

Brilliance of the Moon

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Extract

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One

The feather lay in my palm. I held it carefully, aware of its age and its fragility. Yet its whiteness was still translucent, the vermilion tips of the pinions still brilliant.

'It came from a sacred bird, the *houou*,' Matsuda Shingen, the abbot of the temple at Terayama, told me. 'It appeared to your adopted father, Shigeru, when he was only fifteen, younger than you are now. Did he ever tell you this, Takeo?'

I shook my head. Matsuda and I were standing in his room at one end of the cloister around the main courtyard of the temple. From outside, drowning out the usual sounds of the temple, the chanting, and the bells, came the urgent noise of preparations, of many people coming and going. I could hear Kaede, my wife, beyond the gates, talking to Amano Tenzo about the problems of keeping our army fed on the march. We were preparing to travel to Maruyama, the great domain in the West to which Kaede was the rightful heir, to claim it in her name – to fight for it if necessary. Since the end of winter warriors had been making their way to Terayama to join me and I now had close to a thousand men billeted in the temple and in the surrounding villages, not counting the district's farmers who also strongly supported my cause.

Amano was from Shirakawa, my wife's ancestral home, and the most trusted of her retainers, a great horseman and good with all animals. In the days that followed our marriage, Kaede and her woman, Manami, had shown considerable skill in handling and distributing food and equipment. They discussed everything with Amano and had him deliver their decisions to the men. That morning he was enumerating the ox carts and packhorses we had at our disposal. I tried to stop listening, to concentrate on what Matsuda was telling me, but I was restless, eager to get moving.

'Be patient,' Matsuda said mildly. 'This will only take a minute. What do you know about the *houou*?'

I reluctantly pulled my attention back to the feather in my palm and tried to recall what my former teacher Ichiro had taught me when I had been living in Lord Shigeru's house in Hagi. 'It is the sacred bird of legend that appears in times of justice and peace. And it is written with the same character as the name of my clan, Otori.'

'Correct,' Matsuda said, smiling. 'It does not often appear, justice and peace being something of a rarity in these times. But Shigeru saw it and I believe the vision inspired him in his pursuit of these virtues. I told him then that the feathers were tinged with blood, and indeed his blood, his death, still drive both you and me.'

I looked more closely at the feather. It lay across the scar on my right palm where I had burned my hand a long time ago, in Mino, my birthplace, the day Shigeru had saved my life. My hand was also marked with the straight line of the Kikuta, the Tribe family to which I belonged, from which I had run away the previous

winter. My inheritance, my past and my future all seemed to be there, held in the palm of my hand.

'Why do you show it to me now?'

'You will be leaving here soon. You have been with us all winter, studying and training to prepare yourself to fulfil Shigeru's last commands to you. I wanted you to share in his vision, to remember that his goal was justice, and yours must be too.'

'I will never forget it,' I promised. I bowed reverently over the feather, holding it gently in both hands, and offered it back to the abbot. He took it, bowed over it and replaced it in the small lacquered box from which he had taken it. I said nothing, remembering all that Shigeru had done for me, and how much I still needed to accomplish for him.

'Ichiro told me about the *houou* when he was teaching me to write my name,' I said finally. 'When I saw him in Hagi last year he advised me to wait for him here but I cannot wait much longer. We must leave for Maruyama within the week.' I had been worrying about my old teacher since the snows had melted, for I knew that the Otori lords, Shigeru's uncles, were trying to take possession of my house and lands in Hagi and that Ichiro continued stubbornly to resist them.

I did not know it, but Ichiro was already dead. I had the news of it the next day. I was talking with Amano in the courtyard when I heard something from far below: shouts of anger, running feet, the trampling of hooves. The sound of horses plunging up the slope was unexpected and shocking. Usually no one came to the temple at Terayama on horseback. They either walked up the steep mountain path or, if unfit or very old, were carried by sturdy porters.

A few seconds later Amano heard it too. By then I was already running to the temple gates, calling to the guards.

Swiftly they set about closing the gates and barring them. Matsuda came hurrying across the courtyard. He was not wearing armour, but his sword was in his belt. Before we could speak to each other, a challenge came from the guard house.

'Who dares to ride to the temple gate? Dismount and approach this place of peace with respect!'

It was Kubo Makoto's voice. One of Terayama's young warrior monks, he had become, over the last few months, my closest friend. I ran to the wooden stockade and climbed the ladder to the guard house. Makoto gestured towards the spyhole. Through the chinks in the wood I could see four horsemen. They had been galloping up the hill; now they pulled their heaving, snorting mounts to a halt. They were fully armed, but the Otori crest was clearly visible on their helmets. For a moment I thought that they might be messengers from Ichiro. Then my eyes fell on the basket tied to the bow of one of the saddles. My heart turned to stone. I could guess, only too easily, what was inside such a container.

The horses were rearing and cavorting, not only from the exertion of the gallop, but also from alarm. Two of them were already bleeding from wounds to their hindquarters. A mob of angry men poured from the narrow path, armed with staves and sickles. I recognized some of them: they were farmers from the nearest village. The warrior at the rear made a rush at them, sword flailing, and they fell back slightly but did not disperse, maintaining their threatening stance in a tight half circle.

The leader of the horsemen flung a look of contempt at them and then called towards the gate in a loud voice.

'I am Fuwa Dosan of the Otori clan from Hagi. I bring a message from my lords Shoichi and Masahiro for the upstart who calls himself Otori Takeo.'

Makoto called back, 'If you are peaceful messengers, dismount and leave your swords. The gates will be opened.'

I already knew what their message would be. I could feel blind fury building up behind my eyes.

'There's no need for that,' Fuwa replied scornfully. 'Our message is short. Tell the so-called Takeo that the Otori do not recognize his claims and that this is how they will deal with him and any who follow him.'

The man alongside him dropped the reins on his horse's neck and opened the container. From it he took what I dreaded to see. Holding it by its topknot he swung his arm and threw Ichiro's head over the wall into the temple grounds.

It fell with a slight thud onto the petalled grass of the garden.

I drew my sword, Jato, from my belt.

'Open the gate!' I shouted. 'I am going out to them.'

I leaped down the steps, Makoto behind me.

As the gates opened, the Otori warriors turned their horses and drove them at the wall of men around them, swords sweeping. I imagine they thought the farmers would not dare attack them. Even I was astonished at what happened next. Instead of parting to let them through, the men on foot hurled themselves at the horses. Two of the farmers died immediately, cut in half by the warriors' swords, but then the first horse came down, and its rider fell into the pack around him. The

others met a similar fate. They had no chance to use their swordsmanship: they were dragged from their horses and beaten to death like dogs.

Makoto and I tried to restrain the farmers and eventually managed to drive them back from the bodies. We restored calm only by severing the warriors' heads and having them displayed on the temple gates. The unruly army threw insults at them for a while and then retired down the hill, promising in loud voices that if any other strangers dared approach the temple and insult Lord Otori Takeo, the Angel of Yamagata, they would be dealt with in the same way.

Makoto was shaking with rage – and some other emotion that he wanted to talk to me about – but I did not have the time then. I went back inside the walls. Kaede had brought white cloths and water in a wooden bowl. She was kneeling on the ground beneath the cherry trees, calmly washing the head. Its skin was blue-grey, the eyes half closed, the neck not severed cleanly but hacked with several blows. Yet, she handled it gently, with loving care, as if it were a precious and beautiful object.

I knelt beside her, put out my hand and touched the hair. It was streaked with grey, but the face in death looked younger than when I had last seen it, when Ichiro was alive in the house in Hagi, grieving and haunted by ghosts, yet still willing to show me affection and guidance.

'Who is it?' Kaede said in a low voice.

'Ichiro. He was my teacher in Hagi. Shigeru's too.'

My heart was too full to speak further. I blinked away my tears. The memory of our last meeting rose in my mind. I wished I had said more to him, told him of

my gratitude and my respect. I wondered how he had died, if his death had been humiliating and agonizing. I longed for the dead eyes to open, the bloodless lips to speak. How irretrievable the dead are, how completely they go from us! Even when their spirits return they do not speak of their own deaths.

I was born and raised among the Hidden, who believe that only those who follow the commandments of the Secret God will meet again in the afterlife. Everyone else will be consumed in the fires of hell. I did not know if my adopted father Shigeru had been a believer but he was familiar with all the teachings of the Hidden and spoke their prayers at the moment of his death, along with the name of the Enlightened One. Ichiro, his adviser and the steward of his household, had never given any such sign – in fact, rather the opposite: Ichiro had suspected from the start that Shigeru had rescued me from the warlord Iida Sadamu's persecution of the Hidden, and had watched me like a cormorant for anything that might give me away.

But I no longer followed the teachings of my childhood and I could not believe that a man of Ichiro's integrity and loyalty was in hell. Far stronger was my outrage at the injustice of this murder and my realization that I now had another death to avenge.

'They paid for it with their lives,' Kaede said. 'Why kill an old man and go to all that trouble to bring his head to you?' She washed away the last traces of blood and wrapped a clean white cloth around the head.

'I imagine the Otori lords want to draw me out,' I replied. 'They would prefer not to attack Terayama; they will run into Arai's soldiers if they do. They must hope to entice me over the border and meet me there.'

I longed for such a meeting, to punish them once and for all. The warriors' deaths had temporarily assuaged my fury, but I could feel it simmering in my heart. However, I had to be patient; my strategy was first to withdraw to Maruyama and build up my forces there. I would not be dissuaded from that.

I touched my brow to the grass, bidding my teacher goodbye. Manami came from the guest rooms and knelt a little way behind us.

'I've brought a box, lady,' she whispered.

'Give it to me,' Kaede replied. It was a small container, woven from willow twigs and strips of red-dyed leather. She took it and opened it. The smell of aloes rose from it. She put the white wrapped bundle inside and arranged the aloes round it. Then she placed the box on the ground in front of her, and the three of us bowed again before it.

A bush warbler called its spring song and a cuckoo responded from deep in the forest, the first I had heard that year.

We held the funeral rites the following day and buried the head next to Shigeru's grave. I made arrangements for another stone, to be erected for Ichiro. I longed to know what had happened to the old woman Chiyo and the rest of the household at Hagi. I was tormented by the thought that the house no longer existed, that it would have been burned: the tea room, the upper room where we had so often sat looking out onto the garden, the nightingale floor, all destroyed, their songs silenced for ever. I wanted to rush to Hagi to claim my inheritance before it was taken from me. But I knew this was exactly what the Otori hoped I would do.

Five farmers died outright and two died later from

their wounds. We buried them in the temple graveyard. Two of the horses were badly hurt, and Amano had them killed mercifully, but the other two were unharmed; one I liked in particular, a handsome black stallion that reminded me of Shigeru's horse, Kyu, and could have been its half-brother. At Makoto's insistence we buried the Otori warriors with full rites, too, praying that their ghosts, outraged at their ignoble deaths, would not linger to haunt us.

That evening the abbot came to the guest room and we talked until late into the night. Makoto and Miyoshi Kahei, one of my allies and friends from Hagi, were also with us; Kahei's younger brother Gemba had been sent ahead to Maruyama to tell the domain's senior retainer Sugita Haruki of our imminent departure. Sugita had assured Kaede the previous winter of his support for her claim. Kaede did not stay with us – for various reasons, she and Makoto were not at ease in each other's presence and she avoided him as much as possible – but I told her beforehand to sit behind the screen so she could hear what was said. I wanted to know her opinion afterwards. In the short time since our marriage I had come to talk to her as I had never talked to anyone in my life. I had been silent for so long, it seemed now I could not get enough of sharing my thoughts with her. I relied on her judgment and her wisdom.

'So now you are at war,' the abbot said, 'and your army has had its first skirmish.'

'Hardly an army,' Makoto said. 'A rabble of farmers! How are you going to punish them?'

'What do you mean?' I replied.

'Farmers are not supposed to kill warriors,' he said. 'Anyone else in your situation would punish them with

the utmost cruelty. They would be crucified, boiled in oil, flayed alive.'

'They will be if the Otori get hold of them,' Kahei muttered.

'They were fighting on my behalf,' I said. Privately I thought the warriors had deserved their shameful end, though I was sorry I had not killed them all myself. 'I'm not going to punish them. I'm more concerned with how to protect them.'

'You have let an ogre out,' Makoto said. 'Let's hope you can contain it.'

The abbot smiled into his wine cup. Quite apart from his earlier comments on justice, he had been teaching me strategy all winter and, having heard my theories on the capture of Yamagata and other campaigns, knew how I felt about my farmers.

'The Otori seek to draw me out,' I said to him, as I had said earlier to Kaede.

'Yes, you must resist the temptation,' he replied. 'Naturally your first instinct is for revenge, but even if you defeated their army in a confrontation, they would simply retreat to Hagi. A long siege would be a disaster. The city is virtually impregnable, and sooner or later you would have to deal with Arai's forces at your rear.'

Arai Daiichi was the warlord from Kumamoto who had taken advantage of the overthrow of the Tohan to seize control of the Three Countries. I had enraged him by disappearing with the Tribe the previous year, and now my marriage to Kaede would certainly enrage him further. He had a huge army, and I did not want to be confronted by it before I had strengthened my own.

'Then we must go first to Maruyama, as planned.'

But if I leave the temple unprotected, you and the people of the district may be punished by the Otori.'

'We can bring many people within the walls,' the abbot said. 'I think we have enough arms and supplies to hold the Otori off if they do attack. Personally, I don't think they will. Arai and his allies will not relinquish Yamagata without a long struggle and many among the Otori would be reluctant to destroy this place, which is sacred to the clan. Anyway, they will be more concerned with pursuing you.' He paused and then went on: 'You can't fight a war without being prepared for sacrifice. Men will die in the battles you fight, and if you lose, many of them, including you yourself, may be put to death very painfully. The Otori do not recognize your adoption, they do not know your ancestry; as far as they are concerned you are an upstart, not one of their class. You cannot hold back from action because people will die as a result. Even your farmers know that. Seven of them died today, but those who survived are not sad. They are celebrating their victory over those who insulted you.'

'I know that,' I said, glancing at Makoto. His lips were pressed together tightly, and though his face showed no other expression, I felt his disapproval. I was aware yet again of my weaknesses as a commander. I was afraid both Makoto and Kahei, brought up in the warrior tradition, would come to despise me.

'We joined you by our own choice, Takeo,' the abbot went on, 'because of our loyalty to Shigeru and because we believe your cause is just.'

I bowed my head, accepting the rebuke and vowing he would never have to speak to me in that vein again. 'We will leave for Maruyama the day after tomorrow.'

'Makoto will go with you,' the abbot said. 'As you know, he has made your cause his own.'

Makoto's lips curved slightly as he nodded in agreement.

Later that night, around the second half of the hour of the Rat, when I was about to lie down beside Kaede, I heard voices outside, and a few moments later Manami called quietly to us to say that a monk had come with a message from the guard house.

'We have taken a prisoner,' he said when I went to speak to him. 'He was spotted skulking in the bushes beyond the gate. The guards pursued him and would have killed him on the spot, but he called your name and said he was your man.'

'I'll come and talk to him,' I said, taking up Jato, suspecting it could only be the outcaste Jo-An. Jo-An had seen me at Yamagata when I had released his brother and other members of the Hidden into death. It was he who had given me the name of the Angel of Yamagata. Then he had saved my life on my desperate journey to Terayama in the winter. I had told him I would send for him in the spring and that he should wait until he heard from me, but he acted in unpredictable ways, usually in response to what he claimed was the voice of the Secret God.

It was a soft, warm night, the air already holding summer's humidity. In the cedars an owl was hooting. Jo-An lay on the ground just inside the gate. He'd been trussed up roughly, his legs were bent under him, his hands bound behind his back. His face was streaked with dirt and blood, his hair matted. He was moving his lips very slightly, praying soundlessly. Two monks were

watching him from a careful distance, their faces twisted in contempt.

I called his name and his eyes opened. I saw relief shine in them. He tried to scrabble into a kneeling position and fell forward, unable to save himself with his hands. His face hit the dirt.

'Untie him,' I said.

One of the monks said, 'He is an outcaste. We should not touch him.'

'Who tied him up?'

'We did not realize then,' the other said.

'You can cleanse yourselves later. This man saved my life. Untie him.'

Reluctantly they went to Jo-An, lifted him up, and loosened the cords that bound him. He crawled forward and prostrated himself at my feet.

'Sit up, Jo-An,' I said. 'Why are you here? I said you were to come when I sent for you. You were lucky not to be killed, turning up here without warning, without permission.'

The last time I'd seen him I'd been almost as shabbily dressed as he was, a fugitive, exhausted and starving. Now I was aware of the robe I wore, my hair dressed in the warrior style, the sword in my belt. I knew the sight of me talking to the outcaste would shock the monks profoundly. Part of me was tempted to have him thrown out, to deny that there was any relationship between us, and to throw him from my life at the same time. If I so ordered the guards, they would kill him immediately with no second thought. Yet I could not do it. He had saved my life; moreover for the sake of the bond between us, both born into the Hidden, I had to treat him not as an outcaste but as a man.

'No one will kill me until the Secret One calls me home,' he muttered, raising his eyes and looking at me. 'Until that time, my life is yours.' There was little light where we stood, just the lamp the monk had brought from the guard house and placed on the ground near us, but I could see Jo-An's eyes burning. I wondered, as I often had before, if he were not alive at all but a visitant from another world.

'What do you want?' I said.

'I have something to tell you. Very important. You'll be glad I came.'

The monks had stepped back out of pollution's way but were still close enough to hear us.

'I need to talk to this man,' I said. 'Where should we go?'

They threw an anguished look at each other and the older man suggested, 'Maybe the pavilion, in the garden?'

'You don't need to come with me.'

'We should guard Lord Otori,' the younger said.

'I'm in no danger from this man. Leave us alone. But tell Manami to bring water, some food and tea.'

They bowed and left. As they crossed the courtyard they started whispering to each other. I could hear every word. I sighed.

'Come with me,' I said to Jo-An. He limped after me to the pavilion, which stood in the garden not far from the large pool. Its surface glittered in the starlight, and every now and then a fish leaped from the water, flopping back with a loud splash. Beyond the pool the greyish white stones of the graves loomed out of the darkness. The owl hooted again, closer this time.

'God told me to come to you,' he said when we were settled on the wooden floor of the pavilion.

'You should not talk so openly of God,' I chided him. 'You are in a temple. The monks have no more love for the Hidden than the warriors.'

'You are here,' he muttered. 'You are our hope and our protection.'

'I'm just one person. I can't protect all of you from the way a whole country feels.'

He was silent for a moment or two. Then he said, 'The Secret One thinks about you all the time, even if you have forgotten him.'

I did not want to listen to this sort of message.

'What do you have to tell me?' I said impatiently.

'The men you saw last year, the charcoal burners, were taking their god back to the mountain. I met them on the path. They told me the Otori armies are out, watching every road around Terayama and Yamagata. I went to look for myself. There are soldiers hidden everywhere. They will ambush you as soon as you leave. If you want to get out, you will have to fight your way through them.'

His eyes were fixed on me, watching my reaction. I was cursing myself for having stayed so long at the temple. I'd been aware all along that speed and surprise were my main weapons. I should have left days before. I had been putting off leaving, waiting for Ichiro. Before my marriage I'd gone out night after night to check the roads around the temple for just such an eventuality. But since Kaede had joined me I could not tear myself away from her. Now I was trapped by my own vacillation and lack of vigilance.

'How many men would you say?'

'Five or six thousand,' he replied.

I had barely a thousand.

'So you'll have to go over the mountain. As you did in the winter. There's a track that goes west. No one's watching it because there's still snow on the pass.'

My mind was racing. I knew the path he meant. It went past the shrine where Makoto had planned to spend the winter before I stumbled in out of the snow on my flight to Terayama. I'd explored it myself a few weeks earlier, turning back when the snow became too deep to wade through. I thought of my forces, men, horses, oxen: oxen would never make it, but men and horses might. I would send them at night, if possible, so the Otori would think we were still in the temple . . . I would have to start at once, consult the abbot immediately.

My thoughts were interrupted by Manami and one of the manservants. The man was carrying a bowl of water. Manami brought a tray with a bowl of rice and vegetables and two cups of twig tea. She set the tray down on the floor, gazing at Jo-An with as much revulsion as if he were a viper. The man's reaction was equally horrified. I wondered briefly whether it would harm me to be seen associating with outcasts. I told them to leave us and they did so quickly, though I could hear Manami's disapproving muttering all the way back to the guest house.

Jo-An washed his hands and face, then joined his hands together to say the first prayer of the Hidden. Even as I found myself responding to the familiar words, a wave of irritation swept over me. He had risked his own life again to bring me this vital news, but I wished

he showed more discretion, and my spirits sank at the thought of the liability he might become.

When he had finished eating I said, 'You'd better leave. You have a long journey home.'

He made no response, but sat, head turned slightly sideways, in the listening position I was by now familiar with.

'No,' he said finally. 'I am to go with you.'

'It's impossible. I don't want you with me.'

'God wants it,' he said.

There was nothing I could do to argue him out of it, short of killing him or imprisoning him, and these seemed shabby rewards for his help to me.

'Very well,' I said, 'but you can't stay in the temple.'

'No,' he agreed docilely, 'I have to fetch the others.'

'What others, Jo-An?'

'The rest of us. The ones who came with me. You saw some of them.'

I had seen these men at the tannery by the river where Jo-An worked, and I would never forget the way they had stared after me with burning eyes. I knew they looked to me for justice and protection. I remembered the feather: justice was what Shigeru had desired. I also had to pursue it for the sake of his memory and for these living men.

Jo-An put his hands together again and gave thanks for the food.

A fish leaped in the silence.

'How many are there?' I asked.

'About thirty. They're hiding in the mountains. They've been crossing the border in ones and twos for the last weeks.'

'Isn't the border guarded?'

'There've been skirmishes between the Otori and Arai's men. At the moment there's a stand-off. The borders are all open. The Otori have made it clear they're not challenging Arai or hoping to retake Yamagata. They only want to eliminate you.'

It seemed to be everyone's mission.

'Do the people support them?' I asked.

'Of course not!' he said almost impatiently. 'You know who they support: the Angel of Yamagata. So do we all. Why else are we here?'

I was not sure I wanted their support, but I could not help but be impressed by their courage.

'Thank you,' I said.

He grinned then, showing his missing teeth, reminding me of the torture he had already suffered because of me. 'We'll meet you on the other side of the mountain. You'll need us then, you'll see.'

I had the guards open the gates and said goodbye to him. I watched his slight, twisted shape as he scuttled away into the darkness. From the forest a vixen screamed, a sound like a ghost in torment. I shivered. Jo-An seemed guided and sustained by some great supernatural power. Though I no longer believed in it I feared its force like a superstitious child.

I went back to the guest house, my skin crawling. I removed my clothes and, despite the lateness of the hour, told Manami to take them away, wash and purify them, and then come to the bath house. She scrubbed me all over and I soaked in the hot water for ten or fifteen minutes. Putting on fresh clothes, I sent the servant to fetch Kahei and then to ask the abbot if we might speak with him. It was the first half of the hour of the Ox.

I met Kahei in the passageway, told him briefly what

had transpired, and went with him to the abbot's room, sending the servant to fetch Makoto from the temple, where he was keeping the night vigil. We came to the decision that we would move the entire army as soon as possible, apart from a small band of horsemen who would remain at Terayama for a day to fight as a rearguard.

Kahei and Makoto went immediately to the village beyond the gates to rouse Amano and the other men and start packing up food and equipment. The abbot ordered servants to inform the monks, reluctant to sound the temple bell at this hour of night in case we sent a warning to spies. I went to Kaede.

She was waiting for me, already in her sleeping robe, her hair loose down her back like a second robe, intensely black against the ivory material and her white skin. The sight of her, as always, took my breath away. Whatever happened to us, I would never forget this springtime we had had together. My life seemed full of undeserved blessings, but this was the greatest of them.

'Manami said an outcaste came and you let him in and spoke with him.' Her voice was as shocked as her woman's had been.

'Yes, he's called Jo-An. I met him in Yamagata.' I undressed, put on my robe and sat opposite her, knee to knee.

Her eyes searched my face. 'You look exhausted. Come and lie down.'

'I will; we must try and sleep for a few hours. We march at first light. The Otori have surrounded the temple; we are going over the mountain.'

'The outcaste brought you this news?'

'He risked his life to do so.'

'Why? How do you know him?'

'Do you remember the day we rode here with Lord Shigeru?' I said.

Kaede smiled. 'I can never forget it.'

'The night before I climbed into the castle and put an end to the suffering of the prisoners hanging on the walls. They were Hidden: have you heard of them?'

Kaede nodded. 'Shizuka told me a little about them. They were tortured in the same way by the Noguchi.'

'One of the men I killed was Jo-An's brother. Jo-An saw me as I came out of the moat and thought I was an angel.'

'The Angel of Yamagata,' Kaede said, slowly. 'When we came back that night the whole town was talking about it.'

'Since then we have met again; our fates seem to be entwined in some way. Last year he helped me get here. I would have perished in the snow but for him. On the way he took me to see a holy woman and she said certain things about my life.'

I had told no one, not even Makoto, not even Matsuda, of the words of the prophetess, but now I wanted to share them with Kaede. I whispered some of them to her: that in me three bloods mingled, I was born into the Hidden but my life was no longer my own, that I was destined to rule in peace from sea to sea, when Earth delivered what Heaven desired. I had repeated these words over and over to myself, and as I've said before, sometimes I believed them and sometimes I did not. I told her that five battles would bring us peace, four to win and one to lose, but I did not tell her what the saint had predicted about my own son: that I would die at his hands. I told myself it was too terrible a bur-

den to lay on her but the truth was I did not want to talk about another secret I had kept from her: that a girl from the Tribe, Muto Kenji's daughter Yuki, was carrying my child.

'You were born into the Hidden?' she said carefully. 'But the Tribe claimed you because of your father's blood. Shizuka tried to explain it to me.'

'Muto Kenji revealed that my father was Kikuta, from the Tribe, when he first came to Shigeru's house. He did not know, though Shigeru did, that my father was also half-Otori.' I had already shown Kaede the records that confirmed this. Shigeru's father, Otori Shigemori, was my grandfather.

'And your mother?' she asked quietly. 'If you feel able to tell me . . .'

'My mother was one of the Hidden. I was raised among them. My family was massacred in our village, Mino, by Iida's men, and they would have killed me then if Shigeru had not rescued me.' I paused and then spoke of what I had hardly allowed myself to think about. 'I had two sisters, little girls. I imagine they were also murdered. They were nine and seven years old.'

'How terrible,' Kaede said. 'I am always afraid for my sisters. I hope we can send for them when we arrive at Maruyama. I hope they are safe now.'

I was silent, thinking of Mino, where we had all felt so safe.

'How strange your life has been,' Kaede went on. 'When I first met you I felt you hid everything. I watched you go away as if into a dark and secret place. I wanted to follow you there. I wanted to know everything about you.'

'I will tell you everything. But let's lie down and rest.'

Kaede pulled back the quilt and we lay down on the mattress. I took her in my arms, loosening both our robes so I could feel her skin against mine. She called to Manami to put out the lamps. The smell of smoke and oil lingered in the room after the woman's footsteps had died away.

I knew all the sounds of the temple at night by now: the periods of complete stillness, broken at regular intervals by the soft padding of feet as the monks rose in the darkness and went to pray, the low chanting, the sudden note of a bell. But tonight that regular and harmonious rhythm was disturbed, with sounds of people coming and going all night. I was restless, feeling I should be part of the preparations, yet reluctant to leave Kaede.

She whispered, 'What does it mean, to be one of the Hidden?'

'I was raised with certain beliefs; most I don't hold any more.' As I said this I felt my neck tingle, as if a cold breath had passed over me. Was it really true that I had abandoned the beliefs of my childhood – ones that my family had died for rather than give up?

'It was said that when Iida punished Lord Shigeru it was because he was one of the Hidden – and my kinswoman Lady Maruyama too,' Kaede murmured.

'Shigeru never spoke of it to me. He knew their prayers, and said them before he died, but his last word was the name of the Enlightened One.'

Until today, I had hardly thought of this moment. It had been obliterated by the horror of what had followed, and by my overwhelming grief. Today I had thought of it twice and suddenly for the first time I put together the prophetess's words and Shigeru's. 'It is all one,' she had said. So Shigeru had believed this too. I

heard again her wondering laughter and thought I saw him smile at me. I felt that something profound had suddenly been revealed to me, something I could never put into words. My heart seemed to miss a beat in astonishment. Into my silenced mind several images rushed at once: Shigeru's composure when he was about to die, the prophetess's compassion, my own sense of wonder and anticipation the first day I had come to Terayama, the red-tipped feather of the *houou* on my palm. I saw the truth that lay behind the teaching and the beliefs, saw how human striving muddled the clarity of life, saw with pity how we are all subject to desire and to death, the warrior as much as the outcaste, the priest, the farmer, even the emperor himself. What name could I give to that clarity? Heaven? God? Fate? Or a myriad of names like the countless old spirits that men believed dwelled in this land? They were all faces of the faceless, expressions of that which cannot be expressed, parts of a truth but never the whole truth.

'And Lady Maruyama?' Kaede said, surprised by my long silence.

'I think she held strong beliefs, but I never spoke to her about them. When I first met her she drew the sign on my hand.'

'Show me,' Kaede whispered, and I took her hand and traced the sign on her palm.

'Are the Hidden dangerous? Why does everyone hate them?'

'They're not dangerous. They are forbidden to take life, and so they do not defend themselves. They believe everyone is equal in the eyes of their God, and that he will judge everyone after death. Great lords like Iida hate this teaching. Most of the warrior class do. If

everyone is equal and God watches everything, it must be wrong to treat the people so badly. Our world would be overthrown from the ground up if everyone thought like the Hidden.'

'And you believe this?'

'I don't believe such a God exists, but I believe everyone should be treated as if they were equal. Outcastes, farmers, the Hidden, should all be protected against the cruelty and greed of the warrior class. And I want to use anyone who is prepared to help me. I don't care if they're farmers or outcastes. I'll take them all into my armies.'

Kaede did not reply; I imagined these ideas seemed strange and repellent to her. I might no longer believe in the God of the Hidden, but I could not help the way their teachings had formed me. I thought of the farmers' action against the Otori warriors at the temple gates. I had approved of that, for I saw them as equals, but Makoto had been shocked and outraged. Was he right? Was I unchaining an ogre that I could never hope to control?

Kaede said quietly, 'Do the Hidden believe women are equal to men?'

'In God's eyes they are. Usually the priests are men, but if there is no man of the right age, the older women become priestesses.'

'Would you let me fight in your army?'

'As skilful as you are, if you were any other woman, I would be glad to have you fight alongside me as we did at Inuyama. But you are the heir to Maruyama. If you were to be killed in battle our cause would be completely lost. Besides, I could not bear it.'

I pulled Kaede close to me, burying my face in her

hair. There was one other thing I had to speak to her about. It concerned another teaching of the Hidden, one that the warrior class find incomprehensible: that it is forbidden to take your own life. I whispered, 'We have been safe here. Once we leave, everything will be different. I hope we can stay together, but there will be times when we will be separated. Many people want me dead, but it will not be until the prophecy is fulfilled and our peaceful country stretches from sea to sea. I want you to promise me that whatever happens, whatever you are told, you will not believe I am dead until you see it with your own eyes. Promise you will not take your own life until you see me dead.'

'I promise it,' she said quietly. 'And you must do the same.'

I made the same vow to her. When she was asleep I lay in the dark and thought about what had been revealed to me. Whatever had been granted to me was not for my sake but for the sake of what I might achieve: a country of peace and justice where the *houou* would not only be seen but would build its nest and raise its young.