

The Flowers of the North

Author's Note

The Emishi people lived in the north of Japan during the medieval period, around 700 AD. The ancestors of modern Japanese people came into conflict with this nation known for its horseback archers, guerrilla tactics and techniques for making *kofun*, a kind of tomb. It is not known whether the Emishis were related to the Ainu, but they shared certain physical characteristics, including abundant pilosity. Even after being conquered, the Emishi remained independent for a long time, gradually integrating into the dominant Japanese culture and leaving their own mark on history.

This story was inspired by this mythical nation of which we know so little. I have plundered the medieval history of Japan quite freely in the creation of this fictional island where a northern nation fights for its independence and survival against southern invaders. Seeing as research has revealed no origins for the term *emishi*, I have given it a meaning. I have added several other elements: the disappearance of magic, forced immigration, and betrayal. I have also addressed the difficulty women face when they are judged too strong and determined to integrate peacefully into a patriarchal hierarchy.

Vocabulary

Shogun

The term 'shogun' means 'general'.

The shogun had various functions over the course of Japanese history, including, in some eras, holding supreme power.

Kata

In several martial arts, a *kata* is a series of codified movements that combines a number of techniques.

Clothing

Hakama

A *hakama* consists of a tunic tucked into wide, pleated trousers. It was traditionally worn by nobles in medieval Japan.

Kimono

A *kimono* is rectilinear and falls either to the feet or ankles, depending on the rank of the person wearing it. It is held in place by a large belt tied at the back, called an *obi*.

Yukata

A *yukata* is a light summer *kimono* worn by both women and men.

Weapons

Katana

The *katana* is the hallmark of the samurai. It is a sabre (a white, curved weapon with a single cutting edge) measuring over 60 centimetres in length. It is tucked into left side of one's belt, the cutting edge pointed down.

Kodachi

A *kodachi* is a small Japanese sabre. It measures between 40 and 65 centimetres in length. It is often used as part of a pair in close combat. Assassins find them particularly useful.

Sai

A *sai* resembles a trident and spears rather than cuts. The central prong is longer than the others and framed by two claws. Two *sai* are generally used at once, while a third spare may be kept in one's belt to act as a replacement should one *sai* be broken. This weapon can also be thrown.

Jitte

A *jitte* is similar to a *sai* but only has one claw. It is one of the many weapons used by ninjas as it can neutralise one's opponent without killing them. This weapon cannot cut.

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 by 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 *katakana*, 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 subjected 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 hostel 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 unrelenting 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 necessary to throw oneself against another human being. And it is cruel to find any pleasure in it, as was clearly the case with Noda. Doubtless by knowing that he was sought alive, he saw no need to fear death.

This meant that, with this man, Tatsuké would be forced to use his magic powers. But even if his fan allowed him to throw fire at a distance, it would still be difficult to master the intensity of the flames. They tended not to spare their victims. He had to play this cleverly. That was why he had spread the horses' straw across the battlefield the night before, in spite of the protests from the emperor's advisors. The dry grass that Noda was treading on at this very moment...

Tatsuké threw himself at Noda, sword in hand, crying, 'Fight someone of your own rank, you sissy!' Without a moment of hesitation, the blond warrior's *katana* ended the life of a soldier blocking his path. Then the colossus strode with dignity 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 filled the space, and silence settled about the two men standing across from one another.

'And who are you to claim you are worthy of me, ginger boy?'

Tatsuké's voice held not a tremble, and one could hear even a touch of amusement as he replied, 'Tatsuké Kagi'.

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

Even if Tatsuké preferred to avoid combat, he knew that the world was tough and that he had no choice but to be quick and agile if he was to survive. He also knew that he could not count on magic alone if he wanted to win. In his family, there had been some before him with the power of fire, but controlling this gift was not easy. Before the speed and strength of Hiro Noda, Tatsuké thought gratefully of his father, who had so insisted that he learn to defend himself like a man, without his fire power.

Unnecessarily prolonging this face-off greatly was greatly increasing the risk of death. It was time to put an end to this war. Tatsuké slipped behind the blonde man and took out the large fan attached to his back. '*Netsu hakka*', he murmured, and flames burst from the fan. Tatsuké put the blue *kimono* on fire. While Hiro Noda beat the fabric to extinguish the flames, Tatsuké sent the grass around him up in flames. Surrounded by fire and smoke, it was not long before the blond fighter was struggling to breathe and this made him a lot easier to capture. When Noda dropped his *katana* to try to extinguish the flames, the soldiers watching the scene rushed forwards to capture him. Tatsuké saw them tie him up tightly before taking him off to the emperor.

Tatsuké looked up in search of his next enemy, but a glance at the battlefield revealed to him that the war was over. Hiro Noda and his troops had fought with the energy of despair, but the battle had taken place too close to the end of winter for it to succeed. The South had forgotten about Hokkaidô's northern climate. The spring storms could be intense, and the snow, thick and heavy, had left these soldiers with no chance, acclimatised as they were to more mild temperatures. The chilblains, illness and strain of walking through the snow had killed more men than the battles had.

The setting sun that streamed across the battlefield masked the carnage, bathing the grounds with red light. The white flag of the Southern army's emissary was 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 merged with the amber light of the sky. Emishi, the young emperor of Hokkaidô, would continue to reign in his country, but at the cost of so many lives.

Tatsuké smiled bitterly as he thought how Hokkaidô had been saved by the 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 undertaken this understanding a long time ago such that, in exchange, the mountains and 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 allowed the Kagi family to manage its strange powers in its own way.

Tatsuké Kagi ran his hand over the enormous flame-throwing fan before re-attaching it to his back with a movement made elegant by practice. His hair, of an amber as intense as the flames, shone with a supernatural glow as he turned back to his horse that had stayed further on.

These momentary alliances with the emperor served to keep alive the legend of the Kagi family. Over the past few generations, their magical powers had emerged with growing rarity. The population hardly believed in them anymore. But by fighting by the army's side, Tatsuké confirmed that his family still knew how to control fire with a rare intensity. A single member of this clan on the battlefield caused 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 Kagi had the power of fire. Now that the Southern army had been destroyed, Tatsuké thought there was nothing left to stop him from returning home. Without asking permission, simply directing a wave to the shogun from afar, Tatsuké mounted his horse and turned his back on the dead. He disappeared with the last ray of light.

The spring light shimmered on the snow-capped mountain tops. The peak of Kurodaké dominated the landscape. At its feet, the river from the north had carved a deep groove.

Tatsuké woke very early, his head foggy and his mind haunted by images from the war. He was home once more, but his sleep remained unsettled from the recent events. He felt cold from the sweat sticking to his clothes. He trembled again, hearing the cries of the enemy soldiers as they were consumed by flames. He left his wooden hut to try to escape his nightmares. The mountain was so calm that a single look across his territory calmed his mind.

For the first time, he could smell the scent of spring in the air, that mix of melting snow, wet earth and sweet odours. He took a deep breath to chase away the disturbed feelings that he had brought back with him from the battlefield. The war was over, life was returning to the fore, and soon the summer would chase away the gloom. These mountains were his domain, the only place that belonged to neither of the two empires. Supported by the puffs of warmth carried by the wind, he hoped that the peace could last.

He glanced over at the small village of Fuki, nestled right next to the river as it widened. The only traversable pass between Hokkaidô and Nankaidô, it was highly frequented by travellers passing through. Gradually, the Nankaidô's army was returning home. It had to come back through the mountains after the final confrontation in the Northern territory. But even if the sun had reached the mountains and sought as far as the warriors' camp, perched high up on the slopes of Mount Kurodaké, Fuki was still plunged in darkness.

Tatsuké saw Kôji, whom he considered to be his right-hand man, leave his tent. His best friend came to join him, still rubbing his eyes. This man, with hair so deeply black that it looked almost blue, had taken over as leader of the little group during Tatsuké's absence. Even though the boss had been back for two weeks now, and had taken back command of the camp, Kôji still rose early out of habit. And most likely he was worrying about his friend, even if he had not said a word.

'You already ready for work, Taku?'

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

'I couldn't sleep. Because of spring, I guess.'

‘It’s certainly hanging 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 is running well’, Kôji observed.

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

The passage of this mass of soldiers was causing headaches for the sixty warriors who kept guard of the pass, but no serious incident was yet to occur.

‘They still need to exchange prisoners’, Kôji noted in a worried voice.

‘Nankaidô’s troop has already arrived. We should be welcoming the soldiers from Hokkaidô any moment now. They will complete the exchange in public, in the town’s main square. That should ensure that everything goes to plan.’

It would be a delicate affair, as each side still held the recent confrontations in their memories.

‘I thought I might take a turn on guard this morning. It would give me a chance to enjoy the sun before I have to sit 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 understood that 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 behind his orange kimono branded with his family crest, a red star with seven points, that he usually wore over his *hakama*. With his fan tied to his back, the fire warrior walked peacefully through the woods. He reached the place where they usually posted a man to watch for movements coming from the south. There, he replaced Goro, one of the young warriors from the camp, who had given him a strange look, as if he had wanted to stay longer, before leaving without a word, having no other choice but to allow the chief to take over the guard.

The view really was magnificent. He could see all along the path that ran along beside the river before dipping 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 this landscape completely: the plains would become as blue as the sky, flooded by the rising water level. It was for this that the first villages of Nankaidô were so far away: it was practically impossible to cross this territory in spring.

But suddenly steps could be heard, coming from Fuki. Tatsuké crouched down to observe the early morning walker. Expecting to uncover a fleeing warrior or a thief, he was surprised to see a young woman appear, aged some twenty years, with very long auburn hair, which flickered between a thousand shades of warm gold beneath the rays of sunlight. She was rather small, and wore a frayed kimono that was different to what was worn in that country, and shape of her eyes suggested she was a foreigner.

She took a path that was only just visible to reach the spring of a small stream. Tatsuké concealed himself further, for she was headed in his direction. But she was not aware of him at all, as he realised when she stopped and started to undo her *obi*.

His eyes grew wide. *This* truly was a magnificent view! But who was this stranger? A prostitute from a brothel? Now entirely nude, she climbed into the small pool. A thought came to contradict his first hypothesis: if this woman worked in a brothel, she would not be up so early, and her visit 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 flowing across her back, the outline of her bottom as she brought her arms back alongside her body. He felt heat fill his body and shivers of excitement run through him.

She dived under, then resurfaced right beside the pebbles of the shore. Then she stood up and pulled her wet hair up into a high bun. Tatsuké was filled in admiration before the shock of the whiteness of her skin and the fragility she betrayed. This vulnerability was admittedly only relative, 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.

He quickly crouched down again as she turned in his direction. He waited, anxious he had been seen, but no sound of footsteps came towards him. He breathed a sigh of relief that she had not found 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 had 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 so he could be certain of what he was seeing. To his great surprise, he realised that 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 pin once again. She was rather lacking in technique, not to mention that fact that the tree hardly deserved such treatment. But what was this little woman trying to do?

None of the 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 troop 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 South had permitted these residents to do good business in 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, already the townspeople were imagining all the purchases needed for reconstruction that would be passing through, as well as the travellers who would soon be stopping off in the town, being as it was the natural stopover between the two countries. Wars sow death, but for some, they are also a quick way of getting rich.

The crowd pushed and shoved trying to get a glimpse of the nobles that had been captured during the conflict and who would now have the opportunity to return to their respective countries. It was the most important exchange of the war: Hokkaidô was exchanging 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 big 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?', someone wondered 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.

Tatsuké squinted, still unsure. Was that woman in Noda's welcoming committee the same one from the baths? He kept his eyes fixed on the brown-haired woman who followed Noda as the group entered the hostel. In spite of her lowered head and her 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 everything had gone, shouts rang out from inside the hostel. The door was flung open and a body thrown outside. Tatsuké saw the brown-haired woman fall to the ground beside him, twisted in 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 desire to kill, and suddenly everything moved very quickly. As Noda drew his katana, Tatsuké slipped beneath the blade as it came down upon the woman. He did not even have time to completely open out his fan. The katana cut open his hand, but the half-opened fan managed to limit the damage. Tatsuké rose up, calling upon his power.

‘Netsu hakka!’

Flames burst out along the folds of his open weapon.

The fan in flames before him, Tatsuké stood up and used his body to create a barrier between the woman and Noda. He spoke firmly.

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

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

‘Then let’s leave it there for now. You don’t have long for this world in any case, heir of the flames. From the very efforts of she you just saved, you will soon die. It fills me with joy to know you will suffer such a pathetic end, Kagi.’

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

‘You okay?’

The woman struggled upright and rushed towards the buildings. Kôji threw himself at her and grabbed her harshly by the collar of her kimono.

‘Hey! You! Where do you think you’re going?’

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

‘To save your friend. Let me get my bag.’

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

‘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 had recovered a large black bag and was heading to Tatsuké. She glanced anxiously at the hostel, then asked Kôji, ‘Do you have a quiet place I can make a fire?’

‘Follow me.’

Kôji led Midori to the combat instructor’s warehouse. 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 women got the fire going, placing a pot full of water over the flames.

Then she knelt down beside the red-headed man and opened her bag.

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

Her response was quick, 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 surely know the antidote.’

Midori could not help but glance at this leader in surprise, 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 that 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 was make sure he got through okay. He represented her best chance for survival and vengeance.

She cursed the vigilance of the blond man. A single cut from her weapon, which she had coated in a far more efficient solution, and Noda would not have lasted long in 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 the patient to make him drink the contents.

‘What’s that?’ Kôji asked warily.

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