

Path of a Samurai

by Matthew Bissonnette

The age of the Shogun began in the early 11th century. Before that ancient Japan had been ruled by the emperor, a monarchy with absolute authority over a land of many factions who all strived to impose their control. The emperor's power had been for a large part preserved by the Samurai, a class of warriors. Once the Samurai were common men who had been required by law to serve in the emperor's army, but over time some of them began to believe in strict codes of conduct, such as honor and complete loyalty to their lord.

The Samurai, a word which means “those who serve”, became renowned for their fighting skills, the result of a devotion to athletic prowess and the martial arts. Over time one in ten men had become part of the Samurai class, a significant part of the country's elite. Ultimately some Samurai clans began to believe that their right to rule was greater than that of the Emperor himself.

The end of the Emperor's reign and the emergence of the Shogun, generals and Samurai who had now become rulers, began when two powerful families, the Taira and Minamoto clans, fought for control of Japan as the power of the imperial court began to fade.

These new contenders for power had been protected and aided by the Samurai class. By the dawn of the twelfth century the emperor had been deposed, and it was the Shogun who ruled. The monarchy went on but was now stripped of any ruling authority; simply a figurehead for the people.

The Shogun was the supreme lord over much of Japan; around the Shogun were the lesser leaders known as the Shogunate. The Samurai were now not just warriors but also responsible for judicial and civil matters.

Around 1274, all of Japan and the rule of the Shogun were threatened when a massive naval armada of the Mongol Empire was about to invade the island. But it seems the gods had favored Japan, and a powerful typhoon destroyed the fleet of the invaders—this storm would become known as “The Divine Wind”. For hundred of years

the age of the Shogun continued: power moved from one clan to another as periods of war and peace came and went. Near the end of the Shogun dynasty, around the 17th century, the Shogunate began to fear the influence of foreign traders and religions. Christian peasants became persecuted and they started a rebellion which was defeated by the Samurai but at a great cost, as many of their ranks were slain in battle. What followed was a period during which Japan secluded itself from the world and foreign influences.

This Samurai's journey begins in the small village of Misato in the province of Aki around the year of 1821. Japan is still isolated from the world beyond its shores and the Shogun ruler is Ienari of the Tokugawa clan. The Samurai are at their pinnacle and the Shogun rule over the entire island. But the end of this age of the Samurai and the Shogun loomed ahead as a child named Kusunoki Mishima was born.

To the south of the island of Japan was the province of Aki, a land of valleys and hills along the eastern coast of the island. Aside from the two temples built by Emperor Shomu centuries before, the province was unexceptional and inhabited by small villages which either fished the sea or grew rice on their complex networks of rice paddies. The capital of the province was the city of Hiroshima, from which the Shogunate presided over all affairs in the territory.

The village of Misato was a small settlement built near the coast, but was far away from larger centers of activity, so the town lived in a sort of seclusion from the affairs of the rest of the country. It was a tiny community of paper-and-wood homes, and a small Shinto temple. Rice paddies filled the grassy fields which surrounded Misato. But Misato was not totally unknown; in the center of town was the forge—a large stone building in which the prized Katana, sword of the Samurai, was forged in the bowels of a giant oven over the course of many days. Swords from Misato were much sought after, for the town had one commodity which was Tamahagan, or jewel steel, a type of metal that was stronger and more durable than other kinds of the substance. Misato mined Tamahagan ore from an ancient mine near the town, and it was said to be the finest on the island. Katana swords from Misato were sought by Samurai from the farthest corners of Japan. On the outskirts of Misato was a small farm owned by a couple, Katsu Mishima and his wife Sachiko.

It was a cold autumn as night fell over the Mishima farm, a small house near the edge of a forest. In a small bedroom Katsu was putting his young son Kusunoki to bed for the night. It had been a tiring day as father and son had dutifully tended to the farm; Katsu knew his son was only of the age of six but the boy was exceptionally strong and energetic for his age and was very useful when it came to work.

Kusunoki lay in his small cot in the tiny room as his father sat in a chair and talked to the boy. Katsu was a simple peasant farmer but was a good and honest man who wanted to instill his values into his only son. Every night before bed he would talk to

Kusunoki about history and philosophy. Kusunoki was very attentive and listened silently.

Katsu said, "Kusunoki, I appreciate your help. Hard work will turn you into a fine young man."

Kusunoki told him, "I will try harder tomorrow."

"I am a man, yet my child soon will be able to do more in a day than I can do in a week. You are as strong as a mule, I'm proud to be the father of such a gifted son. But strength alone will not make you a good man, a man should have honor."

Kusunoki seemed happy at his father's approval. "Do I have honor?"

Katsu nodded. "Yes, you are honest and well behaved. It seems Kusunoki was an appropriate name for my son."

The child asked, "why did you name me Kusunoki?"

"Kusunoki," the father said, "was a great Samurai who lived long ago and was said to be a peerless warrior of great honor. But one day Shogun rebels attacked the city of the lord he served. Kusunoki defended his lord but still lost; he chose to die instead of surrendering to his enemy. Kusunoki is still remembered for his bravery and loyalty, traits that can serve a man well. I hope one day you are brave enough to be a man like him."

The child seemed curious. "Father, could I be a Samurai?"

Katsu frowned. "Son, you could be a Samurai I'm sure, you have all the qualities of one. But you are the son of a peasant I'm afraid; the Samurai don't allow peasants to join them. But Kusunoki, you could have been one of the greatest I'm sure."

"I wish I could be a Samurai father."

Katsu rose from the chair and said, "Kusunoki, you need rest because we must work tomorrow. I'm sure that even if you can't become a Samurai, you still can become a good and honorable man."

"I love you father."

Katsu smiled. "I love you as well son. Now get some sleep."

Katsu left and Kusunoki lay in his bed and dreamed while his eyes were open. He wanted to one day be a Samurai and envisioned great battles and heroic deeds. His heart was heavy because he knew it could never be, and he faced the reality that he would most likely spend the rest of his life tending the farm of his family. He was sure the life of a peasant lay before him.

Life continued quietly for Kusunoki during the next few years. He worked his father's farm as he grew into a strong young boy who spent his waking hours doing hard physical labor. Yet when his hard life permitted him the freedom, he would go alone into Misato and stand outside the forge. He spent many hours looking at the stone building and envisioning what was being crafted inside. Old Nitta Yoritomo, the blacksmith, spent his life attending his oven and crafting swords, and had not even noticed young Kusunoki's vigil. Kusunoki might have never ventured inside the forge had it not been for a single act.

Nitta Yoritomo left the forge unattended for a few minutes, unaware Kusunoki was across the street watching. While the blacksmith was gone some older boys from the village went into the building and were about to steal a Katana. Nitta returned to find Kusunoki standing over one of the boys after beating him. The grizzled, lean old Nitta was thankful and was quick to observe that the young boy was looking at the sword the would-be thief had dropped. Nitta invited the boy into the forge.

Inside was a workshop, a giant oven in the center of the room was surrounded by several large anvils and tables covered with the tools of a blacksmith. Katanas adorned the walls. As Nitta showed the boy around the shop young Kusunoki looked at the many swords with rapt fascination.

Nitta asked, "Why do you look at the swords such a way child?"

"I don't know. I just feel they are special to me for some reason."

"Well, I would give you one, but only the Samurai and the Shogun's armies are permitted to carry weapons. But you are right, these swords are indeed special. Finest swords on earth and in the hands of a true Samurai, can cut a man in two."

Kusunoki asked the old man, "would you mind if I spent some time here. I won't be in the way."

Nitta, thankful, was obliged to accept. "Most certainly. What is your name?"

"Kusunoki Mishima."

"Well young Kusunoki, come by any time. Maybe I could even let you do some work in my shop."

Kusunoki seemed overjoyed. The boy said, "Thank you. I must go, my father probably is worried."

Nitta then looked to a corner of the forge. In a dusty, cobweb-infested nook was a old Katana which had long ago become coated with rust as it lay there. Nitta had never gotten rid of it for some reason, and he wanted to repay the boy for his good deed.

"Tell you what Kusunoki. See that sword, it is yours."

"Really?"

"Sure. No one will care about an old rusty sword, but hide it if you can."

Kusunoki picked up the sword easily and held it before him.

Nitta said, "Strange, you wield such a heavy sword so easily."

Kusunoki then left with his prize. Over the next four years he would do his work on the farm, help Nitta at the forge, and when he could, practice wielding the old Katana alone in the forest behind his home. Soon he was able to swing and parry with ease that the sword almost felt like it was an extension of his arms. But he felt sorrow as he trained, for he knew it would come of nothing. Kusunoki came to realize that the old rusty blade was the most important thing in his life.

The day finally arrived when Kusunoki's impossible aspiration was realized; a Samurai came to Misato.

Kusunoki was fourteen, and secretly had become proficient with the sword, and

when he heard a Samurai from a local minor member of the Shogunate was coming to the village to take a katana from Nitta; young Kusunoki knew he had to meet him. Nitta reluctantly agreed and told the boy to come to the forge after the sun had set and said he would introduce him to the Samurai. Kusunoki's mind raced as he walked into Misato but was horrified to find the forge in flames. The town's people stood around the forge as it burned and some yelled excitedly that two men were still inside.

Everyone watched in astonishment as young Kusunoki charged into the forge; they were even more astounded when the boy dragged out old Nitta from the flames, then an adult man dressed in the elaborate armor of the Samurai. Everyone stared at Kusunoki and then applauded. He waited to see if Nitta was alive and when he and the Samurai awoke, Kusunoki ran swiftly home.

The Samurai arrived at the Mishima farm the next day dressed in his armor and carrying his sword. Katsu and his wife received him with hospitality and were shocked speechless when they were told of their son's act of bravery. The Samurai, whose name was Yukio Hitada, a servant of the Shogunate lord Minamoto Yoshinobu, was polite and asked if he could speak to the young boy outside alone. Yukio led Kusunoki to a empty field and walked around the young boy, Kusunoki said nothing and was unable to look at the Samurai.

Yukio asked, "why did you risk your life to save myself and the old blacksmith? Unusual for a boy to be so fearless."

"Nitta is my friend. I knew I had to."

Yukio seemed curious. "And you would risk and even give your life to save a friend?"

"Yes."

Yukio looked towards the horizon. "The Samurai believe in loyalty, even if it means their life. Courage and strength are also signs of a Samurai and you have displayed both. The blacksmith, Nitta, he says that he gave you a sword. Have you been training with it?"

Kusunoki seemed worried. "I know peasants aren't allowed to carry a sword. It is old and covered with rust, it is not a real sword."

"Boy, I asked if you have trained with it?"

"Yes, almost for five years now."

Yukio pulled his Katana from his scabbard and handed to Kusunoki who took it but looked like he was unsure what to do.

The Samurai said, "hold the sword at your side for a few seconds. Then as quickly as you can I want you to swing it in a cutting motion."

Kusunoki seemed confused but did as he was told. And with a mighty swing that was sudden the sword created a sound as the blade parted the air. Yukio seemed impressed. The Samurai took his sword from the boy and returned it to its scabbard.

Yukio said, "I'm sure you could be a great swordsman one day."

Kusunoki frowned. "I will never be one, a peasant isn't allowed."

Yukio then looked very seriously at the boy. “You saved my life, and I must repay my debt. You want to be a Samurai Nitta has told me—it must be hard to know that we do not allow commoners to join us.”

Kusunoki confessed, “I know I was meant to be a Samurai, but all I will ever be is a farmer.”

“Kusunoki, I extend to you an offer. I leave for my lords castle tomorrow, I would like you to come with me, to be my squire.”

Kusunoki seemed both happy and unsure. “Why?”

Yukio put his hand on Kusunoki's shoulder. “If after several years I see that you have the traits of a Samurai, I will train you as one.”

“But I'm not allowed.”

Yukio shrugged. “My lord Minamoto Yoshinobu is both kind and fair. If I tell him of your valor, then I'm sure he will permit me to bend the rules. So young man, do you accept my offer?”

Kusunoki looked at his farm. He had imagined he would remain there his whole life, but now the world had opened up before him. He would miss his parents, but he knew he was meant for this and he could not say no.

The boy said, “I will go with you.”

Yukio told him, “ we leave tomorrow.”

That night Kusunoki had dinner with his parents who were both saddened but proud. They did not talk much, the boy's father Katsu wept when he was alone for a moment. He wanted his son to stay, but he knew that a great opportunity had been bestowed upon Kusunoki and he had to go.

The following morning Yukio arrived with two horses, old Nitta followed him. The blacksmith carried a very polished and fine Katana. Kusunoki hugged by parents then mounted a horse. Before he and Yukio rode away, Nitta approached the boy.

Nitta said, “Kusunoki, I have a gift.”

Nitta handed him the sword and stepped back. The blacksmith explained, “a gift for saving my life. It is the finest, strongest sword I ever crafted. I was saving for it someone special.”

Yukio took the sword from the boy and tied it to the saddle of his horse. He said, “You will carry a sword after you prove yourself. Until then, you are just a squire. Now we must be off, a days ride lies ahead.”

Kusunoki waved at his parents and he and the Samurai rode to the north. Kusunoki would never see Misato or his parents again. But Katsu spent the rest of his life proud that his son had been given a chance at better future.

So Kusunoki's path towards his destiny had started.

Kusunoki's and Yukio rode to the castle of lord Minamoto Yoshinobu who resided in a stone fortress near the northern border of the province of Aki. Sheltered Kusunoki had never seen so many people; inhabiting the castle were numerous servants and

employees who filled its courtyards and hallways. The boy looked at the many Samurai who served the lord. Yukio introduced young Kusunoki to lord Minamoto in his chambers; the elderly lord was impressed when Yukio told him of the boy's bravery. Minamoto readily agreed when Yukio asked if Kusunoki could be trained as a Samurai, but all agreed that it would be best if Yukio kept his new squire's background secret. Kusunoki upon meeting lord Minamoto had been intimidated, for surely a lord would look down on a peasant, but Minamoto received him kindly. Kusunoki liked him immediately.

For the next few years Kusunoki served as Yukio's squire. His time was spent mostly in elementary tasks, such as taking care of Yukio's steed as well as polishing his sword and armor. Though Kusunoki realized that the life of a Samurai was not all fighting and battle, for those years the province of Aki was peaceful and mostly Yukio would bring along Kusunoki to settle civil matters for the lord in the surrounding communities. Yukio spent much of that time training Kusunoki with weapons, but the Samurai mentor quickly realized that while he had exceptional ability with a sword, his squire was only barely capable with the bow and arrow and other weapons of war. But Yukio knew Kusunoki could be a swordsmen of superior ability.

One day on the training field outside the castle Yukio drilled Kusunoki as the squire practiced his swordsmanship on a dummy stuffed with hay. The squire had cut the dummy into two with a single swing.

Yukio asked, "when you must do that to an enemy, will you be able?"

Kusunoki replied, "Yes."

"Kusunoki," Yukio explained, "while you may be an exceptional fighter, I have noticed over the years that you have a gentle nature. Someday your lord will ask you to fight his enemy and you will have to kill other men. I don't question that you would give your life, I just don't know that you could take another's."

The squire told him, "I will do whatever it is I'm asked."

Yukio said, "you might have realized that Samurai are more than warriors. We must know how to fight, but there is other duties which are required of us. Mostly we attend to administrative and civil matters. But on the occasion when an enemy threatens our lord, we must be ready to kill or die. And everything we do is by the code of Bushido."

Yukio had told Kusunoki much about Bushido, a code the Samurai created centuries before which worshiped both the sword and athletic ability. It had evolved over time; as Buddhist and Confucian philosophy had softened the warrior nature of the Samurai, and now they lived by a code of respect for nature and of living a life of frugality and simplicity. While the Samurai still worshiped the sword, they also obeyed ideals of honor and truthfulness which dictated much of their actions. But the main ideal always was complete loyalty to a Samurai's lord. Yukio over the years had come to the realization that Kusunoki acted just as a follower of Bushido would, even before he knew what it was.

Kusunoki said, "lord Minamoto has been both kind and fair to me. And my life is

now to be in his service no matter what it requires of me.”

“Good,” Yukio said, “I think soon you may be ready.”

When he was nineteen, Kusunoki finally became a Samurai. Yukio, pleased and impressed with his squire's ability, had lord Minamoto induct him into his court as a Samurai. Kusunoki was proud to don the armor and sword old Nitta had given to him, and now was under Yukio's command. It should have been a happy time for Kusunoki but the other Samurai in the castle had learned that the new member of their order was a peasant. For the first few months they would ridicule him but Kusunoki never said a word and did what he was told. Kusunoki had been given the name Farm Hand by the other Samurai and they never missed an opportunity to insult him. The young man's first year started quietly but that changed when a lord from the neighboring province militarily challenged Minamoto and had a small army march on the fortress.

Kusunoki and the other Samurai faced the small band of soldiers and several opposing Samurai on a field a few miles from the fortress. His first battle ahead of him, Kusunoki was not eager to fight but wanted to prove that he was a valuable servant of Minamoto. He and Yukio sat upon their steeds and faced the army, watching silently as their enemy approached.

Yukio asked, “Sure you are ready?”

Kusunoki silently nodded and watched them come ever closer.

A Samurai from the opposing army separated from his troops and rode towards Kusunoki and the other Samurai. He faced them and began to speak.

“I am servant of lord Tanaka.”

Yukio demanded, “Take your army from the lands of lord Minamoto. You risk ending the peace between our lords.”

The enemy Samurai said, “Tanaka only wants a small piece of territory. Your lord is known to be weak, so I think he will accept.”

Yukio seemed saddened. “I take no pleasure in taking the life of another Samurai, but I will if you don't leave.”

Tanaka's Samurai seemed moved. “Nor do I. But we both must do as we are told without question. But I will be fair. I will face your best Samurai in single combat and if he bests me, then I will leave and never return.”

This Samurai was older and had the steely eyes of a man who had seen a few wars, Yukio knew that he was a dangerous opponent. Yukio, Minamoto's most experienced Samurai, knew that he might lose his life if he accepted but decided to do so that a costly battle might be avoided.

Then Kusunoki bluntly said, “Yukio, let me fight him.”

All of Minamoto's Samurai laughed except for Yukio. He looked at Kusunoki and asked, “he may very well kill you. Are you certain this is what you want.”

Kusunoki said, “If it will make my lord's enemy leave his lands, then it is worth my life.”

Tanaka's Samurai laughed. “This one, he looks barely old enough to walk.”

“Then you have nothing to fear,” Kusunoki said.

Tanaka's Samurai then dismounted his horse. “Fine, then we will decided this with a contest of skill.”

As Kusunoki dismounted Yukio said, “Luck.”

Kusunoki replied, “I won't need it.”

Kusunoki approached his opponent who seemed unimpressed. Kusunoki then lowered his head and somberly said, “You may make the first move.”

His opponent slowly approached and pulled his Katana from his scabbard then said, “There is no dishonor in dying as a Samurai.”

Kusunoki replied, “No, there isn't.”

Tanaka's Samurai raised his sword and readied to swing. Kusunoki, whose sword was still in his sheath, didn't move. But when the Samurai went to strike Kusunoki pulled his sword free and made a single, powerful strike which was so fast that few barely saw it. The Samurai looked at Kusunoki for a second when he realized that he had been cut in two, his body then fell to the ground in separate pieces. Both armies let out gasps as he fell to the ground.

Kusunoki said, “I'm sorry.”

Yukio was speechless as were Minamoto's other Samurai.

Tanaka's men left those lands and would never return; Kusunoki was not aware that his reputation had just started to circulate beyond Aki. From that day Kusunoki's fellow Samurai never ridiculed him again, though they would still called him Farm Hand, but with affection.

Several years later, around 1843, an event occurred which would drastically change the fate of all Japan—two hundred years of seclusion were about to end as the outside world forcibly returned.

Minamoto seemed concerned as he explained to his court that the king of the Netherlands had made a demand that Japan allow trade into the country. Eventually four American warships commanded by Matthew Perry forced Japan to end its seclusion. And now the world beyond Japan's shores would return, as Kusunoki listened he did not know that this was the event which would in time end the age of the Samurai.

Fifteen years passed as Kusunoki grew into an accomplished man who had won both the respect and gratitude of lord Minamoto as well as Samurai far beyond the province of Aki. Kusunoki and Yukio served together and became close friends though his mentor was growing older. Things had remained peaceful for Minamoto's lands though Kusunoki and the other Samurai had stopped several minor insurrections, and Kusunoki had quickly become Minamoto's most favored Samurai. Among the people of the court, Kusunoki had a reputation as a reliable man who was both humble and honest. But the accomplished Samurai had realized that though a fine warrior he was, there was

not much else about life as a part of Minamoto's court which he understood or was adept at. But his relentless determination to obey every order to the letter had earned him a place there, and he would never do anything to jeopardize that. Trade had returned nearly a decade before and foreign goods had begun to proliferate around the island, as well as muskets which had ended up in the hands of some of the rebels Kusunoki had fought. He had a disdain and almost loathing for the weapon, he could not see the artistry of such a thing and vowed never to use one.

Around 1858 Kusunoki would receive wounds both psychic and physical, and would encounter his nemesis, whom he would spend the rest of his life trying to find and avenge himself upon.

It was night as members of the court slept in their chambers. Most were asleep except for Kusunoki and Yukio. They patrolled the perimeter of the castle, for the most part a symbolic duty, since an attack on the fortress was unheard of.

Yukio, now a man of many years and beginning to age, turned to his friend and said, "I remember you when we met. I could have never suspected that you would pass every expectation I had. I am proud of you Kusunoki."

Kusunoki told him, "I would most likely be tending my father's farm right now had we not met. You have taught me much Yukio, and I shall never disappoint you or lord Lord Minamoto."

Yukio smiled. "I never had a son, but if I had I wish he could have been you."

As the two friends spoke they did not notice as a tall woman dressed in a kimono approached, her face covered with a fan. When he saw her, Yukio stopped the woman and seemed to look her over.

Yukio asked, "And what is your business here?"

She, with a very deep voice, said, "I was traveling north, it is night and I need shelter. May I sleep within the walls of the castle?"

Yukio seemed conflicted. He did not want to admit the woman, but she needed shelter for the night. "All right. Find somewhere to sleep, but bother no one."

The woman bowed. "Thank you, noble Samurai."

Kusunoki didn't trust the woman, but did trust Yukio to know if she should be let in. The woman passed them by and walked slowly towards the castle. When she was out of hearing distance, Yukio said, "that must be the ugliest woman I've ever seen."

Once inside the empty, darkened room the woman removed her disguise, revealing a lean, athletic man dressed in black garments. He carried a small dagger as well as numerous weapons such as throwing stars, for he was a Ninja whom the Samurai both feared and reviled. The Ninja, once commoners who trained in the martial arts, now had become talented spies as well as assassins and saboteurs. Where the Samurai believed in honor, the Ninja believed in nothing.

This Ninja was one of the most treacherous and cruel, his name was Yamato Hideharu, a man who had once been a pocket thief in Tokyo but was trained in Ninjutsu

and over many years became a thorn in the side of the Shogunate. He would work and do anything for anyone, as long as they payed. And he was a natural assassin and arsonist, things he did for money but would have done for free, since he loved destruction. He had lost count of how many Samurai he had killed.

Yamato crept through the darkened hallways of the castle, though in some places the walls were made of paper, the Ninja's stealth rendered him almost invisible. He crept into Minamoto's bed chamber.

Both Kusunoki and Yukio heard Minamoto scream. The two Samurai raced to his bed chamber and found their lord laying upon the ground dead, his wife grieving over his body. When they saw Yamato in the room, they drew their swords. Yukio was both grieving for his lord but full of guilt, for he knew it was his oversight which had cost the life of the one he served.

Kusunoki said coldly, "You will die for what you have done."

Yamato laughed deeply. "You would not be the first Samurai to have said that; everyone who has is dead."

Yukio, almost weeping, said, "Nothing pleases me more then ridding this world of another Ninja."

Kusunoki and Yukio would have advanced and killed the murderer, but Yamato seized the wife of Minamoto and held a dagger to her neck. "Drop your swords or she dies."

Yukio and Kusunoki, not wanting to see their lord's wife hurt, did as they were told.

Yamato laughed again. "You Samurai, so predictable."

What happened next was so quick that Kusunoki was blinded in one eye before he knew what was happening. The Ninja had thrown a razor sharp throwing-star which then buried itself in Kusunoki's left eye, and he fell to the ground in immense pain but was silent. Yamato then threw another star which went in Yukio's neck and killed him within a minute, and the Ninja finished with snapping the neck of Minamoto's wife. Yamato then looked at began to bellow at Kusunoki who lay upon the ground.

Yamato shouted, "don't worry, you won't suffer long."

Kusunoki ripped the throwing star from his eye and let out a yell. He threw it at Yamato, who recoiled when it sunk into his leg and the Ninja screamed in pain. Kusunoki then was about to throw himself at the Ninja when Yamato cast something to the ground and there was a cloud of black smoke. When it dissipated, Kusunoki was alone, with the bodies of his friend and mentor and his lord and lady, permanently blinded in one eye.

Kusunoki let out a scream of anguish and rage which could be heard a great distance away.

After lord Minamoto's death Kusunoki had served several different members of the Shogunate, though never for to long, as he wandered from province to province

across the island. Kusunoki had searched unsuccessfully for the Ninja to no avail but did learn that it was a man named Yamato, who was notoriously elusive.

As time passed Japan began to change; treaties and relations with foreign imperial powers had brought new goods and customs, but also a changing opinion as to who should rule the country. In the Boshin war, Samurai serving the Shogun tried to preserve their rule and prevent power from being returned to the imperial court, and a civil war began. Kusunoki fought many battles against forces loyal to the emperor, but had seen his fellow Samurai fall in one skirmish after another; he realized that the age of his order was near its end. By the end of 1869, the age of the Shogun and the Samurai were in its final hours. Kusunoki had spent more than four years fighting in the Boshin war and now was almost fifty years old. Though his blinding in one eye had been a weakness, he still fought and had defeated many opponents.

Around 1871, the imperial family in power and the Shogun vanquished, the last 5000 thousand Samurai were pensioned off, becoming shizoku, or Japanese gentry. Most were given jobs as merchants and civil servants in the new national system, but it was the end of the Samurai order. After a few years, the emperor decreed that it was illegal for anyone but the military to carry a sword.

Kusunoki moved to Tokyo and was given a job as a low-level civil servant. For the next ten years he tried to do his new job competently but he found the work both hard to understand and harder to return to everyday. He had wanted to join the military but he was old and there was not much interest in an aging Samurai, especially one who had fought against the emperor. As the world changed around Kusunoki, he realized that there was no place for him in this new age. He would stay alone in his modest apartment in the poor district of the city and contemplate the past, Yukio and lord Minamoto; he longed to return to the time he was meant for. He knew that he was now a relic of a different age, and would spend the rest of his years coping with his feelings of uselessness in this strange new era.

His sword from old Nitta was mounted on the wall over his bed. He never touched it but would stare at it for hours, knowing that his sword was as much a part of him as his arms and now just a decoration which reminded him of the past. Kusunoki had only one reason for going on, the unlikely hope that he would meet Yamato again and repay him for his foul deed.

The old Samurai would have remained in that apartment for the rest of his days had it not been for a letter from the son of a old friend. Ashikaga Yoshinobu, the son of lord Minamoto, had sent a letter requesting that Kusunoki come to the small city of Yoshika in the former province of Aki which had now become Hiroshima Prefecture. Ashikaga, a boy when his father was killed, now was a man who had been given a position as a minor governor and wanted Kusunoki to accept a job from him. Kusunoki, longing to return to the place where he had been happy, accepted.

He left Tokyo with few belongings, some clothes and his sword.

Kusunoki, now in his early sixties, reflected that he was a relic, an old man in a time when people of his kind were no longer needed or respected.

Kusunoki traveled to the city of Yoshika by horse, a journey of several days. Yoshika was built on the edge of the coast, an small city of ancient houses, markets and temples. Around it were many farms which had now been abandoned as people migrated to larger cities, empty homes and unattended rice paddies surrounded Yoshika. Kusunoki, as he rode through the city, noticed that more modern buildings had now started to appear amongst the much older structures of Yoshika. The townspeople did not take much notice of him as he rode past, they just saw an old man riding a horse and never would have guessed his former status. Kusunoki arrived at the manor of Ashikaga near the center of Yoshika, a large building of modern architecture surrounded by several gardens. Kusunoki informed a servant of his arrival, as the old Samurai waited outside the manor the servant went to fetch Ashikaga.

Ashikaga emerged from the manor, dressed in expensive clothes and surrounded by several advisers. Ashikaga had been a boy when Kusunoki had last seen him, now he was a man and seemed to be thriving in the new political climate of the island.

Ashikaga, who seemed happy, said, "Kusunoki, I have not seen you in years. When last we met, you were still a man in the prime of his strength. I hope time has been kind to you."

Kusunoki replied, "I am still alive."

Ashikaga laughed. "Yes, I see you are."

Kusunoki lowered his head. "Ashikaga, I apologize that I allowed your father to be killed. I hope I may repay you for that mistake."

Ashikaga seemed saddened at the mention of his father. "Kusunoki, I'm sure you did everything possible. My father liked you, and I'm sure he would have forgiven you if he could."

Kusunoki said, "Your father was good to me."

Ashikaga then approached Kusunoki and told him, "I have asked you here because I need someone I can trust. I remember your reputation as a trustworthy man and thought I might employ your services."

Kusunoki asked, "What do you expect of me?"

"Nothing too difficult. A simple task here and there; mostly I want you to enjoy my hospitality. I think that such an accomplished Samurai would be a welcome addition to my manor. Now, let's go inside."

That night Ashikaga held a banquet in his hall which was attended by his advisers and employees. Kusunoki sat beside Ashikaga and ate in silence, though his former lord's son talked much about the past. Near the end of the feast Ashikaga leaned toward his new employee and said, "I have arranged some entertainment."

All present at the banquet became silent when a young woman dressed in a expensive silk kimono entered the room. She wore thick white makeup on her face and

bright red lipstick and carried two ornate fans as she stood before the guests.

Ashikaga said, “this is Suzuka, my courtesan. Once I saw her dance while in Tokyo, I knew I must have her.”

A courtesan was a woman who entertained men with dancing and were very commonly found as mistresses of powerful individuals. In that time, it was acceptable for a husband to love his wife but still enjoy the company of a courtesan. They were known for kabuku, which meant to be wild and outrageous. The courtesan performed dances and performances for their audiences as well as seeing to the needs of the men they were employed by. Courtesans were entertainers, but at that time the line between entertainer and prostitute was almost nonexistent.

Suzuka began to dance as everyone watched mutely, everyone but Kusunoki, who looked away. As she performed she would occasionally look towards her audience; finally she and Kusunoki locked eyes when he looked towards her. The old Samurai knew that she did not look happy, almost as if she danced with both grace and shame. But he did not dwell on it for long.

As Suzuka danced, Ashikaga turned to the old Samurai and said, “so what do you think of my courtesan?”

“I don't know, I have never appreciated theatre,” Kusunoki replied.

Ashikaga laughed. “Always so serious. While you are my employee I want you to enjoy yourself.”

Kusunoki watched Suzuka dance, then got up from his seat. He told Ashikaga, “it has been a long journey. I would like to rest.”

“Of course,” Ashikaga said, “I have prepared a room for you. A servant will show you the way.”

As Ashikaga's servant led Kusunoki away, he again looked briefly at Suzuka. He felt sympathetic; behind her makeup and extravagant performance, he could see someone else who seemed quite sad.

Kusunoki lay on a simple cot in a small room. He had unpacked some clothes and put his sword on a dresser, but afterward lay awake for hours as he thought about the past. He intended to do whatever Ashikaga asked to the best of his ability, but really could not imagine what use he would be. Why would the governor need the services of an old man who had long ago lost his purpose for living. Ashikaga and everyone else in the manor knew how to exist and flourish in this new age, but Kusunoki felt like a trespasser who was somewhere he didn't belong; where he did belong was a different time, but that time was now gone forever.

As Kusunoki drifted off to sleep, he honestly did not know what the coming months would bring.

For the next few weeks Kusunoki spent his time in the company of Ashikaga; the governor had asked him to do mundane tasks but mostly reminisced with Kusunoki about the past. Kusunoki did not speak much to anyone else in the manor, and no one

seemed overly anxious to strike up a conversation with him. Occasionally someone would ask about his great exploits as a Samurai, but Kusunoki was not eager to talk about them, both because of the shame he felt for his lord's death and his inability to speak eloquently of his deeds. He began to feel like a ghost who haunted Ashikaga's manor, a specter who wandered about the halls alone and was invisible to all but for the governor. Kusunoki had never felt as bereft of purpose as he did during those weeks.

One night Kusunoki left the manor and decided to look for some solace by going to the koi pond in the garden located beside his new home. He watched the fish swim lazily about the pond and felt some comfort and serenity. He had stood there silently when he heard the crying of a woman. He turned to see that Suzuka was near the garden, weeping softly, unaware that Kusunoki was there.

He silently approached the woman and asked, "Can I help?"

She seemed surprised by his sudden appearance and wiped the tears from her face with the sleeve of her kimono. Suzuka said, "It doesn't concern you old man."

Kusunoki turned to leave her when she then asked, "Who are you?"

He looked at her and simply replied, "Just a friend of Ashikaga's father."

Suzuka seemed to be looking at the deep scar over Kusunoki's left eye. "What happened to you? You seem like you have been hurt many times."

He looked away and said, "More times than I can remember."

She said, "You were a Samurai, weren't you?"

He glumly told her, "Once, a long time ago."

Suzuka then suddenly said, "I'm crying because I hate being Ashikaga's courtesan."

Kusunoki asked, "Then why are you his courtesan?"

"Because kabuku is all I am good at. It is all I will ever do, until I am too old to do even that. I wish I could escape, but I know that is impossible."

He told her, "I know what you feel."

She seemed puzzled. "Why would a Samurai know how a courtesan feels?"

Kusunoki explained, "I was born a poor farmer who thought he would never escape a poor farmer's life. I was terribly unhappy because I knew I wanted something else which was impossible. But here I am now, having lived a life that I never could have expected."

Suzuka said, "You don't seem happy. You seem miserable."

Kusunoki nodded. "Well, I've lived the life I wanted. But that life is over, I really don't know what reason there is for me to exist anymore."

Suzuka seemed moved by his words. "You seem kind."

He asked, "What do you really want, Suzuka?"

She pondered his question for a moment. "I would like to travel around Japan. See places that I have only seen in books."

"So why don't you?"

She glumly replied, "I cannot afford it. A courtesan is paid very little."

Kusunoki began to walk away and said as he left, "Don't give up hope. Sometimes life provides the things we seek."

Suzuka watched him leave, feeling comforted by his words.

About a month later Ashikaga asked Kusunoki to do a small errand for him. The governor told him of a Shinto priest who had been seen wandering around the abandoned farms outside Yoshika. Kusunoki was asked to speak with the priest and see what his business was in the city, the old Samurai agreed and traveled outside the limits of the Yoshika. As he wandered about the empty farms and barren fields he got a sense of foreboding, as if something about this place made him feel uneasy. He found the priest inside a farmhouse and spoke with him.

The Shinto priest, a young man by the name of Tsukuyomi Okami, was running about the house when Kusunoki interrupted him. The priest seemed both friendly and polite, but Kusunoki sensed that the man was a little odd.

Tsukuyomi asked, "who are you?"

"I am sent by governor Ashikaga. I have been asked to learn of your business here in Yoshika."

Tsukuyomi returned to moving about the house but explained as he went, "I have heard that restless spirits have taken up residence in these abandoned homes. The locals asked me to scare them away."

Kusunoki was doubtful, during the course of his life he had never been led to believe in spirits. He said, "Seems unlikely."

Tsukuyomi looked at the old man and then cryptically said, "Does it now, Samurai."

Kusunoki asked, "how did you know I was a Samurai?"

The priest explained, "I have wandered the island for several years and have seen many old Samurai about. You all look the same, it is easy for me to spot one."

"How do we look?"

"Like fish who have been taken from the water and left to wriggle and slowly die upon the earth. Men whose bodies may inhabit the present but whose spirits reside in the past."

Kusunoki told the priest, "A suitable way of putting it."

The priest said, "But I get a feeling about you. You may still have some purpose."

Kusunoki was skeptical. "I'm an old man now. I have no purpose but to spend the rest of my days waiting for the end."

Tsukuyomi asked, "Samurai are not afraid to die I'm told, but you, you seem like you are more afraid to live."

Kusunoki admitted, "honestly, I wish I had died back when the world made sense to me. Die as a Samurai, rather than an useless old man."

"So why not end your life Samurai, if life now has no meaning for you."

Kusunoki thought of the night lord Minamoto died, as well as Yukio. Many times afterward he had considered committing seppuku, a ritualized form of suicide that

Samurai who had dishonored themselves had been known to do. But one thing alone stayed his hand, and that was the hope that he would find Yamato. But after several decades he feared this would never come to pass.

Kusunoki told the priest, "Because, I hope to find a man who caused me great pain and sorrow. Make him pay for my dishonor."

"Is that the only reason you go on?"

"Yes. Nothing else matters to me."

The priest said, "I get the sense that fate will give you what you want, Samurai. Now leave, I must return to work."

Kusunoki left the priest to his business, unwitting as to how prophetic his words would be.

During the next few months Kusunoki and Suzuka spent much time together. He told her stories of the past and she listened, and both grew to enjoy each others' company. Suzuka began to see Kusunoki as a kindly, fatherly figure who did not treat her with the subtle disrespect the other employee's of Ashikaga showed her. But she realized that Kusunoki was haunted by demons that he was unable to slay, and she felt sorry for him. During that time Ashikaga received news that a gang of criminals had been active in Hiroshima Prefecture, and were said to be led by a particularly cruel leader whose name no one knew. He sent some of the troops under his command to find them, but while his men were away from Yoshika, this gang came to Ashikaga's manor.

It was around noon when over a dozen men on horseback rode into Yoshika. They were armed with muskets and came down swiftly upon the manor. They waited outside as Ashikaga and several of his staff went to speak with them. Kusunoki stood towards the back of the group, he did not recognize the the older man atop the horse at first.

Ashikaga asked, "why have you come to Yoshika?"

The man on the horse laughed and Kusunoki suddenly realized who he was. The old Samurai muttered, "Yamato."

Their leader was Yamato, who in his later years had become the leader of this band of criminals and still reveled in destruction. Kusunoki looked at him but said nothing.

Yamato said, "Governor, I am here to collect a hefty ransom from you. Give me and my men everything of value you have, or we will burn your city to the ground."

"How dare you!" Ashikaga yelled.

Yamato seemed smug. "I know your men are far away and you are defenseless. Before they return all of Yoshika will be ashes, you and many of your people dead. It is simpler by far to pay me."

Ashikaga seemed incensed. "You would blackmail me?"

"Yes," Yamato said, "and enjoy doing it."

Kusunoki then loudly said, "I have not forgotten you Yamato."

Yamato looked at Kusunoki for a moment but realized who he was when he saw

his missing eye. He began to laugh and said, "I remember you as well. So how do you like being partially blind?"

Kusunoki wanted to kill him then and there but remained silent.

Yamato turned to Ashikaga and said, "Either pay me or I will return tonight and destroy Yoshika. Realize that you are defenseless."

Ashikaga scowled at him. "I will pay you nothing."

"Have it your way. Enjoy the next few hours; they will be your last." Yamato then looked at Kusunoki. "And as for you, I will finish what I started so many years ago."

Then Yamato and his men rode away. As Ashikaga and his people prepared for their return, Kusunoki went to his room. For the first time in over a decade, he picked up his sword with the intent of using it.

Ashikaga was in his office as he tried to decide what was the best course of action. When Kusunoki entered the room, his sword hanging from the scabbard in his belt, Ashikaga seemed dumbfounded.

He asked Kusunoki, "Why are you carrying your sword?"

Kusunoki said, "When they return tonight, I will protect you and the manor."

"I appreciate your gesture, but there are many of them and only one of you. You may have been a great Samurai once, but even you can't win this fight."

Kusunoki didn't flinch. "I failed your father. I will not fail you."

Ashikaga said, "I am not your lord Kusunoki. I do not want you to give your life for me."

Kusunoki turned away. "I am not making a request. I will do this whether you approve or not."

Kusunoki left his office and proceeded through the manor toward the front gates. Suzuka stopped him before he could exit the building; she seemed concerned.

She pleaded, "Kusunoki, don't do this."

Kusunoki pushed her aside. "Suzuka, I don't have a choice. Please, remain within the manor where you will be safe."

He then walked away from her and she began to cry as he left.

Kusunoki waited outside the manor for the rest of the day until the light began to fade and the shadows of darkness gathered all around.

Yamato and his men returned to the manor not soon after dusk. They carried torches as they rode through the streets of the city, and the people hid themselves inside their homes. The streets of Yoshika were empty, empty except for old Kusunoki who waited outside the manor. Yamato and his men approached the Samurai; no one seemed overly concerned about an old man with a sword.

Yamato, from astride his horse, asked, "And what do you intend to do you decrepit fool?"

Kusunoki said, "I think you know."

Yamato began to laugh. "Men, the great Samurai is going to defeat us."

Yamato's men joined him in laughter, though Kusunoki seemed strangely serene. "Please, kill him," Yamato ordered his men.

About six of Yamato's men got off their horse and began to approach Kusunoki. They had their muskets ready but even these criminals were reluctant to kill an old man. Yamato screamed, "kill him."

Then Kusunoki with speed and agility that was unusual for an old man, charged the approaching men. He had killed three of them with several swift arcs of his sword when the remaining few fired their muskets and Kusunoki was hit several times. Yet he did not falter and slew the other three before anyone could do anything. Yamato's men seemed afraid, but Kusunoki, mortally wounded, and fell to his knees. As he struggled to keep his balance, Kusunoki returned his sword to its scabbard.

Yamato dismounted his horse and cautiously approached Kusunoki, a flintlock pistol in his hand. Yamato said, "You fight well for an old man; I am going to relish every second of this."

Kusunoki replied, "No, you won't"

Like he had done so long ago, Kusunoki pulled his sword from his sheath and with a single swing cut Yamato in two. His men watched in shock as Yamato's torso and legs fell away from each other. The criminals in terror rode away, and would never return to Yoshika. Kusunoki would haunt their nightmares for the rest of their lives.

Kusunoki then fell to the ground as he gasped for breath. Suzuka emerged from the manor and went to his side; she knew he was about to die.

She begged, "don't give up Kusunoki."

For the first time in his entire life Kusunoki let out a restrained laugh and he was smiling. He whispered, "Suzuka, don't be sad for me. This is how I would have wished to die, as a Samurai."

"Please, don't."

Before Kusunoki died, he weakly said, "Suzuka, go to my room and look under my bed. There is a letter there for you."

And then he closed his eyes, and his breathing stopped. He died in Suzuka's arms as Ashikaga and his people stood silent around them.

Many years later. Suzuka had been freed of the life of a courtesan thanks to Kusunoki—the letter she found explained that he had amassed a small fortune during the course of his life by his frugal ways. He had bequeathed it to her, and with it during the course of her life she traveled throughout all Japan. Eventually she had Kusunoki's sword melted down and turned into a beautiful sculpture of a Samurai. She kept it with her constantly for the rest of her life, but when she was very old, she decided to thank Kusunoki in a final way.

The sculpture to this day can be found in an small Buddhist temple near Misato. Some visitors to the shrine notice it there occasionally, ignorant of its storied past, and of Kusunoki and his journey through life—a relic of a time long gone and dimly remembered—much like Kusunoki himself.

