



# The Lost Patrol



I am a storyteller, it's what I do. I roam the Isles, from Eddo to the Ro-Kan Mountains, telling tales, singing songs, and bringing news to the villages of Jwar. It can be a difficult life sometimes, one fraught with danger, but I am gratified by the wonder in my patrons' eyes as I tell them of the soldiers of the Ryu, or the introspective teachings of the Monks.

But I love to tell dark tales most of all. Especially at night when most of the Isles are asleep; that's when I scare them with stories of ravenous Oni or sinister cults.

I arrived at Fort Sorrow late that night. I had forgotten just how much it rains in the highlands. The guards at the gate laughed at my sodden state as they waved me through. I like Fort Sorrow; I enjoy staring out at the lush jungle that surrounds its stone walls. I find the squawking birds and chattering monkeys strangely comforting.

I stayed at the tavern as usual. The food and bed are free, just as long as I tell my tales. I spent the day catching up with old friends before returning to the tavern to prepare for the evening's show. I unpacked my drum and warmed up my voice with a bawdy song concerning the 'Maid of the River' and her lust for men. The common room smelt of roasting meat, making my stomach rumble. The inn-keep sat me at a table by the door and served me a plate heaped with food. I washed it down with water instead of beer or sake; I need a clear head to entertain.

The room filled with soldiers, merchants, officers, and artisans, all rubbing shoulders with one another. I finished my meal, wiped the grease from my face and took my place in front of the fire. There was a loud burst of applause as the audience recognised me. I bowed to them, cleared my throat, and began. The hours passed in a blur of singing, joking, and laughing, but finally it was time for the telling of the tale. The customers were eager for it. The night was late, the fire low, and the sake had taken its toll. The room was much quieter now. I put my drum away and mo-

tioned to the bar-keep for a drink. A cup was filled and passed through the crowd to me. I took it, cleared my throat, and began the timeworn tale of 'The Last Patrol'.

There is a Fort, much like this one, very far from here. It sits on a cliff high up in the mountains. The men there are tough, they have to be. They are beset by savage snows for three months of the year and hostile attacks for the rest, but they carry their heads high, and their banners even higher.

The last patrol of the year is customarily made before the first snow falls. The weather is terrifying. Snowdrifts deeper than a man and the cold can blacken exposed flesh in seconds. It is an unforgiving environment. So when the last patrol returns, the men prepare for the long winter.

The last patrol is made by three raw recruits led by a junior officer; it is a rite of passage, a trial to weed out the weak and initiate the strong into the ranks of the hardened. It takes the men deep into the mountain valleys and passes. If they take longer than three weeks to complete the patrol they are expelled from the fort upon their return. The men are given one week's rations, no more. After that, they must live off the land, which is not easy as it is already deep into the autumnal cycle.

The soldiers carry their weight in armour, weapons, supplies and other equipment. It is a difficult trial, but if they are successful, they are given a brooch that distinguishes them from the other soldiers of the Prefecture. Those who have earned it, wear their brooches with pride.

That year's recruits looked like all the others who had gone before. They were a mixture of fat, thin, short and tall; and all of them looked worried. It was a source of much comedy to the older soldiers who were betting on which groups were most likely to return in time. All but one of the veterans was taking part in the wagering. He stood to one side leaning against his yari, picking his rotting

teeth with a sharpened twig. He had completed the trial nearly forty years ago and had seen more than his fair share of fighting since then. His leather armour bore witness to that; it was patched and sown numerous times.

His face was solemn and leathery, except for a thick scar that ran down the side of his face narrowly missing his left eye. He got that fighting bandits in the Cho-Yong pass, and every winter, without fail, it began to throb. They called him 'old man winter' because of it, and he was best left alone when the cold came a-biting. He knew a thing or two about the weather did the old man; you don't spend your life in the wilderness and not learn what goes on around you, even if the signs are too subtle for most to see.

"Snows will come early this year," he said, just loud enough for the others to hear him, "mark my words. They're going to fall hard and fast and won't stop for months. If you send these men out now, they're never coming back," he said, now addressing the commander.

"Don't bet on these dead men, because that's what they are, dead men, one and all. When this scar starts to burn, that's when winter's approaching, and right now this scar is burning something fierce," he said rubbing his disfigurement slowly. He turned his back on them as the commander spoke reassuringly to the men.

"Don't listen to him; we have at least a month before the snows start. He doesn't know what he's saying." So as the night-watchmen lit the braziers and took to the walls, the thirteen groups left the safety of the Fort and marched out into the darkness with the wind nipping at their heels.

High up on the ramparts the old soldier shook his head as he watched them leave.

"What a waste of good men," he said to the night.

"This will end in tears; no good can come of it." When the commander woke the next day, snow flurries were coming over the walls.

He ordered a score of horsemen to bring the patrols back, but by mid-afternoon the storm was too severe. The riders returned lest they find themselves cut off from the fort. The men now looked at 'old man winter' with a new found respect because his gloomy prediction had come true. Winter had indeed come early to Fort Mistake.

Meanwhile out in the jaws of the storm, the men of the last patrol were dying one by one. Of the thirteen groups that left the safety of the fort, three were swallowed up in a crevasse field, one plunged head-long over a cliff, while the others simply froze to death. All perished except for one solitary group; they were all that remained of the last patrol.

The group consisted of a monk's son from Ryu, a squinty eyed refugee from the Spice Islands, a farmer's boy from Bruann, and a lazy patrol leader who made the men carry him through the winding mountain paths. During a brief break in the storm, they found a cave that was deep enough for them to shelter in. Inside the cave it was cold and damp.

"How long do you think we'll have to stay here?" asked the refugee named Kari.

"I'm not sure, but I think it'll be longer than is good for us," answered the farmer's boy from Bruann called Hadaka.

"Men, I want you to give me your blankets," said the officer.

"I should not be made to suffer while you sit around chatting." The men were hesitant to do so.

"Give them to me now, or I will have you hung for disobedience upon return. I won't tolerate a breakdown in command, no matter the circumstance." The men grumbled but did as they were ordered. The officer rolled one out on the floor, covered himself with the rest then fell asleep.

"Hang me would you? I'd like to hang you, you lazy bastard. I've seen turnips that did more than you," said Hadaka under his breath.

"Sshhh," said Kari,

“don’t let him hear you. Gods knows what he will say to the commander when we get back.”

“That’s if we get back.” said the third soldier called Bootu.

“Do you think we will?” asked Kari.

“I don’t know lads, I don’t have a clue. I’ve never seen snow like this before, that’s for sure,” answered Hadaka.

“So what are we going to do with him?” said Bootu pointing at the snoring officer.

“Tolerate him as long as we can and pray that the storm breaks before we do,” said Hadaka.

Sadly for the men of the last patrol, this was not meant to be. The storm did not break, in fact it got worse. It howled and battered the mountains for weeks until they had eaten everything they had; even their boots. Most of the firewood was gone as well, and only a handful of twigs and bark remained. They would have to burn the cloth parts of their armour next if they wanted to survive.

It was night and the three men held conference while the leader slept.

“What do we do Hadaka eh? What do we do? There’s nothing to eat, little left to burn and the storms getting worse. How long have we been in this damned cave now? A week? A bloody month? How long?” asked Kari, his voice shrill.

“I don’t know Kari, I don’t, but you have to keep calm; now’s not the time to get angry,” said Hadaka in as soothing a voice as he could muster; but it was to no avail. Kari was wound as tight a man can get before snapping.

“I can’t take it anymore, I have to get out of here, I can’t breathe, I can’t breathe!” shouted Kari. He stood and strode toward the snow filled entrance. He unstrapped his helmet and began to dig. Snow slid around him and collected in wet piles at his feet. His companions tried to stop him. The leader glanced at what was going on, sighed, and went back to sleep.

“Stop it Kari, stop it please,” pleaded both Hadaka and Bootu.

But Kari was a man possessed and dug like one too. Soon he had opened a hole and snaked his way out of the cave and into the dark. Kari turned to face his companions. He screamed something, but a gust of wind snatched the words away. He turned and disappeared into the night.

Kari was never seen again.

Bootu and Hadaka looked at one another. “I’m going with him Hadaka,” said Bootu.” I can’t sit here and die. Out there,” he nodded at the shrinking hole that Kari had dug, “I stand a chance. I’m going for it.” Bootu dug as frantically as his friend had done mere moments before.

“Don’t, please, don’t ... I can’t make it out there Bootu, it’s too cold for me, I can’t handle the cold, I’m just a simple farmer’s son from Bruann. Please Bootu, don’t do it, don’t leave me here to die,” pleaded Hadaka. Bootu didn’t answer. Hadaka watched him leave, with not a clue about what to do. He crawled back inside the cave. Hadaka sat with his head in his hands, lost in despair. Sobs escaped his frostbitten lips as he shook convulsively. No longer the fat boy from Bruann, he was now thin and near death. His extremities were black with frostbite. Hadaka prayed for salvation...

Back in Fort Mistake, the commander, overwhelmed with the guilt of sending fifty two of his men to die on the back of a tradition, locked himself away in his quarters. But in the cave, the remaining two men of the cursed last patrol stared at one another over a small dwindling fire. This was the last of their fuel, and when the fire burned out, there would be nothing but cold and darkness until death took them both.

Hadaka sat listening to the rumble of avalanches outside and water dripping from the stones above. The water was all they had to put in their bellies since their food had run out. The men were starving.

“So what do we do now then boy?” asked the patrol leader even though they were of the same age.

“I don’t know Sir, why are you asking me? You’re the one in charge. Not me.”

“Careful boy, no need to be sarcastic. Remember who you’re talking too, I’m not your equal,” said the patrol leader. Hadaka, silent, stared at the diminishing fire before him.

The gravity of the situation gnawed his mind. Never the fastest carp in the stream, he was however formulating a plan that he hoped would get him out of this dire predicament.

“Is that it then? Is that all the wood we have left?” Hadaka asked as his hand went slowly and cautiously to a dagger he kept sheathed at the small of his back.

“Yes it is, once that’s gone, that’s it,” answered the leader doing the very same. His fingers moved slowly until the handle of his dagger was in his palm.

They stared at one another, wreathed in shadow, with faces made even gaunter by the flickering light between them. Outside the wind screamed its rage against the cliffs and crags and wound itself like a berserker’s horn through the valleys and narrow places.

Inside the freezing cave, the two men watched the fire and waited. A sane person without food for a fortnight will knock at the doors of madness and beg to be let in. Hadaka leaned forward making himself more comfortable; he wanted to be ready when the time came. The leader did the same. With his left hand, Hadaka undid the knot that tied his helmet under his chin, and again, the leader did the same. They grinned at one another. Survival is a strange thing; what is considered taboo becomes an option never before thought of. When you are starving and far from home, and stuck in a snow-bound cave, your options are limited.

Hadaka cleared his throat and licked his frostbitten lips. He stared at the dwindling flame that lay before them. The flame was tiny and danced precariously on a twig. That

solitary flame turned the wood black, then grey, as it inched its way to the bottom.

It reminded Hadaka of an arquebus fuse before it ignites the powder, that agonising wait before the ‘Bang’ and the blast. The flame was nearing its end now. It was yellow and danced casually, then blue, then amber, then white, then red, then poof, it was smoke and danced no more.

They struck one another at precisely the same time. Only Hadaka’s blade found purchase. It went all the way through the leader’s throat and out the other side. He danced on the end of Hadaka’s blade like a fish caught on a hook. His heels thrummed against the cold stone floor of the cave as the life slowly left his body. The leader tried to curse Hadaka with his last breath but failed. A foot of steel in a man’s throat can do that.

The lazy officer was dead.

Hadaka let the blade go and heard the body slump to the floor. He scooted back on his arse toward the mouth of the cave and threw up, but there was nothing in his stomach. So he got on his hands and knees and crawled toward the body of his fallen leader and did what he had never thought possible.

To say that that the meat was not the finest thing he had ever tasted would be a lie. He had to stop himself from gorging on it lest he vomit. While Hadaka was kneeling there, face down and slavering over his former officer’s body, part of him was revolted that he could do something as barbaric as this. Hadaka’s stomach was just thankful it had something to digest other than snow melt. Let’s face it, it’s a man eat man world after all.

If it had been a normal storm, then Hadaka would have been back at the Fort before the man’s marrow was dry on his chin, but it wasn’t. It was the longest storm in living memory and Hadaka found himself with nothing to eat yet again.

Nothing remained of the leader save his

armour, weapons, and a pile of broken and sucked bones. Hadaka had even cracked open his leader's skull and eaten his brains. Hadaka's options were limited, leave the cave and surely die or... Hadaka looked at his frostbitten fingers and knew immediately what he had to do to survive. He chose his left hand. He did not enjoy them as much as he thought he would, maybe because they were severely damaged, or maybe because they were his own. We will never know. On the day he decided to cut off his toes- let's just say he was well past caring about anything ever again. But then, as he was about to sever his big toe, he thought he heard someone shouting from outside the cave. He stopped what he was doing and listened.

"Hello? Is there anybody in there?" shouted someone from outside.

"Yes, here I am! Please don't go, don't leave me!" he shouted back.

He watched as a flushed faced man popped his head inside.

"Hello, what are you doing here?" he said as if he were a friendly neighbour just stopping by for a chat. Hadaka had no answer for that. So overwrought was he at the thought of salvation that he fainted.

When he awoke, he was wrapped in a mound of blankets with the aroma of boiling stew plugging his nostrils. He opened his eyes to a sight he thought he would never see again; a fire, and food in abundance. His mysterious visitor sat before a bubbling pot smoking a pipe. The stranger was bald, clothed in furs and leathers, with wooden and porcelain masks hanging from belts that criss-crossed his body. The masks clacked against each other as he stirred the pot.

"Aah, you're awake. Good, good, I thought I was going to have to eat this all on my own," said the stranger.

"Who, who are you?" stammered Hadaka.

"My name is Kato," said the stranger, "and you are?"

"Hadaka, my name is Hadaka."

"And he was?" asked Kato pointing at the pile of bones in the corner of the cave. Kato tilted his head back and laughed deeply.

"Never fear Hadaka, your secret's safe with me," he said with a wink.

"Let me tell you a joke, four men walk into a cave, only one comes out..." he laughed again.

"But come now, surely it wasn't an easy choice? I don't think for a second that it was, my friend. I mean, to kill someone then eat them is not something you do every day, and to eat your own fingers? That's a tough choice for sure."

Hadaka merely nodded in return. His shame at what he had done visible on his emaciated face.

"How did you manage to survive the storm?" asked Hadaka.

"I am of you, but not the same as you. I wield a darker power than you could possibly imagine. I am here to make you a deal Hadaka, one that will see you live out this storm with whatever limbs you have left uneaten. Are you interested to hear it?"

"Go ahead, let me hear your deal; it's not like I have anywhere to go now, is it?"

"Oh very good, very good, indeed; Hadaka has got some of his edge back at last," he said with a smile. "It's very simple," he continued, "swear an oath Hadaka; swear an oath to the Cult."

"What Cult?"

"The Cult of Yurei of course. We're the only Cult that would have your sort now, Hadaka. You're a cannibal. I bet it repulsed you at first, but you liked it too, didn't you? That first bite, feeling your teeth slide through that flesh like it was butter, the iron taste of blood trickling down your throat after eating nothing for so long, well, I can only imagine it was as close to Nirvana as one of our kind could get without being a monk."

Hadaka burst into tears.

The stranger laughed long and loud at his dilemma. When Hadaka eventually calmed, he asked Kato,

“What will I need to do for the Cult?”

“Nothing for now, go back to the Fort if you so wish. Maybe pay your Commander a visit and show him how upset you are about all of this. After that, wait until I call for you. It might be next year, it might be never, but when I call, you must come, it is as simple as that. Do we have a deal?”

Hadaka thought about it and realised that he would do anything to leave the cave, to feel the sun on his face and the grass under his feet.

“Yes, yes, I’ll do it. I’ll swear allegiance to the Cult.”

“Excellent Hadaka, a good choice,” said the man in a different voice, a voice fit for the grave. Hadaka watched in horror as the man’s eyes turned black and rolled back in his head, his face becoming a mask of terror. Hadaka screamed as the leader of the Cult grabbed his head and pulled it close to his until they were mere inches away.

“Silence!” he bellowed at the last patrol member. In the flames of the fire, and in the depths of the mountain, a deal was struck that tied Hadaka’s soul to the Cult for eternity; and when it was done, the storm was over. The next morning Hadaka crawled out of the cave and blinked mole-like at the sun and the blue skies above. He had a bag of dried meat tied to his belt, a large flask of wine over his shoulder and a soul now so corrupt and rotten that no amount of penance could ever remove the stain of what it had done. This was not the same meek and mild farmer’s son who entered the cave many weeks ago, no, that person was long since dead. What emerged was a shadow of its former self. Hadaka would stalk the living from just outside the firelight, feeding on both young and old. He had come to crave the taste of human flesh. All other meat paled in comparison. It took Hadaka one week to make it to the Fort, but he did not go inside. He haunted the villages and hamlets instead. At first he took only the young. Then, as his courage grew, he

took the rest, regardless of their age.

So it went for the remaining weeks and months until winter was poised to come again. It was at this juncture that Hadaka half-hand decided to go south and see the isles; he never wanted to be cold, or hungry, ever again.

He is out there now, walking the earth, waiting for the Cult to summon him to their side, and he is always hungry, hungry for human flesh...

The room was quiet. Cicadas chirruped outside. The audience awoke slowly as if from a dream, there was a huge round of applause. They finished their drinks and left the inn, but not before pressing coins into my hand. I drew a seat closer to the fire and drank another draught to slake my thirst and ease my aching throat. All that talking can tire you out. A portly merchant invited me to his house that night to tell his children a story before bed.

“Of course,” I said, “I would be honoured to.” “We can have a late supper when we’re done,” he said, turning to go.

“That would be splendid,” I said, caressing my dagger with my half fingered hand as I slipped out the door behind him. I was looking forward to the meal that lay ahead...