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opening extract from

The Harsh Cry of the Heron

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One

'Come quickly! Father and Mother are fighting!' Otori Takeo heard his daughter's voice clearly as she called to her sisters from within the residence at Inuyama castle, in the same way he heard all the mingled sounds of the castle and the town beyond. Yet he ignored them, as he ignored the song of the boards of the nightingale floor beneath his feet, concentrating only on his opponent: his wife, Kaede.

They were fighting with wooden poles: he was taller, but she was naturally left-handed and hence as strong with either hand, whereas his right hand had been crippled by a knife cut many years ago and he had had to learn to use his left; nor was this the only injury to slow him.

It was the last day of the year, bitterly cold, the sky pale grey, the winter sun feeble. Often in winter they practised this way: it warmed the body and kept the joints flexible, and Kaede liked her daughters to see how a woman might fight like a man.

The girls came running: with the new year the eldest, Shigeko, would turn fifteen, the two younger ones thirteen. The boards sang under Shigeko's tread, but the twins stepped lightly in the way of the Tribe. They had run across the nightingale floor since they were infants,

and had learned almost unconsciously how to keep it silent.

Kaede's head was covered with a red silk scarf wound around her face, so Takeo could only see her eyes. They were filled with the energy of the fight, and her movements were swift and strong. It was hard to believe she was the mother of three children: she still moved with the strength and freedom of a girl. Her attack made him all too aware of his age and his physical weaknesses. The jar of Kaede's blow on his pole set his hand aching.

'I concede,' he said.

'Mother won!' the girls crowed.

Shigeko ran to her mother with a towel. 'For the victor,' she said, bowing and offering the towel in both hands.

'We must be thankful we are at peace,' Kaede said, smiling and wiping her face. 'Your father has learned the skills of diplomacy and no longer needs to fight for his life!'

'At least I am warm now!' Takeo said, beckoning to one of the guards, who had been watching from the garden, to take the poles.

'Let us fight you, Father!' Miki, the younger of the twins, pleaded. She went to the edge of the veranda and held her hands out to the man. He was careful not to look at her or touch her as he handed over the pole.

Takeo noticed his reluctance. Even grown men, hardened soldiers, were afraid of the twins—even, he thought with sorrow, their own mother.

'Let me see what Shigeko has learned,' he said. 'You may each have one bout with her.'

For several years his oldest daughter had spent the

greater part of the year at Terayama, where under the supervision of the old abbot, Matsuda Shingen, who had been Takeo's teacher, she studied the Way of the Houou. She had arrived at Inuyama the day before, to celebrate the New Year with her family, and her own coming of age. Takeo watched her now as she took the pole he had used and made sure Miki had the lighter one. Physically she was very like her mother, with the same slenderness and apparent fragility, but she had a character all her own, practical, good-humoured and steadfast. The Way of the Houou was rigorous in its discipline, and her teachers made no allowances for her age or sex, yet she accepted the teaching and training, the long days of silence and solitude, with wholehearted eagerness. She had gone to Terayama by her own choice, for the Way of the Houou was a way of peace, and from childhood she had shared in her father's vision of a peaceful land where violence was never allowed to spread.

Her method of fighting was quite different from the way he had been taught, and he loved to watch her, appreciating how the traditional moves of attack had been turned into self-defence, with the aim of disarming the opponent without hurting him.

'No cheating,' Shigeru said to Miki, for the twins had all their father's Tribe skills—even more, he suspected. Now they were turning thirteen these skills were developing rapidly, and though they were forbidden to use them in everyday life sometimes the temptation to tease their teachers and outwit their servants became too great.

'Why can't I show Father what I have learned?' Miki said, for she had also recently returned from training—in the Tribe village with the Muto family. Her sister Maya

would return there after the celebrations. It was rare these days for the whole family to be together: the children's different education, the parents' need to give equal attention to all of the Three Countries meant constant travel and frequent separations. The demands of government were increasing: negotiations with the foreigners; exploration and trade; the maintenance and development of weaponry; the supervision of local districts who organised their own administration; agricultural experiments; the import of foreign craftsmen and new technologies; the tribunals that heard complaints and grievances. Takeo and Kaede shared these burdens equally, she dealing mainly with the West, he with the Middle Country and both of them jointly with the East, where Kaede's sister Ai and her husband, Sonoda Mitsuru, held the former Tohan domain.

Miki was half a head shorter than her sister, but very strong and quick; Shigeko seemed hardly to move at all in comparison, yet the younger girl could not get past her guard, and within moments Miki had lost her pole: it seemed to fly from her fingers, and as it soared upwards Shigeko caught it effortlessly.

'You cheated!' Miki gasped.

'Lord Gemba taught me how to do that,' Shigeko said proudly.

The other twin, Maya, tried next with the same effect.

Shigeko said, her cheeks flushed, 'Father, let me fight you!'

'Very well,' he agreed, for he was impressed by what she had learned and curious to see how it would stand up against the strength of a trained warrior.

He attacked her quickly, with no holding back, and

the first bout took her by surprise. His pole touched her chest; he restrained the thrust so it would not hurt her.

'A sword would have killed you,' he said.

'Again,' she replied calmly, and this time she was ready for him; she moved with effortless speed, evaded two blows and came at his right side where the hand was weaker, gave a little, enough to unsettle his balance, and then twisted her whole body. His pole slipped to the ground.

He heard the twins, and the guards, gasp.

'Well done,' he said.

'You weren't really trying,' Shigeko said, disappointed.

'Indeed I was trying. Just as much as the first time. Of course, I was already tired out by your mother, as well as being old and unfit!'

'No,' Maya cried. 'Shigeko won!'

'But it is like cheating,' Miki said seriously. 'How do you do it?'

Shigeko smiled, shaking her head. 'It's something you do with thought, and spirit and hand, all together. It took me months to get it. I can't just show you.'

'You did very well,' Kaede said. 'I am proud of you.' Her voice was full of love and admiration, as it usually was for her oldest daughter.

The twins glanced at each other.

They are jealous, Takeo thought. *They know she does not have the same strength of feeling for them.* And he felt the familiar rush of protectiveness towards his younger daughters. He seemed always to be trying to keep them from harm—ever since the hour of their birth, when Chiyo had wanted to take the second one, Miki, away

and let her die. This was the usual practice with twins in those days, and probably still was in most of the country, for the birth of twins was considered unnatural for human beings, making them seem more like an animal, a cat or a dog.

'It seems cruel to you, Lord Takeo,' Chiyo had warned him. 'But it is better to act now than to bear the disgrace and ill-fortune that, as the father of twins, people will believe you to be subject to.'

'How will people ever give up their superstitions and cruelty unless we show them?' he replied with anger, for in the way of those born into the Hidden he valued the life of a child above all else, and he could not believe that sparing a child's life would be the cause of disapproval or bad luck.

He had been surprised subsequently by the strength of the superstition. Kaede herself was not untouched by it, and her attitude to her younger daughters reflected her uneasy ambivalence. She preferred them to live apart, and most of the year they did, one or the other of them usually with the Tribe; and she had not wanted them both to be present at their older sister's coming of age, fearing that their appearance would bring bad luck to Shigeko. But Shigeko, who was as protective of the twins as her father, had insisted that they both be there. Takeo was glad of it, never happier than when the whole family was together, close to him. He gazed on them all with fondness, and realised the feeling was being taken over by something more passionate: the desire to lie down with his wife and feel her skin against his. The fight with poles had awakened memories of when he had first fallen in love with her, the first time they had sparred against each

other in Tsuwano when he was seventeen and she fifteen. It was in Inuyama, almost in this very spot, that they had first lain together, driven by a passion born of desperation and grief. The former residence, Iida Sadamu's castle, the first nightingale floor had burned when Inuyama fell, but Arai Daiichi had rebuilt it in a similar fashion, and now it was one of the famous Four Cities of the Three Countries.

'The girls should rest before tonight,' he said, for there would be lengthy ceremonies at the shrines at midnight, followed by the New Year Feast. They would not go to bed until the Hour of the Tiger. 'I will also lie down for a while.'

'I will have braziers sent to the room,' Kaede said, 'and join you in a little while.'

The light had faded by the time she came to him, and the early winter dusk had set in. Despite the braziers, glowing with charcoal, her breath was a cloud of white in the freezing air. She had bathed, and the fragrance of rice bran and aloes from the water clung to her skin. Beneath the quilted winter robe her flesh was warm. He undid her sash and slipped his hands inside the garment, drawing her close to him. Then he loosened the scarf that covered her head and pulled it off, running his hand over the short silky pelt.

'Don't,' she said. 'It is so ugly.' He knew that she had never got over the loss of her beautiful long hair, or the scars on the white nape of her neck, that marred the beauty that had once been the subject of legends and superstition; but he did not see the disfigurement, only the increased vulnerability which in his eyes made her more lovely.

'I like it. It is like an actor's. It makes you look like both man and woman, both adult and child.'

'Then you must bare your scars to me too.' She drew off the silk glove that he habitually wore on his right hand, and brought the stumps of the fingers to her lips. 'I hurt you earlier?'

'Not really. Just the residual pain—any blow jars the joints and sets them aching.' He added in a low voice, 'I am aching now, but for another reason.'

'That ache I can heal,' she whispered, pulling him to her, opening up to him, taking him inside her, meeting his urgency with her own and then melting with tenderness, loving the familiarity of his skin, his hair, his smell, and the strangeness that each separate act of love brought newly with it.

'You always heal me,' he said afterwards. 'You make me whole.'

She lay in his arms, her head on his shoulder. She let her gaze drift around the room. Lamps shone from iron holders, but beyond the shutters the sky was dark.

'Perhaps we have made a son,' she said, unable to hide the longing in her voice.

'I hope we have not!' Takeo exclaimed. 'Twice my children have nearly cost you your life. We have no need of a son,' he went on more lightly. 'We have three daughters.'

'I once said the same to my father,' Kaede confessed. 'I believed I should be the equal of any boy.'

'Shigeko certainly is,' Takeo said. 'She will inherit the Three Countries, and her children after her.'

'Her children! She seems still a child herself, yet she is

nearly old enough to be betrothed. Who will we ever find for her to marry?'

'There is no hurry. She is a prize, a jewel almost beyond price. We will not give her away cheaply.'

Kaede returned to her earlier subject as though it gnawed at her. 'I long to give you a son.'

'Despite your own inheritance and Lady Maruyama's example! You still speak like the daughter of a warrior family.'

The dark, the quietness around them led her to voice her concerns further. 'Sometimes I think that the twin girls closed my womb. I think that if they had not been born, sons would have come to me.'

'You listen to superstitious old women too much!'

'You are probably right. But what will happen to our younger daughters? They can hardly inherit, should anything befall Shigeko, Heaven forbid it. And whom will they marry? No nobleman's or warrior's family will risk accepting a twin, especially one tainted—forgive me—with the blood of the Tribe and those skills so close to sorcery.'

Takeo could not deny that the same thought often troubled him, but he tried to put it from him. The girls were still so young: who knew what fate had in store for them?

After a moment Kaede said quietly, 'But maybe we are already too old. Everyone wonders why you do not take a second wife, or a concubine, to have more children with.'

'I want only one wife,' he said seriously. 'Whatever emotions I have pretended, whatever roles I have assumed, my love for you is unassumed and true—I will

never lie with anyone but you. I have told you, I made a vow to Kannon in Ohama. I have not broken it in sixteen years. I am not going to break it now.'

'I think I would die of jealousy,' Kaede admitted. 'But my feelings are unimportant compared to the needs of the country.'

'I believe for us to be united in love is the foundation of our good government. I will never do anything to undermine that,' he replied. He pulled her close to him again, running his hands gently over her scarred neck, feeling the hardened ribs of tissue left by the flames. 'As long as we are united, our country will remain peaceful and strong.'

Kaede spoke half-sleepily. 'Do you remember when we parted at Terayama? You gazed into my eyes and I fell asleep. I have never told you this before. I dreamed of the White Goddess: she spoke to me. *Be patient,* she said: *he will come for you.* And again at the Sacred Caves I heard her voice saying the same words. It was the only thing that sustained me during my captivity at Lord Fujiwara's. I learned patience there. I had to learn how to wait, how to do nothing, so he had no excuse to take my life. And afterwards, when he was dead, the only place I could think of to go was back to the caves, back to the goddess. If you had not come, I would have stayed there in her service for the rest of my life. And you came: I saw you, so thin, the poison still in you, your beautiful hand ruined. I will never forget that moment: your hand on my neck, the snow falling, the harsh cry of the heron . . .'

'I don't deserve your love,' Takeo whispered. 'It is the greatest blessing of my life, and I cannot live without you.

You know, my life has also been guided by a prophecy . . .'

'You told me. And we have seen it all fulfilled: the Five Battles, Earth's intervention—'

I will tell her the rest now, Takeo thought. *I will tell her why I do not want sons, for the blind seer told me only my son could bring death to me. I will tell her about Yuki, and the child she had, my son, now sixteen years old.*

But he could not bring himself to cause his wife pain. What was the purpose of raking over the past? The Five Battles had entered into the mythology of the Otori, though he was aware that he himself had chosen how to count those battles: they could have been six, or four, or three. Words could be altered and manipulated to mean almost anything. If a prophecy was believed, it often came true. He would not utter the words, in case by so doing he breathed life into them.

He saw that Kaede was nearly asleep. It was warm under the quilts, though the air on his face was freezing. In a little while he must arise, bathe, dress in formal clothes and prepare himself for the ceremonies that would welcome the New Year. It would be a long night. His limbs began to relax, and he too slept.

Two

All three of Lord Otori's daughters loved the approach to the temple at Inuyama, for it was lined with statues of white dogs, interspersed with stone lanterns where on the nights of the great festivals hundreds of lamps burned, sending flickering lights over the dogs and making them seem alive. The air was cold enough to numb their faces, fingers and toes, and was filled with smoke and the smell of incense and fresh cut pine.

Worshippers making the first holy visit of the New Year thronged on the steep steps that led upwards to the temple, and from above the great bell was tolling, sending shivers down Shigeko's spine. Her mother was a few paces in front of her, walking next to Muto Shizuka, her favourite companion. Shizuka's husband, Dr Ishida, was away on one of his trips to the mainland. He was not expected back until spring. Shigeko was glad Shizuka would spend the winter with them, for she was one of the few people the twins respected and heeded; and, Shigeko thought, she in her turn genuinely cared for them and understood them.

The twins walked with Shigeko, one on each side; every now and then someone in the crowd around them would stare at them before moving away out of reach, lest

they jostle against them; but mostly, in the half-light, they went unnoticed.

She knew guards accompanied them both in front and behind, and that Shizuka's son, Taku, was in attendance on her father as he performed the ceremonies at the main temple. She was not in the least afraid; she knew Shizuka and her mother were armed with short swords, and she herself had hidden within her robe a very useful stick that Lord Miyoshi Gemba, one of her teachers at Terayama, had shown her how to use to disable a man without killing him. She half-hoped she would have the chance to try it out, but it did not seem likely that they would be attacked in the heart of Inuyama.

Yet there was something about the night and the darkness that put her on her guard: hadn't her teachers told her frequently that a warrior must always be prepared, so that death, whether one's opponent's or one's own, could be avoided through anticipation?

They came to the main hall of the temple, where she could see her father's figure, dwarfed by the high roof and the huge statues of the lords of heaven, the guardians of the next world. It was hard to believe the formal person seated so gravely before the altar was the same man she had fought that afternoon on the nightingale floor. She felt a wave of love and reverence for him.

After making their offerings and prayers before the Enlightened One, the women went away to the left and climbed a little higher up the mountain to the temple of Kannon the all-merciful. Here the guards remained outside the gate, for only women were allowed inside the courtyard.

But as Shigeko knelt on the wooden step before the

gleaming statue, Miki touched her older sister on the sleeve. 'Shigeko,' she whispered. 'What's that man doing in here?'

'Where is *here*?'

Miki pointed to the end of the veranda, where a young woman was walking towards them, apparently carrying some gift: she knelt before Kaede and held out the tray.

'Don't touch it!' Shigeko called. 'Miki, how many men?'

'Two,' Miki cried. 'And they have knives!'

In that moment Shigeko saw them. They came out of the air, leaping towards them. She screamed another warning and drew out the stick.

'They are going to kill Mother!' Miki shrieked.

But Kaede was already alerted by Shigeko's first cry. Her sword was in her hand. The girl threw the tray in her face as she pulled out her own weapon, but Shizuka, also armed, deflected the first thrust, sent the weapon flying through the air and turned to face the men. Kaede seized the woman and threw her to the ground, pinioning her.

'Maya, inside the mouth,' Shizuka called. 'Don't let her take poison.'

The woman thrashed and kicked, but Maya and Kaede forced her mouth open and Maya slipped her fingers inside, locating the poison pellet and extracting it.

Shizuka's next blow had cut one of the men, and his blood was streaming over the steps and floor. Shigeko hit the other in the side of the neck, where Gemba had showed her, and as he reeled thrust the stick up between his legs, into his private parts. He doubled up, vomiting from the pain.

'Don't kill them,' she cried to Shizuka, but the

wounded man had fled out into the crowd. The guards caught up with him but could not save him from the enraged mob.

Shigeko was not so much shocked by the attack as astonished by its clumsiness, its failure. She had thought assassins would be more deadly, but when the guards came into the courtyard to bind the two survivors with ropes and lead them away, she saw their faces in the lantern light.

'They are young! Not much older than I am!'

The girl's eyes met hers. She would never forget the look of hatred. It was the first time Shigeko had fought seriously against people who wanted her dead. She realised how close she had come to killing, and was both relieved and grateful that she had not taken the life of these two young people, so near to her in age.