

A traditional Chinese ink wash painting on a textured, light-colored background. The central focus is a tiger, depicted in a dynamic, walking pose, facing forward. Its fur is rendered with intricate, dark ink strokes, capturing the texture and stripes. Above the tiger, a small bird is perched on a thin, leafy branch, looking towards the right. The composition is framed by bamboo stalks and leaves, with a prominent vertical bamboo stalk on the right side. The overall style is characteristic of traditional Chinese ink painting, emphasizing naturalistic detail and harmonious composition.

LITTLE BIRD
& THE TIGER

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14: The Golden Horn

Umezawa rode out of Vladivostok and into the foothills, ascending switchbacks until cresting a ridge, opening to the vista of the Golden Horn. The rays of the descending sun illuminated the magnificent bay, and with the autumn leaves behind him as well, it was as if he were surrounded by flames on all sides. He decided to pitch his tent here this night—with nowhere in particular to go, he was in no hurry to leave.

He watered and tethered his horse, then made a small fire, and unpacked some rice balls, wrapped in dried seaweed. He savored the pickled plums at the center of each, the burst of sweet/sour/salt suffusing the rice. He had enough for a week, and he intended to enjoy every bite throughout.

After his meal, he stared into the coals, and brooded a little. He had seen Uchida gazing at him from the eaves of the temple as he rode by, but having informed him of his intention to leave some days before, he was not inclined to do so a second time. He was aware of both his own tendency towards romanticism and of Uchida's patronizing contempt. He knew that he was

less than he should be, but more than people like Uchida could understand.

Rather unique for a man of his class, he was only willing to kill for something important, instead of anything that might affect a point of honor. Other than the time he tried to rescue that rosary of children, he had never experienced killing fury, nor had he ever been in fear of losing his life. During his travels around Japan testing his skills, he had fought many men, even mobs of enraged students who could not tolerate the defeat of their teacher (and the honor of their school). But even here, death would have been an accident, because all they meant to do was give him a sound beating. Because he had never risked his life for something worth dying for, he knew that he was found wanting in Uchida and Tōyama's eyes. His own as well.

On the other hand, he was the kind of man who made friends—genuine friends—easily. There was no doubt that he was strong and tough as well, one could see that at a single glance, but he threatened no one's position, because he had no desire to take what was theirs. And it was for this reason that he was far more prepared than Uchida assumed.

After their first meeting in high summer, he started training at Uchida's *dōjō*. He was an even match for the Cossacks, now numbering five. Among the Japanese, only Uchida was a match for him. The older man, however, was infirm from asthma, something that hit him every summer as the fir trees shed their pollen, and Umezawa had no chance to even the score from their bout in Japan. The Cossacks took a liking to him, because he was nearly their size and his approach to fighting was

similar—like them, once he initiated an attack, it was an unbroken onslaught. If he got within close range, he smashed his body into theirs, and they'd go careening around the *dōjō*, crashing into the walls, the pillars, and other people. The Japanese students soon learned to form a barricade with their bodies to protect the altar where the Buddhist deities were enshrined. Just for the hell of it, the Cossacks, including Umezawa, would sometimes fight three-on-three, or asymmetrically, two-on-one or even three-on-one. Even then, one of the team might betray his teammate without warning, join the others and reverse the attack. All the while, Uchida watched.

They took him out drinking and although he'd get red-faced, Umezawa never lapsed into maudlin tears or punched anyone in the tavern who didn't deserve it. Because he matched them drink for drink, and was comfortable in the *banya*, not matter how hot the steam, they loved him in their gusty passionate way. They told him they considered him a Cossack, as long as he could promise that he wasn't a *Zhyd*. Umezawa agreed, having no idea what they were talking about. In the course of their drinking bouts, Umezawa found he had an ear for languages; within a few weeks, they could understand his broken phrases, and he, portions of what they said to him. One night, one of the men asked, "Why are you here?"

Umezawa replied, "Go north. See forest."

The Cossack asked, "Why? You want to live there? Hunt? Fuck bears? Why?"

Umezawa said, "Because I want to."

The Cossack smacked his friend upside the head; he was singing, bawling out a song of indefinable mel-

ody, the only intelligible words, being, “Vodka. Pussy. Pussy, Vodka.” The first man said, “Our Jap wants to go to the Primorye because he wants to. And he doesn’t know shit.”

The other one said, “We don’t know shit either.” He cast his eyes around the room and spotted a ragged man nearby, red faced and panting, drinking *kvass* followed by vodka shots. He leaned to the side, vomited, then threw down another vodka, demanded and got another bowl of the fermented bread beer, and gulped it down on top of the vodka. The Cossack lurched to his feet and lumbered across the room, grabbed the man by the scruff of his jacket and hauled him to their table. He tried to fight, but he was half the other’s size, and so drunk he forgot about the knife on his belt. Turning to Umezawa, the Cossack said, “He’s a *promyshlennik*. A trapper. Some of these guys, they buy one thing and trade another. Like a *Zhyd*, but at least they didn’t kill Jesus Christ. This guy, he’s a true *tayozhnik*, a man of the forest, he kills sable for the fur, and bear for the gallbladder and paws, which the *Manza* like. Those slanty-eyed fuckers eat anything, and if it’s really disgusting, they think it’s medicine. Anyway, this fucker lives out there most of the time. If you run into him out there, watch out—he’ll shoot you in the back.” He affectionately cuffed the man on the back of the head. “Won’t you, Petyen’ka.”

The other Cossack said, “Piotr Mitrofanovich . . . Petyen’ka. We will buy you drinks, as long as you tell our Jappie friend here everything you know about living in the Primorye . . . ”

They drank until dawn. Petyen’ka was slobbering

drunk, with an acrid stink so eye-wateringly bad that one drank more, in hopes of numbing one's nose. He spluttered out instructions in no particular order and with no particular sense—"Fuckin' *gnus*, black flies, eat you alive, you gotta smudge yourself in the day, but in the night come gnats and mosquitos, fuckin' eat you alive. Tigers. Yeah. Tigers. Don't fuck with tigers, they get very offended, but a tiger dick will get you enough from the *Manza* that you can drink yourself half to death and have three whores left over. HARDTACK. Last forever, but you gotta' eat meat. Smoke and dry the meat. Watch your ass, the leopards and wolves and bears and wolverines and lynx and sable and boars and wasps, big fuckin' wasps, big as your thumb . . . they smell it and fuckin' steal everything, but you can't keep it in your camp, hang it high, or they'll fuckin' eat you too. You travel on the ice in the winter, but you need skis for the snow, you don't know what skis are . . . and anyway, you'll freeze. Fuckin' Jappie. You'll freeze your ass. Fuck your mother! I'll shoot you. I'll shoot you in the back if you steal my catch. I'll make you my catch. Hah Hah Hah Hah! More vodka. EGGHAGHHHH. More *kvass* . . ."

Ivan, the larger of the two Cossacks, got up and stomped out of the tavern. Ten minutes later, he was back with the apothecary in his sleeping *kimono*, slung over his shoulder. He dropped him onto a chair, demanded a glass and another bottle of vodka and the apothecary translated, as best he could, until the vodka got the best of him and he fell asleep on the table.

So, Umezawa had bought the wrong horse, no doubt about that, but he was well-armed and as well supplied

as he might be, after piecing together the drunken rambling advice of the *tayozhnik*. Of course, in terms of actual survival, he knew little . . . what he had was drunken phrases, poorly understood, interspersed with random snatches of song, sudden bursts of vomit and two fights with half the tavern, where he found the apothecary had a mean hand with a stool upside the head of anyone who came near.

As he pulled his blanket over himself, he remembered something Uchida had said to him, the profundity of which far overshadowed his contempt—in fact, it shook the axis of his life. “You are the eyes of the Emperor. Each glance of one of his eyes fleshes out what we need to know to best serve Him.” Umezawa saw himself as a man of personal honor, who would always strive to do the right thing, but now, superseding this was his greater responsibility. “If it comes to merely dying for honor, I will be blinding the Emperor. If I am fortunate, personal honor and my greater task will be hand-in-glove, but my most important task is to experience that which no Japanese has ever done before. Any sin that I commit will be a sacrifice, offering my personal honor as a burnt offering to the Emperor.”



He woke at dawn and turned towards the West. In the scrub trees to his left, he heard a tap-tap-tap of woodpeckers and there in the bushes, a burst of gold, an oriole. He rode some miles on narrow paths at the edge of high cliffs overlooking a lapis sea. Fork-tailed swifts flew below, grazing the rocks, as cormorants did above

the waves. At one point, he paused to watch a number of gulls mob a sea-eagle, the latter apparently trying to ignore them, but then the eagle turned upside down and snatched a gull within his claws, then rolled into a dive until he was just above the water. He dipped and the struggling gull was immersed, the raptor continuing to glide. When he rose again, the drowned gull was dangling from his talons, and he veered towards the beach to devour his meal.

After half a day, Umezawa checked his horse, and turning to the north, gazed over an ocean of trees, silvery threads of two rivers, and beyond, mountains. He heard the trumpeting of swans, and, looking up, saw them flying in a V-formation, just as leadership shifted, allowing one behind to beat his wings and assume the apex position, so the other could catch his backdraft and conserve energy.

After the filth of Vladivostok, the pure air and swirling life was intoxicating. The land sloped downwards to rough brush, but also some fields of sorghum, the freehold of a settler. A sounder of boar appeared, roughly twenty, much bigger than those he'd seen in Japan. He drew his rifle. He had trained for years in Japanese matchlock musketry, and it had taken him a little while to learn how to use this modern carbine. He loaded its single cartridge, aimed at a yearling that he estimated he could shoulder, and fired a round into the recessed spot behind its ear. It dropped immediately, the other swine squealing and running pell-mell into the forest.

He reloaded—boar sometimes circle around to attack the killer of their own. He descended the slope, slinging the rifle over his left shoulder, weapon in front

of his body, trigger outwards. If need be, he could shrug off the rifle, grab the barrel, and have it in shooting position in a single movement. He hung and slaughtered the boar from a nearby tree, burying the offal and hide.

He shouldered the rest, almost his own body weight, and carried it back to his campsite. He made some racks out of birch limbs stripped of bark, and placed them near his rekindled fire. He roasted liver and heart, and cut them in small pieces, sprinkling them with some of his store of salt. He gorged himself while slicing the rest of the meat in thin translucent strips. He figured that if one could smoke fish, something done in Japan, it would work equally well for boar. He hung the meat on the racks near the fire and with the combination of the clear autumn air, the heat and the smoke, he soon had enough dried meat to last him many weeks, as long as he could find water.

Birds and boars . . . and bears. As he gazed down the hillside, he saw a mother and two cubs digging up the remains of the boar. The wind shifted to his back, and she caught his scent. As she rose on her hind legs, he saw the white crescent moon on her chest. She stared at him a long moment, then decided he was far enough away that she could return to her meal. He shifted position and immediately she rose up again. "Alright," he thought. "We will each stay in our place and all will be well."



21: Heaven – Earth – Humanity

“Tachibana-*san*. Please consider the three flowers. They are of three lengths. They are symbolically Heaven, Earth and Humanity, the three primordial powers. The height, the angle of each and the balance between them must embody, in a single arrangement, this balance of universal forces.”

“*Oshō-sama*. Still, after all these months, I can’t help but wonder if the flowers would be happier in the ground.”

The priest smiled. “Well, that is the natural world. I suppose the question is if we humans have a place in such a world, and if we do, what then is our responsibility? Everything: the vase, this temple with the gravel of its gardens swept in waves resembling the sea, this tea whisk, the rocks, the trees, and yes, these flowers taken at the height of their beauty, all are also part of the third realm, that of Humanity. The works of Humanity must be in harmony with Heaven and Earth. This does not mean passively ‘blending,’ as the Chinese would have it, being a mere microcosm of the larger universe.

Rather, we are responsible for engendering a resonating interplay among these three powers. In essence, it is Humanity's existence, properly cultivated, that places the universe in a greater harmony. Dare I say, this is no different from the way the Emperor orders the realm with his every action—his every breath."

He chuckled, "As for your work today, I'm afraid, your 'Heaven' hangs with a morose droop, your 'Earth' breaks the soil in a rather arrogant burst, and in between, your 'Humanity' stands, rather irritated. Perhaps if we replaced her with a rose, the thorns might balance the misery of the rest."

Tachibana smiled, "Thank you for this last lesson, *Oshō-sama*. I think it is clear that I lack enough artifice to do anything but reflect the three realms as I find myself within them."

The priest said, "You know, we have *zazen* . . ."

She shook her head. "I do not think I will bloom in your dark and dusty hall . . ."

She bowed, stood and strode out the door. She strode through the temple lanes, and paused at the nursery-school, watching the children play. Turning, she walked down the flagstones, over a high-arching crimson footbridge, then emerged between the statues of muscular temple guardians at the entrance. She paused and exchanged bows with an elderly man in a gray kimono, posture straight as a reed.

The old man took a circuitous route, lingering at the edge of the temple's moss garden, squinting his eyes so that the little hillocks became mountains and the tiny manicured trees, looming giants. Then he entered the small outbuilding for his own lesson.

“*Oshō-sama*, I apologize for being late. I always become rapt in your garden.”

“No worries, *Murata-sensei*. All morning, I’ve been engaged in a fierce battle with some shrimp from last night. I haven’t dared to move. Thanks to your delay, I could get up, leave this room, and take the time to fully defeat them, but it was a bout surely as fierce as any at your *dōjō*. I apologize. I have not cleared away the disaster that was my last student’s work.”

Murata smiled at his jocular friend, and then looked at the arrangements on the table. He didn’t know what to do with his facial expression. “Those are . . . remarkable. There is something about them . . . they betray such ambivalence at being here. The person who did them understands the principles, but . . . everything is so wrong together!”

The priest laughed. He moved to get up, but Murata forestalled him. “Do not trouble yourself, lest your armored foes once again rise up from the depths to vanquish you. It’s better you sit quietly, my old friend. I will clean them up so we have a clear field of battle for my own untalented work.”

He picked up the two arrangements, one in a vase, and the other on a square sloped-sided plate of celadon porcelain. He carried them to the veranda, where there were some wicker baskets to hold students’ work, later to be thrown onto the temple’s compost heap. He pulled the three flowers, stems of three different diameters, out of the vase. He was just about to cast them away, then stopped and held them close to his eyes, upside down. He bent down, picked up the other three flowers, and matched their bases to the first. He stared

at them a long moment, lips pursed, and returned inside with the flowers.

“*Oshō-sama*. I will not ask who your student is, but . . . ”

“That is no matter, *Murata-sensei*. There is nothing secret about arranging flowers in a temple . . . ”

“It is out of respect for the person.”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you know who your student is? Not his name, but what he does?”

“Not ‘he.’ She’s just a woman of apparently moderate means and limited education, who asked for lessons a few months ago.”

“A woman! . . . *Oshō-sama*. Look here,” *Murata* said, holding the flowers, stems forward, across the table. The priest looked puzzled. *Murata* pointed, “Look at the cuts. Each flower is a different species, the stems variously fibrous or soft, thin or thick, yet each cut is precisely the same angle. There is no ragged edge, no scooped-out areas. Each of these knife cuts is perfection, and each is exactly the same as the other. Your student may never learn *ikebana*, but whoever she is, she is someone who cuts with perfection. I thought, perhaps a cook? But if so, the stems would have been pinned down like captives, and the cuts would have been crushed at the edge, however minuscule. These stems were cut suspended in the air, thoughtlessly, yet impeccably. And this by someone who, judging by her arrangements, was ill-tempered, doing *ikebana* because she is bored, or due to some misguided intention of rounding herself out.

“May we cancel our lesson for today? I would like to go into the garden and just look at these cuts until the

sun goes down, so that on my deathbed, I will be able to say that I once came into the presence of a true *ken-sei*, a swordsman—actually, it seems, a swordswoman—touched by the divine.”