

The Warrior With Broken Wings



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折れた翼を持つ戦士

THE
WARRIOR
WITH
BROKEN
WINGS

A FANTASY NOVEL BY
THORSTEN BRANDL

3RD EDITION

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Prologue

We find ourselves looking down on the city below us. The name of the city is irrelevant. In stark contrast to the events we are about to witness.

To us, it appears to be an ordinary, uneventful morning. A day like any other, seemingly.

We are just in time to see the sunrise, to witness the sunlight slowly but surely fighting its way through the morning mist and creating the most beautiful play of colors.

In the distance, we can hear a familiar potpourri of noises, including the ubiquitous sound of car engines mixed with the voices and footsteps of passers-by. All those people, on their way to work, are either on their cell phones or hurrying to catch the next subway train.

Our attention, however, is being directed to a small, inconspicuous alley located in one of the central districts of the city. An alley lined with rows of old, five-story red brick buildings, now obviously well past their prime.

Now that we are focusing on this alley, we notice the small, rusty street sign. In this moment, the buildings to the left and right of Denoue Street are starting to light up with the orange-red glow of the rising sun. One of the windows on the fourth floor in the building to our left is partially open, and we can hear a piano being played. The somber tune of Gary Jules' "Mad World" echoes off the walls of the buildings, sent back and forth like a tennis ball in an invisible tennis match. In the distance, we can hear the ringing of a school bell, carried to our ears by the wind, followed almost instantly by the cheerful voices of children.

Unfortunately, this apparently calm and serene setting has one disturbing flaw: in the middle of the alley, unnoticed by the many people on the busy street, we see a person lying on the cobblestone pavement. With every second in which the sun rises, with every inch the light drives back the darkness and its loyal shadows, we are able to see more of the dreadful details.

What might have been mistaken for a puddle of water in the nocturnal gloom is now revealed to be a trail of blood. At its end, the person in front of us, dressed in a dark brown coat, seems to

be trying to drag himself toward the nearby main street. Judging by his physique, we can tell it's a man, tall, perhaps in his thirties, now uncontrollably shivering and coughing. His coat covers most of his body and its edges greedily soak up all the blood within its reach. We can tell that he's trying to say something, but the words are instantly choked off by his own blood.

To us, it is obvious that this man would never have reached the end of the alley. The urgently needed help will not be granted to him. Too severe are his injuries and the loss of blood. We realize that we are doomed to be the sole witnesses to the last moments of this person's life. We are bound to watch him die without being able to help in any way.

Our sorrowful gaze, currently focused on the man in the alley, is suddenly diverted by a series of ear-piercing explosions that cause not only the buildings in this alley but surely all the buildings in the city to tremble. It feels as if the explosions are so powerful that they could tear apart the very fabric of time and space. For a fraction of a second, the sounds of the city - people, cars, children, everything - cease. Silence reigns. Only to be eclipsed by reality again in a heartbeat, like an old cassette tape being fast forwarded. Despite the lack of a physical presence, we can still somehow feel the shock waves forcing their way through the streets, alleys and subway tunnels like an unstoppable tsunami.

In confusion, we look down again, remembering the injured man. He is still alive, still lying in the alley. But now, in what looks like slow-motion, he lifts his quivering head. With the last bit of his strength, he looks up at the sky. To our surprise, we notice a peaceful smile on his face and follow his gaze.

Where, just a few moments ago, a beautiful orange light show created by the rising sun filled the morning sky, blue bolts of lightning streak toward the earth.

If fate had decided to intervene and allow someone from the main street to pass by at that moment, he or she might have heard this man's very last message.

But there is only us.

Barely escaping his trembling lips, we hear him speak these six words: "So this... is how it ends..."

As soon as the words have left his mouth, his lifeless head hits the blood-stained cobblestone pavement. No one hears or sees this. No one, except for us.

Shakespeare stated that all the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players. Players who have their exits, and their entrances. But from now on, the world's a stage with one player less to perform on it. As this one just took his exit right in front of us.

Camera Obscura

Some stories and classic dramas start with a blow. Ruthless, abrupt, in the middle of despair or within a hopeless scenario. Others, however, begin rather innocently. Like a venom slowly creeping its way toward the heart.

It all began with a nondescript parcel that was delivered to me last year on a cold and rainy October morning. It contained my cousin Jan's legacy. He died unexpectedly last spring at the age of forty-one in Seoul while doing research for a new book. At least that was the official version. Either way, fate had forcefully taken the life of the last living relative I had in this world.

Jan worked as a foreign correspondent and traveled a lot. He was rarely at his house, and even that was located all the way across the country. When I was a kid, he sometimes dropped by and showed me one of his card tricks. I clearly remember that sunny day in September when he took me to a zoo and I won my first camera in a prize drawing. My passion for photography started that day. So in a way, it's due to him that I ended up becoming a photographer. He was a good guy, one of those people who could never do anything bad to anyone else.

After a few months, his landlord had finally cleared his small apartment and sent me his few belongings. There were a variety of books, some travel guides (one of which he had even written himself), some hand-written manuscripts held together with red string, an old celluloid film reel, a bunch of clothes (which I wasn't even sure would fit me, as he was much shorter than I was), and an old camera. *The* camera.

Working as a freelance photographer, I knew a lot about digital cameras. But this one was different. It was an obsolete relic, one of those old analog cameras produced by the German company Zeiss-Ikon in the '40s or '50s, yet it appeared to be in mint condition. I was instantly stunned by its quality. A massive brick of solid steel held together by tiny screws, the product of skilled manual labor. I opened the cover and released the lens on the front of the black bellows. I noticed the crackling noise of the leather as it opened, and was amazed to find that the mechanism still worked perfectly after all those decades.

Also in the box, I found a red glass filter in a leather case no bigger than a matchbox. I knew that in the analog days, such filters were used to level adverse light conditions or to create certain moods, especially for black-and-white film. Nowadays, it only takes a few keystrokes and a photo editing program to do such things, but back then, it was much more of an art.

On the side of the camera, I found the model number stamped into the thin leather: 518/16. I tried to find more information about it on the internet, but many cameras of this type were being produced until the 1950s in Germany. I wanted to try it out right away, but finally decided to wait for my next foreign photo shoot assignment. In the meantime, I would try to find some matching roll films for it. Until then, I put it into one of the glass cabinets in which I usually kept all of my camera equipment.

After briefly having a look at the rest of Jan's belongings, I decided to leave them in the moving box until I had some time to properly sort them out. I was glad to have a few of his things, and intended to use some of it, especially the camera, in the near future.

Unfortunately, fate had other plans. The death of my beloved wife Jenny, and shortly after, of my best friend Mark, caused my life to derail, so that I forgot Jan's heritage for some time, including the camera. I was unable to work, and months would pass before I could leave the farm we'd bought just two years ago without instantly suffering from massive panic attacks. Thankfully, I had some money saved and I was able to live off of that until I got back on my feet.

In hindsight, I wished on several occasions that I had never received that box. I told myself it would have been for the best if it had just gotten lost. Thousands of parcels disappear every year, so why not this one, too? But by that time, it was too late, as the fate of mankind was already inextricably linked with mine.

The camera, the cat, the final battle... it was all an endless row of dominoes destined to fall, one after another... right in my direction.

Festivo

The heat embraced me without a trace of mercy. Even breathing was exhausting, and thanks to the high humidity, it felt like I was breathing water. My white shirt was already stuck to my upper body, and I hadn't even left the train tracks yet. I looked up, gazing with weary eyes at the passenger information display. Final destination. Track 3, Utsunomiya, 11am. The other passengers, many of them wearing white, short-sleeved business shirts and matching ties, rushed around me toward the exit. To my left, the white Shinkansen train, with its aerodynamic front that looked a bit like a dolphin's nose, released the last passengers.

The Japanese summer had a tight grip on the country. Between July and September each year, it turns Japan into a greenhouse right after the rainy season. It had taken a long time until I, as a foreigner, had been able to cope with the extreme weather conditions, and it was still a miserable experience, even after years of visiting this country.

At the end of the platform, I spotted several vending machines, offering all kinds of cold drinks, like an oasis in the desert. During my time in Asia, I always carried some coins in my pocket, so I could buy some water at one of the countless vending machines scattered all throughout Japan. These days, most people used the same magnetic cards that could also be used to pay for bus or train tickets, but I preferred using coins. Like inserting a token into one of those old arcade machines, it felt somewhat retro, and I didn't want to miss out on that. I put my backpack with my digital camera equipment next to me on the floor, inserted the three coins and chose a bottle of ice-cold mineral water. As I opened it, I took a look around me. The platform was now empty.

I had intended to be on a sacred mountain at Yamadera in less than two hours, but now found myself stranded at this small, rural station. A 5.9 magnitude earthquake had apparently damaged the tracks, so the trains had been redirected until they could be repaired. In Japan, there are over a thousand earthquakes of varying strength every year. Even the recurring typhoons in spring and fall would prevent many trains from

reaching their destinations, thus those forces of nature always had to be taken into account. I only wished I was still in Tokyo and not stuck in a small town with very little to see.

The conductor told me there would be another train back to Tokyo departing in two hours and five minutes. I had a look at my cell phone, as the prospect of sitting on this sweltering platform for another two hours was less than appealing. My seat neighbor, a backpacker from the US named Michael who was on his way to Hokkaido, had told me about a shrine he'd visited in this city a couple of years ago and recommended it to me.

I finally found a note on the internet describing the shrine. It didn't seem to be far from the station, perhaps five or ten minutes by foot. At least I could make use of the time left until the train back to Tokyo departed. Even if I couldn't take pictures of the sacred temple at Yamadera, I might be lucky enough to get some nice shots of that shrine. I had asked Michael if he wanted to go there with me but he just shook his head.

"Nah, it's too hot for me, man. I don't do well outside in all this heat," he said with a smile and tossed his brown hair aside. He looked a bit like a surfer dude, with his red and white floral shirt and the round sunglasses he wore even inside the train. I shrugged my shoulders and we said goodbye.

I had gotten used to the fact that chance tends to interfere with my plans. Usually for the better, like when I once took a picture of a weathered Torii in the golden evening sunlight, deep in the mountains near Kyoto, just when a raven flew by. Or the shot of a monk praying in front of the Buddha statue at Kamakura. Both shots were awarded on several occasions. Some people might be flattered by this, but I was never after fame or awards. To me, the point was always to depict the world as I perceived it, and to capture its beauty and serenity for others to enjoy. I tended to see things, details, that most people wouldn't even notice.

But since Jenny's accident, everything was different. My life felt muted and dull. I was nothing but a hollow, empty shell, trapped in a self-made purgatory where trivial things such as money or fame had already lost all of their appeal. Especially in a world that was now on the brink of self-destruction.

The news was filled with natural disasters caused by man-made climate change and reports of armed conflicts spreading around the world like a plague. Outbursts of violence and rage on the streets had become a daily occurrence, and in many countries, the police were ordered to fight against their own citizens. Most of the global economy was now controlled by huge corporations that exploited their employees and cared about nothing but profit.

People felt desperate and hopeless. After the pandemic, mass unemployment had destroyed lives, separated friends and families, and triggered countless personal tragedies. Many sought refuge in alcohol or drugs, anything that would silence the demons in their heads, if only temporarily. Everyone was so good at pretending to be okay that hardly anyone realized how bad things really were, until it was already completely out of control. The world in the 21st century was unrecognizable, and the future far worse than we had ever imagined.

I remembered all the dystopian movies and books I'd watched and read as a kid and realized that reality had far eclipsed them all. Gladly, Japan was still somewhat safe compared to most Western countries, but no one could tell how long this would last.

An announcement about other delayed trains coming from the speakers mounted to the ceiling dragged me out of my thoughts. I picked up my backpack and headed for the exit. On my way downstairs I put on my headphones, pushed the play button on my old, blue MD player and listened to the resumed lyrics and tune of Robert Tepper's "Angel of the City." I passed a small shop selling snacks, and as I was beginning to feel a bit hungry, I went inside and chose one of the wrapped tuna sandwiches from the chilled showcase, intending to eat it as soon as I arrived at the shrine. Another stairway later I finally reached the ground floor and the station exit.

I stepped outdoors, taking a deep breath. There was only a little more wind, and the air still felt like water, not much better than on the train tracks. In front of the station, there were several yellow and green cabs lined up, but if possible, I always preferred to travel by foot. You missed a lot of the world if you always took cabs, buses or trams.

While most of my jobs centered around Japan or Asian motifs in general, I'd had other assignments all over the world. Whether walking the narrow streets packed with tiny cafes on Montmartre in Paris, the hilly streets of San Francisco or the labyrinthine alleys of the Chan-el-chalili bazaar in Cairo, it's impossible to truly experience a city if you aren't willing to take the plunge and discover it on your own.

So I passed by the parking lot and crossed the empty street. By the time I reached the other side of the road, I could already feel drops of sweat running down my forehead. I took off my headphones, wiped my forehead with a handkerchief and put on my sunglasses. Their small, round lenses at least made the blinding midday sun a little more bearable.

The virtual compass on my cell phone pointed to the west. As I crossed the intersection, I felt Jan's old camera hanging from the belt of my cargo pants, swinging in time with my footsteps. While sitting on the train, I had started to carefully clean its case and lenses and loaded it with a 120 roll film, which I had bought at a large electronics store in downtown Tokyo. Even in the 21st century, now firmly ruled by digital cameras and cell phones, there were still plenty of enthusiasts and lovers of analog photography out there, which ensured that such niche products did not entirely disappear from the shelves. I had intended to take the first shots with this camera in the area of the Ryūshaku temple in Yamadera, but this wouldn't be possible now. When the train stopped at Utsunomiya station, I decided to take a few test pictures with it on the grounds of the Utsunomiya Futaarayamajinja instead.

It proved to be only a short walk, past the rows of shops, drugstores, hair salons, and bank buildings. The streets were virtually deserted. That wasn't much of a surprise, though. Who would voluntarily walk around outside in such unbearable heat when they didn't have to?

I caught a glimpse of my battered, lonely reflection in one of the shop windows, and found the answer to my question. In a fruitless attempt at encouragement, I tried to smile, and gave myself a halfhearted thumbs up.

Even though only a few cars were on the streets at that time of day, I patiently waited in front of one of the pedestrian traffic lights until it turned green. I was just about to start crossing the road when I heard a "meow" right next to me. In surprise, I looked down and saw a Siamese cat sitting on one of the knee-high, gray concrete pillars that were set up next to the traffic light on the sidewalk. The cat had beautiful eyes. With its well-groomed fur, it definitely did not look like a stray. Following an impulse, I tried to pet its head, but the cat avoided my touch and just stared at me. I followed its unwavering eyes and realized that it was looking at the tuna sandwich, which I had stuffed into one of my backpack's outer mesh compartments.

"Hello there! Are you hungry?" I asked, but got neither a "meow" nor any affirmative reaction in return. The cat's eyes focused on the tuna, then it gazed at me with an adorable look on its face. I sighed, took the sandwich out and unwrapped it, then took out a piece of tuna and held it in front of the cat's face.

With a swift movement, its head held high, it grabbed the tuna out of my hand, jumped off the concrete pillar and disappeared into a narrow gap between two buildings.

"You're welcome!" I called after it. I turned around just in time to see the traffic light change to red again. "Well, that's just perfect," I muttered, then decided to eat the rest of the sandwich as I walked.

When I finally crossed that last intersection, the area of the shrine to my right was easily recognizable, as it turned out to be drastically different from the surrounding area. Located across from some sort of department store, it looked like a misplaced relic from a bygone era. A wooden torii gate marked its entrance, through which a visitor reached a forecourt with paving stones. At the end of that, a long, steep stone staircase led to a higher area, with the shrine building located on a hill at the top. I certainly didn't feel like climbing that many stairs right now. And yet, the Yamadera Temple, with its one thousand steps, would have been much more difficult to reach.

I considered for a second just going back to that air-conditioned food booth and having something else to eat before taking the next Shinkansen back to Tokyo. But now that I was already here,

it would have been foolish not to at least have a look at the shrine and take some pictures.

As I started to climb the steps, strange noises were carried to my ears by the wind, namely an interesting mix of chants and drum beats, originating from the top of the hill.

I frowned. Was there a festival taking place at the shrine today? If so, where were all the people? I turned around. The forecourt below me was deserted. In the background, behind it, only a few cars passed by on the street in front of the torii gate. There was no one out there. Except for me.

I shrugged, curious, already looking forward to seeing what awaited me on top of the platform. With each step I took, the drum beats and chants became gradually louder. Of course, festivals in Japan were not uncommon. Especially during the hot summer months, the Hanabi and Obon festivities were events that young and old always looked forward to, but the ones I'd been to before were so well attended that you could barely move due to all the masses of visitors crowding the streets, no matter if it was day or night.

As I climbed the last few stone steps, I could slowly see the tips of colored flags appearing in front of me, emerging over the stairs and blowing in the wind. In fact, with each step I took, I could feel the wind getting stronger. It started to tug on my shirt and veiled me in a comforting layer of pleasant, cooling air. I took the sunglasses off as I reached the last step. About twenty yards in front of me, framed by the colorful, waving flags, dozens of monks and priests dressed in black and white robes had gathered. Some had their hands folded in prayer as they knelt on the ground in front of the wooden main building; others were rhythmically beating old taiko drums, while another group of them had gathered in a circle directly in front of the shrine building.

As strange as this appeared to be, it was something else that caused me to freeze: as soon as I set foot on the shrine grounds, all the singing and drum beating stopped from one second to the next.

There was something wrong here. Something enigmatic, something I was unable to comprehend. I felt like an outlaw who

had just set foot in a saloon. Worst of all were the expressions on the faces of the priests when they spotted me.

As a foreigner visiting Japan, I was used to the fact that the Japanese people, especially the ones living in the countryside, would at times stare at me, more or less openly. I had always tried to blend in and to respect the Japanese customs, so it had never been a problem of any kind.

This, however, was different. Completely different. These faces reflected nothing but confusion, disbelief and surprise.

According to Wikipedia, this shrine was open to the public to visit. Had I just unknowingly disturbed a sacred ceremony? Or even desecrated the forecourt? I was tempted to just turn around and go back down the steps again, but something prevented me from doing so. Besides, I admit I was curious about what exactly was going on.

The priests and monks were frozen in place. It seemed they didn't know what was happening either, and had no idea what to do now. I could tell from the look in their eyes that something was wrong. To them, my appearance had come as a huge shock. But why?

After what seemed like an eternity, a murmur went through the crowd, piercing the silence. It was as if they had finally broken free of their shock, and now all begun talking at once in a wild and chaotic babble of voices. None of them would let me out of their sight. As they talked, they continued to stare at me, a sweating foreigner standing there at the top of the staircase. It made me feel very uncomfortable. I've always hated to be in the limelight, especially in such a surreal situation over which I had zero control.

To my left, I noticed a small, rectangular fountain basin with a bronze dragon's head mounted on it. As part of the traditional cleansing ritual, these fountains were commonly found at shrines and temples. I slowly walked over to it, took the wooden dipper and poured water over my hands. I hoped this cleansing ritual would at least underline my good and respectful intentions. But the murmuring just got louder. I wished so much that I could have understood what they were whispering to each other. Unfortunately, my Japanese was, despite countless stays in Japan,

not too good. I decided to stay at the water basin for now, raised my left hand, waved at them and hesitantly said, "Konnichiwa."

One of the priests, dressed in a black robe and wearing wooden sandals, suddenly broke away from the crowd and walked toward me. To my eyes, he still had no idea what to say to me. He just furrowed his brow. But to my surprise, he walked past me, went to the top of the stairs, looked down at the empty forecourt near the torii and then turned around again. The others in the group now looked at him, but he just shook his head. Then all heads turned back in my direction again.

The black-clad priest finally spoke to me in a trembling voice, heavy with meaning.

But I could not understand him. My Japanese was very poor, but since he was waiting for my answer, I decided, in the midst of bowing, to at least try and introduce myself.

He instantly interrupted me by calling someone in the crowd behind him. One of the younger monks hastily hurried into one of the wooden main buildings.

"Come," said the priest in Japanese. At least I was able to understand that much. He signaled me to follow him. To my surprise, the other monks let me pass, but kept a polite distance from me when I passed by. We walked to an adjacent building, which, like the shrine building, was built entirely out of wood. The same building the young monk had run into moments ago.

What on earth was going on here? I really hoped they would not call the police. Maybe I had indeed disturbed some kind of sacred ceremony, but I'd never heard or read of such a thing. Like Buddhism, I always considered Shintoism to be exceedingly tolerant of other religions.

When we arrived in front of the white sliding door that marked the entrance of the building, out of habit I intended to take my shoes off, but much to my surprise, a voice called out to me in English. "Leave them on."

A very old man, dressed in a black robe with long sleeves, sat in the middle of the room, with his legs crossed on the sand-colored tatami floor. He must have been at least eighty or ninety years old and looked like the kind of person you'd want to help cross the street, and who would then thank you with a grateful smile for

doing so. I realized that he must have been the gūji, some sort of chief priest. He glanced at me and made a gesture with his hand, which I interpreted as an invitation to sit down in front of him. To my surprise, the old man spoke understandable English.

"You are not Japanese."

It sounded more like a statement than a question. And yet, he had chosen his words carefully. In embarrassment, I looked down and cleared my throat.

"Listen, I'm very sorry if I unwittingly disrupted your ceremony. I didn't know there was a festival or whatever it is going on out there today."

The old man laughed, then looked at me with a sudden, serious facial expression.

"You mean to say," he replied, "you do not know what you are?"

"What do you mean?" The question confused me. Perhaps his English was not as good as I had thought? I assumed he was simply expecting a formal introduction. "Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't introduce myself," I quickly added. I reached into my pocket, pulled one of my business cards out of my wallet and handed it to him with both hands. He glanced at the business card, which showed my name in cursive font above a picture of the Tokyo Tower at night, blinked several times, then looked at me again. "My name is Thomas. Thomas Knight. I'm a photographer and..."

But that was as far as I got.

"Yes, I understand. My name is Kaeru." He bowed too deep and long for my taste. In Japan, this was a gesture of respect for age or status, and should have been reversed in this situation.

In my confusion, I didn't quite know what he expected me to say. "I'm sorry, but I don't understand any of this. Were you expecting someone? Maybe they just got caught up somewhere, and will still drop by. There was an earthquake, and the Shinkansen I intended to take to Yamadera had to stop here. The only reason I came to this place is because I wanted to take some pictures of the shrine grounds."

He stared at me in silence for a few moments before he spoke again.

"You are right about one thing. We were expecting someone indeed, just..." After a short pause, as if he seemed embarrassed

now, he added, "...not a foreigner." He suddenly turned toward the door and called out, "Akira!" in a surprisingly loud voice. After a few seconds, one of the monks stormed into the room. As he hastily pushed the sliding door aside, I could see that the other priests and monks had all gathered in front of the building.

There was a quick, agitated exchange of Japanese with the priest, a middle-aged man dressed in a brown and white robe. Kaeru never took his eyes off me, even while he talked to Akira. I almost felt a bit of relief because of the mix-up, as apparently I wasn't the person they were waiting for. However, the relief still fought an ongoing battle with a rising curiosity.

At some point, Akira bowed and quickly left the room again, only to return less than a minute later, carrying a box in his hands. When he handed it to Kaeru, I could see that it was an old, wooden chest, perhaps the size of a shoebox. Its tarnished copper fittings made it look like a small, vintage treasure chest. It was covered with shiny, black lacquer. I had seen this kind of finish before, the Japanese called it "shikki." Even such a small box must have been worth quite some money.

Kaeru carefully and slowly opened it, as if it was either very fragile or very valuable. Inside, buried in a velvet blanket, there lay a paper scroll, which made crackling noises when the monk slowly spread it. It looked as if it had been rolled out and rolled up again countless times over the decades or centuries. The priest put on his glasses, looked at the Chinese characters artfully painted on it in black ink, then at me.

"The thing is," he continued slowly and, I noticed, with deliberate wording, "we were expecting a descendant of the Tsubasa clan today." He looked at me over the top of his small glasses, then took them off again with a sigh.

I'd heard of the Tsubasa clan before. Tsubasa, translated into "wings," was an old Japanese dynasty originating in the Edo period.

"But instead," he said as he rolled up the paper again, "you show up here." He broke into an unexpected, hearty laugh, which took me by surprise. "It seems that we all had it completely wrong the whole time. Can you imagine that?" Once more, laughter

followed his words, before he added, "That's at least... interesting," in an amiable tone that caused me to relax a bit again.

After another long and uncomfortable pause, Kaeru once more called the priest, who was still waiting in front of the sliding door. When he stepped in, an excited exchange of words followed, just like before. But this time, the old man in front of me got upset. He insistently repeated the same sentence over and over again, and each time he got angrier. Finally, as if unsure what to do, Akira nodded and left the room with a horrified face.

"We send our apologies for you to take." Kaeru had turned his head in my direction again. "I am so very, deeply sorry for you. Please believe me." His tone had changed again, and now it radiated calmness and honesty. "You take pictures with that?" He pointed at the old camera that was attached to my belt with the snap hook.

I followed his gaze. "Oh yes." I cleared my throat. "Well, I usually use a professional digital camera for my work." I pointed to the backpack next to me.

The sliding door was opened again. Out of breath, Akira entered the room, this time holding something wrapped in a thin, black blanket. He was reluctant to give it to the gūji at first, but Kaeru looked at him with a solemn, penetrating gaze, then held out his hand, demanding it to be given to him. Finally, Kaeru gently took it and revealed its contents to me. What had at first looked like a staff or stick to me, turned out to be a long, slightly curved, black wooden saya, containing a Samurai sword. It had to be really old. I had seen similar historical swords in various Japanese castles before, which usually kept and exhibited such relics on the floors that served as a museum.

It was obvious that this was definitely not one of those cheap replicas that were often sold to tourists.

The abbot carefully grasped the wooden saya with a cloth, held it up, and shook it. At the other end, this caused the sword to slide out by half its length.

Why was the gūji so anxious not to touch the sword? I found that, as well as the whole situation, to be disturbingly surreal.

I looked at the katana, which was indeed a fascinating piece of art. Its blade was folded several times, and broke the light in all its

spectrum. It shone as if it had never been used before. The handle had white, wooden intarsia, bestrewn with Japanese characters. It was strikingly beautiful. The abbot seemed to notice my admiration for the sword and grinned broadly.

"This is for you." He shook the saya again so that the blade disappeared back into the wooden sheath as he bowed to me. My eyes looked from the sword to the smiling abbot in disbelief and surprise. It had to be worth a small fortune. Perhaps even a large fortune. But what would I do with a sword? And why me? After all, no one would just hand a valuable, ancient sword to some random visitor, and certainly not to a foreigner. I didn't even want to think about the cost and formalities that would be required to take it through customs. And yet, I so wanted to hold it in my hands at least once. It felt as if it were calling my name. I'd never had the chance to actually touch such a sword, as you would never be allowed to do that in a museum.

I reached out my hands to take it from him, but the abbot, as if thinking better of it, suddenly pulled the sword back.

"However," he added, "I would like to ask for a comparatively tiny favor in return. If you don't mind, that is."

He put the scroll back into the wooden chest and slowly closed its lid before placing it and the sword carefully on the ground next to us and standing up.

He interpreted my silence, which was actually a result of total confusion, as my agreeing to whatever he intended to ask of me.

"Would you please take a picture of me with your old camera? You see, I... I have such fond memories of those devices." Then he quickly added, "After taking the picture, you are free to leave with the sword, as a gift for your trouble." His face showed the same broad smile as before. I nodded in relief, still wondering into what kind of spectacle I had gotten myself. At this point, my only wish was to leave that place and get back to Tokyo as fast as possible.

I stood up, took the camera from the snap hook, and pressed the small silver button on the top, so that the black leather bellows with the lens on the front ejected with its typical rustling sound. The abbot walked over and positioned himself in front of one of the doors, which were adorned with white rice paper, then bowed and smiled slightly as he took up his stance. I looked at the old

man, changed the aperture to a lower number, set the distance ring to four meters and looked up again.

I still remember hearing him say, "It was an honor," but since by that time I had already cocked and pushed the camera's trigger, it was too late to question it. The light fell through the lens, exposing the roll film within the blink of an eye.

In an instant, darkness swallowed me, and from one moment to the next, everything around me ceased to exist.

Hiraeth

The next feeling I perceived after the darkness released its grip on me again was warmth. A comforting, pleasant feeling of warmth that surrounded all of my body. I heard birds chirping, listened to the rustling of leaves in the treetops, felt sunbeams caressing my hands and face. But at the same time, a terrible headache pierced my brain and reached out to every single cell of my body.

When I finally managed to open my eyes, I was instantly blinded by the bright sunshine. Out of instinct, I raised my hand to shield my eyes from the light in order to see just where exactly I was.

At first I thought I might have fainted for some reason, and that the monks had carried me to some open space or garden behind the shrine buildings. It took what seemed like an eternity until the blurred outlines changed into identifiable forms, and for me to accept the fact that these were definitely not the shrine grounds anymore. Instead, I found myself lying in an incredibly large, open meadow. I could feel the warm blades of grass under the palms of my hands. And yet, the rest of my body was still laying on the very same tatami mats that were in the gūji's house. It looked as if someone had cut out the floor of the room and randomly placed it somewhere. But where?

A few hundred yards from my location, I noticed a crescent-shaped forest spreading out in front of me. In the opposite direction, behind me, a mountain range with snow covered peaks adorned the horizon. What had just happened to me? And where was I? This couldn't possibly be Japan. Where did the shrine and all the monks go? The humidity and all of its drawbacks, the problems with breathing the humid air, all of this was no longer an issue. On the contrary. The air was unusually clean and... different. Clear. Pure. Not polluted in any way. My lungs instantly and greedily filled with oxygen, and with each breath I felt better and more energized.

It was warm, but pleasantly warm, not muggy or hot. I tried to sit upright, which I managed to do only with difficulty. Next to me, I saw my backpack and the sword lying next to it on the tatami mat, along with the box holding the paper scroll. How did

I get here? And with all those things? I hadn't had a blackout for over a decade, and at least back then I knew it was from drinking too much. Now, in this state of utter confusion, I couldn't remember how I'd gotten here. I reached for the backpack, dragged it closer to me and opened its zipper. The digital camera, the lenses and everything else was stowed in the dedicated compartments. Even my passport was still in the left side pocket. The old Zeiss-Ikon camera lay at my feet, on the tatami. I bent down and put the camera back on its hook on the black belt of my cargo pants, then fumbled for the cell phone in my pocket and pulled it out with shaking hands.

No reception. And no GPS, either. I put the phone back in my pocket and tried unsuccessfully to get up. I was still far too dizzy. Only then did I notice the cat.

The feline was sitting to the left of me on top of an old, weathered tree stump, and watching me with big, blue eyes. I inevitably flinched in surprise, which once more nullified all of my efforts to get up.

It was a Siamese cat with beige-brown and black fur, very similar to the one I had seen on my way to the shrine. Except that this one was wearing a black collar with a diamond-shaped pendant that had the numeral "IV" engraved in its center. The pendant glistened and sparkled in the sun so that it almost blinded me. I had to squint my eyes for a moment.

The cat seemed to be less impressed by my presence, as it tilted its head and examined me several times from top to bottom. My next attempt to get up was much more successful than the first few. I took another deep breath, which was a blessing, although I still felt a bit shaky standing on my feet again. I grabbed my backpack and picked up the sword. I didn't really know what to do with it, but I finally attached it to the backpack with the two velcro straps that normally held my tripod in place. I then slung it over my right shoulder and slowly picked up the old scroll from the ground.

But what now? Where should I go? Where on earth was I? This all made no sense whatsoever. I rubbed my temples.

The cat kept watching me, while I indecisively let my eyes run back and forth from the forest to the mountain range.

"I assume you don't know how I ended up here, do you?" I said to the cat. But the cat, much to my disappointment, just blinked and tilted its head again. I sighed and finally decided to head in the direction of the mountains. Maybe I could get some reception up there, or I would pass a village or a town on my way. In any case, the chances of finding someone who could actually tell me where I was seemed to be best in that direction. I really believed this to be a good idea, but I didn't get far. After only three steps, I heard a voice behind me.

"I would not go in that direction if I were you."

I stopped. The voice sounded strangely distorted, like nothing I had ever heard before. I could easily understand the words, but they were spoken in a high, indefinable tone.

I slowly turned around, but there was nobody there.

Except for the cat, that is, who still looked at me with its head tilted. I turned around again and again, moving in a circle, but the cat proved to be the only creature I could see, far or near. I stopped right in front of it.

"Did... did you just say that?" I felt so stupid asking this. I might as well have asked a daffodil how its day was going so far.

"No, the mushroom over there." The cat pointed with its paw to the left. My eyes instantly looked in the direction it was pointing. But again, there was nothing. Except for grass and meadowland.

I turned back to the cat, who was now rolling its eyes. Which I realized looks rather scary when a cat does it.

"You can..." I stuttered as I stared at the cat in disbelief.

"Wonderful. Hello, Mr. Einstein. You do know that with every word that comes out of your mouth, you lose more of your prestige?" Once more, the cat looked at me askance, which I now perceived as disdain.

"Am I..." I hesitated to finish that sentence. "...dead?"

"That depends..." replied the cat slowly, as if it had to think about what I just asked, then raised its paw again and pointed to the mountains.

"If you go that way, you will certainly be dead very soon."

I had never seen a cat smiling before. I felt insulted. By a cat. The headache building up in my head didn't make it any better.

"Then where should I go? And why should I believe a talking cat?"

The cat let out a short growl. I instantly realized that this remark must have deeply upset it. Gladly, this lasted for only a brief moment. What on earth was going on here? Did I have an accident and this was some kind of comatose dream? On the other hand, I had imagined heaven - or hell - to be completely different.

"First of all, my name is Phoenix."

I nodded briefly. Before I could stop myself, out of pure habit, a "Nice to meet you," escaped my lips. The cat however, received it with satisfaction. I sighed. "My name is Knight, Thomas Knight." I now successfully refrained from shaking the cat's paw. And without waiting for a response, I added, "How is it that you can talk?"

"Why is that so strange? So can you. Although regrettably with much less eloquence than I had hoped for."

Was I being repeatedly insulted by a talking cat? I tried to ignore the echoing screams spreading from all corners of my mind. I realized that this was apparently what madness must feel like.

Finally, I pointed my finger toward the mountain range behind us.

"What's up there?" I asked.

"You don't want to know that," the cat replied.

"And how about this way?" I pointed at the forest.

"If I told you that, I am afraid you wouldn't believe me."

For some odd reason, one of Tenniel's etchings from Carroll's "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" came to my mind.

"So in which direction should I go, then?" I asked.

"Just follow me," Phoenix said, and then added, "If you want to live, that is."

With a swift and graceful movement, the cat jumped down from the tree stump and headed for the forest. I followed. Hesitantly. But what other choice did I have?

A talking cat. Something inside of me told me to run away screaming, but with my luck, this would have ended in some sort of bottomless pit or bear trap. I still had the sword, so at least I

wasn't entirely unarmed, but on the other hand, the cat didn't really look like much of a threat.

Instead, my own mind was threatening me now.

"Are you aware that you're following a talking cat? Congratulations, that's it. You're completely nuts. You'll soon wake up straitjacketed." These thoughts didn't make it any better.

"Could you at least tell me where I am?" I said, as I tried to keep pace.

"Verðld." Once more I noticed an extremely annoyed undertone in its voice.

I couldn't remember hearing that name before. "Verðld? Is that a prefecture? Where is that?"

The cat paused, only to change its mind and continue walking.

"You know, you're just about to slip into the negative on my rating of human intelligence. You do not seriously believe that this is Earth, right? Please tell me you are not that stupid. Please!?"

I decided that for now, no matter what the cat said, I would keep my thoughts and questions to myself. Maybe I was in fact in a coma and my brain was, at this very second, happily frying itself. I wondered if one could "feel" when you were in a dream or coma? When I thought about all the dreams I'd had so far, it didn't seem as if I had ever experienced anything like this before.

I wasn't able to hold out for long, though.

"I don't want to ask too many annoying questions," I said, in another likely fruitless attempt to hold a conversation with the cat, "but where are you taking me?"

"Fàilte. It's something like the capitol here." And with a sorrowful undertone, Phoenix added, "The last one left."

I had never heard of Fàilte, either.

"What happened to the other cities?"

Phoenix didn't reply at first, but after a while just said, "We are the last."

"The last? Of what?" I asked. But either the cat didn't want to talk to me or I simply didn't understand the vague hints. By this time we had already reached the forest. The trees were huge and, judging by their size, must have been hundreds of years old. The forest floor was densely overgrown with all kinds of moss and ferns, but I couldn't sense anything threatening or eerie. Quite the

contrary: tiny, colorful, iridescent birds that looked like hummingbirds flew from branch to branch. Sunbeams worked their way through the branches and leaves, forming cones of light on the mossy ground. Directly in front of us, a meandering path snaked along.

"No matter what happens, do yourself a favor and stay on the path. Don't make any sudden movements. I don't want anything to happen to you here. Because then it will be my fault, and I don't want to be blamed if you don't even make it to Fàilte," said the cat, without bothering to turn around or even look at me. After a few minutes of walking, I began to have the strange feeling that I was being watched. I looked around. It felt as if I saw groups of people standing behind me. But every time I turned around, there was nothing to be seen but the peaceful forest.

To my right, the crumbled remains of something that might once have been a beautiful pagoda made out of white marble greeted me from another time long gone.

"I don't think we're alone here," I finally whispered to the cat.

"I know. Stay on the path, and nothing will happen to you. These are the Gæta. Guardians, if you like. All that is left of the fallen warriors. They have decided to stay, and now they are the last bastion that protects Fàilte. If they fall, so does our kingdom. Don't worry. They will do you no harm. As long as you don't do anything stupid, that is."

I failed to comprehend what the cat had just told me, or whether I was being tricked and lied to. Instead, I tried to focus on the cat and on the path in front of us, winding through the forest. With every step we went deeper into the woods, the movements that I perceived around me increased. I couldn't hear anything abnormal; everything looked as idyllic as before.

Still, the shapes I could see out of the corners of my eyes became more and more numerous.

What had I gotten myself into here? I so badly just wanted to go home to my farm, sit down on my sofa and watch a movie or take some pictures anywhere but here.

The path finally made a small bend, and now I could already see it getting brighter again at the end. We were approaching another vast grassland. It must have been a mile or so, because at

its end, little by little, far beyond the forest, I could descry an incredibly large stone wall. For several miles in length, it was lined with towers and observation decks at intervals of several hundred yards.

As we approached it, I noticed soldiers on watch, standing in each of its recesses. They were wearing shiny gold, silver and iridescent armor which glittered in the sun like precious jewels. Some held longbows, others halberds. As soon as they spotted us coming in their direction, one of them gave a signal which spread from tower to tower. From behind the wall, I heard bells frantically being rung.

We continued toward the city wall, until I spotted a gate in front of us. It was perhaps twenty-five feet in height, made of solid wood, with heavy iron fittings holding it in place. I had been to Cairo before, and I was deeply impressed by the Pyramids of Gizeh and their enormous size. But this was beyond compare.

With a loud rattle, the city gate was slowly pulled open by half a dozen guards. Behind them stood a second row of soldiers with drawn swords, which they sheathed immediately when they saw us approaching. As we got closer and closer, they formed an alley with military precision. Their armor looked vaguely like a medieval knight's armor, but whatever it was made of molded flexibly to each soldier's physique, and looked as if it weighed almost nothing.

Behind the ranks of soldiers I could see countless houses alongside the road. It actually looked like a late medieval city. Or at least the way I would have imagined such a town to look. With one significant difference: it all looked clean. Nor did it smell bad in any way. Nothing like that. On the contrary, it felt like an open-air museum with exhibits that were all well maintained and cared for. Paved roads that led from all sides of the city went up a hill, and on its top a white castle stood majestically, high above the city. On each of its five pointed towers were huge red flags with a circled, white diamond on its upper half. Inside the diamond there was a vertical line with two shorter lines slanting upwards from the right side. The flags slowly and gracefully waved in the wind.

By the time we passed the gate, the guards had already formed up to the left and right of it. The front row dropped to their knee, and the back row assumed posture, with the sparkling swords held in front of their bodies. Ordinary men and women of all ages, from the very young to the very old, lined up to the left and right of us, which surprised me. Unfortunately, I had no time to take a closer look or stop walking, as I was trying not to lose the cat that was still walking in front of me, out of sight.

Besides, there were simply too many impressions raining down on me, and life inside the city walls was unfolding right before my disbelieving eyes. People stopped and stared at me in astonishment. They wore beautiful, old fashioned clothes. Some were made out of leather, others out of colorful linen cloth ornately sewn together in traditional costumes of all kinds. The majority of them fell to their knees, their heads bowed. They had good-natured faces in which I could read no trace of anger, suspicion or contempt. However, I don't know if I imagined it, but I felt something like a deep-seated fear that seemed to hide behind the eyes of those people.

As we continued walking through the city, more and more people gathered and instantly fell to their knees as soon as we came near them, while lowering their heads.

Why would they do that? It was endlessly bizarre. I found this to be so unpleasant that I wanted to ask everyone to get up again or even lift them up myself. But would they even understand me? Phoenix could speak and understand my language, but did that apply to the people here as well? There was no way to tell.

The houses looked so beautiful. Built of dark brown wood and adorned with different types of intarsia, they also all had thatched, wooden roofs. There were several larger buildings, probably administrative or assembly buildings whose roofs were covered in shiny, red shingles. Most houses had only one or two floors and were rather small. They even had shutters on the windows that could be opened and closed depending on the time of day. Some of the shutters had little hearts or symbols cut out near the top.

We finally turned off onto an unpaved side street, and after a few more yards, the cat stopped in front of a building with a

blackboard set up in front of it. On a huge wooden board, suspended from two chains above the front door, the word "Tavern" was written in white paint.

"The innkeeper is alright. He will answer your questions. I will announce your arrival at the castle," Phoenix called to me, and then quickly ran off before I was able to ask anything.

So here I was, standing in front of a massive oak door, surrounded by people who wouldn't stop staring at me, and questioning my sanity. I wanted to get out of the street and inside that inn or whatever it was as quickly as possible. Should I just enter? The door had a round arch at the top. An iron ring was attached to a fitting in the middle. Unsure about what to do and how to do it, I glanced to the left. "Happy Hors d'oeuvres from 5-10pm" was written on the blackboard in cursive, with light blue chalk and a white outline. I decided to knock first and banged the iron ring three times against the door. With every strike, the hollow sound of the iron ring echoed inside the building. After the third knock, I heard a voice.

"Come on in. It's open."

