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opening extract from

Warrior's Path: Sisters of the Sword

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I have become invisible.

Imagine you are making your way along a bustling street in the Imperial city of Kyoto, rubbing shoulders with craftsmen and merchants. You push through the crowd, touching me, but you still do not see me.

Perhaps you are walking alone through a deserted alleyway in some remote village. You might walk right past me and never notice.

I can move as silently as a ghost. Unseen by the human eye. And when I strike, I strike fast. You could be dealt a deathly blow, and yet never see who or what had killed you.

But I would not draw my sword against you. Because to kill without reason, in cold blood, is against the *bushi*, the samurai code. And I am a samurai.

Ah, I see you blink with surprise. *A girl?* you are thinking. *Surely a girl cannot be a samurai!*

But you are wrong. My sister Hana and I have proved that girls can be samurai. Together we have honoured our father's memory by treading the path of the warrior, a path full of hardship, danger and death.

It is strange to think that I once knew little of danger, and nothing of death.

But now, death stalks me. A dark shadow follows my every footstep, watches my every move. I can hide from you in the streets, but I cannot hide from death.

Oh, yes. Death and I have come to know each other very well.

Chapter 1

Kai Province in the year 1216

I was in the moss garden when the bell tolled to announce the approach of a visitor at the gate.

'Yamamoto no Hidehira!' The watchman cried Uncle's name from the watchtower. '*Ima tsukita-maisoro!*' He is arriving!

My heart jumped with excitement and I dropped the bamboo cane I'd been using as a practice sword. Two energetic leaps took me over the gravel beds and across the narrow stream that snaked through the moss garden.

'Kimi, slow down!' my mother called from a nearby pavilion. 'Remember what your grandmother always used to say—'

'Yes, yes!' I called back. 'The first daughter of his lordship, the *jito*, should not behave like a farm-worker!'

My mother laughed. 'And are you behaving like a farm-worker, Kimi?' she asked.

'Of course not,' I replied, smiling.

To honour my grandmother's memory, I proceeded in a ladylike fashion all the way to the end of the path with my hands inside the wide sleeves of my silk robe. But being a lady all the time was too much for me. I would much rather spend my days fighting and studying the *bushi* code, like my father and brothers do. So the moment I was out of sight of my mother's pavilion, I broke into a run and raced to the side courtyard.

I arrived at the entrance to the courtyard just in time to see Uncle Hidehira dismount from his horse. He was a big man, dark eyed and dark haired, dressed in robes of glossy red silk that befitted his important station as brother to the *jito*. Plates of lacquered armour were strapped to his chest, arms, and legs, the iron panels laced together with strips of strong rawhide. I could see my uncle's favourite *tanto* dagger was fastened tightly at his waist by a narrow silk sash. The bright red lacquered decoration on its ornate scabbard glittered in the late afternoon sun.

Surrounding Uncle Hidehira was his entourage of about thirty samurai soldiers in full armour, their faces stern beneath their elaborate helmets. Long curving bows and quivers of arrows bristled at their backs as they leapt gracefully off their mounts and tossed the reins to a gaggle of waiting servants. I felt a thrill as I watched the samurai. They looked poised and fierce in their hardened leather armour.

'One hour's rest for the men,' my uncle said curtly to his captain. 'Then I want the weapons made ready for inspection.'

As his soldiers received their orders from the captain, Uncle turned to survey the compound that had been his childhood home. One hand rested casually on the hilt of his *tanto* dagger as his dark gaze settled on the red-painted pillars and graceful curved rooftops of the pavilions. I saw him smile as he took in the beautiful gardens that went down in sweeping steps all the way to the green valley far below.

I stepped forward out of the shadow of the gateway and Uncle caught sight of me.

'Little Kimi!' he cried, as he stretched out his hands towards me and came striding across the courtyard. 'All dressed in silk robes with her long hair down her back. You've grown since I saw you

last year. I suppose I shouldn't call you "little" any more. You're as tall as a willow tree and twice as strong.' He clasped my hands in his and I was aware of his great strength. 'I suppose you've come running to see if I've brought presents for you?'

I laughed and shook my head. 'Seeing you again is better than any present, Uncle.' I glanced past him and surveyed the samurai, searching for a smaller figure among the men. 'Is Ken-ichi with you?'

'Your cousin is in training,' Uncle answered. 'These days he has no time for visiting. He must focus on his studies if he is ever to be a worthy samurai.' Uncle's eyes crinkled at the corners as he regarded me. 'And how are your own studies, Kimi? Have you remembered the *kata* I taught you when I was here last year?'

'Yes, Uncle,' I replied, bowing to show my gratitude for his teaching. 'I practise the sword movements you showed me every day.'

Training with a sword was not usually part of a noble lady's education, but Father insisted that all women in his household knew how to defend themselves and their home in case of an attack. He even indulged our training in men's weapons like the sword because, as he said, both Hana and I had shown exceptional talent. Tea ceremonies,

dancing, and calligraphy were one thing, but it was weapons training and martial skills that thrilled me the most.

'I remember I was impressed with the way you handled a sword,' Uncle said with a thoughtful nod. 'You should have been born a boy, Kimi. What a warrior you would have made!'

I smiled as I led Uncle up the stone steps and along a covered walkway towards the entrance hall. *One day*, I thought, *I will show my family that even a girl can be a great warrior.*

'I've also been training with the *naginata* spear,' I told him as we walked.

'An excellent defence weapon,' Uncle said with a wise nod. 'You'll need that if any rebels ever attack the compound. How many of the basic postures have you covered, Kimi?'

'All six,' I said proudly. 'And I can attack a target from above *and* below!' I swept my hand in a wide curve to show Uncle one of my moves.

As I told him about my training and the things I had been reading about in my Zen studies, servants in loose cotton trousers and baggy blue jackets followed respectfully behind us, carrying Uncle's baggage. The samurai soldiers had disappeared off to their own quarters, no doubt to prepare for weapons inspection.

Up ahead, a slanting beam of sunlight captured my younger sister Hana as she emerged from the entrance hall. She was dressed in a thick, sea-green silk kimono that rippled like water as she moved towards us. My grandmother would never have called Hana a farm-worker—she was always poised and elegant. Her name meant 'flower', and I often think how well my parents named her. She was grace itself.

I gave a little wave and Hana answered with a smile, her gentle face full of welcome as she bowed to Uncle. Behind her scampered our youngest brother Moriyasu, dressed in yellow with the bottom of his trousers still damp from playing in the pond. He gave a yelp of delight when he saw our visitor, and waved his *bokken*, the little wooden sword that rarely left his hand.

Hana came to stand at my side, her fingers briefly touching mine in our secret signal of kinship. As Moriyasu dashed down the steps to Uncle, Hana and I stood side-by-side, giggling softly behind our hands as we watched our brother's antics.

'Hai-ya!' Moriyasu shrieked, as he kicked up one foot and pretended to stab Uncle with a swift sword movement. 'You're dead! I killed you!'

Uncle clutched his stomach, bending over as if

he had been mortally wounded. 'Aai!' he groaned. 'An old man like me is no match for such a skilled young samurai!' He straightened up and lightly pinched Moriyasu's cheek. 'Keep up your practice, young man, and perhaps one day the great Shogun himself, Minamoto no Sanetomo, will employ you as his bodyguard.'

Moriyasu's eyes widened. 'Do you think so, Uncle? What an honour that would be for our family. I would be like you then, serving the Shogun just as you serve my father.'

Moriyasu's voice was full of admiration, but I held my breath for a moment. Would his innocent words offend Uncle? It was not polite to remind a strong man like Hidehira that he must serve his younger brother.

But Uncle cheerfully ruffled Moriyasu's short black hair. 'So you want to be like me, eh? Well, I think you have some growing to do first, little warrior!'

We all made our way towards the *shinden*, the elegant pavilion that was the centre of our home. My mother came out to meet us, all the elegance of her station reflected in her beautiful pale face and dark eyes. Her smooth hair was worn loose to the waist like mine, and it shone like black silk as she bowed to Uncle.

'Welcome, Hidehira,' she said softly. 'As always, it is a pleasure to see you. My husband is in the rock garden with his secretary. Yoshijiro was finishing some paperwork while he waited for you to arrive.'

'My brother works too hard,' Uncle said with a smile.

'Perhaps,' my mother replied, bowing respectfully. 'But Yoshijiro always says that the *jito*'s job is as much about proper administration as it is about samurai and fighting.'

'Wise words,' Uncle acknowledged politely. 'The Shogun would approve.'

My mother led him through the square rooms, where the paper walls seemed to whisper as we passed. Moriyasu danced at Uncle's heels, swinging his wooden sword.

Hana and I followed on behind, falling into step together. As we walked I felt calmness settle over me. My sister was the tranquil influence that soothed my restless energy.

We made our way out of the house and followed a line of cherry blossom trees to the rock garden. I could see my father sitting on a wooden bench in a patch of golden sunshine. His black hair was twisted into a knot on the top of his head, and his brow was creased in concentration

as he held back his heavy, yellow silk sleeve and dipped his brush onto his wet ink stone. He made a series of quick, firm brush-strokes on a paper scroll, and then handed the scroll to a servant who stood nearby.

My father was very wise and learned, and he worked from dawn until dusk in his role as *jito*, Lord Steward, a representative of the Shogun himself. He presided over a large southern part of the Kai Province, but however hard he worked, he was always pleased to give his attention to his family. He would often take time away from administration to train us: Hana and me and my brothers. Mother would often be his mock attacker as he demonstrated principles of fighting: the importance of distance between the fighters, how to watch your opponent or when to move. These were my favourite times as a family. We would listen and learn, swords in our hands and our minds fixed on Father, privileged to know that we were being taught by the best warrior in the kingdom.

Now, as he heard our footsteps crunching across the gravel towards him, Father looked up and beamed with pleasure when he saw us all.

'Brother!' he cried, rising and coming to meet Uncle. 'I welcome you.'

They greeted each other formally at first, as

befitted the *jito* and a faithful servant. But soon Uncle was teasing my father just as he had teased Moriyasu, calling him by his childhood nickname of *Koishi*, which means 'little stone'.

My father laughed. 'And as I recall,' he reminded Uncle, 'you were *Oiwa*, my "big rock"! Always there to support me, Hidehira, just as now.'

Patting his brother's shoulder, Father asked the servant to bring *sake* rice wine to refresh Uncle after his long journey. Then we all sat on *tatami* reed mats at my father's feet to listen as Uncle told us the news he'd gathered from patrolling my father's lands. I wished I was allowed to roam the countryside, fighting any bandits that I came across. What an exciting life!

The men talked for a long time, and when I next looked up at the sky I was surprised to see that the afternoon had turned to dusk. A handful of servants emerged from the pavilions and glided silently across the terrace gardens. They lit the lanterns that hung between the trees where they shone like small moons.

With a bow, Uncle withdrew to inspect his soldiers' weapons and my mother leaned forward to gently touch my hand. 'Kimi,' she murmured. 'It's getting late. I would like you and Hana to take Moriyasu back to the bedchambers now.'

'But I'd like to stay,' I protested quietly. I glanced at my sister. 'And I'm sure Hana would, too.'

But my mother shook her head. 'The men must prepare for their ceremonial dinner,' she explained. 'The *kaiseki ryori* is an important occasion where your uncle will assume the duties of the *jito* for your father.'

'Uncle is to be *jito*?' I asked my mother in surprise.

'Only temporarily,' my mother said in a reassuring voice. 'Just while your father travels around our estates with your older brothers. You remember our discussions about the journey Harumasa and Nobuaki must make, now that they are of an age to begin to understand the duties of their station. One day, one of your brothers will inherit the *jito* title.'

I did remember. We had talked many times, and not always peacefully.

But this time I didn't argue. Nor did I question why sons could inherit while daughters could not. Instead I nodded, and did as my mother asked me.

But as soon as Moriyasu was settled with his nurse, I took Hana's hand and led her to the *shinden* banqueting room.

'What are you doing, Kimi?' she asked. 'You know we mustn't disturb the ceremony.'

'The ceremony will not be disturbed,' I reassured her. 'No one will even know we are there!'

I led her quickly through the rooms to a hidden alcove I knew well, next to the formal dining room. The two of us hid easily behind the painted silk screen. I pressed my finger to my lips, signalling her to be quiet, and then pointed to a small slit at the edge of one of the padded sections.

Hana put her face to the slit, and then jumped back when she saw how close we were to the men. Her eyes were wide with amazement and delight, and I nodded—we would not be seen, but we could see everything!

12 There was a second slit for me to look through, and I could clearly see my father, brothers, and Uncle were kneeling on *tatami* mats just the other side of the screen. Samurai soldiers sat shoulder-to-shoulder in two long lines that stretched all the way to the far walls of the banqueting room. All of them wore long, loose tunics. Those in red silk were Uncle's men, others in yellow served my father.

I felt a thrill of excitement as I watched the ceremony begin. Everyone washed their hands to purify themselves, and then my father began to speak. His words were thoughtful and formal, as befitted the ceremonial occasion.

'The House of Yamamoto is proud to welcome its treasured brother, Yamamoto no Hidehira,' Father said, bowing to Uncle.

Uncle bowed low in response. I wondered how he felt, being welcomed to the place that had once been his own home . . . would still have been his home, if things had been different. My grandfather had decided many years ago to pass the title of *jito* to Father, even though he was the younger brother, because of his exceptional martial skill. Samurai from all over Japan came seeking work under my father's leadership. Since becoming the *jito*, he has built strong alliances with neighbours that once opposed our family, and has earned favour with the Shogun and the Emperor.

I was so proud of Father and all he had achieved. I prayed that I had inherited some of his skill, as my brothers had, and that one day we might all reach the standard he had set.

I gazed through the gap in the silk screen as Father turned to the gathered men. His voice rose with pride as he spoke of Hidehira's bravery in past battles. 'My brother's skill was the key to defeating a rebel army from Shinano,' he said. 'He out-fought three ambushes, and went on to march southwards and defend our allies in the province of Sagami. The Yamamoto lands are in

safe hands. Yamamoto no Hidehira will look after our people as if they were his own children.'

Uncle bowed. 'I thank you for the trust you place in me, brother. I am proud that you think me worthy of the great honour of passing your powers to me.'

My father bowed. 'You have earned that honour, Hidehira.'

'Thank you, little brother,' Uncle said.

Servants came gliding silently into the room, bearing balls of sticky rice, fresh *sushi*, and paper-thin slices of fresh soybean curd arranged on wooden trays shaped like leaves. They placed the food carefully on low black and gold lacquered tables, and then bowed as they withdrew backwards from the room, their heads respectfully lowered.

I glanced at Hana and she made a face that said, 'I'm hungry, too.'

Using pairs of short *hashi* chopsticks, my father and Uncle helped themselves to bean curd and sticky rice. This was the part of the ceremony that took away the pangs of hunger that might spoil the enjoyment of tea drinking later.

When my father had finished, he passed his *hashi* to a waiting servant. 'Hidehira, as you know, my sons will accompany me on my tour around

the estates,' he said to Uncle. 'They are ready to learn about their inheritance, and to test the skills they have learned at their training school. Indeed, we will be leaving early tomorrow morning to attend the opening ceremony at the *dojo* and pay our respects to Master Goku before we proceed on our tour.'

'I trust that Goku has been as rigorous with them as he was with us, Koishi,' Hidehira said.

'Indeed he has,' my father replied. He glanced across at my eldest brother and raised his eyebrows. 'As first son, perhaps you will demonstrate some of the moves Master Goku has taught you, Harumasa?'

My brother nodded eagerly and rose to his feet. I watched as he stepped into the wide space between the rows of *tatami* mats. 'With your permission, I will now demonstrate.'

Carefully drawing his long sword, Harumasa held the blade horizontally before his face and bowed to Father. Uncle sat back, a look of keen interest on his face.

Behind the silk screen, I mirrored Harumasa's graceful motions as he performed a series of slow movements to warm up. Knees bent . . . eyes on sword . . . elbow up . . . blade placed carefully across the upturned palm of the hand, pointing to

the floor. Every move was designed to concentrate the warrior's mind.

Now Harumasa was ready.

For a moment he looked as though he was preparing to dance, but then he executed a short, sharp, and deadly thrust.

Steel sword singing, Harumasa cut left and right, deflecting invisible attacks from an imaginary enemy. He bent at the knees and twisted behind to cover an attack from the rear. A turning single-handed forward slash was followed instantly by a fast two-handed slice. And when the invisible opponents were dead or dying from their wounds, Harumasa shook the imagined blood off his blade and sheathed his sword in one single fluid movement.

Behind the screen my hand followed his every move.

'Excellent,' Uncle said, as Harumasa bowed.

'Very good, first son,' my father said, pride ringing in his voice as he gestured for my brother to sit down again. 'You will earn the respect of the people we meet on our travels.'

My heart burned at the unfairness. I had been dedicated in my training and practised every day, even without the privilege of attending Master Goku's school. I had grown up watching

Father's samurai exercises, copying the movements in the privacy of my bedchamber. Whenever my brothers were home from school I had pestered them to teach me what they had learned. Now my skills were almost as polished as Harumasa's, but I would never have the chance to prove it.

One day, I promised myself, *I will show them that a girl can be just as good as a boy.*

For the hundredth time, I ached to be allowed to go on the journey around the province, riding at my father's side like my brothers. The arguments of the past moons played again in my head, and once more I heard my father's voice, kind but firm: 'No, Kimi. As first daughter, it is your duty to remain here at your mother's side.'

But I didn't want to be at my mother's side! I wanted to be out in the provinces on horseback, with the wind in my hair and a quiver of arrows strapped to my back . . .

A sharp nudge from Hana brought me back to the present. Her expression showed that she knew I had been daydreaming. She mouthed, '*Look*,' and pointed to the slit in the screen. I looked through to see servants carrying in the charcoal fires to heat water for the tea. Others placed elegant ladles and small ceramic drinking bowls

carefully on the low table in front of my father so that he and Uncle could admire them, as ceremony demanded.

My father made tea slowly and in silence, demonstrating with every move his authority and power as the *jito*. I watched, fascinated as always by the strict rules of the tea ceremony.

His motions calm and harmonious, Father held his sleeve back with one hand as he poured a bowl of dark green tea and then he lifted the bowl to his lips with both hands. He took a sip, wiped the rim, and then passed it to Uncle Hidehira who sipped in the same place to show their bond. The passing of the tea bowl symbolized the strong bond of friendship between them.

When he had finished, Uncle placed the bowl carefully on the mat in front of him. Then suddenly his red robes rippled as he rose to his feet and I felt a flash of surprise. Such abrupt movements were not fitting, especially during a tea ceremony!

'I honour my brother the *jito*,' Uncle said. 'Just as I honour our Yamamoto ancestors—especially our father, who chose to pass power to the little stone, Koishi, instead of the great rock, Oiwa.'

Frowning, I looked at my father. His face showed the surprise and confusion that I too was feeling. What did Uncle mean—was he criticizing

grandfather's decision in front of everyone? I clenched my fists, my body full of tension.

However, Uncle smiled. I could see clearly as he pulled my father to his feet and embraced him. My father grunted and I guessed that he must have been astounded at such an unusual display of affection. But I relaxed, because all was well between them.

Then I realized that the grunt was not astonishment, but pain. My surprise turned quickly to shock as my father cried out. I caught a glimpse of his face. It was twisted in agony.

What was happening to him?

Then I looked at Uncle's hand and saw that he was holding the shiny red lacquered hilt of his sharp *tanto* dagger. The blade was buried deep in my father's back . . . and a dark crimson stain was beginning to spread outwards across the glossy yellow silk of his ceremonial robes.