR IN YOSHINO."

"HE IS THE CURRENT HEAD OF THE FAMILY SINCE HIS ELDER BROTHER PERISHED IN A RECENT BATTLE".

SO THAT THE FIELDS ARE PROTECTED.

SO THAT THE RAIN DOES NOT WEAR DOWN THE MOUNTAINS.

KA-CLANG

SO THAT THE WIND DOES NOT FELL OUR TREES.

SO THAT LIGHTNING DOES NOT STRIKE.

THE MEMBERS OF THE UNICORN AND TSUKIKAGE TROUPES DRESSED UP AS VILLAGERS AND LIVENED UP THE FESTIVAL GROUNDS.
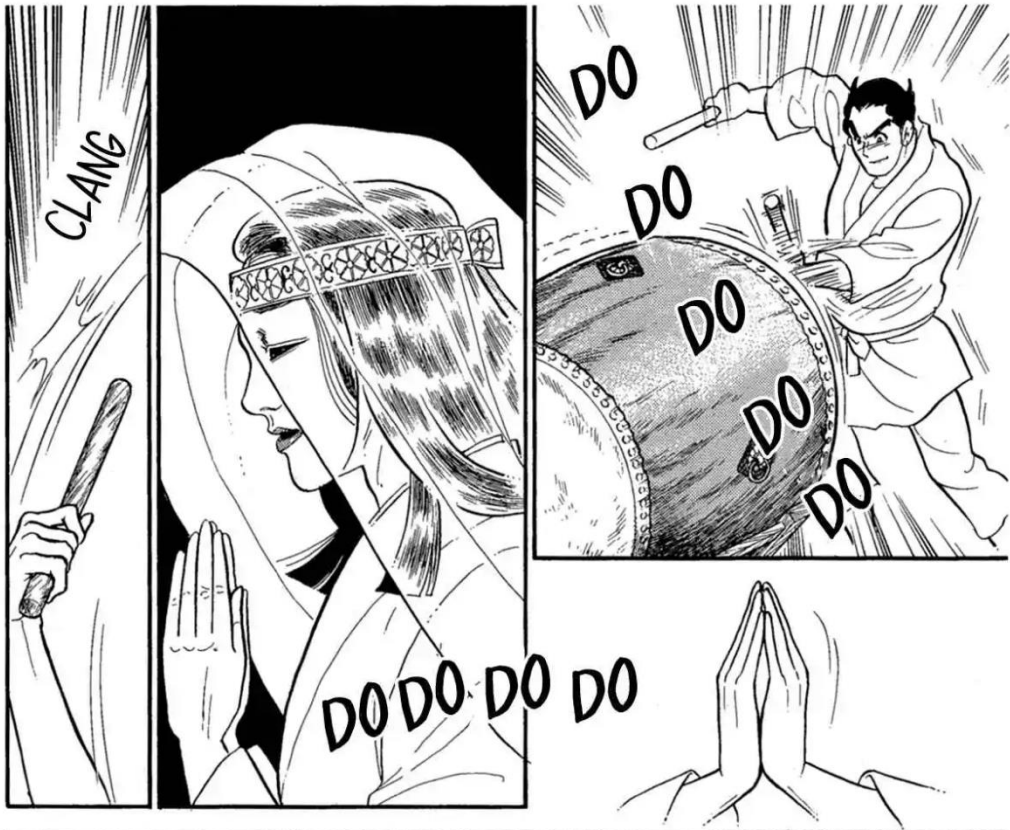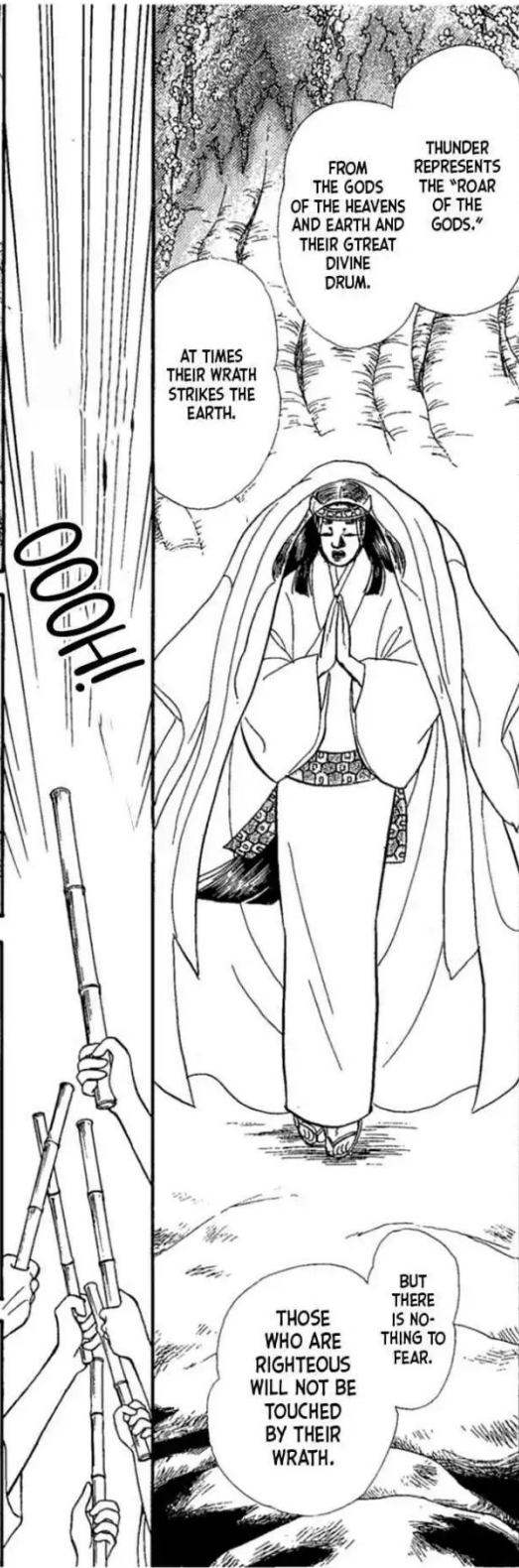
TO THE GREAT GODDESS CLAD IN CRIMSON.

MAKE A PLEA FOR US.

AKOYA, OH AKOYA

TO THE DEAFENING DRUMBEAT OF THE THUNDER GOD.

LIGHTNING SPLIT THE HEAVENS

AT THAT MOMENT, THE NIGHT SKY CLOUDED OVER

AND THE ROAR OF THUNDER FILLED THE SKIES.

grow

CLANG

DO

DO

DO

DO

DO

DO DO DO DO

OHH!

I SEE IT! IT'S A FULL MOON!

LOOK, THE MOON ...!

THE CLOUDS PARTED AT AKOYA'S PRAYER

AND REVEALED THE FULL MOON SHINING IN THE SKY.

IS THAT REALLY HOW IT LOOKS TO YOU, AKAME-SENSEI?

WHAT IS THAT GIRL DOING? IT'S UNSIGHTLY.

KA-CLANG

WHY DON'T YOU TAKE A BETTER LOOK AT HER FACE AND SEE WHAT SHE'S DOING?

HUH?

SHE JUST CAN'T SIT STILL AND WATCH, CAN SHE?

WHA...!

shake

shake

EVEN MORE FRIGHTENING, WHILE SHE'S DOING ALL OF THAT, SHE...

...HAS ALSO MEMORIZED EVERY LINE AND GESTURE IN THE PLAY SO FAR.
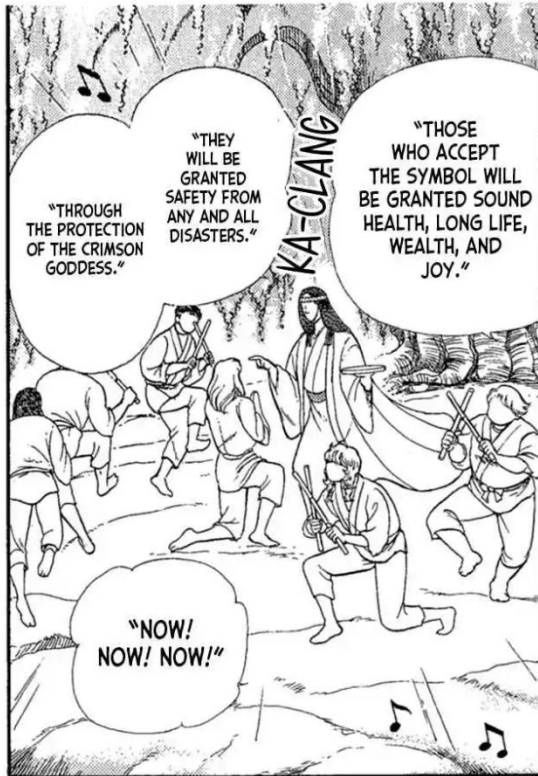
DO YOU SEE NOW?

WHILE SHE WATCHES THE PLAY WITH HER EYES, SHE'S ALSO ABSORBING EVERY PART OF IT INTO HER HEART.

THAT'S WHY SHE CAN MATCH AKOYA'S MOVEMENTS AND EXPRESSIONS WITHOUT EVEN MEANING TO.

shudder

"IT WAS FAR MORE PRECIOUS THAN MERE GOLD."

"IT WAS SAID THAT *TAN* COULD BE USED TO CREATE AND MULTIPLY GOLD."

"SAID TO BE CONSUMED BY THE IMMORTAL SAGES OF CHINA, IT WAS A PANACEA THAT GRANTED IMMORTALITY."

"COULD THIS RED SAND BE ...TAN!?"

"CAN IT BE ...!?"

"PERHAPS THE GODS OF THE FORBIDDEN LAND ARE ACTUALLY ..."

THE TROUPE LEADER HAD AN OMINOUS GLINT IN HIS EYE.

"WHAT A BRILLIANT CRIMSON COLOR."

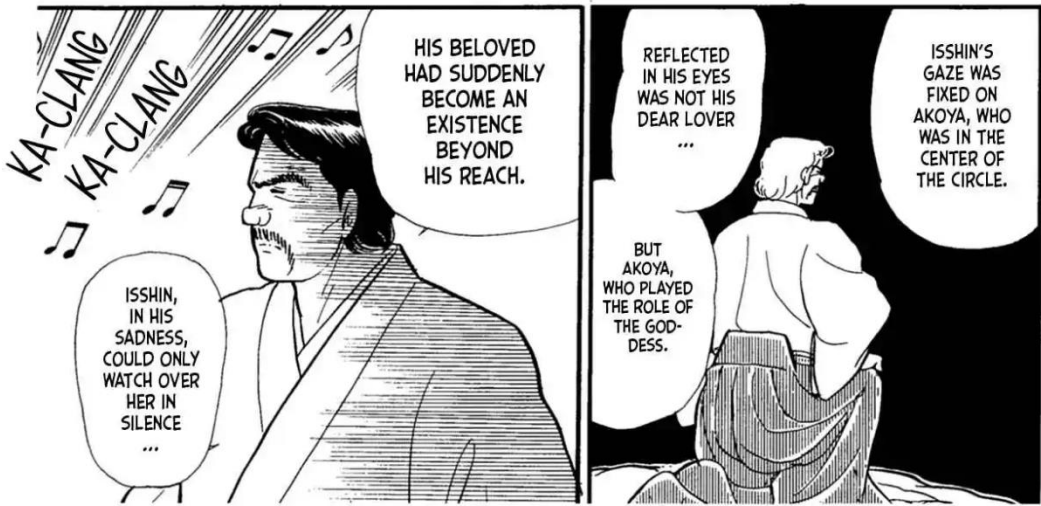"I'VE NEVER SEEN SUCH A HIGH LEVEL OF PURITY BEFORE!"

THE LEADER OF THE PERFORMING TROUPE LOOKED IN SHOCK AT THE RED SAND THAT HAD BEEN RUBBED ON HIS FOREHEAD.

HE SUDDENLY TOOK NOTICE OF ISSHIN.

THAT WAS WHEN ...

AT THE SAME TIME, KUSUNOKI WAS ALSO DEEP IN THOUGHT AS HE LOOKED AT THE RED SAND IN HIS HAND.

KA-CLANG KA-CLANG

HIS BELOVED HAD SUDDENLY BECOME AN EXISTENCE BEYOND HIS REACH.

ISSHIN, IN HIS SADNESS, COULD ONLY WATCH OVER HER IN SILENCE ...

REFLECTED IN HIS EYES WAS NOT HIS DEAR LOVER ...

BUT AKOYA, WHO PLAYED THE ROLE OF THE GOD-DESS.

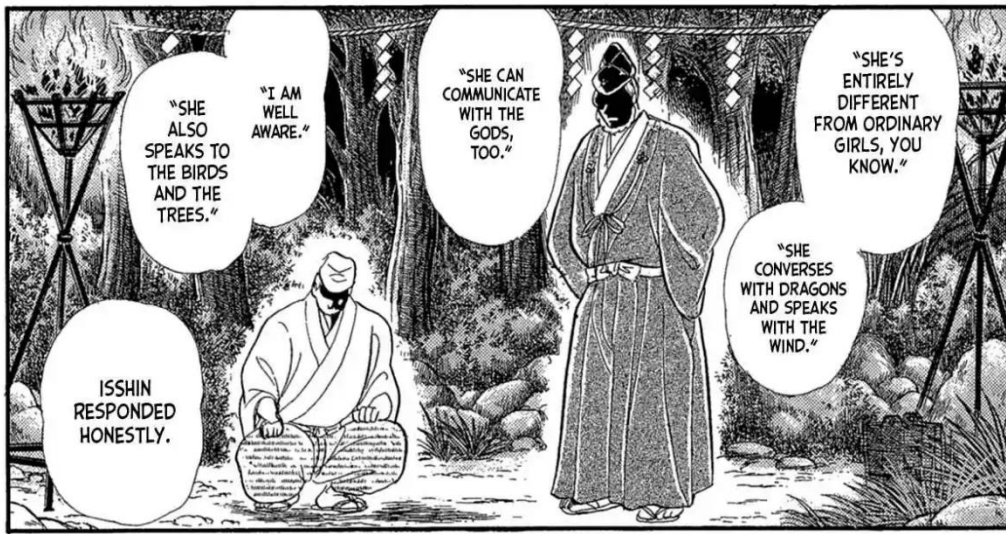ISSHIN'S GAZE WAS FIXED ON AKOYA, WHO WAS IN THE CENTER OF THE CIRCLE.

"I DO LOVE HER."

ISSHIN LOOKED AT KUSUNOKI IN SURPRISE.

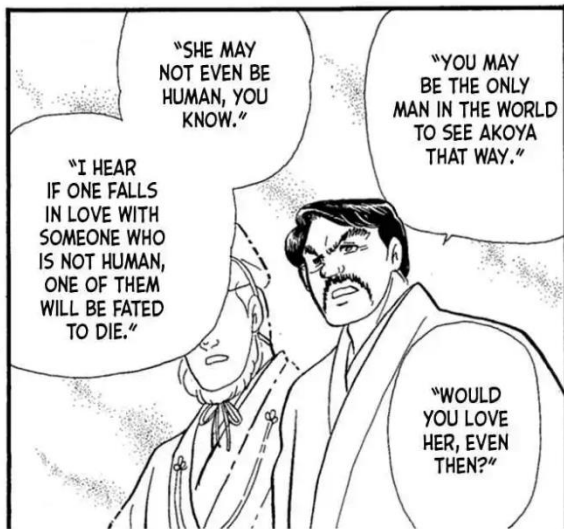KUSUNOKI STRUCK UP A CONVERSATION WITH ISSHIN.

"DO YOU LOVE AKOYA?"

"SHE ALSO SPEAKS TO THE BIRDS AND THE TREES."

"I AM WELL AWARE."

"SHE CAN COMMUNICATE WITH THE GODS, TOO."

"SHE'S ENTIRELY DIFFERENT FROM ORDINARY GIRLS, YOU KNOW."

"SHE CONVERSES WITH DRAGONS AND SPEAKS WITH THE WIND."

ISSHIN RESPONDED HONESTLY.

"SHE MAY NOT EVEN BE HUMAN, YOU KNOW."

"YOU MAY BE THE ONLY MAN IN THE WORLD TO SEE AKOYA THAT WAY."

"I HEAR IF ONE FALLS IN LOVE WITH SOMEONE WHO IS NOT HUMAN, ONE OF THEM WILL BE FATED TO DIE."
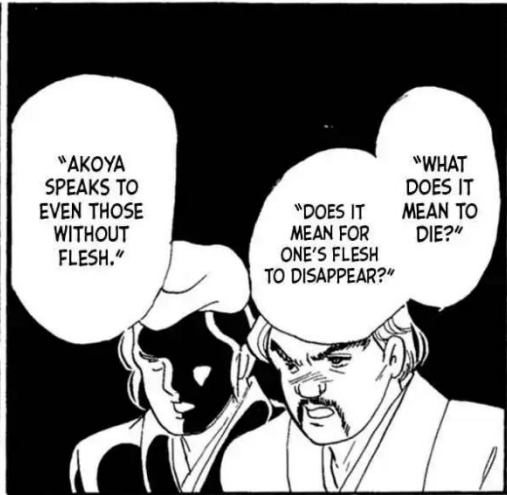
"WOULD YOU LOVE HER, EVEN THEN?"

"THE FACT THAT SHE IS MOST PRECIOUS TO ME DOES NOT CHANGE."

"IT MATTERS NOT WHAT KIND OF GIRL AKOYA IS."

"AKOYA'S BODY IS NOT THE ONLY THING I LOVE."

"AKOYA SPEAKS TO EVEN THOSE WITHOUT FLESH."

"DOES IT MEAN FOR ONE'S FLESH TO DISAPPEAR?"

"WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO DIE?"

"IT DOES NOT MATTER WHAT FORM AKOYA MAY TAKE, I WILL ALWAYS BE DRAWN TO HER."

"IF WE ARE TO SPEAK OF TRUE LOVE, IT IS TO LOVE HER SOUL."

"I DO NOT BELIEVE THAT LOVE DIES AFTER DEATH."

SHE WILL BECOME CLOSER TO BEING HUMAN.

IF SHE FALLS IN LOVE WITH A HUMAN MAN
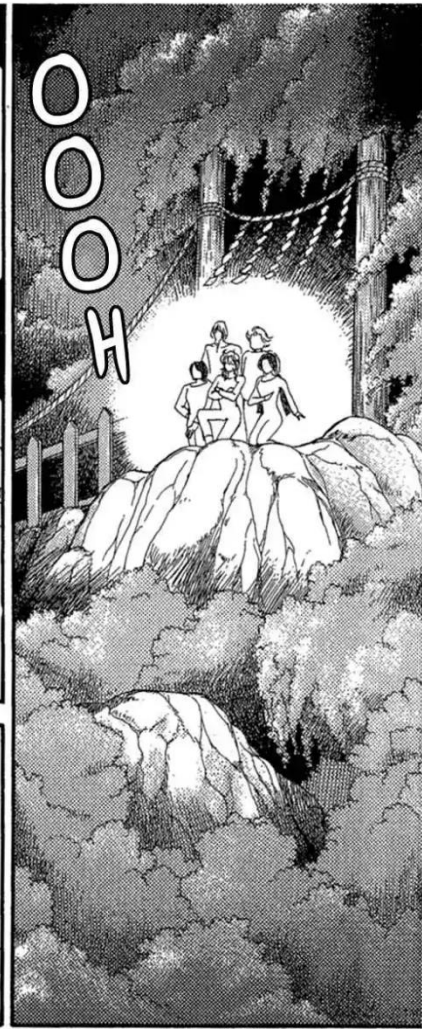
SHE LOOKED LIKE AN ORDINARY GIRL.

THIS IS A PROBLEM.

QUITE A PROBLEM.

OOOH

IT WILL NOT END WELL IF SHE BECOMES HUMAN.

AKOYA IS THE AVATAR OF THE GODDESS.

DID YOU SEE AKOYA'S FACE!?

BUT A GODDESS...

WERE SHE AN ORDINARY PRIESTESS, THEN SHE WOULD MERELY BECOME UNABLE TO HEAR THE VOICES OF THE GODS.

AND LIVE A HAPPY LIFE AS A NORMAL GIRL.

AN EERIE CLOUD SPIRALS ABOVE US.

OOOOO

HOW OMINOUS...

THIS WILL NOT END WELL FOR US.

SHE WOULD LOSE HER DIVINE VIRTUE.

HER POWER.

IT WILL NOT BE LONG BEFORE TERROR STRIKES US.

AND IN TIME, HER OWN BODY.

haa

haa

haa

TSUKIKAGE-
SENSEI!

haa

haa

I CAN
STILL
ACT

I JUST
NEED A
LITTLE
REST
...

I CAN
DO
THIS
...

haa

IT'S
OKAY.

I'M
FINE.

SENSEI
...

SHE POSESSED A FRIGHTENING AND OVERPOWERING CLARITY TO HER THAT FORBADE THE APPROACH OF ANY IM- PURITY.

IT WAS AS IF A HOLY AURA EMANATED FROM HER ENTIRE BEING.

THERE, ON STAGE, STOOD A GODDESS.

PERHAPS THIS WAS WHAT IT MEANT TO HAVE A *DIVINE PRESENCE.*

THAT WAS WHAT EVERYONE THOUGHT.

THEY
FELT THE
SILENCE
OF THE
OCEAN
DEPTHS
...

THE AIR
SWAYED
AS IF IT
WERE
WATER.

LIGHT
WAVERED
AS IF IT WERE
WIND.

ICHIREN...!

MY
OTHER SELF
IS AWAKENING
INSIDE ME!

AH...!
IT'S THE SAME
AS THE LAST
TIME!

DO
DO
DO

"OVER
THERE
TOO!"

"I SEE
ANOTHER
ONE ON THE
OTHER
SIDE!"

"IT'S A
RIVER!"

"I
SEE A
RIVER
HERE
...!"

"OH...!
IT IS
INDEED
OX-BACK
MOUNTAIN!"

"THERE
IT IS!"

KUSUNOKI
AND HIS PARTY
RUSHED THROUGH
THE RAIN AS THEY
WERE TOLD.

THEY
HURRIED
NORTHEAST
IN THE DARK
OF THE
NIGHT.

DO

DO DO
DO

"GOOD!
LET US
GO UP-
STREAM!"

"CLIMB
UP FROM
THE EAST!"

DO

...FAR OFF
IN THE DISTANCE,
ILLUMINATED IN THE
LIGHTNING, WAS THE
SILHOUETTE OF THE
MOUNTAIN...!

DO DO DO

AS THEY
CLIMBED HIGHER
THEY COULD ALSO
HEAR THE ROARING
SOUND OF A
WATERFALL.

AS THEY
CONTINUED
TO CLIMB UP-
STREAM, THE THREE
RIVERS MERGED
AND BECAME
ONE!

DO DO   DO

THE TWO
THIEVES IN
THE CAVE
NOTICED THE
PURSUERS
...

"THERE IT IS...!
THE GROTTO
WHERE WHITE
FLOWERS
BLOOM!"

FINALLY
THEY SAW
THE WATER-
FALL.

THE RAIN
WAS ALSO
LETTING UP
AND BECOMING
A DRIZZLE.

IT WOULD
SOON BE
DAWN.

THE
SKY WAS
GETTING
BRIGHTER.

AND
RAN OUT OF
THE CAVE IN
A PANIC.

DO DO DO DO

DO DO

THE
WARRIORS
CLIMBED UP
THE MOUNTAIN
UNDER INTENSE
PRESSURE.

haa

haa

SILENCE

A HEAVY SILENCE
WAS ALL THAT
REMAINED AFTER
AKOYA EXITED
THE STAGE.

NO ONE
COULD BRING
THEMSELVES
TO SPEAK.

BECAUSE
THEY FOUND
THEMSELVES
WITHOUT ANY
WORDS TO
SAY.

A MIST
HAD BEGUN
TO SETTLE
IN THE VALLEY
OF THE PLUM
TREES.

AND SO THE CURTAIN ROSE ON THE SECOND ACT OF THE PLAY.

HOWEVER, AS REWARD FOR RECOVERING THE THREE SACRED TREASURES, THE EMPEROR GRANTED KUSUNOKI THE CRIMSON VALLEY.

THE PEOPLE WELCOMED KUSUNOKI AS THEIR NEW FEUDAL LORD.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN KUSUNOKI AND AKOYA BECAME STRAINED AFTER HE BROKE HIS PROMISE TO THE GODDESS.

"TO THINK THERE WOULD BE SUCH PURE *TAN*, WITH SUCH BRILLIANT CRIMSON COLOR"

"THE GREAT CRIMSON GODDESS MUST BE...!"

"THAT MAN MUST BE AIMING FOR THE *TAN*"

"THEY MUST BE KEEPING IT IN THE DEPTHS OF THE VALLEY, THE FORBIDDEN LAND."

"THERE'S NO DOUBT IT WAS TO KEEP PEOPLE'S EYES AWAY AND PROTECT THE *TAN!*"

ON THE OTHER HAND, THE NORTHERN COURT SPY WHO HAD ESCAPED, BEGAN PLOTTING IN SECRET ONCE MORE.

"IT WOULD BE A GREAT BOON TO THE SOUTH'S WAR CHEST."

"AT LONG LAST... WAR!"

"IN THE NEAR FUTURE, THE SOUTH WILL ALSO BEGIN TO MOVE."

"THE GENERALS OF THE SOUTH ARE IN CONSTANT CONTACT AS THEY GATHER SOLDIERS."

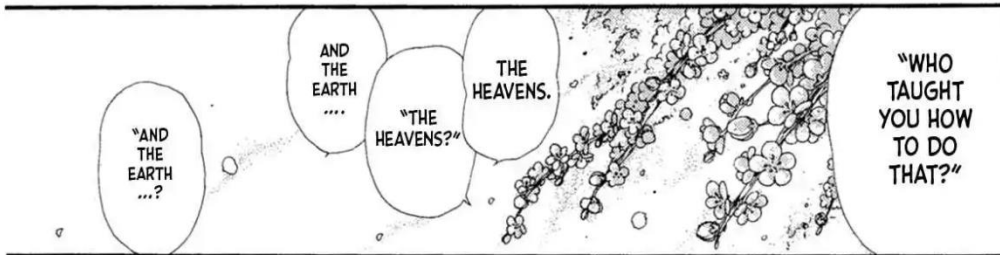AS ALL THIS WAS HAPPENING, THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AKOYA AND ISSHIN BEGAN TO GROW STRAINED.

"AKOYA..."

THE FEELINGS IN YOUR HEART WILL REACH ME ALL THE SAME.

ISN'T THAT RIGHT, DEAR?

IT DOES NOT MATTER WHAT NAME YOU GO BY.

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN!? COME, NOW, AKOYA!"

"PLEASE TELL ME MY NAME."

"AND THE EARTH ...?

AND THE EARTH ....

"THE HEAVENS?"

THE HEAVENS.

"WHO TAUGHT YOU HOW TO DO THAT?"

AS WELL AS GODS THAT GOVERN BOTH NATURE AND THE PEOPLE IN THEIR ENTIRETY.

THERE ARE GODS THAT GOVERN OVER HUMANS.

IN THE SAME WAY THAT THERE ARE GODS TO GOVERN OVER NATURE

AS WELL AS IN THE EARTH, THE STONE, AND THE PLANTS.

GODS DWELL IN THE WIND, IN THE FIRE, AND IN THE WATER TOO.

THE NATURAL WORLD IS FILLED WITH THE ENERGY OF THE GODS.

"AKOYA ..."

WE ARE ALIVE BY THE WILL OF THESE GODS.

PEOPLE WERE ALSO ONCE GODS.

THESE BODIES OF OURS ORIGINALLY HOUSED GODS ...

THERE ARE ALSO GODS THAT GOVERN THEM.

THAT IS WHY WE MUST KEEP IT SAFE

FROM THE EYES OF THOSE WHO DO NOT SEE THE TRUTH.

A PLACE THAT HUMANITY MUST NOT BE ALLOWED TO POLLUTE.

THE FORBIDDEN LAND IS THE PLACE WHERE THE GODS DESCENDED, AND WHERE THEY ASCEND FROM THE EARTH. IT IS THE PLACE FOR THE GODS OF HARMONY.

DOWN FROM THE HEAVENS IT POURS...

DOWN FROM THE HEAVENS IT POURS...

THIS BEAUTIFUL SOUND.

FAST SOUNDS.

SLOW SOUNDS.

HIGH SOUNDS.

LOW SOUNDS ...

SOUNDS FROM THE SKIES AND SOUNDS FROM THE EARTH.

I CAN ALWAYS HEAR IT IF I OPEN UP MY HEART ...

THE MUSIC OF THE GOD'S VITALITY BORN OF THE EARTH ...

POURING ENDLESSLY DOWN FROM THE HEAVENS ...

LISTEN!

MY DEAR, CAN YOU NOT HEAR THE MUSIC!?

MUSIC?

ALL LIVING CREATURES ARE BROUGHT UP BY THE MUSIC OF THE HEAVENS AND THE EARTH.

BECOMING A GOLDEN WAVE THAT ENCOMP-ASSES ALL

MELT INTO EACH OTHER BECOMING A BEAUTIFUL RING.

COLLIDE INTO EACH OTHER.

THEY MIX INTO EACH OTHER

THE PARTICLES OF MUSIC, INVISIBLE TO THE EYE, BECOME LIGHT.

THIS VILLAGE IS FULL OF MUSIC...

TO THE MOUN-TAINS.

THE FORESTS.

THE FIELDS.

THE VILLAGES.

THIS VILLAGE IS FULL OF MUSIC...

THE CONSTANT RING OF THE MUSIC THAT SUSTAINS LIFE...?

HUH...?

LISTEN ...!

CAN YOU NOT HEAR IT!?