

HUNGRY GHOSTS

Three Oni of Blood



Barb Lien Cooper & Park Cooper

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ISBN

(print) 978-1-987884-50-0

(ebook) 978-1-987884-48-7

Author's Note:

Please note: Although a few elements of the plot– and characteristics of certain characters besides Isogai Heidazaemon Taketsura– may seem similar to things in our graphic novel, also entitled Hungry Ghosts, please understand that they are two different stories. The graphic novel doesn't take place before nor after this novel– it's more like they're two (very) alternative timelines exploring events involving Taketsura and his adventures. We hope you'll enjoy them both.

–Barb Lien-Cooper and Park Cooper

Dedication

Respectfully dedicated to the memories of
filmmaker Akira Kurosawa, actor Toshiro Mifune,
and the writer of many great Japanese folk tales,
Lafcadio Hearn. May your names and influence
always be honored. Thank you for lighting the
way.

And an extra thank-you to the artist of the
Hungry Ghosts graphic novel, Jeremy
Dumouchel... Your vision and talent helped us so
much in the forming of this novel.

Signed,

Barb Lien-Cooper and Park Cooper

Preface

IT IS A TIME OF FAMINE AND WARFARE.



It is the era of Feuding Warlords, where men dying on battlefields and social upheaval are happening nearly constantly. Various samurai warlords and clans are fighting to rule Japan and fill the vacuum of power. Famine and poverty stalk the land, and there appears to be no end in sight. Masterless soldiers and samurai, whose lords they swore to serve are dead, wander aimlessly, looking for purpose... or, failing that, just for food and survival. But as soldiers and samurai wander, so too do the ghosts of war and famine... and all of the land's other supernatural secrets and fears are awakened as well...

Chapter 1

I woke up suddenly, jolted awake by...

...nothing. By my dreams.

My head hurt. I couldn't see anything—there were bandages wrapped around my head, over my eyes. My eyes hurt, too, so I left the bandages where they were for the moment, though I was dying to pull them up and check my vision...

I felt around me. It was soft underneath me. I could just feel that I was indoors, in a room somewhere. Not a big room—it felt a little confining. Smelled like wood and dust. Couldn't hear much else—everything was pretty quiet. Was it nighttime? Wherever I was, I wasn't in the cave I'd been hiding in, slowly but surely bleeding to death.

The *shikibuton* of the futon I'd been sleeping on felt soft and welcoming after the hard, damp cave floor. The blanket around me felt rough, but warm. The air in the room was cool, but not uncomfortably so.

I wanted to look.

“*Aim for his eyes,*” I remembered a soldier saying. “*Without them, he's nothing.*” I bit my lower lip, and reached for my bandages...

—And froze, because I heard a board in the floor make some noise. It was the first odd sound I'd heard, which made it feel like someone had already quietly slipped into the room. Desperately, I reached around for my sword.

I couldn't feel it anywhere nearby me. If the person in the room was an enemy, then he would be a more dangerous one than I had ever faced before in my life.

Because it was true; without my eyes, I was nothing.

“I didn't mean to startle you,” said a deep male voice.

“Am I...blinded?” I asked.

“The area around your eyes has a couple of deep cuts, but with the compress around that area, you probably won’t go blind... probably. It’s all up to the will of the compassionate Buddha, isn’t it?”

“From what I’ve seen of this world, it’s more like the sleeping Buddha,” I said.

The man laughed. “From what I’ve seen, the Buddha is wide awake. It’s the people who are asleep.”

I laughed a bitter laugh myself, but I was starting to relax, in spite of everything that’d happened, in spite of my dreams that were quickly fading from my memory.

“Now, I’ve brought you some food,” said the man. “Just a little broth, but it might lighten your mood a little.”

“I’m not hungry.” It was surprising, but true.

“You’ve been too long without food—your stomach won’t be ready for a full meal yet anyway, it’ll just make you sick. You should have just a little soup, though, at least. I’ll leave it by your bed. I warn you, though: simple fare doesn’t improve with time.”

I heard him put a tray down by me, to my right. “Thank you,” I said.

“Well, at least you have manners... Most soldiers don’t.”

“Speaking of which, I need my sword.”

“No, you don’t. It wouldn’t help you here.”

“Where is here? Jigoku?”

“...Jigoku? Don’t you think Hell would be warmer than this?”

“I was being... I don’t know. I just...everything is just— I feel—”

“Shh, quiet your mind. Be still. I’ll come back later and see if you need anything.”

“Say that again.”

“Me? I didn’t say anything much. Just to quiet your mind... and be still.”

“That’s what—‘be still’—what my father always used to say.”

“Did you obey him?”

“Always.”

“I see that we’ll have a lot to talk about once you get better. But until then, know that you are safe here.”

“Where is here?”

“Tenzin Monastery.”

“Oh. I guess that’s about as far from Jigoku as someone can get. For a young man like me, anyway...”

“It’s my experience that we carry heaven and hell within each of us.”

I was getting tired of the strange way the man spoke. “I’d like to sleep now.”

I heard the door to my room slide shut, nearly silently.

I was alone again. I preferred it that way. My life had always been that way.

And yet... Without being able to use my eyes to guide me, I felt lonelier than I ever had before.

I lay down again.

I was still and unmoving.

But my mind wasn’t quiet.

Instead, I played my last battle over and over again in my head.

My commander had been an idiot. He knew more about the art of partying and having a good time with women and drinking than he did about the art of war. No wonder we were losing. When a commander’s station in life meant more to those in power than his brainpower did, of course things weren’t going to go well. I’d spent most of my time covering for the man’s mistakes.

But, then, my regiment called me “The Little God of Death.” The avatar of the afterlife. Maybe that was my problem; maybe it’d gone to my head. Maybe I’d gotten too sure of myself, too cocky. Killing hundreds of men without a thought might do that to a

person. Especially when that person was me, who'd been forced to join the army at fourteen because he'd been blamed for a crime he didn't commit.

And Lord Yamato had believed the lies!

Or if he didn't, he let me take the punishment anyway...

Don't think about that, Takeshi, I thought to myself.

...But how could I not think about it when the very name my father had given me to walk through life with meant "warrior?" How much time had passed, I wondered, since Lord Yamato had unceremoniously dumped me into the military? Time passes quickly, or perhaps not at all, when all one has to think of is one's survival. When he came back, I decided to ask the man with the deep voice (was *he* a monk? In spite of the way he talked, I questioned if that could really be true) what month and year it might be. By my best calculations, I was currently either sixteen or seventeen years old, though I couldn't swear by it.

I wondered if Lord Yamato was still alive and well, or if he had made the journey from which no one ever returns.

The thought made my eyes burn. Would my eyes be watering with salty tears, now, if they weren't bandaged? I'd seen thousands of people die in my time, some as young as me, some even younger, some as young as infants, and I had never batted an eye. War claimed the young and the old, after all. But a single thought about Lord Yamato, and all of a sudden I was having a hard time not crying like a little child.

Be a man, is what my father would have told me.

But I *was* a man! I was a man just about from the time I was born! "You forced me to be—just for the sake of your stupid ambition!" I muttered to the empty room. And look where it'd gotten me! I'd lost my eyes, my sword, my fellow soldiers...

Of course, I hoped my eyes might still work if given time. And my sword, the man who'd brought the food had implied, must be around here somewhere. So losing my fellow soldiers was, therefore, the worst, because I couldn't find them again. They were all dead now, all in that same last battle. Nori, Daichi, Hiroto, Minoru... you couldn't have been much older than I was, Minoru, and you were always so proud of the fact that

your name meant “truth.” But you found out the truth, as that sword pierced your gut again and again. You kept trying to stand up again, even after you knew it was useless.

And at the last moment, Minoru had looked at me—me, who’d sworn to protect my friends—and he’d known the truth.

Their little God of Death couldn’t protect them after all.

My sword and I got revenge against the soldier who’d kept sticking steel into Minoru’s guts; I’d hacked and I’d slashed like an amateur. In my condition, my much-admired sword-play went to hell, and I didn’t care what it looked like. I didn’t care that the emotional detachment that I’d always been able to summon up when I fought was completely gone. My platoon was dying all around me, and even my sword couldn’t make up for the mistakes of my commander.

And revenge didn’t make it the least bit better.

But you lived, a voice in my head said to me.

That didn’t make it any better, either. I’d only lived because they’d let me survive. The enemy thought that I’d be so disgraced by being blind that I’d commit hari-kari with the same sword that I’d used to chop down so many—

Oh, I realized. *That’s why my sword isn’t in the room with me.* The man with the deep voice didn’t wish me to harm myself.

Well, was he right to worry?

...No. In spite of all that I’d seen so far in my young life, I had no wish for it to end.

It didn’t seem right for my life to be over so soon, when I hadn’t really even lived it yet.

That was the last thought I had before I fell asleep.

But it was a restless sleep, very light.

Half-way between the land of the living and the land of dreams, I felt a presence in the room. “Monk-san?” I asked. “Is that you?”

Someone laughed, a cackle like an old man. Mocking laughter. “You’re a foolish boy, Takeshi,” said the voice.

"You've delivered so many to the realm of the Dead, yet you don't recognize us..." said an even older-sounding woman.

"Well of course he doesn't," said a man, still not the man who'd fed me. "His eyes are covered. But I bet that soon he'll be back to his bloody work..." This man's age was hard to guess, but his voice had a high, oily, slimy quality to it that was almost nauseating to hear.

"Who *are* you?" I demanded.

"What matters is what *you* are," said the crazy-sounding old man. "You're one of us. Or you soon will be..."

"Only if he keeps to the proper path," corrected the crazy-sounding old woman.

"Of course he'll keep to his path," said the old man. "He's got too much anger in him to do otherwise."

"Don't be overconfident. People can change," chided the old woman.

"Not this lad," said the old man. "He's as much an Oni, in his way, as we are."

Oni. They were monsters... demons that preyed on human beings... and they wanted me.

...Wait, hadn't my dreams recently been something about oni?

"We can reward you with what the human world can never even offer," oozed the slick-voiced oni.

"There's nothing *you* could offer me that I would want," I said.

"Not even revenge?" asked the old man's voice. "Vengeance against those who have done what they should not have done?" The room seemed warm, as if each of these visitors had brought a hundred lit candles with them, candles that I couldn't see.

"Wouldn't you like those who blinded you and abandoned you to get what's coming to them?" asked the old woman.

"Or your father?" suggested the oily voice.

"Or Kana?" offered the old man. "It's her fault that Lord Yamato gave you to the military."

"Mightn't you want that power? You're already judging those who do the wrong thing, but your opinion doesn't affect anything without action... and strength," said the old woman. "Didn't your father always say that power is all that matters in this life?"

"You could leave your mark on the land," said the oily man. "A mark as unchangeable as the way that Fuji's slopes and peak tower above the horizon."

I noticed that the room had gotten even warmer—no, hot. As hot as Hell itself. Or the heat of a burning hatred.

Life had never given me anything. Anything I'd ever had had been taken from me.

My visitors were oni... but was what they were saying actually wrong?

What was wrong in listening to what they had to say?

"I will not let you take my friend," said someone. A young voice—a voice I knew.

"Minoru?" I asked. "Is that really you?" I said into my darkness.

"Call that man who speaks like a monk, Takeshi!" Minoru urged me. "Call him *now*!"

I yelled until I was hoarse. I heard someone run into the room. Someone said words, words that I could barely understand, words that sounded like a chant of some kind. I heard the name "Hachiman," the protector of Japan and its people.

The room became cool, although my skin still felt hot. I felt the monk kneel next to me.

"What sort of man are you, to have such nightmares so young in life?" he said in amazement.

"I'm not a man. I'm The Little God of Death," I said with a bitter laugh.

I felt the monk's hand on my head. "No, you're not. You're a boy. A very sick boy. You have a raging fever," he said.

"The wounds..." I said, "around my eyes...they're..."

"Infected, yes," the monk said.

The next few days were a blur to me. My fever kept rising. I slept...and dreamed...and screamed myself awake. “The Oni...! Can’t you hear their voices? They call my name...”

“Perhaps,” said the man with the deep voice, “perhaps not. I can’t hear them... but even if they’re real, that doesn’t mean you have to answer their call.” And with that, he went back to chanting his chants.

Sometimes, I would get sick of his constant chanting. “Why must you do that?” I asked him at some point after he finished one chant and started another.

“Because I care about your soul,” he said, “even if you don’t.”

“I...” I didn’t know what I wanted to say in reply to that. “...Just try not to chant too loud,” I said. “I need to sleep.”

He chuckled, then went back to chanting—but more softly than before.

Finally, it was time to change the bandages around my eyes. The light of the single lit candle in the room hurt my eyes. The wounds around them were swollen so I could barely see. But I did see the monk for just a moment. “You’re hairy as a tanuki,” I said.

“Hah!” laughed the monk. “And we all know how much tanuki love impersonating priests. That’s funny.”

“No seriously, you’re not a tanuki, are you? Because you’re not wearing a priest’s robe, either. I thought you would b—I mean, look, I thought monks were supposed to be bald.”

“I haven’t shaved in two weeks. I’ve been busy taking care of you.”

“It’s felt like an eternity,” I said.

“You’re too young to talk of such things. Wait until you’re my age. Then talk to me about time.”

“How old are you?”

“Thirty-nine, come next August. But seeing it’s only January now, who knows if I’ll last that long.”

“Are you...ill?”

“No. These are just very dangerous times, and I lead a dangerous life.”

“I didn’t know that monks led dangerous lives.”

“I do.” Then he replaced my bandages, and the world was dark again.

“Tell me about your dangerous life, monk-san,” I asked when he was done with my bandages.

“Why would you want to know about a stranger’s business?”

“Because you’ve fed me and helped me when I needed to go to the bathroom and so forth.”

“Are you sure it’s not just curiosity?”

“Well, some of that, too. It’s just...without my eyes, I get bored.”

“An honest answer.”

We sat in silence for awhile.

“You must at least have a name. I can’t just keep on calling you monk-san.”

“Do you want my monk’s name, or my given name?”

“Either.”

“My official name, as a monk, is Kwairyō, because that’s what the head monk of this monastery named me. I wanted to be called Eisai, after the founder of the Japanese Rinzai sect of Zen, and because of my stubborn efforts, there are more people who call me that as a sort of nickname, even though it’s not my official monk’s name.”

“Eisai-san does seem a little easier to remember.”

“Mm. But I’m not always called *that*, either.”

“Why not?”

“Because my given name is much more interesting.”

“All right, what is it?”

“Would you like some food? I managed to gather some while it was allowed.”

“While it was allowed?”

“Monks can only eat until noon-day.”

“You’ve fed me at other times.”

“You aren’t a monk. And even if you were, the rules don’t apply when one is ill. Now, food or no food?”

“Food.”

He got up and left to go get me some food. *Eisai-san is a man of many secrets*, I thought. *I wonder why.*

When he returned, I asked him the day and year.

“That means I’m still sixteen,” I said when he told me.

“I might have guessed fifteen. You’re a little short for sixteen.”

“I haven’t quite reached my growth spurt yet, all right?”

“I see. Hence, the *Little God of Death* nickname.”

“Yes.”

“What month were you born, little god?”

“August.”

“Hm. Based on my calculations, that means you were born in the year of the Horse.”

“I don’t really believe in birth signs.”

“Do you believe in anything?”

“I believe I’m hungry.” Eisai-san put the food next to my bed. “And Little God isn’t my real name either, Eisai-san. My name is Ito Takeshi.”

“Sounds like you’re from the Nagano region.”

“My ancestors were,” I said as I carefully felt around on the tray and got my food. “I’d prefer not to say where I came from exactly. Let’s just say I’m a long way from home. Well, what used to be home.”

“You know, if you’re going to dance around your origins... and if I’m doing the same... we will soon bore each other to death,” said Eisai-san.

“You tell me your story, I’ll tell you mine.”

“You go first. A monk doesn’t ask for a reward for his efforts, but I have been your eyes these few weeks...and displays of gratitude please our beloved goddess, Kuan Yin. Although perhaps you don’t believe in the goddess of compassion, either? Still, common politeness would dictate that—”

“You are the oddest monk I’ve ever met, you know that?”

“Do we have a deal, Takeshi-san?”

“Let me just finish this bland, tasteless food you brought me.”

“Forgive him, beloved goddess, he hasn’t learned anything in this life yet.”

“I have, you know. I’ve learned not to trust anyone but myself. That’s all anyone can trust.”

“This is why I said that you’ve learned nothing.”

“Listen to my story before you judge me.”

The monk came back and sat by my bed. “Let’s start with a simple observation on my part.”

“All right.”

“You own a sword that some samurai would kill for.”

“You’re talking about Little Enma. She’s my pride and joy.”

“You named your sword after a death god?”

“If I believe in any form of deity, it’s the shinigami.”

“Still, it’s a dangerous thing to connect a sword to the Underworld like that. And this one is so sharp, and well-made...”

“What do you know about swords, Eisai-san?”

“This isn’t my first incarnation, you know. Perhaps in another life, I knew...”

“Huh. Perhaps in *this* life you knew.”

“Perhaps. But it’s your turn to talk, not mine.”

“I’m growing frustrated with your riddles, friend.”

“Friend! An excellent word! I like how that sounds. Now that it’s steeped, let me pour you some medicinal tea to warm up that voice of yours properly.”

“...Please do.”

He poured. “I still can’t figure you out,” he said. “Sometimes, you speak like a peasant. Yet, you often act like a prince.”

“Thank you.”

“I didn’t mean it as a complement. You’re arrogant. You speak as if you’re entitled to something, and didn’t get it.” He put the tea into my hands.

“I didn’t,” I said, and I sipped the tea to stall for time. Not that I was thinking of something else to say... I just didn’t have a lot of desire to talk about old losses. I wanted to enjoy my tea.

But Eisai-san pushed the subject some more. “What weren’t you given? What was taken away from you?”

“I... if there really are gods, why did they give me ability, but no opportunities to get ahead in life?”

“Perhaps you were given everything you need and you simply haven’t seen it yet. In spite of your dependence on your eyes, spiritually, I think you were already quite blind.”

“...Do you want to hear my story or not?”

“I have nothing better to do. Go ahead.”

“My father said that I was born to fight.”

“Why did he say that?”

“Because my mother died when she gave birth to me. But I...in spite of the fact that I was born too early, I fought to stay alive.”

“Hence the name Takeshi-san.”

“Yes. It was like I was at war with the world. Right from the beginning.”

“I see.”

“My father was a lowly servant in the house of Lord Yamato.”

“Yamato? My, you really are a long way from home if you lived in that household.”

“Yes. But imagine my father’s frustration. He’d married the Lord’s concubine’s niece, only to have that woman die on him.”

“‘That woman?’ She was your mother!”

“My father always called her ‘that woman.’”

“I see. I assume you inherited your mother’s looks. Your father sounds so ugly on the inside, I can only suppose that he must have been somewhat ugly on the outside.”

“He used to say that my mother’s ghost haunted my face.”

“Hm. So. Your father had planned to use your mother’s family to get ahead in life. But that plan failed. What did he do then?”

“For the first few years of my life, he did nothing differently. There was nothing he could do, but continue to be a humble servant.”

“Then something changed.”

“Then something changed.”

I didn’t say anything for a moment.

“Well, what changed?”

“I thought that monks were supposed to be patient.”

“I’m not your average monk. Now, what happened next?”

“Tanaka-sama happened.”

“Tanaka Katsu? The swordsman?”

“You’ve heard of Tanaka-sama?”

“He’s quite good at what he does. Word travels, but also becomes exaggerated. From what I’ve heard, he tends to be a little hot-headed, which can’t do his swordplay any good.”

“‘Quite good’? Katsu was the best!”

“You called him by *his* name, not his family name. You must have been close to him.”

“We were close—” I sipped my tea. “...At least I thought we were.”

“How’d you meet that over-rated slasher, anyway?”

“You take that back!”

“Answer my question.”

“No! Apologize!”

“...Takeshi-kun, just because you were close to him doesn’t mean that he was the God of the Blade like people said he was.”

“How about Takeshi-san, to you? It’s the same respect I’ve been giving you! Don’t just call me –kun like I’m a toddler or something!”

“You’re acting like a toddler. I think I’ve had enough of you for today, Ito-san,” said Eisai-san.

“I don’t care if you stay away forever,” I said bitterly.

“Tell me that when you have to use the restroom,” said Eisai-san, but he left.

Two hours later, I had to pee. I was damned if I was going to call for Eisai-san, though. I got up from my futon... and fell straight on my ass. I was so weak!

I heard Eisai-san laugh. Come to think of it, I hadn’t heard him close the door. He must have padded off silently down the hall, then come back just as silently, in time to see me fall. “Well, help me up, dammit!” I said.

He laughed again—but he did help me to the chamber pot.

“...Please don’t say anything bad again about my mentor,” I said.

“You’re loyal, at least,” said Eisai-san. “Loyalty isn’t always deserved, but it says good things about your character.”

“All right, so Tanaka wasn’t the best. I admit it. There was someone better, one person. Fine. But he was still good.”

“Who did you see fight him that was better? Or was this by his own admission? ...Or is it that you saw someone better after you left Lord Yamato’s household and became a full-time soldier?”

“None of those, exactly, or not the way you meant them. *I* am better.”

“Ah hah.” Eisai-san paused. “You talk about him a bit like he was like the father you always wanted your father to be.”

“He was like the father any boy would want.”

“Then to hell with his swordsmanship. A good man is sometimes more of a rarity than a good samurai.”

“I used to think about him like that...” I said as Eisai-san returned me to my futon.

“...Why did it all have to turn out so badly?”

“He taught you what you needed to know, then he was no longer needed to play that role in your life. Perhaps if you tell me more of your story, we might be able to figure out why that was.”

I nodded, then, once I was settled down again, I went back to my story. “...From the start of my life, it was just my father and me. But, really, it was just me. Since my mother died in childbirth, my father saw me as a nuisance, more than anything.”

“His heir? How could any father see his child in that way?”

“His ambitions were to be more than a guard for Lord Yamato’s household. A child was something to take care of. The two weren’t a good mix.”

“I see.”

“My father was afraid that a crying, demanding infant would annoy the household. Since he didn’t want to spend the little money he had hiring a woman to take care of me, he took me on his rounds as soon as I was able to walk. I was an infant full of questions, but his only answer was ‘be still.’”

“...And were you?”

“I didn’t wish to be hit, so yes.”

“So you simply walked, and stood, while he made his rounds?”

“No. I looked at things.”

“...What do you mean?” asked Eisai-san, though I thought he sounded like he really understood what I meant.

“Eyes never have to be still. They can go as far as one can see. So I became an expert at studying the world. The leaves on the trees, the stars in the sky, the patterns on vases. You get the idea.” Eisai-san nodded. “As long as my eyes could move and play, as long as my mind could imagine, I was able to stay still.”

“I see.”

“Then, one day, that all changed.”

“How old were you? And what happened?”

“I was four or so. Quite young. My father was standing still, as a guard must, as was I; I was standing next to him, still as the grave. Suddenly, a horse coming into the gate reared up. It threw its rider to the ground and started stampeding. It ran and ran. It was coming closer and closer. My father had run away by that point—the natural thing to do was just to get out of the horse’s way and let it wear itself out and calm down naturally. But I couldn’t run. I just stood there...”

“‘Still as the grave.’”

“Yes. Suddenly, a man grabbed me and got me out of the way, just in time. That man was Lord Tanaka. My father bowed and bowed, apologizing for his frightened, idiotic son. Lord Tanaka looked at me and asked if I was an idiot. I shook my head no. He asked me if I had been frightened. I shook my head again. My father started saying that I was

being rude, as I was looking directly at Lord Tanaka and not bowing or apologizing for all the trouble I'd caused."

I drank some tea again, to calm myself down. It didn't work. "As if I'd caused it! It was the horse that caused the trouble, not me! Well, the Lord hushed my father, then asked me why I didn't run away, if I wasn't frightened. I looked him in the eye and said, 'A guard doesn't leave his post.' The Lord laughed a huge, pleased laugh. I'd done what a faithful servant of the household should have done; I'd held my ground. I'd thought of duty instead of my safety.

Lord Tanaka then asked my father why such a young boy was accompanying him on guard duty. My father told him about my mother's death and how difficult it was for a man alone to tend to a 'proud, stubborn child.' The Lord looked at me, then he looked at my father, and then he looked at me again. Then he smiled, and asked my father if he was willing to sell me to him."

"Oh? And your father was willing to do so, I take it."

"Mm, he pretended otherwise at first, but the truth was, he wanted rid of me, he wanted money, and he wanted to get in good with Lord Yamato."

"And what better way to do that than to sell his own son to the Lord's chief samurai?"

I nodded. "From that day forward, I was taught combat by Lord Tanaka himself. From early in the morning to late at night, sometimes later, I was training. There was a dojo inside Lord Yamato's compound, and I trained there with the children of the other guards, as well as the guards themselves. Even the youngest of the children were twice as old as I was. But I was determined to do my Lord Tanaka honor. Even when I was hurt during practice, I didn't complain. I was silent about it, even when I ended up black and blue. My attitude pleased my Lord so much that he gave me the nickname of Still and Silent Waters."

"Were you happy, Still-and-Silent-Waters?" asked Eisai-san.

"I was content."

"How long did that last?"

"...What makes you think it didn't last?"

“Change is a constant in our lives. Buddhism is a way to deal with the shifting sands under our feet. There’s no true contentment without the stability that comes from knowing one’s path.”

“Now you’re back to talking like a monk again. Training was my Buddha.”

“A Buddha with a false face, it seems to me.”

“Why do you say that?” I demanded, getting mad again, but this time at Eisai-san (again).

“No, no, forget I said it, go on. Let’s see if I’m right or not based on the way the story goes. I want to hear what happened next.”

“Hmph. So you admit you’re interested.”

“Perhaps. Or maybe I’m just being polite to an injured, bored young man.”

“‘Perhaps?’ You really piss me off sometimes, you know that?”

“It’s your decision to feel that way—that’s up to you. But if you do, I don’t have to take it personally.”

“I’m tired. *You* tire me out. Go away.”

“Very well.” There was a noise of something being put on the floor near me. “I’ve just put a bell near your bed. When you get bored, ring it, and I’ll come to you.”

I nodded. Nearly silently, he left again.

This man knows stealth, I thought. Like he’s seen battle first-hand. Do they really teach monks to walk that silently?

And then I thought, *He wasn’t **always** a monk...*

Too tired to think any more, I lay back, and went to sleep.

