



DEVA

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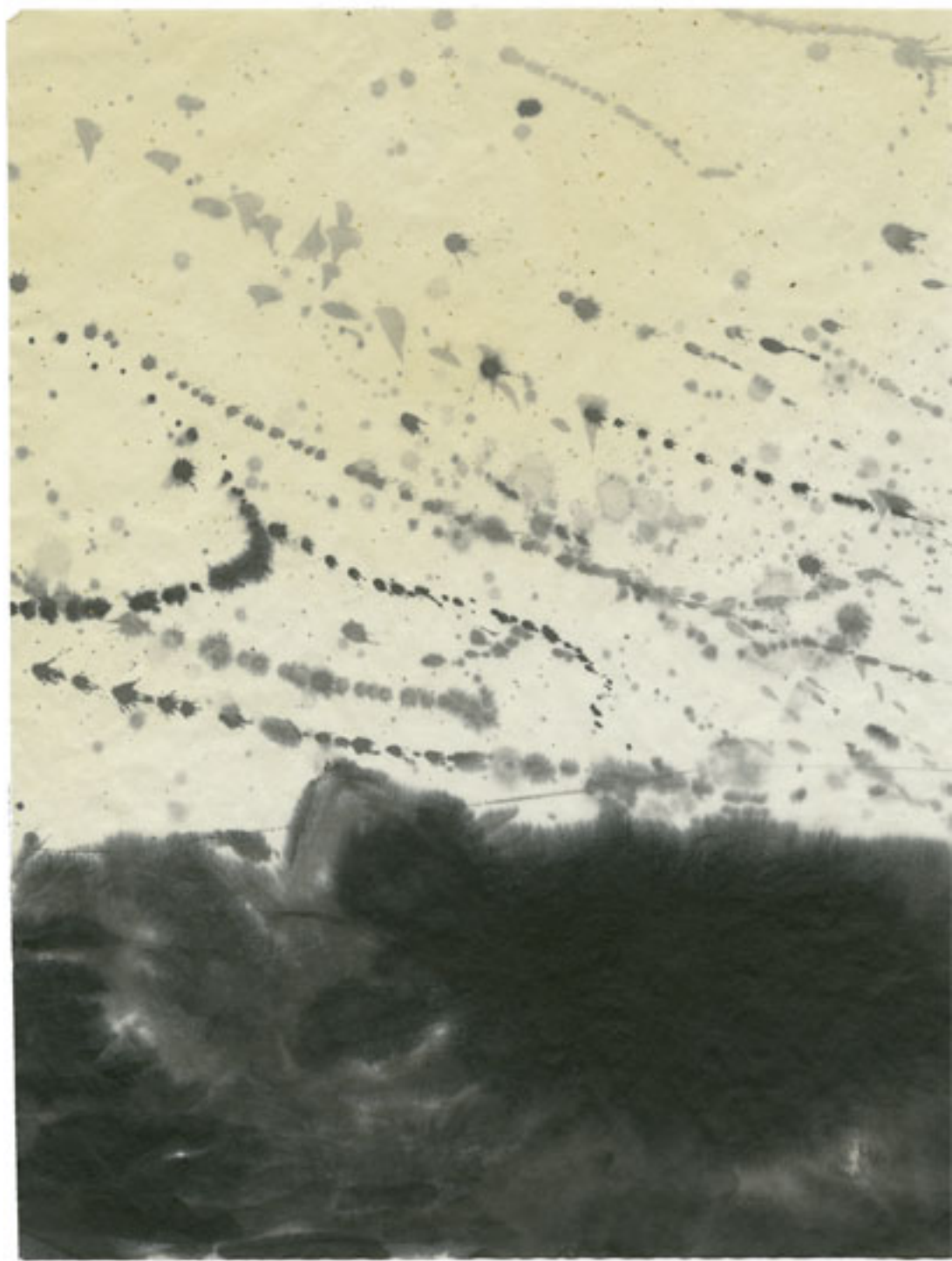




THE BATTLE BETWEEN light and darkness transformed more than the realm of the gods. What had been fast flames to them was slow corrosion to mortal life, but doom all the same—animals and humans fading, their forms pulled towards the chaos that was Ku.

This was where the hero of this tale began his life, in a world without a purpose.

One day, the time he came from would be known as the end of the Edo period, the last age of the samurai—and he was of those famed warriors, his black hair knotted in the back in the *chonmage*, marking his profession. This hero's name was Zan, but in this world he called himself Yoshitsugu Kamishiro.





He was a young ruffian fighting for the doomed shogunate in the Boshin War, the final stand of the Tokugawa dynasty. He fought well, but no matter how many times his sword was swung, his situation got worse and worse. As the days went on and the corpses piled up, Zan embraced a growing self-loathing.









He used to think the battle had meaning. He was glad for his skills and training with the sword. Even now he felt the reason for the fight was a good and noble one. But the battle itself had lost its nobility, and had become a bog of gore through which he now trudged with no thought but to escape and end it as quickly as possible. And so he swung again, and again, and to those he slaughtered he was not a man, not a warrior, but a devil that had taken their lives. He raised his sword and brought it down again, but it was no longer clear to him the reason.

*I feel as if I was born fighting, as if I came into this world to kill. I killed to protect the path I believed in. I murdered, unrestrained. And now I have not a path, but chaos.*

With these thoughts, he broke from the frontlines and fled to Mt. Koya and its eight holy peaks, hoping in its refuge to heal his battered body and soul, and mend his broken dream.

Zan wished to be closer to the gods, not knowing they had been effaced even from this place. The darkness had eroded the guardians of the shrines and temples—lion-dogs, dragons, creatures of magic. In their place, like squatters, were goblins, lurking about the untended brush that now lined the mountain path.

They saw the slender man in his torn garb advance toward them, his eyes fixed upon theirs. And yet his eyes seemed but bare embers, where theirs glowed at the sight of prey, as they licked their lips, tempted. They could sense his heart was as worn as his robes. Surely it would not take much more for that heart to fail him, and for their claws to pull him under into the dark.

But even as the creatures rose in menace, their knotted muscles froze, and then a force that surrounded the man toppled them. Perhaps indeed he would have fallen to the goblins, but it was not his own power that protected him. Zan was unaware that someone guarded his steps.