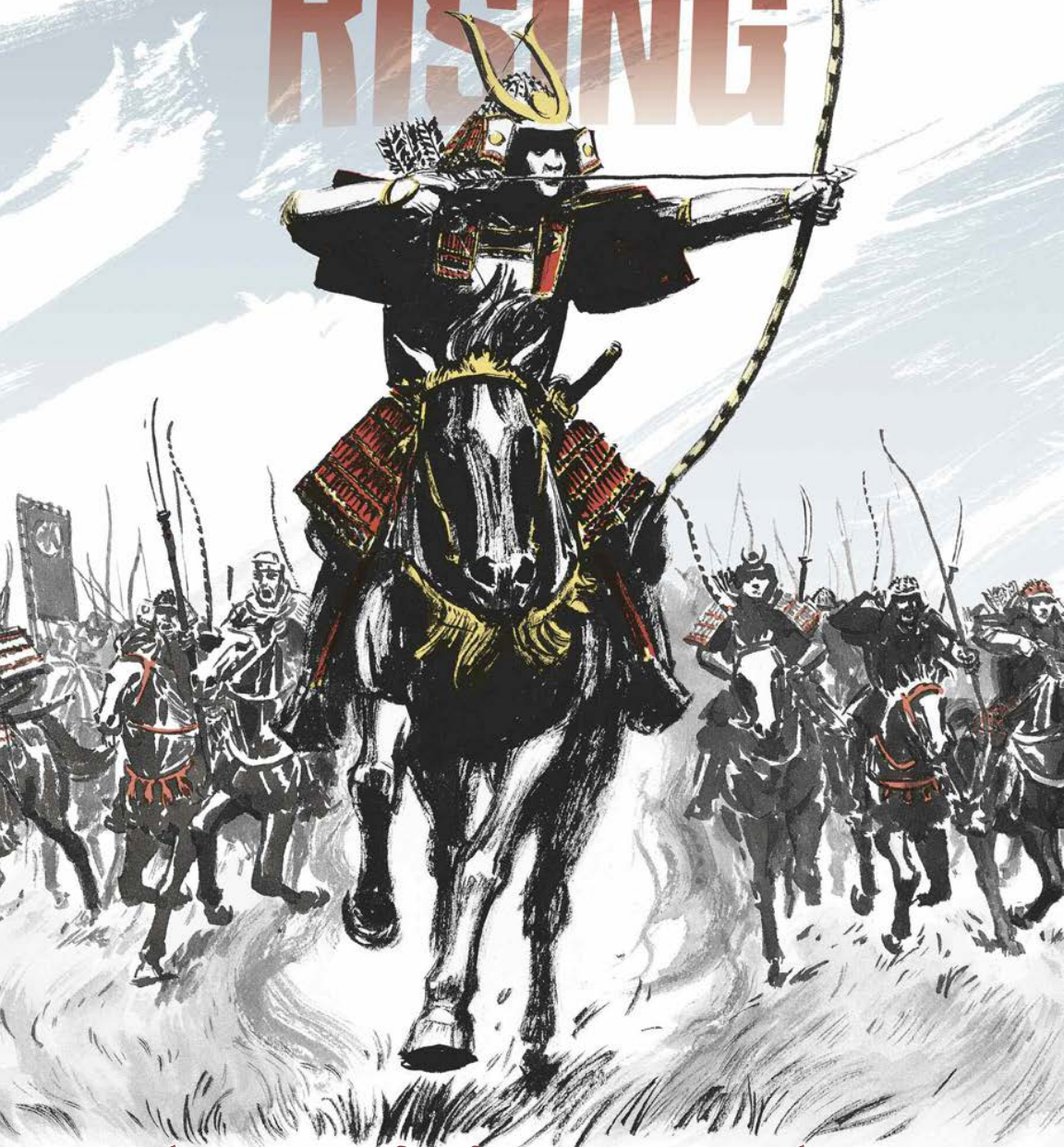


Pamela S. Turner • *Illustrated by Gareth Hinds*

SAMURAI RISING



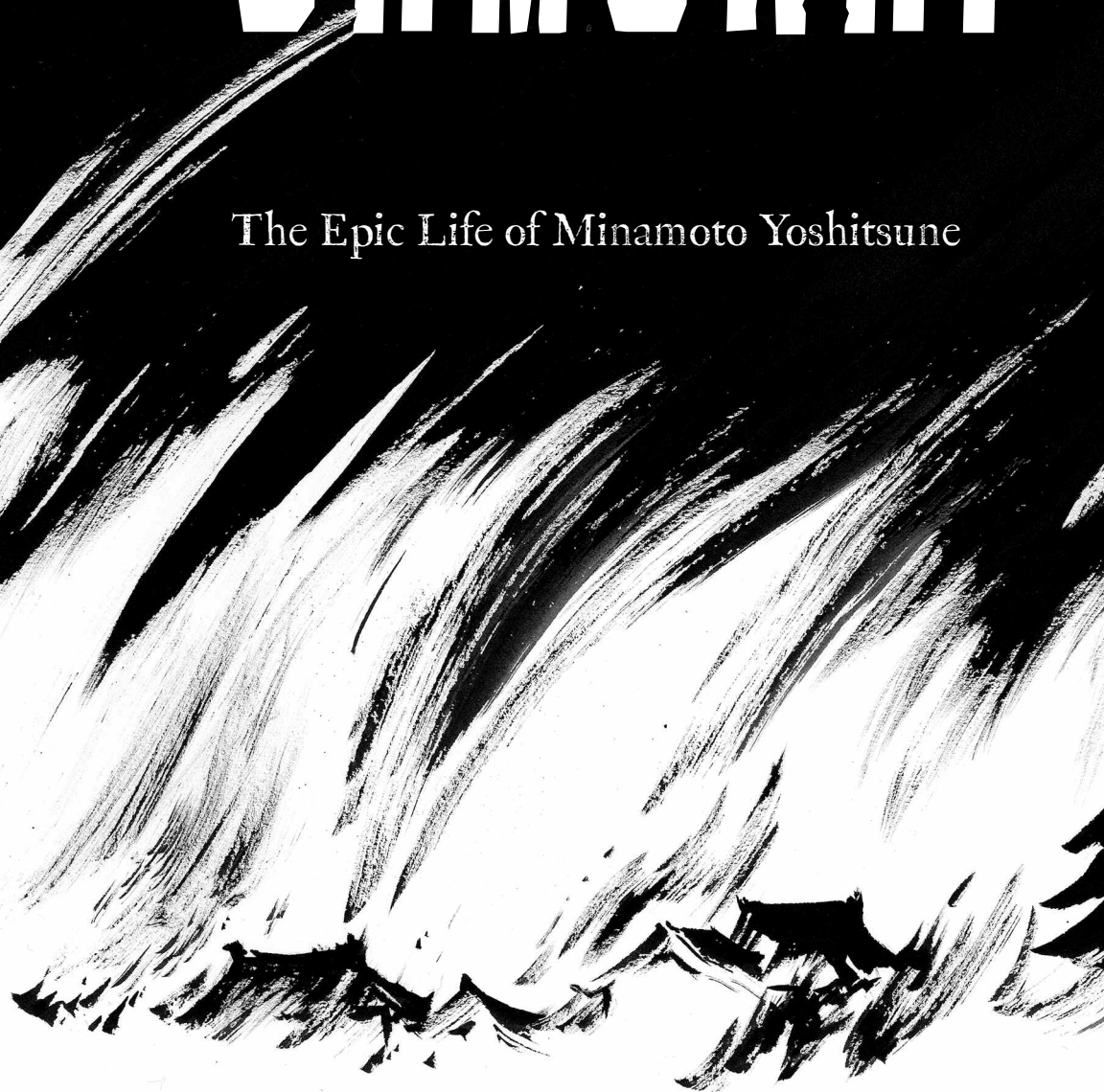
The Epic Life of Minamoto Yoshitsune

SAMURAI RISING



SAMURAI

The Epic Life of Minamoto Yoshitsune



RISING



Pamela S. Turner
Illustrated by Gareth Hinds

For Connor Townsend and my friends at Berkeley Kendo Dojo and Oakland Kendo Dojo—P. S. T.

For Sara Norton and Jim Kelso, who helped a nerdy, head-strong boy explore Japanese culture; and to Bill Gleason Sensei, who brought me back to aikido—G. H.

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CHARACTERS AND PLACES

Please note that in Japanese the *r* sound is very soft; the pronunciation is actually somewhere between an *r* and an *l*. A vowel with a line over it indicates a drawn-out sound. For example, *ō* is pronounced like the long *o* sound in the English word *row*, but is held for a beat longer. In general, Japanese words do not have a stressed syllable.

THE MINAMOTO

Yoshitsune (yoh-shee-tsoo-nay): *our main character*

Yoritomo (yoh-ree-toh-moh): *Yoshitsune's elder half brother and leader of the Minamoto samurai*

Noriyori (noh-ree-yoh-ree): *another half brother of Yoshitsune*

Kiso Yoshinaka (kee-soh yoh-shee-nah-kah): *Yoshitsune's cousin*

Yukiie (yoo-kee-ee-ay): *Yoshitsune's uncle*

Tametomo (tah-may-toh-moh): *Yoshitsune's uncle; famous archer who commits first known seppuku (ritual suicide)*

Yoshiie (yoh-shee-ee-ay): *Yoshitsune's great-grandfather; a famous barbarian-fighter*

Yorimasa (yoh-ree-mah-sah): *distant relation of Yoshitsune; commits seppuku*

Tokiwa (toh-kee-wah): *Yoshitsune's mother*

Yoshitomo (yoh-shee-toh-moh): *Yoshitsune's father*



THE TAIRA

Kiyomori (kee-yoh-moh-ree): *leader of the Taira samurai*

Noritsune (noh-ree-tsoo-nay): *Kiyomori's nephew and a famous archer*

Munemori (moo-nay-moh-ree): *son of Kiyomori and leader of the Taira after his father's death*

Atsumori (ah-tsoo-moh-ree): *Kiyomori's nephew*

THE IMPERIAL FAMILY

Go-Shirakawa (goh shee-rah-kah-wah): *the Retired Emperor and head of the imperial family*

Antoku (ahn-toh-koo): *Go-Shirakawa's grandson; emperor of Japan*

Mochihito (moh-chee-hee-toh): *one of Go-Shirakawa's sons*

THE HIRAIZUMI FUJIWARA

Hidehira (hee-day-hee-rah): *lord of Hiraizumi*

Yasuhira (yah-soo-hee-rah): *Hidehira's heir*

Tadahira (tah-dah-hee-rah): *younger son of Hidehira*

YOSHITSUNE'S FRIENDS

Benkei (ben-kay): *a warrior-monk*

Ise Saburō (ee-say sah-boo-roh): *a reformed bandit*

Shizuka (shee-zoo-kah): *famous dancer and Yoshitsune's lover*

Tadanobu (tah-dah-noh-boo): *a samurai from Hiraizumi*

Tsuginobu (tsoo-gee-noh-boo): *a samurai from Hiraizumi; Tadanobu's brother*

Washinoo (wah-shee-no-oh): *a former mountain hunter*

OTHER CHARACTERS

Kagetoki (kah-gay-toh-kee): *Yoritomo's favorite retainer*

Shōshun (shoh-shoon): *Yoritomo's retainer*



PLACE NAMES

Biwa (bee-wah): *large lake near Kyoto*

Dan-no-Ura (dahn-noh-oo-rah): *naval battle site in the straits between the islands of Honshu and Kyushu*

Fuji River: *battle site in central Japan*

Hiraizumi (hee-rye-zoo-mee): *elegant city in northern Japan*

Hiyodorigoe (hee-yoh-doh-ree-goh-ay) **Cliffs:** *steep slope behind the Taira fortress at Ichi-no-Tani*

Honshu (hohn-shoo): *main Japanese island*

Ichi-no-Tani (ee-chee-noh-tah-nee): *Taira fortification on the Settsu coast, near modern-day Kobe*

Ikuta-no-Mori (ee-koo-tah-noh-moh-ree): *Taira fortification on the Settsu coast, near modern-day Kobe*

Kamakura (kah-mah-koo-rah): *Yoritomo's headquarters in eastern Japan*

Koshigoe (koh-shee-goh-ay): *small town near Kamakura*

Kurama (koo-rah-mah): *temple north of Kyoto*

Kyoto (kyoh-toh): *capital of Japan*

Kyushu (kyoo-shoo): *large Japanese island off the western coast of Honshu*

Seta (say-tah): *small town east of Kyoto, site of a major bridge*

Settsu Coast: *coastline southwest of Kyoto, near modern-day Kobe and Osaka*

Shikoku (shee-koh-koo): *large Japanese island off the southwest coast of Honshu*

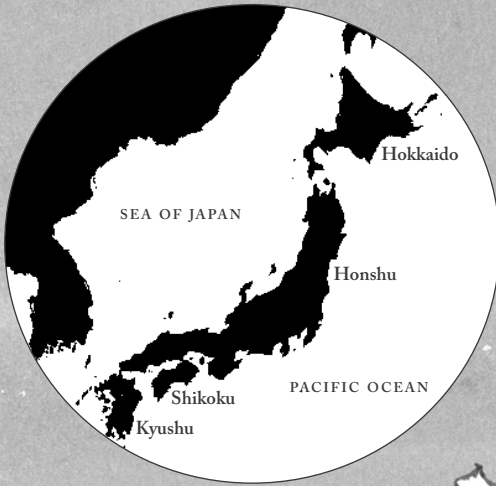
Uji River: *major river flowing out of Lake Biwa*

Yashima (yah-shee-mah): *island off the coast of Shikoku*

Yoshino Mountains: *rugged area south of Kyoto*

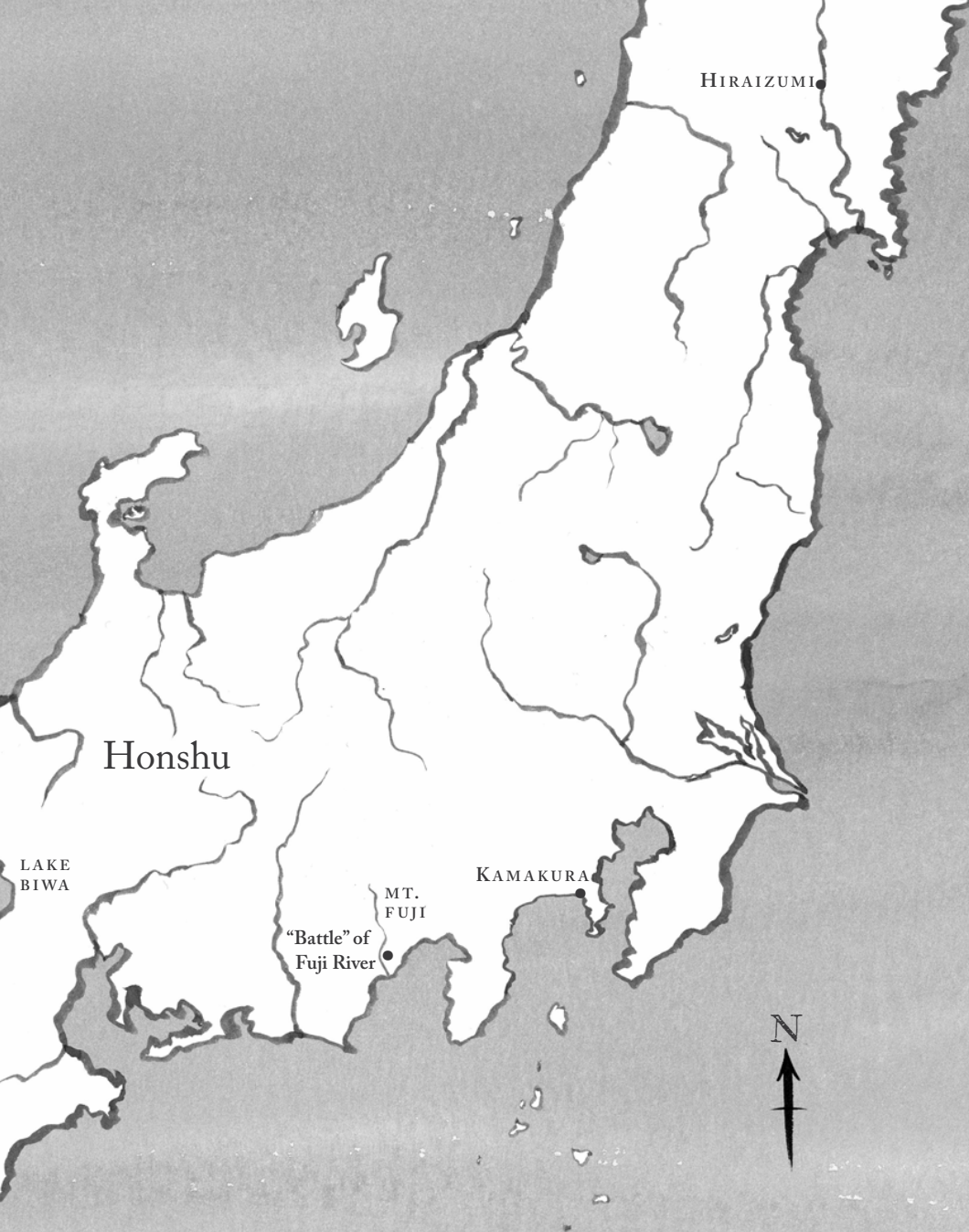


MAP OF JAPAN



SEA OF JAPAN
(EAST SEA)



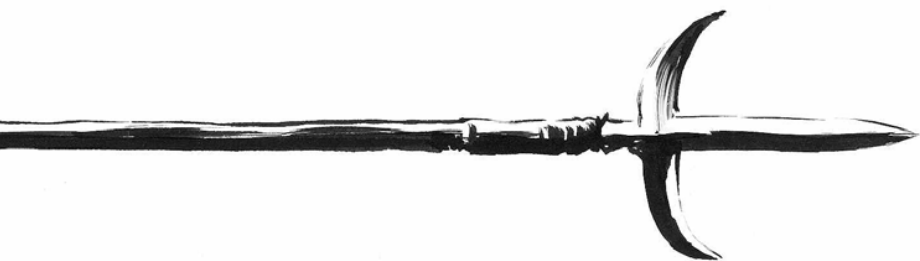
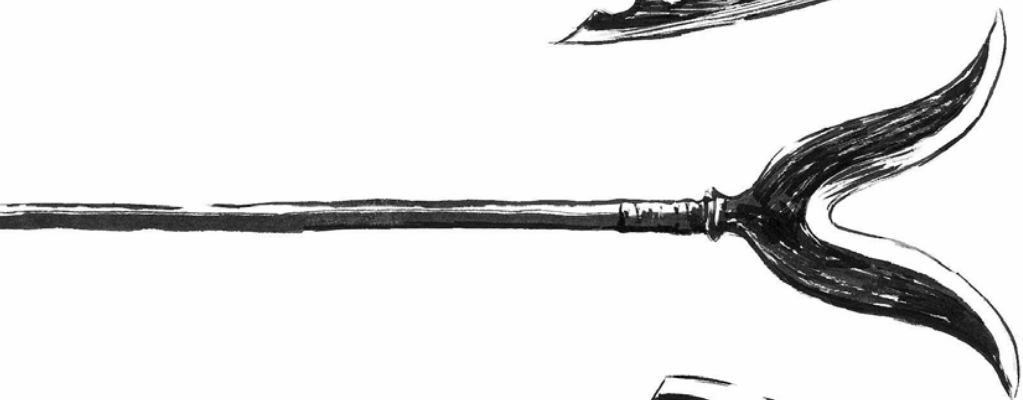


PACIFIC OCEAN



Detail Maps

- 1 Battle of Uji River, p. 49
- 2 Battle of Ichi-no-Tani, p. 59
- 3 Battle of Yashima, p. 85
- 4 Battle of Dan-no-Ura, p. 104



INTRODUCTION

Few warriors are as famous as the Japanese samurai. We remember those beautiful swords and those fearsome helmets. We recall, with both horror and fascination, how some chose to end their own lives. But no one can understand the samurai without knowing Minamoto Yoshitsune.

Yoshitsune's story unfolds in the late twelfth century, during the adolescence of the samurai. Yes, cultures have their youth, maturity, and old age, just as people do. During Yoshitsune's lifetime the samurai awakened. Their culture was bold, rebellious, and eager to flex its muscle. The samurai would ultimately destroy Japan's old way of life and forge a new one using fire and steel and pain.

Yoshitsune was at the very heart of this samurai rising. Exile, runaway, fugitive, rebel, and hero, he became the most famous warrior in Japanese history. The reason is simple: Yoshitsune was the kind of man other samurai longed to be.





I

DISASTER IN KYOTO

KYOTO, 1160

Minamoto Yoshitsune's inheritance arrived early. The boy could not yet walk when his father left him a lost war, a shattered family, and a bitter enemy.

Yoshitsune's father prepared for battle in the cold darkness of a winter night. Warrior pride demanded elegance, so servants led out two warhorses—one black and one white—for him to choose between. He ordered pine torches held aloft. The bronze and silver fittings on the horses' saddles flashed and sparkled in the light.

"When one goes into battle, nothing is so important as one's horse," Yoshitsune's father declared.

Yoshitsune's father was the leader of the Minamoto samurai. Five hundred warriors followed him as he rode, astride his black warhorse, through the shadowy streets of Kyoto. Surely the commoners who lived along the way—fishmongers and silk weavers, carpenters and midwives,



beggars and papermakers—were awakened by the clattering of two thousand hooves. Just as surely they clutched their children close and remained silent, knowing that nothing good ever comes of heavily armed men moving in the dead of night.

Two hours after midnight, Yoshitsune's father and his men reached their target: the palace of the Retired Emperor. The Minamoto forces barged through the palace gates, dragged the startled Retired Emperor from his slumber, and shoved him into an oxcart. The cart rolled away with Yoshitsune's father riding guard alongside.

Never before had a samurai dared to lay hands on a former emperor. As head of the imperial family, the Retired Emperor wielded enormous power. The reigning emperor—the Retired Emperor's teenage son—served as a figurehead. The Retired Emperor was the true ruler: he wrote the laws, controlled the government, and awarded titles and land to the Japanese elite.

In addition to his power, the Retired Emperor enjoyed enormous prestige. Japanese emperors were considered semidivine descendants of the sun goddess. Most people would think twice about kidnapping a demigod, but Yoshitsune's father was not a think-twice sort of person. Plus he was in a nasty snit. A few years earlier, he had taken the Retired Emperor's side in a political dispute. When the Retired Emperor won the dispute, Yoshitsune's father had expected a lofty title and the wealth that went with it. Instead, he was named Minister of the Stables of the Left. A rival samurai leader named Taira Kiyomori, who had also backed the Retired Emperor, received a much grander reward.

To get back at those who had slighted him, Yoshitsune's



father was willing to risk his own life, the lives of his men, and the lives of his children. He hoped that by kidnapping the Retired Emperor, he could seize control of Japan. He planned to force the Retired Emperor to heap titles on him while stripping them away from Taira Kiyomori. But first Yoshitsune's father wanted the Retired Emperor to know just how angry he was about that "Minister of the Stables of the Left" business. He ordered his men to burn the Retired Emperor's palace.

The Minamoto samurai set the wooden buildings ablaze. They lined the avenues outside the palace gates and drew their bows. Everyone who tried to escape was shot down, whether nobleman, lady-in-waiting, or servant boy.

A war chronicle says: "If they sought to avoid the arrows, they were consumed by fire. Those who quailed before the arrows and were terrified by the fire jumped into a well. But those on the bottom drowned in the water, and those on top were buried by ash and embers from the multitude of buildings burning in the violent wind, and not a single one of them was saved."

As smoke and screams filled the air around the flaming palace, news of the attack spread. Yoshitsune's father had waited for his nemesis Taira Kiyomori to leave town before kidnapping the Retired Emperor. But as soon as messengers reached Kiyomori, the Taira lord readied to ride to the Retired Emperor's defense.

Kiyomori dressed in black-laced armor and black bearskin boots and carried a black-lacquer scabbard and black-lacquered arrows. From his helmet rose a brilliant silver ornament shaped like monstrous beetle horns. Mounted on a thickly muscled black horse, the dark knight of Kyoto galloped home.



Other Taira samurai rushed to their leader's side. By the time Kiyomori reached the capital, he had gathered three hundred warriors. Yoshitsune's father and his five hundred followers had taken over another imperial palace in Kyoto. Taira Kiyomori led the counterattack. Despite a fierce fight, the outnumbered Taira were unable to dislodge the Minamoto.

Kiyomori and his men began to withdraw. Yoshitsune's father assumed that the Taira were retreating toward Kiyomori's mansion east of the city, and he couldn't resist the temptation to crush his archrival. He ordered his warriors into pursuit.

As soon as the Minamoto left the safety of the palace walls, squads of Taira attacked from all sides. The "retreat" had been a ruse; the Taira had simply circled around the block. Arrows sliced in from every direction. Unable to retreat, the Minamoto samurai were stamped out like the embers of a dying fire.

Meanwhile, the Retired Emperor was being held prisoner at an imperial library elsewhere in Kyoto. He disguised himself as a common gentleman, walked past his Minamoto guards, and fled into the snow-frosted hills. The entire war was now entirely pointless.

Yoshitsune's father had ridden to war with his two eldest sons, a nineteen-year-old and a sixteen-year-old. During the battle outside the palace, the older boy fought bravely but was captured by Kiyomori's men. The younger boy suffered a deep arrow wound in his knee. Yoshitsune's father and his wounded son, protected by a small band of loyal warriors, managed to break through the Taira lines. They rode east toward the Minamoto homeland.

Yoshitsune's father planned to gather reinforcements



and return to battle. But as they rode, his wounded son's condition grew steadily worse. At last, unable to go on, the boy begged to be killed.

His father obliged.

At last Yoshitsune's father and his remaining men stopped to rest at the home of a retainer (a lower-ranking samurai who had pledged his service and loyalty). But pledging is one thing; true loyalty is another. This retainer didn't want to be allied with a loser. He offered Yoshitsune's father a bath, which was gratefully accepted. The retainer's men then burst into the bathroom and murdered Yoshitsune's father. Only his head returned to Kyoto.

The bloody trophy was tied to a sandalwood tree beside the Kyoto prison gate. There it rotted, a sharp reminder that when you go into battle, the most important thing isn't selecting your horse. The most important thing is *winning*.

But Taira Kiyomori wasn't satisfied with his enemy's death. He also wanted his enemy's sons. Kiyomori now held both the nineteen-year-old who had fought in the battle and a fourteen-year-old who hadn't ridden to war. Kiyomori had the older boy beheaded but hadn't yet decided what to do with the younger boy.

The Taira lord knew that Yoshitsune's father (who, like other well-born Japanese men, had multiple wives) also had three young sons by a wife named Tokiwa. Tokiwa had a seven-year-old boy, a five-year-old boy, and a baby named Yoshitsune. Despite their youth and innocence, Taira Kiyomori wanted those sons as well. After all, samurai boys would grow up to bear swords—and grudges.

Tokiwa knew this, too. As soon as she learned of her



husband's death, she fled Kyoto with Yoshitsune bundled against her chest and his older brothers clutching her robes. Frost paralyzed the trees and ice stilled the rivers as they stumbled, half-blind, through clouding snow.

When they reached Tokiwa's relatives in a nearby town, terrible news awaited: Kiyomori had arrested Tokiwa's mother and was torturing her to find out where Tokiwa and her sons were hiding. In hopes of saving her mother but terrified for her sons, Tokiwa led her children back to Kyoto. The forlorn family surrendered at the gates of Kiyomori's mansion.

Triumphant Kiyomori could not resist a peek at his dead rival's wife. After all, Tokiwa's looks were legendary. It was said she had arrived in Kyoto as a teenager to compete for the position of imperial lady-in-waiting. Out of a thousand pretty girls, the hundred most lovely were chosen, and then the ten most radiant, and finally the most beautiful of all: Tokiwa.

And so Yoshitsune's mother, the twelfth-century beauty queen, was brought before Kiyomori, victorious samurai lord. Tokiwa clutched little Yoshitsune to her chest and begged Kiyomori to kill her first.

"Every mother, high or low, wanders in darkness for love of her children," Tokiwa said, tears raining down her face. "I know that I could not live a moment longer without them."

Maybe Kiyomori felt a stirring of Buddhist compassion. Maybe something else moved the samurai as he gazed upon Tokiwa, so dazzling, so desperate. What harm, Kiyomori must have reasoned, could come of mercy? Tokiwa's fatherless children needn't become warriors. The older ones could be sent to Buddhist temples and trained as monks. In a few years baby Yoshitsune could follow the



same quiet path. Why not? After all, the Taira had won the war. Surely the scattered sons of the Minamoto—and little Yoshitsune in particular—could pose no possible threat.

Kiyomori was wrong. Utterly, fatally wrong.





HEADLESS GHOSTS

KURAMA, 1160–1174

We know very little about Yoshitsune's early life. According to some accounts, Tokiwa became Kiyomori's mistress. As a small child Yoshitsune may have spent his first years in Kiyomori's household on the outskirts of Kyoto.

In those days Kyoto was the center of the Japanese universe. The emperor lived there, hidden like a nesting doll inside his palace, which was surrounded by a compound, which was surrounded by a city laid out as tidily as a checkerboard. Such a special place required spiritual protection. As everyone knew, bad luck and ill spirits often arrived from a northerly direction, so Kyoto had been built on a plain sheltered on the north, east, and west by mountains. Tile-roofed temples sprouted like mushroom caps from the forested slopes, providing an extra line of defense



against evil demons, malicious sprites, and vengeful spirits. And a good thing, too. The recent Minamoto-Taira conflict had sharply increased the number of bad-tempered ghosts wafting around.

At about age seven Yoshitsune was taken away from Tokiwa and delivered to one of the holy places north of Kyoto. Did no one notice that Kurama Temple was dedicated to Bishamon-ten, the Buddhist patron god of warriors?

At Kurama there were no soft laps and mother's kisses. Yoshitsune entered a world of hard floorboards and silent statues. The temple offered no chairs, no beds, and no bedding. Monks and monks-in-training slept on thin straw mats and instead of blankets covered themselves with extra clothing made of rough hemp. No roaring fireplaces warmed the wooden buildings, not even in the frozen core of winter.

The monks of Kurama expected young apprentices to memorize the names and proper worship of Japan's divine beings. This wasn't easy. Buddhism had moved into Japan six centuries earlier but never evicted the gods of the native Shinto religion, so the invisible realm was rather crowded. There were cosmic Buddhas and Buddhist gods of salvation. Every major family had its own patron god, every hamlet had its local Buddha, and countless Shinto nature spirits inhabited oddly shaped rocks and stately trees.

Monks kept these divine beings happy by reciting and copying sacred Buddhist scriptures. As part of their religious training, boys like Yoshitsune spent countless leg-numbing hours kneeling over sheets and scrolls of rice paper, learning to read and write scriptures in both



Japanese (the everyday language) and Chinese (the language of scholars and administrators).

Besides pleasing the gods, Buddha's sacred words also worked magic on the souls of the dead. Buddhists believed that a person's soul would be reborn into a new body and that the balance of good deeds and bad deeds in one's prior life determined one's fate in this one. However, while awaiting its next reincarnation, a soul sometimes lingered in the world as a ghost. Unhappy ghosts caused illness and accidents, so it was very important to keep departed souls placid until their next rebirth. As a monk, Yoshitsune would be expected to copy and recite scriptures to soothe the restless spirits of his dead relatives. The restlessness of the boy's own spirit was apparently overlooked.

No boy with Yoshitsune's energy could be contained within incense-scented walls. Kurama's doors opened to a wilderness of tumbling waterfalls and lofty cedars, pink-faced monkeys and flying squirrels. Short-winged hawks chased smaller birds through the forest, crashing recklessly through bushes in fierce pursuit, like samurai on the wing.

People later told stories about Yoshitsune's boyhood and how he sought out the secrecy of the forest. They said he pretended that bushes were Taira and slashed the enemy shrubbery with switches and sticks, saving his most ferocious attacks for a tree he named Kiyomori.

Of course, Yoshitsune couldn't possibly remember what had happened in Kyoto. He was just a baby during that terrible time. Yet even hidden away at Kurama, he learned something of his family history. Stories travel. Even holy men gossip.



In Yoshitsune's time the names Minamoto and Taira were famous throughout Japan. Yoshitsune was probably proud to discover that he was the tenth-generation descendant of an emperor. His enemy Taira Kiyomori also boasted an imperial bloodline. The ancestors of both Yoshitsune and Kiyomori had become samurai because of the problem of excess princes.

Japanese emperors often married several wives and produced more sons than necessary to carry on the imperial line. Unfortunately, within the strict ranking system of the imperial court, only a limited number of high-ranking titles (which came with vast estates and equally vast riches) were available to these princes. Sons born to the emperor's lower-ranking wives had little chance of advancement, so they sometimes went looking for opportunities outside Kyoto. The founders of the Taira and Minamoto families were spare heirs who moved to the provinces to seek their fortunes. The Minamoto family became a power in the east; the Taira dominated the west.

As provincial lords, these princes (and their descendants) took care of the messy parts of governing. They caught criminals, killed barbarians, and forced peasants to pay taxes. Sometimes they owned their own land, but mostly they acted as estate managers for higher-ranking aristocrats living in Kyoto. The aristocrats in the capital didn't want to get their robes muddied. They preferred to concentrate on poetry, fashion, and illicit love affairs with one another's wives and daughters.

In the provinces, the Minamoto and Taira lords commanded great respect because of their imperial blood. Well-off local men became their retainers. The Minamoto and Taira also kept in close contact with the capital. However, the snobbish aristocrats of Kyoto never let the



samurai forget who was who in the social scheme. If transported into a modern high school, the Kyoto nobility would consider themselves the cool kids. They thought of the samurai as dumb jocks.

As the years passed, the Minamoto and Taira grew in wealth and military muscle. The two great samurai families served the imperial family, it is said, “like the two wings of a bird.” They put down rebellions, kept the roads and sea routes safe from bandits and pirates, and made sure that taxes flowed into Kyoto. Yet as the power of the samurai lords increased, so did their inferiority complex. And there is nothing in the world as dangerous as a man bristling with weapons and insecurities.

When Yoshitsune’s father kidnapped the Retired Emperor and burned his palace, he thought his actions would make the Minamoto stronger and more secure. His bungling produced the opposite result. Before the failed rebellion, the Retired Emperor had kept the growing influence of the samurai in check by playing one samurai family off against the other, Minamoto versus Taira. But now the Minamoto were weak and leaderless, unable to serve as a counterweight to the power of the Taira family. Taira Kiyomori had the upper hand. He forced the Retired Emperor to appoint him chancellor—the highest rank ever awarded to a samurai. Titles, land, and wealth flowed to Kiyomori, his family, and his friends. Team Taira was on top.

This bitter news surely reached Kurama Temple. It’s easy to imagine young Yoshitsune, angry and frustrated, slashing his way through forests of phantom Taira. But how could a temple boy redeem the Minamoto family’s honor?

Yoshitsune didn’t have money. Or allies. Or anyone



who could teach him essential samurai skills: archery, horsemanship, and swordsmanship. He wasn't big or strong or good-looking. The only description we have of him is "a small, pale youth with crooked teeth and bulging eyes." Maybe it's a blessing that the mirrors of the time were made of polished metal and not very reflective.

Yoshitsune couldn't hope for rescue. Most of his surviving uncles and cousins lived far to the east under the beady gaze of Taira overlords. He did have at least one surviving half brother—the boy who had been fourteen at the time of the disaster in Kyoto. But his half brother, now a grown man, was held captive by one of Kiyomori's retainers. Yoshitsune's two full brothers—the other sons of Tokiwa—had already become monks. It was the path Kiyomori had chosen for Yoshitsune as well.

Yoshitsune's only assets were brains, ambition, and a dream. But childhood dreams can change history.

His fifteenth birthday loomed. At this age Japanese boys were considered men. Soon Yoshitsune would be expected to shave his head and take his final religious vows. A safe life of scripture reading and ghost soothing unscrolled before him.

That spring a wealthy gold merchant stopped at Kurama on his way north. The gold merchant turned out to be a friend of the Minamoto and was willing to help. Yoshitsune seized his chance to change his fate. Disguised as the merchant's servant, he slipped away.

Surely Yoshitsune understood the risk. His escape was no boyish game; it was a rebellion against Taira Kiyomori, the most powerful samurai in Japan. If Yoshitsune were captured, his severed head would probably dangle



from the sandalwood tree beside the Kyoto prison gate.
Just like his father's.

Eight centuries separate us from Yoshitsune. Yet it is easy to imagine the hope and fear in his heart as he launched himself into a dangerous world.



