

chapter
one

里見八犬伝

Tale of the 8 Dog Warriors



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A NOTE FROM THE STORYTELLER

They say the Satomi clan rose in Awa by leading with virtue and shattering enemies with brilliant strategy. They conquered the two provinces of Kazusa and Shimōsa and held them for ten generations, their name enough to awe all eight provinces of the Kantō. They were, without question, the first among warriors.

In that golden age, the clan was served by eight remarkable men. Each bore the name "Dog" as his surname. They were called the Eight Dog Warriors. Were they as wise as the legendary Eight Talents of ancient China? Perhaps not. But their loyalty and courage? That should be spoken of in the same breath as the eight heroic retainers of the Kusunoki clan. It's a pity so few in their own time wrote their story down. Their names are just footnotes in popular war tales and forgotten genealogies. The full truth of their lives was lost.

I've always regretted that. I wanted to find the remaining pieces of their legend and put them back together. So I hunted through every old record I could find. For years, I found nothing.

Then, one drowsy afternoon, lost between waking and sleep, a visitor came to my cottage. He was from the south, from Nansō. Our talk turned to the old tales, and he spoke of the Eight Dog Warriors— but his version was different from the one in the history books. When I pressed him, he said, "This comes from the elders. The story passed down by word of mouth. Will you write it, master? Preserve it?"

I agreed. "I will spread this wondrous tale."

Pleased, he left. I saw him out to my brushwood gate, where a dog lay sleeping in the sun. In my distraction, I stepped on its tail. It yelped in pain—and I jolted awake.

It was all a dream. A fantasy as fleeting as the famous "Dream of Nanke." My cottage was empty. The gate was silent. But the visitor's words felt true. Even a dream shouldn't be thrown away.

I tried to write it down immediately, but the details slipped away. I remembered only fragments. So, I did what storytellers do: I borrowed colors from other tales. I took threads from Chinese legends—like the story of the princess who married a divine dog—and wove them into my own cloth. I filled the gaps with imagination.

After a few months, I had five volumes. This is only the beginning, the origin of the legend. I haven't even reached the proper biographies of the eight heroes. But the publishers snatched it up anyway, carved the blocks, and printed it. When they asked for a title, I gave them the first thing that came to mind: "The Tale of the Eight Dog Warriors."

It's a story to wake up the sleepy, to stir the heart. I hope you find something in it.

— The Storyteller, washing his brush in the autumn of 1814

THE EIGHT DOG WARRIORS

Their names, as the old chronicles whisper them, are these:

- Dog-Mountain Dōsetsu (who was called Michimatsu as a boy)
- Dog-Mound Shino (childhood name Shino)
- Dog-Slope Kōtsuke (called Keno)
- Dog-Keeper Kenpachi (called Genkichi)
- Dog-River Sōsuke
- Dog-Bay Shinbee (called Shinpei)
- Dog-Village Taikaku (called Kakutarō)
- Dog-Field Bungo (called Kobungo)

That's all the histories tell us. Names without stories. A gallery of portraits with the faces scrubbed away. It's a shame.

So I've taken an old Chinese fable about an emperor whose daughter married a heavenly dog, and used it as my loom. I've spun a new yarn from its threads, tracing causes and imagining effects, all to chase away the drowsiness of an idle afternoon.

This first volume tells how the Satomi clan first came to power in Awa. What you'll read here, is the spark that starts the great fire. It's a complete story in itself, but just the opening act. In the next volumes, each of the eight warriors will step into the light and tell his own tale. That will take time. Stories, like trees, grow at their own pace.

— The Storyteller, again

CHAPTER ONE

The Last Lesson & The White Dragon

The age was rotten. In Kyoto, the Shogun was a puppet. In Kamakura, his deputy was greedy and weak. The great peace had splintered into a hundred warring states.

It was in this time of chaos that a man fled the carnage of the east, came to the remote shore of Awa, and carved out a new kingdom. His line would rule for ten generations. His name was Satomi Yoshisane.

Yoshisane was the son of Satomi Sueimoto, a samurai of proud, ancient blood—a direct descendant of the legendary Minamoto no Yoshiie. Their lord was Ashikaga Mochiuji in Kamakura, a man whose ambition finally overran his sense. He defied the Shogun in Kyoto, forgot the laws of lineage, and plunged the land into war.

The Kyoto army marched east. They joined with the turncoat regent, crushed Mochiuji's forces, and trapped him and his heir in a temple. There, they were forced to take their own lives. It was a clean, cruel end.

But two of Mochiuji's younger sons escaped. Boys named Haruō and Yasuō. They fled south to Shimōsa, where a loyal lord, Ujitomo of Yūki, gave them shelter. He refused the Shogun's orders. He would not surrender the children.

Warriors still loyal to Mochiuji's memory flocked to Yūki castle. Among the first was Sueimoto. For three years, they held the fortress. They were brilliant, defiant, unbeaten. But no relief came. Their food ran out. Their last arrows were spent.

"There is no way out now," Sueimoto said to his men.
"Let us die here together. With honor."

They threw open the gates and charged into the besieging army. It was not a battle; it was a last, glorious suicide.

On that final day, Sueimoto's son Yoshisane fought like a demon. At twenty, he was already a better warrior and strategist than his father, and wiser in the ways of books and men. He cut down fourteen, fifteen enemy horsemen and roared for more.

From across the field, his father saw him. Sueimoto spurred his horse, cut his way to his son's side, and grabbed his reins.

"Yoshisane! Stop!"

"Father! Let me die with you!"

"A true warrior knows when to live!" Sueimoto's face was a mask of ash and resolve. "If we both fall here today, our line ends. That is the greatest dishonor to our ancestors. Our duty is done. The castle falls. I will die for my lord. You will live for our name. Now go!"

Yoshisane shook his head, tears cutting through the grime on his cheeks. "To run while my father faces death? Even a child would not do such a thing. I have read the classics. I know duty. My duty is to follow you now—to the underworld itself!"

Sueimoto's eyes blazed. "Fool! Do you think Lord Mochiuji was our blood? Our true loyalty was to the Southern

generations ago! We serve these Ashikaga by chance, not by blood-oath. I die for a principle. You must live for a future. Is your learning just for boasting? If you disobey me now, you are no son of mine!"

The words were a physical blow. Yoshisane reeled. His father didn't wait. He caught the eye of his two most trusted retainers—Sugiwara Ujimoto and Horiuchi Sadayuki. A single nod.

They understood.

Ujimoto seized the bit of Yoshisane's horse. Sadayuki struck its rump. The beast lurched forward. The three men—the young lord and his two guardians—broke from the battle line and fled west, into the twilight.

Sueimoto watched them go. A calm settled over him. He turned his horse to face the advancing tidal wave of enemy troops. Behind him stood less than ten men. "For glory!" he cried. "For a future!"

They charged. They fought not to win, but to hold. To buy seconds, then minutes. They became a whirlwind of blades, a wall of dying flesh. Not one asked for quarter. Not one was given.

When the last of them fell, the great Satomi Sueimoto among them, the enemy did not cheer. They walked silently among the dead, their respect the only tribute. Yoshisane, Ujimoto, and Sadayuki rode until their horses staggered. They hid in ditches, slept in thickets. After three days, they reached the coast at Miura, a place called Yatori Inlet. They were ragged, starving, and utterly lost.

The sea stretched before them, calm and endless. On the other side was Awa, a land of strangers. But there was no boat.

Ujimoto approached a group of fishermen's children mending nets. "Please. Is there a boat? We must cross. My lord... he is starving."

A lanky boy of fourteen looked up, his face sour. "A boat? All the boats are taken for the war. We can't even fish. And why should we feed you? I'm hungry too." He scooped up a clod of hard earth. "Here. Eat this."

He threw it. Not at Ujimoto, who dodged, but straight at Yoshisane, who sat exhausted on a pine root. Yoshisane's hand snapped out. He caught the dirt clod in mid-air. Ujimoto's sword was half-drawn, his face murderous.

"You little viper! I'll—"

"Stop." Yoshisane's voice was quiet. He looked at the clod in his palm, then out at the sea. A strange smile touched his lips. "Don't you see? This is a sign."

"A sign, my lord? Of their insolence!"

"Earth," Yoshisane said. "The foundation of a country. Heaven has just given me the foundation of a country."

He raised the clod solemnly to his forehead three times, then tucked it carefully inside his robe. "This is an auspicious gift."

Ujimoto stared, his anger dissolving into baffled awe. Then the sky broke. Clouds bruised the horizon. The wind screamed in from the sea, and the tide turned against

itself. Lightning tore the world open. The fishermen's children shrieked and ran inside, barring their doors. The three rōnin had no shelter. They huddled under a bent pine as the storm raged around them. The sea became a cauldron of white fury.

And in the heart of the storm, something moved. A shape, vast and serpentine, coiled within the clouds. It glowed with a cold, inner light. Scales like polished silver flashed between the rain curtains. It was a dragon—a white dragon.

It thrust its head from the clouds, surveyed the raging world, and then, with a grace that belied its power, turned and flew south. Toward Awa.

As suddenly as it came, the storm vanished. The sea lay calm, gilded by the setting sun.

"Did you see it?" Yoshisane whispered.

"I... I saw something," Ujimoto stammered. "A leg. A flash of scale. Was it truly...?"

"A white dragon," Yoshisane said, his eyes alight with a fierce, new fire. "White is the color of the Minamoto, my ancestor. South is Awa. I saw its tail, but not its head—I will rule that land, but perhaps not all of it. You, Ujimoto, you saw its thigh. You shall be my strong right arm." He stood, no longer a fugitive, but a lord envisioning his domain. "This was no storm. It was a coronation."

As the moon rose, full and heavy, a single boat slid out from behind a distant cape. It moved with purpose, straight for them.

At the helm stood Horiuchi Sadayuki, the third retainer, whom they had lost days before. He grinned as he threw them a line. "Sorry I'm late. I was... procuring transportation."

He had foreseen their need, taken a shortcut, and bargained, begged, or stolen this fishing boat. In its hold was a small pot of cooked rice.

Yoshisane laughed—a real, free sound he hadn't made in years. "Your lateness is forgiven, Sadayuki. Today, you haven't brought a boat. You've brought a kingdom." They boarded. The fisherman pushed off. The little boat rose on the gentle swell, pointing its prow toward the dark, waiting shore of Awa, under the watchful eye of the dragon's moon.

