

29. Plateau

Because I was sixteen and did not yet understand the meaning of humility, my first instinct was to blame the cold for the stiffness in my fingers. It was because of the cold that I couldn't coax the notes I wanted from the strings of the koto, but I knew I didn't perform much better at home near the warmth of a hearth, either. I wasn't going to admit it in front of the goze Rikei. I couldn't embarrass myself in front of a goze.

The goze were an order of blind women who practiced music. This is an understatement. To say the goze practiced music is to say that a statesman practices rhetoric. They were masters. In goze Rikei's hands, the koto did more than make a beautiful sound. It seemed to speak to me.

Goeze Rikei smiled at me without seeing where my hands were. She didn't need to. I had laid my hands down quietly on the neck of my koto. The strings hummed gently under my touch. The sound was like a quiet exhalation of defeat, and it told her everything.

"It's not so cold. And you're a young girl. Your fingers are much more delicate than mine," Rikei said.

Her words stung, but I knew she was right. I ran my fingertips up and down one of the strings, coaxing a thoughtful groan out of my koto. It wasn't cold. Winter was coming to an end. Already a few of the trees were sprouting the first bundles of green leaves. In a month there would be sakura.

"I'm having trouble with this part here," I said. I went through the motions of the melody.

Sakura, Sakura.

It was such a simple song. It was a child's song. Washerwomen sang sakura sakura while working up to their knees in the stream. I played the notes well enough. 'Sakura sakura,' my koto said, each note like the pronunciation of a child: technically correct, but lacking any artistry. There was a point in the middle of the song where one note seemed to leap into another. The song had to take a little flight of fancy, delighting in the sweetness of its own sound the way a cherry blossom delights in its own loveliness.

That was what Rikei said.

I reached a phrase in the middle of the song and my koto stammered. The notes came out hesitant and off-rhythm. If my koto was speaking, its speech was slurred.

"Just there," I said, tried the phrase again. I slowed down, reasoning my way through the words, the syllables, the slight shift in intonation and pitch. Music was a language, too. I wondered if this was what it was like to learn Hingan as a foreigner, to struggle with tone and pronunciation.

"Stop," Rikei said. Then, gently, she repeated herself, still smiling. "You're trying to force the notes out. Listen."

Rikei had a certain way with the koto that I could never understand or comprehend. When I watched her perform I felt an infantile urge to just laugh, not because she was amusing to me, but because it was like magic to me. She made it seem so simple.

To play the koto required both hands. One hand to pluck the notes, the other to give the koto its voice. Rikei played Sakura, Sakura. Her performance was eloquent. Each phrase seemed to come from a deep balsa-wood throat. Its sound was silvery and dark, gliding from phrase to phrase with liquid grace. She added flourishes and trills that seemed so simple in her hands. I closed my eyes for a moment and listened.

"Do you hear that?" she asked. "You can't force notes out of the koto any more than you can force words out of your mouth. If you try, you'll stammer."

"I can't play like that," she said. "I'm nowhere close to your level."

"I think you can," she said, and carried on playing. The sound of her koto was like a third conversationalist, joining into her side of the argument. I could see that I was outnumbered. "Go home and practice each individual note in that phrase. Slowly at first. Don't try to get the notes to sound right. Just practice letting your hands fall on the strings in the right way."

I withdrew my hands into the long sleeves of my yukata, pooled in my lap, and listened to her play. Who was I to argue with a goze? I had my moments of arrogance, but even I knew the difference between pride and petulance. Goze Rikei carried on playing Sakura, Sakura.

At home I played by the warmth of my own hearth and had to admit with a sinking sense of guilt that, no, it wasn't the cold at all. My fingers plucked away at the notes one by one like a child sounding out phonetic syllables.

Goze Rikei had told me not to worry about getting the notes to sound right. "Just practice letting your hands fall on the strings in the right way," she said. But whenever I arrived at that same phrase, the little flurry of quick notes squeezed into the middle of the song like the trilling of a songbird, I faltered.

This carried on for weeks, night after night of practice. My mother and father had to endure the sound of their daughter's koto stumbling over and over the same elementary notes. I neglected my lessons with Goze Rikei until, I told myself, I'd master this complicated phrase. I imagined myself performing for her just as the cherry blossoms were opening. I imagined the koto singing for me. We would've come to an understanding, the koto and I. We'd finally speak one another's language and accept the natural order of things, which was its subservience to me as its master,

and my mastery over it. I imagined pink cherry blossoms filling the air and crowding the branches and the sound of my koto, syrupy and bright, pouring out from my fingers, and I imagined goze Rikei nodding in approval and smiling, simply smiling, not even at me, but at the excellence of her own tutelage.

I plucked another note and it came out like a cracked voice.

Then I laid both my hands down on the koto and just stared at it for a while. I must have looked pathetic, my back crouched over an instrument and my hair hanging down my face, staring at this thing with a look of accusation. I didn't want to play Sakura anymore. I didn't want to play the koto anymore, either. I hated how ugly the instrument made me feel, how graceless.

Spring arrived in the pavilion where goze Rikei played, but I wasn't there to see it. I assured myself that after a few absences from my usual lessons, Rikei would have simply forgotten about me. I was one of (I was sure) dozens of bright-eyed girls with dreams of mastering the koto who'd simply given up after a few lessons. She must have expected it. She must have been relieved, in fact, because she no longer had to spend her mornings smiling her smile at me and trying to ease me through the rudimentary melodic phrases of Sakura, Sakura, like a master gymnast trying to teach a clumsy child how to walk.

The hanami festival arrived and I'd largely forgotten about goze Rikei and my own koto. I never missed hanami. The pavilion and the garden where we practiced came alive with the entire town. Streamers and lanterns hung in long strings between trees, their branches crowded in white and pink cherry blossoms as if they'd been dipped into clouds.

Goze Rikei was performing at the festival. She was one of six different performers--kagura dancers, singers, a few traveling bards strumming away at their shamisen. They were all remarkably skilled in their own way, but Rikei was masterful. When she performed, the festival went quiet. She was sitting on a straw mat on a raised platform on a simple wooden stage, her head bowed and her hands traveling up and down the length of the koto. Her fingers moved with their own fluency, and even as callused and weather-worn as her hands were, they spoke through her koto. When I closed my eyes and listened, I could hear its voice, the full richness of it. Her koto was one instrument, but it spoke as if it was many, a fugue of melodies and countermelodies, as if it was in conversation with itself--sometimes playfully improvisational, sometimes boldly dramatic.

When it was over, no one moved or spoke. The applause began quietly and remained reverent. It only stopped after one of the attendants helped Rikei to her feet and escorted her away.

I found her sitting underneath one of the trees on her same straw mat with a cup of tea in both hands. She lifted her head up when she heard the sound of my approach. I settled down in the grass beside her.

"Teacher," I said. "How beautiful the sound of your koto."

"Ah," she said, "My wayward student. Have you been cultivating your sound?"

I shook my head. "My own sound was nothing special."

"I rather liked your sound. It had a certain dignity, even when it was struggling. You showed promise," she said.

I felt my cheeks burning with shame. "I reached the limits of my potential."

Rikei was about to drink from her bowl of tea, but at my words she paused and let out a long, sad sigh. "I see," she said.

"I want to thank you for all that you've taught me," I said.

She reached out and found my shoulder. "Can I offer you one last lesson?"

"I did not bring my koto with me," I said.

"This is more important than koto. You say you've reached the limit of your potential. How can you know that until you've exceeded it?"

I hesitated, searching for something to say, but I didn't have anything.

"Do you think novices are capable of judging anyone's potential, especially their own?" she said.

"I suppose not," I said.

"Definitely not. If you put these limits on yourself, then it will begin to spread into the rest of your life. So knock it off with this nonsense about the limits of your potential."

Goze Rikei punctuated her statement with a long sip of her tea. I sat in quiet silence for a while. When a few admirers came to offer her compliments, Rikei busied herself with them and I quietly excused myself.

That evening I arrived home early from hanami, thinking about what Rikei had told me. She was right. I had felt a strange sense of comfort in telling myself I'd simply reached my limits. My koto sat neglected in a corner of my room, covered in a white linen cloth that had been invisibly gathering dust.

I swept the linen cloth aside and sat down with the koto. The strings gazed up at me, waiting, and in their silence, they seemed to ask me if I was ready to accept the natural order of things,

which was my subservience to it. As long as I left the koto covered, I'd never have to face it. I'd never have to look at it or confront the pang of guilt I'd feel whenever I tried to play.

My hands hovered over the strings, hesitating, unsure of how to begin, until, at last, I just let my hands fall the right way.