Joining

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by FallLover

Summary

After Hyakkimaru deals the final blow to the Bakemonogani, Tahomaru goes to thank him, properly.

Set during Episode 11: The Story of Banmon: Part 1

Notes

This was originally published on Archive of Our Own.

See the end of the work for more notes

The sound of drifting monster parts in the fast-moving water was background noise as Tahomaru gazed at the taller boy, who couldn't be much older than himself. He was thinner, too, clearly a traveler not used to luxury. But through his thin clothes, he was muscular, and able, and he carried himself confidently.

He moved faster than I could even see, Tahomaru thought, with great jealousy. All the years Tahomaru had trained, and he knew he was not this boy's equal. *I could not defeat the monster as he did, even if we gave him the opening to fight the thing.*

Tahomaru was proud of his people and their efforts, even if all they had done was led the way for Hyakkimaru to finish the beast off. *After all, the creature is dead and my people are safe. What more should I want?*

His hands clenched in frustration. *Power to defeat whatever other evils may lurk. Power I do not have to draw from others.* He recalled his father's strength and determination. The way others flocked to follow him, looking to him as the land's savior. Tahomaru wished for that, too. He wished to be someone his people could rely on.

But even as he tried to be like his father, he found more and more walls in his way. His parents both kept their secrets. And his efforts to uncover them remained fruitless. Was he not meant to be the future lord of this land? But what use was an ignorant lord? He would only lead his people to folly. Just as here, when their inability to guard the sluice nearly led to their ruin. Tahomaru was still young, but that did not mean he could not begin to be wiser.

"Will you teach me to fight as you do?" Tahomaru asked, making Dororo – the little boy at Hyakkimaru's side – look at him in surprise, and Tahomaru's retainers behind him twitch in shock. Tahomaru only had eyes for the swordsman, who gaze at him with those strange not-eyes.

The ensuing silence seemed something of a rejection.

"I've never seen aniki teach anyone," Dororo finally said. "And I don't know who taught him. But you could always come with us if you wanted to see him fight…?" He seemed as clueless as Tahomaru as he glanced between both warriors.

"It would be an honor to observe such a fighter," Tahomaru said. It was not the same as being taught, precisely, but he'd observed plenty of warriors during his training.

"My lord, please reconsider," Mutsu began. "Your father would never approve of you going off with a… complete stranger such as this." There was clear distrust in Mutsu's voice.

"Hyakkimaru saved our lives," Tahomaru said. "After we throw him a feast in honor, I would be happy to be his student for a time. It will benefit our land in future." A good lord did not turn his back on those who aided him.

"A feast?!" Dororo said, excitedly. "That sounds amazing!" He bounced up and down on his small feet.

Tahomaru saw Mutsu grimace in frustration.

It is his right, Tahomaru thought as he led their savior and his companion back to the village, so they could check on the other survivors and see how the injured fared. “After I see to my people, we shall feast.”

The people were upset at the turn of events, which still resulted in more dead and injured, but grateful the demon was dead at last. They praised Tahomaru, and when he directed praise at Hyakkimaru, praised him as well. The group didn’t even make it home: the villagers insisted on treating them all for their hard work.

Hyakkimaru was given a seat of honor near Tahomaru, and although the swordsman still didn’t speak, Dororo spoke plenty for him. The little boy was brash, playful, and loud, and Tahomaru almost found him entertaining, were it not for the fact he kept glancing at Hyakkimaru, to try and understand him. But Hyakkimaru was quiet and contemplative, focusing on his food or occasionally staring in seeming surprise at comments sent his way. After a time, people largely let him be, noting that one of the heroes needed his peace. The others got drunk enough for him, happy to be alive.

Tahomaru also noted the drawn faces. Those who’d lost more in the battle. The quiet funeral before this had been solemn, and there would potentially be more if any of the injured died of their wounds.

Tahomaru swore to learn. To be better for his people. The plan hadn’t been a bad one, but it needed work. He would improve. He would make his people and his parents proud.

It was late when Tahomaru rode back home with his retainers and new companions, with starlight on their backs. But he insisted they be presented to his father for their deeds. No matter what Matsu said, Hyakkimaru had risked much for them, and succeeded.

His father granted them an audience, despite the hour, and Tahomaru showed his guests in, stating, “Chichiue, these are the ones who helped us slay a beast terrorizing our people.” He nodded to Hyakkimaru and Dororo, and Dororo pushed Hyakkimaru to bow… but the other boy did not. He only stared at Tahomaru’s father with a sharp expression.

Daigo stared back at Hyakkimaru, and his expression grew cloudy and then angry. “You… how are you alive?!” He sounded like Hyakkimaru had insulted him.

“What do you mean?” Dororo demanded. “He killed the crab monster for you!”

But Tahomaru had the impression his father did not mean the monster when he spoke.

“Half-born child…” Daigo said, angrily. “You should be dead!”

Hyakkimaru’s lips parted in surprise.

“Tahomaru!” Daigo cried, glaring at his son. “You bring our death into our very home?!”

“Chichiue, I…” But Tahomaru wasn’t sure what to say. “I don’t know what you mean. Hyakkimaru saved us!” More would be dead, were it not for Hyakkimaru.

Daigo only glared.

There was a clamor outside, and a side door flew open to reveal Nui no Kata, clad in her normal robes. Her hair was a bit disheveled, and she looked somewhat wild, but she, who barely ever gave Tahomaru a glance, looked at Hyakkimaru with eyes of wonder.

“Oku,” Daigo cried, “begone! You are not needed here!”

“My *son* is here,” Nui no Kata cried back, moving closer to Hyakkimaru, with something like desperate joy and sorrow covering her face. “*Our* son. Abandoned to pay for the luxury we enjoy. Oh, my child, I thought I felt something on the wind… But it *is* you, isn’t it?” She clutched her headless statue of the god she so fiercely worshipped. “I *know* it is you…”

“Hahaue…” Tahomaru began, not knowing what to say. He looked at Hyakkimaru, and seeing him and Nui no Kata together… Yes, he could see a resemblance. *Child? My… brother? Abandoned?* “What are you talking about?” Pieces of what he’d learned fell into place. 16 years ago. An abandoned baby. “Hyakkimaru is not… He can’t be…?!”

“Hyakkimaru?” Nui no Kata asked. She smiled sadly at the other boy. “Hyakkimaru. My son.”

Hyakkimaru did not go to her. He merely looked on neutrally.

“You are angry…” Nui no Kata sniffed, but quickly wiped her face. “You should never forgive us. Never.” There were more tears in her eyes.

“O…” Hyakkimaru began. “Oka…chan?” He sounded lost.

Nui no Kata’s tears grew stronger. “Yes. It’s me. I’m so sorry, though it can never be enough.”

Daigo stood up. “Archers!”

“Chichiue!” Tahomaru said as the guards raised their weapons. “He helped us!” There was no way someone who saved their people could be evil. *And if he is my brother?! Why would chichiue attack him?!*

Daigo ignored him.

Tahomaru saw the guards continue to point their weapons at Hyakkimaru.

Hyakkimaru didn’t move, while Dororo drew closer to him, clearly afraid.

Tahomaru knew the guards wouldn’t listen to him. Not while Daigo was there.

“No!” Nui no Kata cried out. “Run, Hyakkimaru!” She ran towards him, flinging herself before him, to get between him and the attackers.

Tahomaru knew then that only tragedy awaited if he did nothing, and he would not stand by and watch his life run from him again. No matter how hard the road was.

“Mutsu!” Tahomaru cried. “Hyogo!”

“My lord!” Mutsu and Hyogo cried, as one.

“Protect my mother and our guests!” Tahomaru ordered. “We’re leaving!”

“Tahomaru!” Daigo yelled, clearly still furious.

“Follow me!” Tahomaru said as he met Hyakkimaru’s gaze before moving towards the room’s exit.

The other boy – his brother – nodded and grabbed Nui no Kata’s hand and ran. Dororo fell in line with them.

They made it out of the hall, with Daigo shouting behind them. They’d spent so little time there that their horses were still being taken care of.

Tahomaru shouted at the hostlers to stand aside and prepare another horse for his mother. The servants were shocked but quickly obeyed.

Tahomaru looked back at the hall, and saw his father, with an unreadable expression at this distance. Tahomaru bowed his head, knowing he was abandoning everything. Perhaps doing everything wrong.

But he did not slay his guests. You did not slay heroes. That was the path of demons.

Tahomaru mounted his horse and gazed at Hyakkimaru, who had quickly mounted his own horse, which Mutsu and Hyogo had gotten for him from the villagers. Then Tahomaru looked at his mother, who looked worried. Then he looked back at Hyakkimaru. “I know not the full tale of what has happened here, but I will hear all of it. And then… we shall decide next steps. But you are under my protection, brother or no.”

Hyakkimaru gazed back at him for a while with that unreadable expression, then finally nodded.

“Mutsu! Hyogo!” Tahomaru called as he turned to his retainers. “You serve my father. You need not follow me if this goes against that loyalty.”

Mutsu snorted. “My lord, do not say such things. We are with you to the end.”

“The very end,” Hyogo continued. “Wherever that leads.” They both wore confident looks.

Tahomaru smiled, glad he was not alone. He looked at his mother and said, “Mother, we do not have your servants. Are you sure you wish to do this?”

“I have done my duty,” she replied. “I will stand by my children.” She looked between him and Hyakkimaru. “I have failed enough as it is.”

Tahomaru clutched his reins. “Very well.” He turned his horse and led their party away from the main house, and all the life he’d known.

End Notes

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