



Flowers of the North (extract pp. 19-40)

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PART ONE

THE WARRIOR AFLAME

A candle loses none of its light by sharing it with another.
Japanese proverb.

PROLOGUE

THE DECISION

Soon, I will take back my freedom. I will kill Noda and so avenge my husband, my father and all those to whom he brought suffering in taking them from their homes.

I can still see the red earth and the sand kicked up by the horses' hooves. The dust filling the air, as if it were the end of the world. I ran towards my house, towards the men entering our village. These invaders killing our people, our sick, our dying. I left the hospital for my father's, to warn him, but there was no need for me to even go inside: he lay lifeless before the door. He had tried to defend the entrance to the village.

I kept running, to the house opposite, my body weighed down by the new life it was cradling. Covered in the cold sweats of fear, hoping that Ryû had hidden himself, that my husband had not stood up to the bandits, that he had been a coward and fled. But my fears took shape before my eyes: there he was, facing up to one of them. Into his body was being thrust a katana, laughter echoing around him as our house was searched for possessions to steal.

I screamed. They saw me and taunted me as I fell to my knees at Ryû's side. I quickly pulled a cleansing solution and clean strips of cloth from my bag to dress his wounds. There was a different look in the men's eyes now. The largest of the savages pulled me back. I could no longer care for my beloved. They hit me until I was forced to follow them.

It was a long walk, all the way to the sea. There were a great many women captured by these men, exhausted, collapsing one by one. New ones joined along the way as the men destroyed defenceless villages. It was when they sent us sailing off to Nankaidô that I realised I would never see my country again.

I still remember that terrible moment when the lifeless child slid out from inside my body, one night on the ship. This child that had protected me from the violations to which the brutes did not hesitate to subject the other girls. It was a boy. I had lost the last piece of my Ryû. I cried and wished I would die. I cannot explain why I survived.

And yet, when the time came to ease suffering, I was indispensable to their little group. From that moment on, Noda, my executioner, took me everywhere, for I was useful to him. This war with the people of the North brought me even further from my country.

For a long time I have nurtured this desire for Noda to be tortured and to die. That face of a murderer fills my every thought. Now, I have come to a decision. If he returns from this war, it will be my job to kill him. Then I will leave, or I will die. Free.

木与木・美土里
Kiyoki Midori

Midori took a deep breathe and lay her pen down beside the paper with trembling hands. She felt cold. Her body, tense from the memories, ached as it always did when she revisited the past. In her room in the Fuki inn where she was staying to treat the injured soldiers, she made her preparations for her daily bath in the icy waters of a small mountain lake. This pain that she inflicted on herself every morning kept her spirit lively and alert. She would be ready when the moment came to kill Noda. She would not leave this place without first condemning him. The moment was coming, she could feel it.

CHAPTER 1

PAIN

The Emperor had strongly insisted that the noble who commanded the armies, Hiro Noda, was to be captured alive. This was a lot easier said than done, thought Tatsuké, as he watched the scene before him. This Noda was an imposing man with his unremitting blows, killing around him pitilessly, with obvious satisfaction.

Tatsuké did not like war. It gave him no pleasure to take down an adversary, not since he had realised that, of all the scars that conflict left, those of the soul were often more painful than those of the body. One must be young and thoughtless to possess the ardour needed to throw oneself at another human being. And it is simply cruel to find any pleasure in it, as Noda clearly did. Doubtless safe in the knowledge that he was sought alive, he saw no need to fear death.

This meant that Tatsuké, against this man, had no choice but to use magic. But even if his fan allowed him to throw fire from a distance, it would still be difficult to control the intensity of the flames. They tended not to spare their victims. This had to be a game of wits. That was why he had spread the horses' straw across the battlefield the night before, ignoring the protests from the Emperor's advisors. That dry grass there, on which Noda was treading at this very moment...

Tatsuké threw himself at Noda, sword in hand.

'Why don't you try fighting an equal, you coward!'

Without a moment of hesitation, the blond warrior's katana ended the life of a soldier blocking his path. Then the behemoth strode confidently towards the man who had just provoked him. He was even more imposing than Tatsuké had imagined. The leather armour covering his blue kimono creaked with the power of his muscles. His large frame seemed to fill the sky, and silence settled about the two men as they faced each other.

'And who are you to declare yourself worthy of me, ginger puss?'

Tatsuké's replied in a voice that bore no tremble, and even betrayed a touch of amusement.

'Tatsuké Kagi'.

The monstrous warrior realised his error. He had found himself face to face with the only person in the army capable of fighting him with magic. His strategy to counter this was swift and simple: he lifted his katana and struck to kill. Tatsuké had just enough time to throw himself aside to avoid the blow. Another blow struck, then another. Hiro Noda obviously did not wish to give him the chance to use his power.

While Tatsuké preferred to avoid combat, he knew the world was tough and that he had no choice but to be quick and agile if he were to survive. He also knew that he could not count on winning with magic alone. There had been others in his family before him with the power of fire, but controlling such a gift was not easy. Faced with the speed and strength of Hiro Noda, Tatsuké gave silent thanks to his father, who had insisted he learn to defend himself like a man, without his fire power.

The longer this face-off continued, the greater the risk of death. It was time to bring this war to an end. Tatsuké slipped behind the blond man and drew his tessen from behind his back. '*Netsu hakka*', he murmured, and the fan burst into flames. With such a torch, Tatsuké quickly had the blue kimono ablaze. While Hiro Noda beat at the fabric, trying to extinguish them, Tatsuké spread the fire into the grass at their feet. Surrounded by flames and smoke, it was not long before the blond fighter could barely breathe, which meant it was a lot easier to capture him. As Noda dropped his katana to try to smother the flames, the watching soldiers rushed forwards to take him. Tatsuké watched as they bound him tightly then led him off to the Emperor.

Tatsuké looked up, prepared to face his next enemy, but from just a glance at the battlefield he could see the war was over. Hiro Noda and his troops had fought with the energy brought by despair, but the battle had taken place too close to the end of winter for it to succeed. The South had forgotten to take Hokkaidô's northern climate into consideration. The spring storms could be intense, and the thick, heavy snow had left these soldiers without a chance, acclimatised as they were to milder temperatures. There had been more casualties from chilblains, illness and the strain of walking through snow than there had been in battle.

The carnage was masked by the setting sun as it bathed the battlefield in red light. The white flag of the Southern army's emissary could be seen making its way towards the hill where the Emperor and the Shogun were waiting.

Yet Tatsuké could not find it in him to celebrate. The scattered fires between the bodies mingled with the amber light of the sky. Emishi, the young Emperor of Hokkaidô, would continue to reign in his land, but at the cost of so many lives.

With a bitter smile, Tatsuké reflected on how Hokkaidô had been saved by a bizarre alliance between the Northern cold and the fire of his clan. The Emperor had made sure to remind Tatsuké that the

freedom he enjoyed in the mountains was subject to certain conditions, including that of acting as ally to the imperial armies in case of invasion. His family had made this oath a long time ago so that, in exchange, the mountains and the small town of Fuki would remain outside Hokkaidô territory. The mountain chain thus served as a neutral zone between the two sovereigns of the island, and the Kagi family was allowed to manage its strange powers in its own way.

Tatsuké Kagi ran his hand over the giant flame-throwing tessen, then returned it to his back with the kind of elegance only achieved through practice. His amber hair, as bright as the fan's flames, shone with a supernatural glow as he turned back to his waiting horse.

These momentary alliances with the Emperor served to keep the legend of the Kagi family alive. Over the past few generations, such powers had begun to grow rare, and the people hardly believed in them anymore. But by fighting at the army's side, Tatsuké showed the world that his family still knew how to control fire with a rare intensity. A single member of his clan on the battlefield would wreak devastation.

It was a show of strength that kept the nobles, warriors and rulers, who thought at times of annexing this frontier, away from the mountains. Few people knew that no other Kugi had the power of fire. Now that the Southern army had been destroyed, Tatsuké judged that there was nothing stopping him from returning home. Without asking permission, simply directing a wave to the Shogun from afar, Tatsuké mounted his horse, turned his back on the dead, and disappeared with the last ray of light.

The spring light glistened on the snow-capped mountain tops. Kurodaké's peak towered over the landscape. At its feet, the river from the north had carved a deep groove.

Tatsuké woke early, his head foggy and his mind haunted by images from the war. He was home again, but his sleep remained troubled by the recent events. His sweat on his clothes chilled him, and he trembled as he heard the screams of the enemy soldiers as they were consumed by flames. He left the wooden hut, trying to escape the nightmares. The mountain was so calm that a single look across his territory put his mind at rest.

For the first time he could smell spring in the air, that mixture of melting snow, wet earth and sweet perfumes. He took a deep breath to chase away the troubled emotions he had brought back from the battlefield. The war was over, life was taking over again, and soon the summer would chase away the grey. These mountains were his domain, the only place that did not belong to one of the two empires. Supported by the wafts of warmth carried by the wind, he hoped the peace could last.

He glanced over at the small village of Fuki, nestled by the river right at the point where it widened. The only traversable pass between Hokkaidô and Nankaidô, it was popular point of call for travellers passing through. The Nankaidô's army was slowly making its way home, back through the mountains after their final confrontation in the territory of the North. But even if the sun had spread to the mountains, reaching all the way to the warriors' camp, perched high up on the slopes of Mount Kurodaké, Fuki was still plunged in darkness.

Tatsuké watched as Kôji came out of his tent. Still rubbing his eyes, his best friend and right-hand man came to join him. This man, with hair so black it looked almost blue, had taken over as leader of the group in Tatsuké's absence. Despite his leader having returned and taken back command of the camp

a full two weeks ago, Kôji still rose early out of habit. Moreover, he was certainly worried about his friend, even if he did not show it.

‘Already up and ready for work, Taku?’

Hearing Kôji use his childhood nickname, Tatsuké smiled. He had never managed to convince Kôji to call him anything else.

‘I couldn’t sleep. It’s all this spring, I guess.’

‘You can certainly feel it in the air today...’

Kôji stretched, making the most of the morning sun to warm up his muscles.

‘The return of the soldiers to Nankaidô seems to be going well’, Kôji observed.

‘Yes. But I can’t wait until they’re all back in their homes.’

The mass of soldiers coming through was creating headaches for the sixty warriors who guarded the pass, but there had been no serious incidents as of yet.

‘They still need to exchange prisoners.’

Kôji sounded worried.

‘Nankaidô’s lot has already arrived. We should be receiving the group from Hokkaidô any time now. The exchange will take place in public, in the town’s main square. That should ensure everything runs smoothly.’

It would be a delicate affair, with the recent confrontations still fresh in everyone’s memories.

‘I thought I might take a turn on guard this morning. It would give me a chance to enjoy the sun before sitting down with Sôjiro to prepare for the exchange.’

‘Oh... Sure, if you want.’

Suddenly, Kôji smiled, and his eyes sparkled with mischief.

‘What about on the southern path? The view from there is magnificent at this time of the morning.’

Tatsuké could tell this sentence carried two meanings, but he could not work out what his friend meant. He set off, dressed in the white tunic and long black trousers of his hakama. It was hot enough for him to leave his orange kimono behind. Branded with his family crest, a red star with seven points, he would usually have worn it over his hakama. With his tessen tied to his back, the fire warrior wandered peacefully through the woods. He reached the place where they usually posted a man to watch for movements from the south. There, he replaced Goro, one of the young warriors from the camp. He gave Tatsuké a strange look, as if he had wanted to stay longer, before leaving without a word, having no choice but to let his leader take over.

The view really was magnificent. Tatsuké could see all along the path that ran beside the river then down between the mountains, before reaching the plains of Nankaidô on the other side. Tatsuké knew

that soon the melting mountain snow would add to the volume of the river and that this extra water would transform the landscape completely: the plains would be as blue as the sky, flooded by the rising water level. This was why the first villages of Nankaidô were so far away: it was practically impossible to cross this region in spring.

Suddenly, Tatsuké heard footsteps, coming from Fuki. Tatsuké crouched down to observe the early morning wanderer. Expecting to catch a fleeing warrior or thief, he was surprised to see a young woman appear, some twenty years in age, with very long auburn hair flickering between a thousand shades of warm gold beneath the rays of sunlight. She was rather small, and her frayed kimono was unlike any worn in Tatsuké's country. The shape of her eyes, too, suggested a foreigner.

She took a barely discernible path to the spring of a small stream. Tatsuké concealed himself further, for she was headed in his direction. But he quickly realised she had no suspicion of his presence when she stopped and started to undo her obi.

His eyes widened. A magnificent view, indeed! But who was this stranger? A prostitute from a brothel? Completely nude, now, she climbed into the small pool. A thought came to counter his first hypothesis: if this woman worked in a brothel, she would not be up so early, and her visits would not be so regular. He knew that prostitutes received clients into the early hours of the morning, but this woman seemed to be a regular of these baths, as Kôji's remark and Goro's look of disappointment would suggest.

Tatsuké kept his eyes fixed on the swimming silhouette. He told himself, with little conviction, that he should look away to respect her privacy. But he did no such thing. From where he was, he could clearly make out the curves of her body beneath the water, the long loose hair floating across her back, the outline of her bottom as she brought her arms back alongside her body. He felt a heat rush through him, and the shiver of a thrill.

She dived under, then resurfaced right beside the pebbles of the shore. She stood up and pulled her wet hair up into a high bun. Tatsuké was struck, admiring, by the shocking whiteness of her skin and the fragility she betrayed. A relative vulnerability, to be fair, seeing as she had just swum in a freezing cold lake without hesitation. He did not know who she was, but he felt a strong desire to find out more. He hurried to crouch down again as she turned in his direction. He waited, anxious that he may have been seen, but he heard no footsteps approaching. He breathed a sigh of relief: she had not caught him spying. He felt like a guilty schoolboy. When she began walking again, he followed her.

She did not turn back towards the village, but headed a little further on down a path leading towards Nankaidô. Then she took a path to the east. Tatsuké knew where it led and he took another route to arrive there before her. Soon the small Shinto temple at the end of the path appeared between the trees, and Tatsuké hid himself amongst the bushes.

The woman arrived, but she had not come to pray as he expected. He watched her take out the long black stick that had held up her hair, letting the dark strands fall across her shoulders. She made her way to a massive pine tree and struck it with her improvised weapon. There was a dull thud. Tatsuké could not see very well, so he gently pushed a branch out of the way to be certain of what he was observing. To his great surprise, he realised she was savagely attacking an imaginary enemy.

The woman's face was contorted with rage. Her eyes glittered and her mouth trembled. He saw her strike the pine once again. Her technique was somewhat lacking, not to mention that the tree hardly deserved such treatment. But what was this little creature trying to do?

None of the other men must have followed her this far and discovered this strange behaviour or he would have been informed. Tatsuké was sufficiently intrigued to carve her features into his memory. He had to find out more about her.

CHAPTER 2

EMPATHY

The mysterious stranger did not return the next morning, and Tatsuké quickly forgot about her when he was warned that the group from Hokkaidô was approaching. The exchange of prisoners was about to take place.

The population of Fuki, curious and carefree, chatted loudly amongst themselves. The war between the North and the South had permitted these residents to do good business thanks to their refusal to take sides. But it was time for the battles to end, and everyone knew that the economy would be running flat out all through the coming summer. Indeed, the townspeople were already imagining all the merchandise needed for reconstruction that would be passing through, as well as the travellers, being as it was the natural stopover between the two countries. Wars strew death, but, for some, they are also a quick way to get rich.

The crowd pushed and shoved trying to get a glimpse of the nobles captured during the conflict and now given the opportunity to return to their respective countries. It was the most important exchange of the war: Hokkaidô was trading a single prisoner for several of its soldiers. A blond man was pulled down from a cart. He walked forward, framed by the Hokkaidô guards. He was as immense as a lion. His two katanas were presented to him, and he tucked them away at his side, one on top of the other. 'Who could have captured such a fighter?', wondered someone out loud.

Tatsuké smiled. He had heard the question asked behind him. Hiro Noda, a close friend of Nankaidô's Emperor, was a noble famed and feared for his unpredictable acts. He was now free to return to his occupations. The giant headed over towards his men. He was humiliated, and it was written all over his face.

Uncertain, Tatsuké squinted. Was that woman in Noda's welcoming committee the same as the one from the pool? He kept his eyes fixed on the dark-haired woman following Noda as the group entered the inn. Despite of her lowered head and submissive attitude, he knew she was carrying a weapon. Against whom was she planning to use it?

The exchange was complete. It had taken but a few minutes, and already the Hokkaidô troop was heading back north. As Kôji approached to ask how it had gone, shouts rang out from inside the inn. The door was flung open and a body thrown outside. Tatsuké saw the dark-haired woman fall to the ground beside him, contorted with pain.

Noda strode towards her.

'Midori. I thank you for your welcome.'

He gave her a vicious kick, sending Midori into a fit of coughing.

'The war is over, sweetheart. We lost. I take no pride in it. And now we are no longer fighting, you are no use to me. The soldiers you cared for will survive without your help. I have seen enough of you!'

Noda's eyes glistened with the lust to kill, and suddenly everything moved very quickly. Noda drew his katana and Tatsuké slipped beneath the blade as it came down upon the woman. He did not even have time to fully open out his tessen. The katana sliced his hand, but the half-opened fan managed to limit the damage. Tatsuké rose, calling upon his power.

'Netsu hakka!'

Flames burst out along the folds of the open tessen.

Holding the flaming fan before him, Tatsuké stood up and created a barrier with his body between Noda and the woman. His voice was firm when he spoke.

'You cannot take your vengeance here, Hiro Noda. This town is neutral. If you do not respect the peace in this place, you will be condemned. No one will take mercy on you in Fuki.'

The blond man recognised Tatsuké, and his eyes glittered with hate. Then his face twisted into a sarcastic smile.

'Let's leave it there for now, then. You have not long to live anyway, heir of the flames. Thanks to the very efforts of she you just saved, you will soon be dead. It fills me with joy to know you will suffer such a pathetic end, Kagi.'

He turned away and went back inside the inn to find his men. Tatsuké stumbled, suddenly weak, and the fire of his fan went out. Kôji approached, looking worried.

'Are you okay?'

The woman struggled upright and rushed towards the buildings. Kôji darted forwards and grabbed her roughly by the collar of her kimono.

'Hey! You! Where do you think you're going?'

She gave a small cough and spat blood onto the ground before replying.

'To save your friend. Let me get my bag.'

She pointed at a dark object lying between two water barrels.

'What are you saying?'

'Noda's katana... It was poisoned.'

Kôji turned to Tatsuké, who was struggling to stay upright. Sweat ran down his forehead, and his skin had turned grey. The woman collected a large black bag and headed over to Tatsuké. She glanced anxiously at the inn. *'Do you have a quiet place I can make a fire?'*, she asked Kôji.

'Follow me.'

Kôji led Midori to the weapon master's storehouse. The place was deserted and slightly set back from the village. Tatsuké's men had followed their leader, who was leaning heavily on Kôji's shoulder. They

lay him down on the ground while the woman got the fire going and placed a pot full of water over the flames.

She knelt down beside the Tatsuké and opened her bag.

‘How do you know the katana was poisoned?’ Kôji asked.

Her response came quickly, and reassured no one.

‘Because I’m the one who prepared the poison.’

Kôji shared a look with Sôjiro, but Tatsuké held his hand out to him and murmured, ‘Let her me. She must know the antidote.’

Midori could not help but glance at him in surprise: a leader respected by his men yet clearly far too naïve. Nonetheless, he was right, she was going to save him. Noda thought that the poison of his katana killed its victims, but she knew it was not fatal for a man in good health. She had taken care to reduce its concentration. This man would suffer from a strong fever, but she would make sure he got through it. He represented her best chance for survival and revenge.

She cursed Noda’s vigilance. A single cut from her weapon, which she had coated in a far more potent solution, and Noda would not have been long for this world. But she had not managed to touch him... She gritted her teeth and plunged a clean rag into the boiling water. She cleaned the wound, then applied a powder to reduce the swelling. She opened a bottle and approached her patient with the contents.

‘What’s that?’ Kôji asked warily.

She did not reply, attending only to those eyes of the wounded that did not leave her own. In their pupils there shone something gentle, a feeling that bothered her, as if he were telling her he understood. He drank the potion without looking away, as if wanting to prove his trust. She gently wiped his forehead, brushing aside those red hairs that captured fire’s every shade. He closed his eyes. She could breathe better now, liberated from his hypnotising gaze. But who was he? And what did he know?